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Sport, Education and Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cses20

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To cite this article: Laura Gubby & Shannon Martin (26 Mar 2024): Sexism, abuse and threatening behaviour: experiences of women football referees in amateur and semi-professional men's football in the UK, Sport, Education and Society, DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2024.2324376

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2024.2324376

Published online: 26 Mar 2024.

SPORT, EDUCATION AND SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2024.2324376

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Sexism, abuse and threatening behaviour: experiences of women football referees in amateur and semi-professional men's football in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Recent events in football, such as the all-female officiating team of Stéphanie Frappart, Neuza Back and Karen Díaz at the 2022 men's World Cup, and the coverage of England's Lionesses in UEFA Women's Euro, have raised the profile of women in football. Despite this, literature has demonstrated the difficulties faced by women who officiate football. Experiences include being subject to sexism and abuse, and belittling language from players, coaches and parents of young players. This research presents experiences from seven women who referee men's football in the UK. Participants referee at varying levels, from grassroots to semi-professional football. Participants chose to be part of observation and interviews or complete a qualitative questionnaire with the potential for follow-up questions. A number of Foucault's ideas were then used to analyse and explain data. Findings demonstrate experiences of sexist language and abuse, sometimes related to traditional gender roles or incompetence of women referees, and sometimes represented as extreme and threatening behaviour. Additionally, some women in this study expressed the pressure of representing all women football officials when they were completing the qualification and later when refereeing. Despite these obstacles and the frequent 'othering' of women referees within the football environment, their persistent involvement and occasional overt challenges to remarks or actions demonstrated their resistance to dominant discourses and the normalising judgements, showcasing the ability and determination of women officials. Overall, more support, including mental health support, needs to be available for women who referee football at all levels. Harsher punishments should be administered for those that harass or threaten women, and clear and effective structures should be in place to address women's experiences of harassment, ensuring that women feel confident in making complaints and are assured by the resulting actions taken.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 4 March 2023
Accepted 22 February 2024

KEYWORDS
Women referees; football; gender; sexism; women officials; soccer; Foucault

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Background

A place for women in football

On the 1st December 2022 in Qatar, French referee, Stéphanie Frappart became the first woman to officiate a men's World Cup game, and more so, was part of an all-female officiating team along with assistant referees Neuza Back from Brazil and Karen Díaz from Mexico. This event made history in relation to women officiating an international male football tournament of this kind and demonstrates the advances that women have made in their presence on the male pitch. Additionally, 2022 brought the crowning of England's Lionesses as champions of UEFA Women's Euro. The success of England's Lionesses garnered much support and interest in England in relation to women's involvement in football. Prior to England's success, UEFA Women's EURO 2022 legacy programme (the first programme of its kind for UEFA and the FA) was designed in order to improve women and girls' participation in football in the host cities, with plans and strategies designed until 2024 (the FA, 2022). The FA (2022) describe how 'key partners from education, local government, professional and grassroots football plus local public and voluntary sectors, are working with the FA to bring all female football opportunities under one umbrella for the first time'. Within this legacy programme, particular aims relate to women and girls' increased participation as players, leaders, coaches and referees. The acknowledgement that women need more opportunities in various roles in football has also been argued in international perspectives such as South Africa (Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2016) and South Korea (Kim & Hong, 2016).

Gender discourse and ability to officiate

Women have been assistant referees in the English Premiere League since 1997. Yet, the 2011 abuse that occurred when derogatory comments about female officials' lack of football knowledge were made by Sky Commentators, Andy Gray and Richard Keys, revealed sexist attitudes still existed within the male game (Jones & Edwards, 2013). Arguments related to essentialist views about women's innate [lack of] physiological or psychological ability to officiate elite men's football are refuted and ultimately, sexist (Jones & Edwards, 2013). Nevertheless, verbal assertions around the ability of female referees due to their sex, are still prevalent and experienced by female referees (Forbes et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2021). There is a concern that women have to work considerably harder than men in order to justify their place in the game (Drury et al., 2022; Grubb et al., 2023).

Assumptions around the 'fit' of women as referees have also been shown in previous research. For example, where referees have experienced players assuming that the male assistant referee was the main referee rather than the female referee (Drury et al., 2022). Additionally, in research by Grubb et al. (2023), a female referee discussed how she had nowhere to get dressed at a match. When male officials were offered a changing room, she was offered the only alternative space available, a store cupboard. This lack of fit is further illustrated by Reid and Dallaire (2020) who describe gendered discourses presenting female referees as 'incompetent', weak, unfit, uninformed, unskilled and meek in contrast to the valued traits in sports associated with masculinity such as strength, physical prowess, confidence and assertiveness' (772).

Gendered abuse of women football officials

An improvement in policies and strategies has led to increased opportunities and numbers of women in various roles in the men's game (e.g. as officials, commentators and medical staff). However, international research asserts that women continue to experience gendered abuse as football officials. For example, research in Turkey suggests that female football referees are subject to more intimidating behaviour than male football referees (Hacicaferoğlu & Gündoğdu, 2014). Furthermore, research by Marín-Montín and Bianchi (2022) found evidence of women officials who had

been subjected to physical violence as well as verbal abuse in Brazil and Spain, although, the most frequent form of violence found in their research was verbal sexist abuse.

Unsurprisingly, verbal abuse has been seen to be the most common form of abuse in research in a multitude of sports (Mojtahedi et al., 2024). It has also been seen to be more prominent in youth sport or amateur settings where spectators are closer to the officials and fewer safeguards or support staff are available to help manage situations (Mojtahedi et al., 2024; Webb, Dicks, et al., 2020). Despite verbal and physical abuse being reported by male and female football referees (Cleland et al., 2018), research has demonstrated the difference in language used when referring to female referees, such as 'darling' or 'sweetheart' rather than 'ref' (Webb et al., 2021). This demonstrates how gendered microaggressions continue to exhibit sexism in football (Drury et al., 2022).

Neil et al. (2013) and Drury et al. (2022) recognise the abuse experienced by female football referees in relation to traditional gender roles such as their place in the kitchen doing 'homemaker' duties. In other research, female referees in Spain described older men at games using verbally abusive slurs related to traditional gender values, whilst younger men were described as using sexualised and objectifying comments (Devís-Devís et al., 2021; Forbes et al., 2015). Additionally, sexist abuse has been shown to come from both players and spectators (Devís-Devís et al., 2021), as well as coaches and parents of younger players (Drury et al., 2022; Kim & Hong, 2016) and even other referees (Webb et al., 2021). Female spectators have also been shown to use sexist language related to traditional gender roles to prove themselves in the male-dominated domain of football (Devís-Devís et al., 2021). Abuse related to overt sexism (Forbes et al., 2015), homophobic slurs, as well as violent and sexual threats are also experienced prevalently by female referees (Drury et al., 2022). Both male and female referees recognise the difficulty of dealing with abuse from spectators compared to players, which they seem helpless to be able to regulate (Devís-Devís et al., 2021).

Contemporary research in England reveals how some female referees do not recognise experiences of sexism, despite their description of events which could be deemed as sexist. This demonstrates how there may not always be a critical consideration of moments constituting 'sexism' (Drury et al., 2022). Where women experience sexism, but do not recognise it as such, it downplays and normalises these events and reduces awareness of the prevalence of such occurrences. Furthermore, in other research, women described sexist comments as 'banter' or jovial, even when they knew such comments were sexist, thus, downplaying the sexist interactions and allowing the male preserve to go unchallenged (Forbes et al., 2015).

The impact of abuse on wellbeing and mental health

Recent research conducted in England with female football referees demonstrated abusive environments dominated by men, where language was often sexist and had a negative effect on referee mental wellbeing (Webb et al., 2021). This was similar to findings in US research with female basketball referees, where they also recognised that resulting mental health issues are not well-addressed and further support is needed when these cases are recognised (Tingle et al., 2022). Similarly, Downward et al. (2023) call for a zero-tolerance approach to referee abuse, which is consistently applied and reinforced as organisations have a duty of care to protect their officials. The interactions that the female match officials described in research by Webb et al. (2021) suggested a male dominance and a male orientated outlook which was not designed or organized for female participation. Furthermore, in news story analysis, Marín-Montín and Bianchi (2022) noted that aggressions directed towards female referees directly impacted mental health, with referees referring to fear and anxiety in relation to stories of abuse.

The impact of abuse-related decreased mental wellbeing has been shown to have a negative impact on referee confidence and judgement and increases the chances of mistakes being made (Mojtahedi et al., 2024). Additionally, poor mental wellbeing as a result of abuse increases the chances of officials considering quitting (Downward et al., 2023; Marín-Montín & Bianchi, 2022; Mojtahedi et al., 2024). This has very real and serious consequences for grassroots sports who depend on

the support of referees in order to provide opportunities for players at this level (Webb, Dicks, et al., 2020; Webb, Rayner, et al., 2020).

Mentor support

The importance of a well-structured mentor system has been advised as a result of previous research into sports and match official abuse (Mojtahedi et al., 2024). Reid and Dallaire's (2020) research with female soccer referees in Canada demonstrated gendered experiences in relation to discourses of ability. Some referees in the study described support from male players or male mentors who congratulated or commended them at times, which they felt validated their identities as referees and improved confidence in their abilities as competent referees. Despite generally being known as skilled officials, the women still felt a need to continuously justify their presence in the game and prove their officiating and physical abilities to those playing, coaching, and spectating, for fear of being perceived as an incapable [female] official in a masculine context. Nevertheless, encouragement from mentors gave them necessary support to aid their confidence in their refereeing ability. In other research, female football referees have expressed a desire for female mentors or women only referee meetings where issues can be discussed that male referees may not understand or that female referees would not feel comfortable talking about with male referees (Grubb et al., 2023; Kim & Hong, 2016). The need for a more effective mentoring system has been acknowledged in a number of studies (e.g. Kim & Hong, 2016; Reid & Dallaire's, 2020; Webb et al., 2021). This was also true of research conducted with US women basketball officials, who noted that a lack of role models and other women as mentors leads to poor experiences for women officials and responding to this would help attract and retain women (Tingle et al., 2014). The FA has developed a Female Development Group which aims to develop female referees, and research has suggested that women welcome the opportunity to discuss their experiences with people they deem to be like-minded or have a similar understanding to them (Grubb et al., 2023). Furthermore, if female role models are willing to share their experiences and generate interest from women who may wish to referee in the future, this may grow the pool of women referees and begin to normalise women on a male pitch (Grubb et al., 2023).

Supporting women officials

Raising awareness related to respect such as promoted in the Respect Campaign from the FA in 2008, cannot necessarily change existing culturally normalised behaviours such as verbally abusing football referees (Cleland et al., 2015; Cleland et al., 2018). Research conducted in the USA found a perception that soccer referees are subjected to a normalised culture of abuse, in comparison to other sports such as rugby which depend upon a culture of respect for officials (despite the fact there is still evidence of some referee abuse in rugby) (Jacobs et al., 2020). This is similar to assertions by Webb, Rayner, et al. (2020) who suggest that some referee respondents in their research assert that football has developed a culture whereby players, coaches and managers understand this action to be a normal part of footballing culture. Yet, changes to the way that abusive episodes are sanctioned could mean an improvement in the number of referees available to officiate football competitions (Dawson et al., 2022). The consistent study and implementation of policies favourable for female football referees would improve the level of their empowerment, diminish the separation between the genders, and generate productive power in terms of tackling traditional gender inequalities (Kim & Hong, 2016). Additionally, increased media coverage of positive stories related to women officials, for example, the increasing number of women refereeing football matches at all levels, could promote more positivity around the area and detract from media sensationalism related to negative stories about women officials (Marín-Montín & Bianchi, 2022). Although, ignoring negative instances altogether may have a negative impact, as it might encourage people to assume that inequalities no longer exist. Finally, reinforcement of a cultural shift which supports female

referees could come through the training and education of coaches and also perpetrators (Grubb et al., 2023), as well as male and female referees.

Lack of research about women officials

Research related to female match officials in sports is an area requiring further investigation as the area is limited (Kim & Hong, 2016; Webb, 2022). Additionally, a recent systematic review of 60 studies about match officials and abuse acknowledged a lack of research that recognises gender differences in match official abuse and called for more research which investigates gendered experiences (Mojtahedi et al., 2024). Specifically, more research also needs to be conducted with female football officials and other non-playing roles (Drury et al., 2022; Pina et al., 2018). An integrative review of 267 studies about football referees found only 11.99% included female referees and 2.62% acknowledged female assistant referees (Pina et al., 2018). Webb (2022) also asserts the need for such research to garner focus from sociological approaches which 'should be aimed at improving the working environment for match officials, irrespective of the sport or country' (Webb, 2022, p. 203). This aligns with arguments from research about refereeing more generally, which suggests that governing bodies and policies do not do enough to deal with, or prevent abuse of female or male referees (Cleland et al., 2015; Cleland et al., 2018; Dawson et al., 2022).

Research justification

This research aims to add to the growing, but still under-researched area of women officials in male football. Aided by the second author's experience as a female football referee, this research considers the experiences of female football officials who referee boys' and men's football matches at an amateur and semi-professional level in the UK. More specifically, it investigates the treatment of female officials by players, supporters and team managers, and discusses how female officials consider the way they present themselves and continue to work in this space. Foucault's ideas have been used in this research to analyse and attempt to explain the experiences of the officials in this study.

Adopting a Foucauldian lens

Foucault (1982) described how scientific classification acts to categorise people and dividing practices then differentiate people who are placed in different categories, e.g. men and women. Through this classification and division, men and women are expected to be different and are subjected to socially constructed gender discourse which guides preferable ways to look and act depending on gender, whilst 'othering' those that do not comply. These 'systems' are maintained through knowledge, discourses and power. Foucault (1979) describes how power is not 'owned' by some, instead, characteristics of power are complex and allow opportunities for resistance (Foucault, 1990). These ideas are useful when considering the workings of gender discourse in sporting environments, as they provide possible explanations about the workings of power and the reproduction and resistance of dominant discourses.

Many of Foucault's works described the influence of the gaze (see Foucault, 1979). Dominant discourses inform the gaze which, when deviated from, can have disciplinary consequences such as emotional punishment or humiliation, physical discipline or deprivations (Foucault, 1979). These forms of normalising judgement help to guide people to comply with norms, as this provides discretion and acceptance, as opposed to deviating from norms which leads to such judgements of transgression from the norms of dominant discourse (Foucault, 1990). Foucault (1979) describes how power workings function efficiently through a process called panopticism, whereby, simply the fear of the gaze and the understanding of the potential for discipline or judgement is often

enough for people to engage in self-surveillance and normalise themselves in-line with dominant discourses.

Within this research, Foucault's ideas related to discourses, the gaze and normalising processes helped the researchers understand and explain how officials in this study comply with, negotiate, and resist gender discourse in male football settings.

Methods

Research design

For this research, a qualitative approach was utilised which involved the investigation of experiences, social practices and subjective meanings (Silverman, 2020). Participants were given the choice of how they would like to participate in the research. Providing choice for participants in relation to how they would like to be involved in research has been shown to increase participation in research about sensitive topics and improve convenience for participants (Heath et al., 2018). This was considered to be ethically responsive as the approach actively endeavoured to avoid overburdening participants who wanted to contribute but had little time or less flexibility. Participants were given details of the project and were given the choice of participating in ethnographic methods which included observation, interviews and informal conversations (five participants), semi-structured interviews, or in-depth qualitative questionnaires with the potential for follow-up questions (two participants).

The ethnographic-style approach gave the second author the opportunity to integrate into the environment and observe and interact with participants in their real-life environment which produced detailed data of the social phenomena being investigated (Reeves et al., 2013). Rapport is important in qualitative research, especially in studies of an ethnographic nature (Martos-Garcia et al., 2022) where observations and conversations are the main forms of data collection. The second author had extensive experience as a female football referee prior to the research and had established relationships with participants prior to discussing the research with them. This meant that rapport and trust existed prior to data collection. The second author's interest in this subject arose from her involvement in the game as a player (for 11 years), a coach (for six years) and a referee (for five years). This experience meant that the research already had an insider's perspective.

Participants

To be included in this study, participants needed to have refereed boys' or men's football in the UK. Nine female referees with relevant experience were contacted by the second author, either by telephone or email. Initial contact provided a brief overview of the study and the proposed process. Seven women then responded stating they were interested in participating. All participants had started out as players before becoming officials, and they officiated at varying levels, from grassroots level to semi-professional men's league.

Data collection

Phase one of the research included participant observation with five of the participants as they officiated boys' or men's football in the South East of England. Observation took place during a game with each of the five participants, with the researcher acting as a football spectator. Observation provides the opportunity to see behaviour and interactions in the field (Hall et al., 2022). Four of the matches were cup final games which meant the researcher could witness participant engagement with managers, players and assistant referees. This approach allowed the researcher to identify social practices that are normally 'hidden' and 'identify, explore and link social

phenomena' (Reeves et al., 2013: e1365). The researcher's phone was used to record key thoughts and feelings from the participants in addition to any significant events that occurred during the game. Writing notes on a phone was discreet since the use of phones for texting was not unusual on the side-lines (Gubby, 2023).

Phase two of the research included follow-up interviews. The interviews acted as conversations which aimed to gain participant understandings and perceptions (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) and were in-depth and semi-structured which allowed for probing questions (Reeves et al., 2013). Interviews have frequently been justified as a useful tool for qualitative studies in sport and exercise research, particularly when endeavouring to understand perspectives and experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). They provide a useful co-construction of meaning generated from socially constructed moments and perspectives and can provide rich and detailed knowledge, furthered by the opportunity to deviate from interview schedules to gain deeper insight (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). The interviews lasted between 25-minutes and 41-minutes and an average of 32-minutes, and took place in private spaces to ensure confidentiality and encourage honest and in-depth answers from participants (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Five interviews took place immediately after a game, in the 'referees' room' and one was organised to take place two days after the observed game at another facility.

Phase three included questionnaires, which were used when participants were not available for interviewing or decided that they would prefer to complete a questionnaire at their convenience. The questionnaires followed the same format and questions as the interview schedule, although, due to the lack of potential for probing questions, some answers were not answered as in-depth or detailed as the researcher would have liked (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). This study benefitted from the good relationships between researcher and participants as the researcher returned some further questions to develop previous answers or gain a better understanding of the responses.

Data analysis

Once the observations had been documented, the interviews transcribed and the questionnaires received, the data was analysed and interpreted in a holistic manner. Reoccurring themes were identified and grouped through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Broadly following Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis, the second author familiarised herself with the data by reading and re-reading the data set as a whole, she then gave segments of text initial labels or codes (these segments sometimes included a sentence or part of a sentence, and sometimes included longer narratives). The initial codes were then grouped together, and then further grouped and refined into themes, which were then checked against the initial codes to ensure generated themes represented the initial codes. The grouping of codes into themes and cross-checking back with codes involved both authors, and was considered complete when authors were happy with the three themes generated: sexist comments and behaviour, representing all women football officials, and gender-marking and presentation of the self. Both authors worked to present the themes in the final write-up with appropriate data to illustrate the thematic points. The first author then analysed the findings using relevant literature and Foucault's ideas: working through the finalised themes and accompanying data and assessing where particular Foucauldian concepts may help to explain a moment or phenomenon.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained prior to data collection. Prior to the observation and interview, the participants were introduced to the purpose and structure of the interview and given consent forms to sign. Consent forms stated that individuals would remain anonymous and pseudonyms would be used, and that interviews would be recorded and stored in accordance with data protection guidelines. Before the questionnaire was completed, there was an introductory statement that described

the purpose and confidentiality of the data. Those that completed the questionnaire were asked to read this and decide whether they would like to complete the questionnaire. Although observation of anonymous groups or crowds in public settings does not need ethical consent, such as crowds of football spectators (Jones et al., 2013), when a spectator was engaged in conversation, they were asked to read an information form and sign a consent form to agree to their data featuring in the study.

Trustworthiness and rigour

To ensure good qualitative research, Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) considered eight 'big tent' criteria to address academic rigour and trustworthiness. Applying the ideas to this research, the research investigates a *worthy topic* since it is timely in relation to the current status of women in football; it employs *rich rigour* through the use of high quality and relevant theoretical analysis, justified data collection methods, and appropriate participants and context for the topic being investigated; *sincerity* was considered through the reflexive nature of the research, for example, the acknowledgement of the second author (who collected the data) as being a female football referee herself; *credibility* was enhanced through data and participant quotes to evidence arguments; the rich description in the data quotes enhanced *resonance* and the potential for naturalistic generalisation; a *significant contribution* has been made to the under-researched area of women officials, which could help inform policy; *ethics* were considered through responsive data collection methods and choice provided to participants; finally, the research has *meaningful coherence,* whereby, findings offer meaningful comparisons to literature in the field, and offer the opportunity to better understand lived experiences of female football referees.

Results and discussion

Sexist comments and behaviour

Participants in this research explained how the abuse from the side-line rarely starts as sexist, however, abuse becomes sexist when people disagree with referee decisions. Every participant in this research had heard the comment 'get back in the kitchen!' or similar (Drury et al., 2022; Neil et al., 2013). For example, Sarah recalled a significant moment:

> The worst one that sticks in my mind: I was doing a Southern Counties game. The home team player went down in the box. Wasn't a penalty, he just hurt his head. He was on the floor injured. The crowd clearly wanted a penalty, but it wasn't, and one man came from about 20 yards to behind the goal and quite loudly said, 'get back in the kitchen where you belong'. He said it about three times. I was just like, 'really?'. If he said it quietly, I would have ignored [it], but everyone heard it, so I thought, 'I can't let this go'. So, I asked the physio if anyone could get rid of him, and, to their credit, they were on it. A steward came and took him out. After the game, the steward came up to me saying he wanted to apologise. So, I thought, 'yeah, I'll hear him out', and he came back, head down, saying, 'I'm really sorry'. I said, 'why did you do it?', 'oh I don't know, sorry'. I said, 'please, just don't do it again'. I had to report it, and the club apologised, and since then the club has been more than nice.

Comments like this can be seen in cases where men try to illustrate a 'lack of fit' for women officials in football environments (Grubb et al., 2023). Overt sexism can be seen in different ways. For example, through comments related to gender-roles as Sarah illustrated, or, by objectifying women officials which was noted by Ellie: 'the first couple of games I was just being wolf-whistled at by the male players. I've been asked for my number. You just take it on the chin and move on with it' (Ellie). Additionally, similarly to research by Drury et al. (2022), violent and sexual threats are also experienced by female referees:

> On one occasion, I was the assistant at an under-18's game, and halfway through the game, three spectators turned up and sat right behind where I was, no-one else was there. And, for the whole 45 min, they were

> shouting at me. Started out as comments about my body and how I looked. Then it became sexual – saying what they would do to me after the game, basically describing how they would rape me. I was quite young, maybe 16 (Ellie).

Ellie went on to say how this experience almost led to her to quit refereeing (Downward et al., 2023; Marín-Montín & Bianchi, 2022; Mojtahedi et al., 2024). After this incident, she took a break from refereeing and then went back to only officiating youth football. Even if only temporarily, the panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1979) influenced the decision Ellie made to stop refereeing at the same level. Once aware of the gaze, Ellie internalised normalising discipline and engaged in self-surveillance (Foucault, 1979). She decided to stop refereeing male football at a higher level, temporarily reducing the number of women referees officiating men's football. When events like this happen and female referees quit, it reduces the visibility of women in the male game and increased presence of women in the male game is what is required to normalise female referees (Grubb et al., 2023). With the support from her family and other referees who had endured similar experiences, Ellie decided to resume her refereeing. This demonstrates the effect of support from like-minded referees, and emphasises the need for an effective mentoring system (Kim & Hong, 2016; Reid & Dallaire, 2020; Webb et al., 2021).

Dell et al. (2016) found that a key factor that influences football referees' intentions to quit the game was lack of support and inadequate training by the FA and CFA. Data collected suggests that officials feel that they get all the support to complete the qualification, but once out on the field they are not protected, with no neutral assistants or mentors. Six of the seven participants in this study had been exposed to sexism during matches in the middle of a park, and were therefore, on their own. The prominence of abuse in amateur settings where fewer support staff are available has been documented in previous research (e.g. Mojtahedi et al., 2024; Webb, Rayner, et al., 2020). Sarah officiates higher levels of men's and women's football and is fortunate to have her own mentor, but she acknowledged the lack of support for officials in lower leagues, particularly park football, where exposure to sexism is greater. Sarah described the need for mentors or support,

> At lower levels, an arm around the shoulder can mean a lot. Just to show that, 'hey, look, it is ok'. Perhaps more support for those wanting to get into refereeing men's football, have a specific coach, that goes to the games and is on the end of the phone to them (Sarah).

The need for a more effective support or mentoring system for female football officials is aligned with assertions from previous research (e.g. Kim & Hong, 2016; Mojtahedi et al., 2024; Reid & Dallaire, 2020; Webb et al., 2021).

Representing all women football officials

At times, participants highlighted that their focus when refereeing was about demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of the game, they did not feel the need to demonstrate how well *women* can referee. When asked if they felt any pressure when performing, these responses related to ensuring decisions were right, not gender-specific performance pressure:

> I don't feel any extra pressure than the normal pressure of refereeing. I don't see me being a female referee being any different to a male referee (Lizzie).

> I feel pressure whenever I officiate but not because I am female, more just the pressure to get things right (Amy).

> Not pressure, I know my knowledge, I know I know sport, and I know I know football (Emma).

However, a number of participants felt that their performance was being judged because they are female. Previous research has demonstrated how women must work harder than men to prove themselves in male-dominated environments (Drury et al., 2022; Grubb et al., 2023). In agreement with findings from Reid and Dallaire (2020), some women felt skilled and capable as referees, but felt the need to prove themselves so that they were not judged as incompetent *female* referees:

> [When warming up] I put in that extra 5 or 10% just to be like, 'yeah, I can keep up with you!' And some of them do say, 'woah you're quick!', and I'm like, 'yeah, I'm a girl, but I can run just as fast'. In that way, I give that little bit extra, just to show them I can (Sarah).

> I find the pressure most during the warmup with the other officials, especially if they are male. This is because it is more difficult to keep up with them for the sprints during the warm-up, and when there is an audience, it is as if I am providing visual aid, saying that I am weaker than my male counterparts. There is also a pressure to represent female officials, as you don't want your performance to impact a team's perception of us, and so I feel as though I must work harder to show that women are the same as men (Ellie).

> I feel like I am being judged by everyone, on every decision I make, whether it wrong or right (in their eyes), or even the small things like how I run (Robyn).

The referees in this study have shown evidence of internalising their understanding of how others potentially view gender norms. They are aware of dominant discourses around gender norms in relation to football and have an awareness of the resulting gaze (Foucault, 1979). In turn, some of them internalise a need to resist dominant discourses and the resulting gaze, by attempting to prove themselves in this male-dominated environment.

Women's non-playing involvement in football often faces opposition, as their presence in non-playing roles challenges the masculine hegemony of the sport (Webb et al., 2021). The women in this study openly discussed their experiences when completing their referee qualification, which marked the start of their officiating journey. Even at this early stage in their refereeing careers, they described their feelings as a minority, 'even our assessors were not females, they were males, so we were surrounded by males' (Emma). They also expressed concern for how the men taking the same qualification, and the male instructors, may feel towards them, 'usually I'm quite confident in class environments, but in this case, I wouldn't put my hand up or answer questions with the fear of being wrong and therefore ridiculed' (Robyn). Five of the participants in this study felt there was increased pressure for them, as women, to perform well and successfully complete the qualification due to the all-male environment they were studying in. Conscious of their position during the teaching stage of the qualification, some officials expressed reservations and hesitation in relation to their performance and described concern about the impact of their gender on peer reactions if they performed badly, 'if I got something wrong, I felt like I'd get taken the mick out of' (Jess). Jess expressed wanting to prevent attention being drawn to her as she felt subject to more scrutiny as a woman. These arguments align with suggestions from previous research which assert a need for female-only referee meetings and female mentors for female referees (Grubb et al., 2023; Kim & Hong, 2016; Tingle et al., 2014). Women-only courses (which are now promoted by some County FA's), or an increase in female assessors might help build female referees confidence whilst they are establishing themselves as referees.

The stereotype that women are incompetent referees (Reid & Dallaire, 2020) puts increased pressure on women when completing their qualification and when officiating men's games. Findings suggest that during the various stages of officiating, participants felt they were representing *all* women referees. Sarah's response when asked about the pressure she felt when completing the refereeing qualification demonstrates this feeling, 'I think maybe on exam night, I was thinking, I don't want to be that person that fails, because it's the woman that failed' (Sarah). Similarly, Jess stated, 'because they'd judge all women in football from my wrong decision' (Jess). This essentialist idea, where women are presented as homogenously embodying a particular [lack of] ability as football officials, is sexist and inaccurate (Jones & Edwards, 2013).

Gender-marking and presentation of the self

Findings from this research suggest that participants feel that they are surrounded by others who hold outdated, sexist views about women being weak and incompetent referees (Jones & Edwards, 2013; Reid & Dallaire, 2020). If officials are not confident, or do not feel the need to confront situations where sexism occurs, subtle and hostile forms of sexism are likely to remain unchallenged

and potentially retain prevalence in the game. Congruent with the findings from Forbes et al. (2015), this study found that female referees would often ignore sexist remarks or mask them with humour. For example, Lizzie, Amy and Emma described ignoring sexist comments, suggesting that they did this so that they could just concentrate on the game. Whereas, Jess and Sarah explained that it is hard for them to ignore such comments, and Jess stated that it is only when abuse is directed at her gender that she is reminded that she is 'a girl, and not just a referee' (Jess). Nevertheless, as a method of coping with such comments, these participants described refraining from confronting the comments and instead, channelling their displeasure into making the game better. Conversely, Robyn stated that she often challenges sexist comments in an attempt to stop gender-ideologies from developing (Williams & Hess, 2015), and explained that by not confronting inappropriate behaviour, it is allowed to become acceptable. To deal with unnecessary and derogatory comments, Robyn described how she has often had to warn individuals on the side-lines, for example spectators (Devís-Devís et al., 2021), including parents of younger players and coaches (Drury et al., 2022; Kim & Hong, 2016). She stated, 'one of the hardest things for me is ignoring these comments. I feel I must stick up for myself and other female referees' (Robyn).

In addition to this, individual appearance and presentation is also scrutinised. Studies suggest that females will legitimise their involvement in sport by conforming to ideologies of appearance (Forbes et al., 2015; Jones, 2008). The participants in this study both supported and contested the idea of legitimising themselves in the football community. Robyn identified that when refereeing small-sided adult leagues, she avoided drawing attention to her gender due to previous experiences where abuse was shouted at her for being a woman. The abuse could be seen as a normalising technique, demonstrating a judgement of transgression from the norm (Foucault, 1990), presumably when she embodied more feminine traits in a highly masculinised environment. To avoid drawing attention to her gender, Robyn now always wears baggy kit and stands in a way that she believes avoids emphasising feminine physicality (Reid & Dallaire, 2020). Arguably, this is an attempt to obtain discretion by complying with norms in this environment (Foucault, 1990), as well as proving she is not 'an idiot that doesn't know what they're talking about' (Robyn). Conversely, the other participants in this study are not conscious of their image due to the referee kit requirements. For example, Emma explained, 'all referees wear the same kit' and therefore 'get on with the game' (Emma).

When refereeing Saturday or Sunday league football, all participants stated that they do not consciously draw attention to their gender, however, it is common for others to do so, particularly younger people. When asked why attention is drawn to their gender at youth football, Ellie suggested it is due to 'lack of experience with women in football'. She then went on to suggest that in televised football, the team off officials and the technical area is predominantly male, so that is what they see. To combat this problem, participants argued that the introduction of female referees needs to be in the younger-aged football teams, so it is natural for boys and girls to be refereed by females. Ellie shared the thought that her County Football Association was 'one of the best counties for tackling it [sexism]. They have so many awareness campaigns and bigging up the female game'. Developing on this, she suggested that 'it's about educating them [youth players] that a male and a female referee aren't that different. Just because of the way you look and the gender you are, [it] doesn't affect your performance'.

Participants described comments from others which gender-marked them as *female* referees. Fink (2015) suggests that gender-marking 'refers to the verbal and visual presentation of male athletes and men's sports as being the norm, while rendering female athletes and women's competitions as secondary' (333). Research field notes reveal a gender-marking incident at Sarah's cup final game:

> The half-time whistle was blown, and Sarah and her two male assistants were walking into the changing rooms. From the spectators' side of the field, I heard someone say 'well done lady ref!', highlighting Sarah's gender. I approached the group of men where it came from and explained that I was here watching the referee for a study. I asked, 'why did you say 'well done lady ref?' Would you say well done male ref?'. One of the men responded that he just wanted to say well done, and stated: 'female referees are great and it was good to see one on a men's cup final, and I wanted to highlight that she was doing a great job' (Fieldnotes: March, 2018).

Foucault discusses the notion of 'the other' through the creation of scientific classification and dividing practices (Foucault, 1982). Scientifically classifying people into categories such as male or female helps to differentiate acceptable social spaces for each classification through dividing practices (Foucault, 1982). In this way, discourses begin to shape embodied gender, and gender specific embodied practices emerge from discursive practices related to gender discourse. Due to the historical trajectory of modern sport, particularly football, being created for and by men and based on values of masculinity (Jones & Edwards, 2013), when considering sport discourse, women are often seen as 'the other'. This is possibly accentuated when women are not entirely separated from the male form of the game and are instead awarded a position of power or control as a referee.

Conclusion

Limitations of this study include the small sample size which was dependent upon pre-existing relationships and participants already known to the second author. An additional snowballing method to aid recruitment may have garnered more participants who were willing to share their experiences. Additionally, the use of questionnaires for some participants who felt that they did not have time or the flexibility to engage in an interview, meant that the depth and richness of data from those participants was more limited than it would likely have been if a semi-structured interview was conducted. Participants' own time constraints limited the engagement with interviews to some degree, and meant that interviews often lasted less time than the researchers would have hoped for. Nevertheless, it was important to ensure an ethically responsive approach to research which prioritised the needs and wishes of the participants.

Findings from this study demonstrate the persistent challenges faced by female referees who officiate men's football. Experiences of the female referees in this study have ranged from threats of sexual violence, to derogatory abuse related to incompetence of female referees or traditional roles of women in society. Officials in this study have shown times where they have openly challenged certain actions from individuals, but also how they have adopted strategies to cope within an existing structure too.

A Foucauldian analysis of the findings demonstrated how referees in this research were often 'othered' in the football environment, with male referees being considered as the norm. Additionally, referees in this study were sometimes influenced by dominant discourses and the gaze, but, their continued involvement, and sometimes overt challenge to remarks or actions, showed how they also resisted dominant discourse and normalising judgement to continue to demonstrate the ability and determination of women referees in football. The continuous growth of, and support for women in all spheres of football will hopefully change the deep-rooted norms and male dominance within football culture.

Recognising the experiences of the participants within the study is important when considering recommendations to enhance the experiences of female football referees in the future. Such recommendations include a greater prominence for women only refereeing courses, which are visibly promoted now by some County FAs. It is also important that there are more female instructors on all types of FA referee courses (women only and mixed gender). Additionally, mentors or experienced referees should provide regular support on and off the pitch. Overtime, hopefully, an increased visibility of female referees at the highest level (in televised matches) but also at grassroots level with young children, will ensure that young boys can see that it is normal for female referees to officiate football matches. Finally, there is a need for more effective methods to reprimand those that use misogynistic language and actions towards female referees, including spectators, coaches, managers and players. As previous research suggests, a zero-tolerance approach would be ideal, but strong support mechanisms would need to be in place to ensure successful implementation.

Future research calls for studies which continue to seek meaningful, rich data from a larger number of women around the UK and in international contexts. The combination of interviewing or talking to referees about their experiences and perspectives, as well as ethnographic or

observational methods may enable researchers to better understand the impact of negative experiences on women who referee, and also witness, see, or hear incidents on the field as they happen. This would encourage the thick description of relevant events, and may potentially reveal moments that referees are unaware of whilst they are actively refereeing a match. Finally, an intersectional approach to future research is important to help understand experiences of women and the impact that diversity may have on the experiences of women who referee.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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