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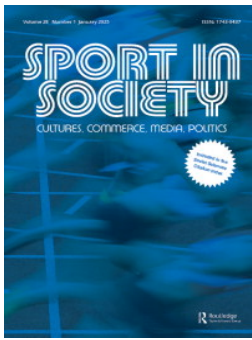
A socio-ecological approach to understanding the experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sports

This is the Published version of the following publication

Pankowiak, Aurelie, Casey, Meghan, Eime, Rochelle and Westerbeek, Hans (2024) A socio-ecological approach to understanding the experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sports. *Sport in Society*. ISSN 1743-0437

The publisher's official version can be found at
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17430437.2024.2390989>
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To cite this article: Aurélie Pankowiak, Meghan Casey, Rochelle Eime & Hans Westerbeek (19 Aug 2024): A socio-ecological approach to understanding the experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sports, *Sport in Society*, DOI: [10.1080/17430437.2024.2390989](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2024.2390989)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2024.2390989>



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Published online: 19 Aug 2024.



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A socio-ecological approach to understanding the experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sports

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand the experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sports through a gendered lens on the socio-ecological model. Data collected from fifteen semi-structured interviews with Australian women and girls was thematically analysed at the societal, the organisational/community, the interpersonal and the intrapersonal levels. The study highlights that gendered factors shaped women's and girls' experiences at all levels. Club leadership valued women and girls' inclusion, but resources were sometimes unevenly committed, and men's participation and leadership were privileged. This inequity fuelled women and girls' desire to advocate change for future generations. A socio-ecological system approach is critical to continue gender equity developments in sport.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 September 2023
Accepted 6 August 2024

KEYWORDS

Inclusion; player; female; physical activity; grassroots sport

Introduction

In recognition of the health benefits of participation in community sport, Australian sport policy highlights that sport clubs, where the majority of grassroots sport opportunities are provided should be inclusive and cater for all people (Casey et al. 2019; Spaaij, Knoppers, and Jeanes 2021). Globally, governments and sport governing bodies are increasing strategic initiatives toward the inclusion of women and girls in sport (Clearinghouse for Sport n.d.; Council of Europe 2019). These gender equity strategies have facilitated the growth of women and girls' participation, especially in sports that have been traditionally dominated by males such as contact sports that portray stereotypical masculine traits, in Australia (Eime et al. 2021b, Eime et al. 2022), and internationally (Global Sport Matters 2020). Despite improving opportunities, sporting clubs continue to be settings of exclusion and discrimination, particularly for women and girls who play male-dominated sports (Casey et al. 2019; Jeanes et al. 2021).

The barriers experienced by women and girls to play sport are often connected to the social and cultural construction of gender, whereby sport is traditionally seen as masculine

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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(Bevan et al. 2020). Indeed, community sports clubs have traditionally been developed by and for men, and whilst opportunities for women and girls to participate in male-dominated spaces increase, the division of power and resources may not be equitable (Casey et al. 2019; Jeanes et al. 2021). Research indicates that barriers tend to be exacerbated in traditionally male-dominated sports, where hegemonic masculinity is accentuated, which leads to women and girls' participation being undervalued (Abadi and Gill 2019; Bevan et al. 2020; Persson 2022) and contests the participation growth and retention of women and girls in these sports. These gendered barriers can explain why women and girls' participation and retention rates in community sport are consistently lower than that of men and boys (Eime et al. 2021a; Eime et al. 2018).

With a continuing gender gap in participation by women and girls especially within male-dominated sports, a deeper understanding of their experiences in these sports is needed. Such knowledge could inform sport development strategies that promotes equitable participation (opportunities) for women and girls. Although many studies exist on the experiences of women and girls in physical activity they have predominantly focused on adolescents only (Basterfield et al. 2016; Casey et al. 2009; Eime et al. 2015; Fowlie, Eime, and Griffiths 2020) and on barriers to physical activity in general rather than community sport (Basterfield et al. 2016; Moreno-Llamas, García-Mayor, and De la Cruz-Sánchez 2020; Somerset and Hoare 2018). The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sports using the socio-ecological model (SEM) and taking a gendered lens to the SEM (LaVoi and Dutove 2012) to examine the societal, organisational, interpersonal and intrapersonal influences on women and girls' participation experiences.

Literature and theoretical framework

Women in male-dominated sports in Australia

In many countries, male-dominated activities, including sports, are those viewed as being the domain of male expression, displaying stereotypical masculine activities such as physical contact, strength, toughness and aggression (Connell and Messerschmidt 2016; English 2017; Persson 2022). While popular male-dominated sports vary from a national context to another, they typically include many mainstream sports that have historically been only played professionally by men, and that receive important media coverage for men's team. These include for example: Ice Hockey (Gilenstam, Karp, and Henriksson-Larsén 2008) in Canada and American 'tackle' football (Migliaccio and Berg 2007). In Europe, a typical male-dominated sport includes football (soccer) (Persson 2022), and in Australia, male-dominated sports include for example the football codes of Australian rules football, rugby, and football (soccer) as well as cricket (Abadi and Gill 2019; Bevan et al. 2020). Targeted gender-equity in sport initiatives and improved social attitudes have increased opportunities for women and girls to play sport, and sports that have traditionally been male-dominated are becoming more popular for women and girls (Hall and Oglesby 2016; Rauscher and Cooky 2016; Eime et al. 2021a). In Australia, participation in traditionally-male dominated sports (e.g. soccer, Australian football, cricket) has increased for women and girls however their participation and retention rates in these sports remain much lower than that of boys and men (Eime et al. 2021b). With ongoing gender inequities and continuing gender gap

in participation and retention, it is important to understand the experiences of women and girls in male-dominated sport.

Studies on the socio-cultural dimensions of gender construction provides a useful background to understand male-dominated sports. Scholars describe how sport has developed as an activity associated with stereotypical masculine roles and traits (Berg, Migliaccio, and Anzini-Varesio 2014; Spaaij, Farquharson, and Marjoribanks 2015). Amongst other frameworks, hegemonic masculinity, which articulates social ideals around masculinity and femininity in society, explains the cultural dynamics by which hyper masculine, heterosexual men are more valued in society, and thus sustain leading positions over those portraying femininity and non-heterosexuality (Spaaij, Farquharson, and Marjoribanks 2015, English 2017, Connell and Messerschmidt 2016, Persson 2022). This helps explain men's domination in sport historically, and in contrast, women's subordination, and how patriarchal gender hierarchy in sport make it difficult for women and girls to be actively involved in sports in general and in male-dominated sports in particular (Spaaij, Farquharson, and Marjoribanks 2015, English 2017, Connell and Messerschmidt 2016).

Gender hierarchy in sport is challenging to disrupt. For example, a study by Jeanes et al. (2021) found that despite the attempts of an Australian football club to increase involvement of women and girls as players and managers through gender equity initiatives, inequalities persisted because men who can embody dominant types of masculinity were privileged. Similarly, other studies conducted in the Australian context highlighted the presence of discriminatory comments towards girls and assumptions about their inadequacy to play in stereotypically masculine sports, concluding that these gendered social dynamics influence both initial participation as well as dropout (Bevan et al. 2020; Fowlie, Eime, and Griffiths 2020; Jeanes et al. 2021; Kernebone et al. 2021). As a result of these challenges, interpersonal and social connections with family, mentors and peers are critical for girls' continued participation in male-dominated sports (Abadi and Gill 2019; Bevan et al. 2020; Elliott, Bevan, and Litchfield 2019; Kernebone et al. 2021).

These socio-cultural micro studies offer important explanations into the gendered experiences of women and girls, highlighting the persistent lack of equal opportunities to participate in male-dominated sports (Eime et al. 2021a; Persson 2022). These dynamics also warrant consideration of gender-specific elements when examining the multitude of factors influencing the experiences of women and girls in male-dominated sports. The socio-ecological model (SEM) (LaVoi and Dutove 2012) provides an opportunity to examine these experiences, taking into consideration the multitude of factors influencing participation.

Applying the socio-ecological model to women and girls' participation in male-dominated sport

Many studies investigating the determinants of participation in sport have utilised the SEM to understand the multi-layered and interacting factors influencing individual behaviours and experiences (Eime et al. 2021b; Eime et al. 2015; Fowlie, Eime, and Griffiths 2020; Jenkin et al. 2018; LaVoi and Dutove 2012; Taylor et al. 2020). Originally developed by Bronfenbrenner (1977), the SEM posits that human development is contextual and therefore experiences are influenced by a multitude of factors at different contextual levels including: the individual/intrapersonal level (i.e. the biology, psychology, personality, demographics of the individual), the interpersonal level (i.e. the individual's relationships), the community/

organisational level (i.e. the community in which people work and live/programs, policies and organisational procedures of the sporting organisation) and the socio-cultural level (i.e. the cultural beliefs and social norms surrounding the individual). Originally developed to understand individuals' development from a holistic, system-based perspective (whereby people interact with the diverse contexts in which they live and participate in, which in turn impact their overall development), the model has been applied and adapted to examine many other areas, notably health-promoting behaviours such as physical activity (Sallis et al. 2006) and sport (Rowe et al. 2013).

Relevant to this study is LaVoi and Dutove (2012) application of the SEM to analyse the literature on women coach development. LaVoi and Dutove (2012) work guides researchers and practitioners in understanding the experiences of women coaches, by showing how gender-specific factors occur at each level of the SEM. These included for example how being a mom influences one's career trajectory in sport (individual level), the importance for women to have a community of practice with other women coaches (interpersonal level), paid maternity leave (organisational level) and how dominant gender ideologies impact the perceived lesser value of women coaches (societal level). Similarly, one study that used the SEM to investigate the multi-level barriers that teenage girls face in playing cricket in regional Australia (Fowlie, Eime, and Griffiths 2020), highlighted gendered-specific barriers such as the absence of player pathways, and no female-only competition. This broader understanding offered by the SEM is useful to inform where and how change can occur, by intervening at diverse levels (for example increasing girls' opportunities to play with peers at the interpersonal level, or gender-equity initiatives at the organisational levels), ultimately aiming to improve the conditions in which women and girls play (LaVoi and Dutove 2012).

The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sports taking a gendered lens to the SEM to examine the intrapersonal, interpersonal, organisational, and societal influences on women and girls' participation experiences.

Methodology

Paradigm and strategy

This study was underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology, with an understanding that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore participants and researchers make sense of experiences based on their embeddedness in a particular socio-cultural context (Crotty 1998; Patton 2015). As knowledge is socially constructed, realities are multiple, there is no one truth but patterns of meaning are socially produced (Braun and Clarke 2006; Patton 2015). In line with social constructionism, the research followed a qualitative strategy using individual semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of adolescent girls and women over the age of 15 years who had played in male-dominated sports in the previous year (2019/2020). Qualitative designs are a powerful means to gain in-depth knowledge about peoples' experiences (Patton 2015).

In terms of positionality, the research team comprised three women and one man, and was heterogeneous in terms of age, cultural background (French, Australian and Dutch) and experiences in sport, and homogenous in terms of ethnicity, i.e. white Caucasian. The researchers came from diverse academic careers in sport; participation epidemiology,

policy, and business. All authors on the research team have played community-level sport, some in male-dominated sports, and all have been club-coaches and volunteers, three of which were involved as a volunteer (parent, coach) at time of data collection and analysis. This range of experiences gave both insider and outsider perspectives to the phenomenon of women and girls' experiences in male-dominated sport (Patton 2015). This diversity allowed to reflect on the participants' meanings and experiences during the peer debriefing meetings during which the four authors discussed data analysis and interpretation (Patton 2015).

Participants

Following approval by the Federation University Human Research Ethics Committee [number A20-099], an invitation was sent out on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) of the researchers involved in the project and through the research teams' sport professional networks inviting them to pass the invitation onto their contacts. The invitation flyer and associated text purposefully targeted women and girls residing in the State of Victoria, Australia, 15 years or older and who were participating in any male-dominated sport such as Australian football, cricket, football (soccer), and rugby to share their experiences. The advertisement explicitly encouraged girls and women from any background and from both metropolitan and regional areas of Victoria to participate in the study. Women and girls interested in participating in an interview were able to contact the researcher and provide written consent to their participation following review of an information sheet about the study. The information sheet provided details regarding the procedures of the research, how anonymity and confidentiality would be ensured and their right to withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussion, as well as choose not to answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, the information sheet provided links to free support services options available to the interviewee if they experienced any distress. This information was repeated to the interviewee verbally prior to the interview. All interviewees received a \$30AUD retail store voucher as compensation for their time.

A total of 15 women and girls aged between 16 and 48 years participated in the semi-structured interviews. All interviewees were recruited through social media advertisement, but one, who was recruited through the professional network of one of the authors. A summary of the sample is provided in Table 1. The women and girls played in a range of male-dominated sports. Five of them played in two male-dominated sports, indicating that they are highly involved in sports. None of the women and girls were part of the same sports club. Interviewees' name and personal information such as club and locations were removed from the written transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms.

Table 1. Interviewees' profile.

Age, years (n)	Residence (n)	Sports (n)
15-18 (3)	Metropolitan Melbourne (9)	Australian football (6)
19-30 (8)	Regional Victoria (6)	Soccer/ futsal (4)
30-50 (4)		Rugby/ touch rugby (3)
		Cricket (4)
		Rock climbing (2)
		Taekwondo (1)

Data collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted online (*via* Zoom), as these took place during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdown (September–November 2020). The questions were semi-structured and were informed by the literature on women and girls' sport participation, and explored key dimensions of the socio-ecological model (i.e. intra-/interpersonal levels, organisational level and socio-cultural level). The guide included the following topics and questions: their motivations and reasons for starting and continuing participation in their sport, what they gained from participating; how others (peers, friends, family, club) treated them, what they thought about their sport club environment, what were positive and negative issues they had experienced. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min, they were all audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Participants' identity was removed from the written transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2012) and Patton (2015). The process was facilitated by NVivo and consisted of actively searching for patterns in the data to develop themes and sub-themes. First, interviewees' transcripts were read by the first author who drove the analysis and was immersed in the data (data familiarisation phase). During the second step, coding, interviewees' statements relating to the same topic or meaning were assigned to a code. Initially, coding was primarily open and thus inductive, whilst maintaining a focus on the main concepts of investigation. In a second, more deductive stage of coding, the different levels of the SEM were used to frame the development of the themes. For instance, women and girls were asked what attracted you to play their sport. These comments were then linked to SEM levels, e.g. '*I loved the physical contact*' (intrapersonal), '*My family members played*' (interpersonal). As interviewees comments evolved through the interview the complex and interacting factors tended to emerge e.g. '*when I first told my friends I was playing footy the boys were like you won't be really good at it*'. As demonstrated in the literature review, experiences are complex and influenced by many elements that go beyond the individual level. Overall, the analysis involved a back and forth, interactive process, whereby the interviewees' statements were compared and contrasted against the codes and the themes, to ensure delineation and consistency of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2012; Patton 2015).

Study rigour

A number of strategies aligned with quality assessment criteria of qualitative studies were employed to ensure the rigour of the study and analysis (Patton 2015). A second, senior independent researcher reviewed the development of the coding process and development of the themes. This technique was used as a form of triangulation to ensure the trustworthiness of the analytic claims (Patton 2015). Further, peer-debriefing meetings took place between all authors, allowing clarification of meaning, reflexivity and challenging of assumptions about the data and meaning making. By being explicit about the scientific

paradigm and positionality, and by providing details about the data set obtained and how this was treated in the analysis, our intent is to ensure transparency, thus allowing readers to judge our assumptions, claims and how these can be transferred to their own contexts. Another way of showing transparency and ensure the credibility of this research was to provide a thorough or thick description in the presentation of data below through the use of direct quotes (Patton 2015).

Findings

The gendered experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sports were analysed using the SEM levels, namely the societal, organisational/community, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels (see Figure 1). The findings are presented in this order because it is apparent that gendered-social norms have a ripple effect throughout the other levels. Therefore, presenting the experiences of women and girls interviewed within the societal frame first provides a broader context through which the organisational, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels can be understood. It is important to note however that, in presenting the findings in such manner, we do not aim to remove or diminish individuals' agency and motivation as determinants on sport behaviours. In line with the SEM (Bronfenbrenner 1977), our goal instead is to demonstrate that an individual's experience is connected to various layers of influences which may or may not constrain women and girls' sport participation behaviours and experiences (LaVoi and Dutove 2012). While the SEM levels are presented separately in this section to guide the reader, relationships between the diverse

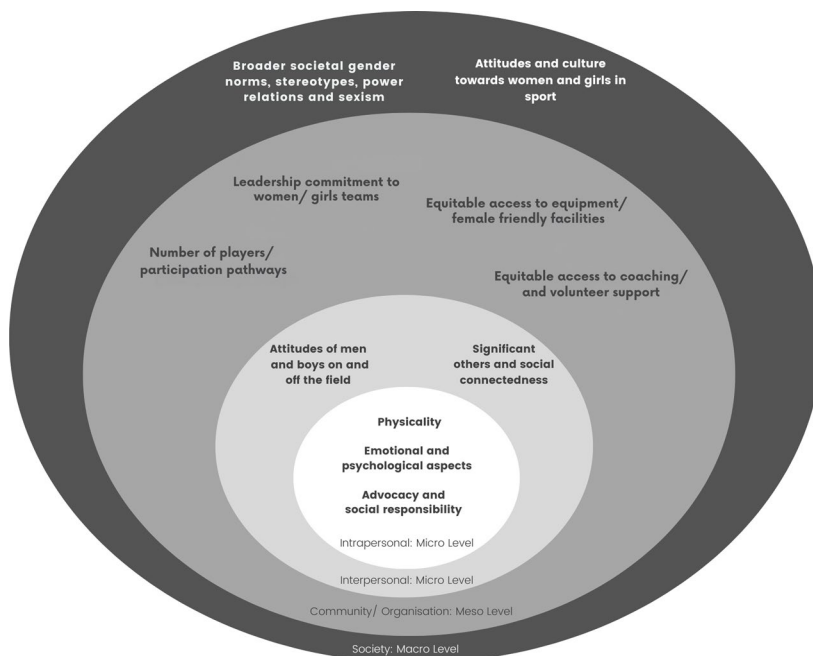


Figure 1. Socioecological factors influencing girls and women's participation and experience in male-dominated sports.

levels are evident in the data and we therefore make these explicit. We refer to [Figure 2](#) for visualisation of the relationships.

Societal factors

At a societal level, women and girls had to contend with entrenched gendered norms and stereotypes whereby there were deep-seeded beliefs about women and girls playing male-dominated sport. Interviewees indicated living and playing in environments that assumed that masculine sports are *'not really a sport for women'* (Lisa). Interviewees specifically discussed these gendered norms in the context of their clubs, in which there was evidence of an unconscious gender bias. Alice provided an example of a situation at a social tournament organised by the club's committee members who: *'instead of going around and just asking an equal number of men and women to step out so this new crew could have a kick, [they] actually asked all of the women to step out. They didn't ask any of the men'*. Another example related to women's leadership within a team, particularly in mixed-gender environments. Kerry, a climber, highlighted how gendered-power dynamics negatively influenced the ability of more experienced women to lead climbing trips. She expressed frustration over the fact that some women did not feel comfortable participating in women-only climbing sessions, to the point *'where whenever she [the woman lead] does trips outdoors, she will make sure that she's got a male friend with them so other women can come along. That's like that's a bit fucked'*. (Kerri) These statements illustrate assumptions made by various club members, suggesting that women might not be interested in participating

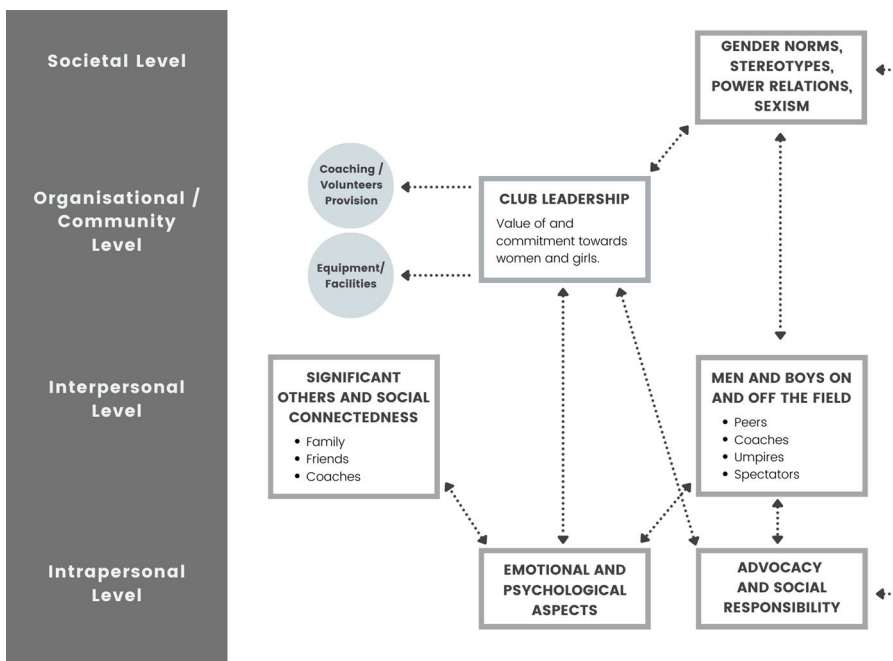


Figure 2. Relationships between factors influencing the participation and experience of girls and women in male-dominated sports.

in social games or that they may lack the skills to take on leadership roles as effectively as men. These actions may not be intentional, but unconsciously they devalue, and at times exclude, women. This is in line with the idea of unconscious gender biases whereby learnt mental associations associated with gender and stereotypes are ingrained within our beliefs and the process of socialization, and can unintentionally discriminate against women and girls (Strachan et al. 2018).

Feeling that women's participation was devalued was further discussed by several interviewees, who felt that their performances were perceived as not meeting the standard masculine expectations of a player. For example, Nura received several comments such as '*you aren't as tough as the men*' and '*women's football is boring*'. She explained that for her, this devaluation by her friends was '*the biggest source of negativity*'. Similarly, Olivia said these types of comments took her '*self-esteem down because they're practically saying you can't play sport just because of your gender and it's not the best thing in the world to hear*'. This demonstrates the impact that societal views can directly have on relationships, and on women and girls, to play male-dominated sport in the first place or the gendered bias they endure by diverse club members to continue playing (Figure 2).

Because of the gendered social dynamics identified above, all interviewees believed that having girls and women better represented throughout the club and visible in the community would improve societies acceptance and inclusion of women and girls in male-dominated sports. For instance, Kerry used her '*Instagram page to feature women that no one usually talks about, because it's not just about the pro climber, it is all athletes*' In doing so, Kerry took an active role in the promotion, education and normalisation of the presence of women and girls in male-dominated sports.

On a positive note, changing views towards women and girls in male-dominated sports were identified by a few interviewees as having facilitated opportunities for them to play, as illustrated by Rebecca: '*it [the sport]'s becoming more and more and more accepting of female players...*' She believed that the younger generations had facilitated this change and were becoming '*more gender inclusive, even to those that are non-binary. But there's still a long a way to go*'. (Rebecca) Others believed that sporting organisations were starting to be '*aware of how damaging some of those stereotypes are*'. (Lisa), though nothing was mentioned about organisations' roles in dismantling these negative gendered stereotypes.

Organisational and community level

The way sports organisations, especially clubs, lead and manage sports programming, coaching, equipment and facility access was a significant topic of discussion. Interviewees showed both positive and negative impacts of organisational factors on their experiences, influencing the ways in which they felt included in their sport and club (Figure 2).

Player shortages and club's participation opportunities, or lack thereof, for women and girls were both enablers to and barriers of participation. Some interviewees indicated they started to play because of the small number of women and girls playing in male-dominated sports: '*I started subbing in for their team and then I eventually just signed on because they always needed women*' and the newly created team simply provided '*that opportunity*' to play (Chloe). The lack of local opportunities was a motivation for some '*to help create a club there and help create a women's team...*' (Emily). Interviewees highlighted the inconsistency

of underdeveloped playing pathways for girls to progress through various age categories. This created logistical challenges for some, notably those living in regional areas, and impacted feelings of community belonging as illustrated by Charlotte: *'They don't have a girls' team or a women's team, and your closest one is [town name], you've then got to travel 30 min and you're not part of your community anymore...'* For some women, this lack of opportunities to develop influenced their skill level, potentially adding complexity to the views that girls and women's sporting capacity is lesser than that of men (Figure 2):

People assume that women aren't as skilful.... That's complete rubbish ... it's because the women haven't been invested in and shown how to pass and tackle properly and do all these one-per-cent things that the men have been doing for years. (Lisa)

The club environment, its leadership and commitment towards developing women and girls' participation was an important topic of discussion. Interviewees gave examples of times they felt included or excluded in the club and this often related to how management invested in women/girls teams and in particular in terms of the quality of physical and human resources allocated (or not) to women and girls' teams (Figure 2). Overall, club environments were diverse in the way they allocated physical and human resources and this impacted women's feelings of inclusion.

On one hand, some women perceived that club leaders showed value towards the inclusion of women and girls' teams, with leaders having *'the right attitude'* and *'listen[ing] to the female voice'*. This resulted in positive experiences, with women highlighting that *'it's all fair and equal'* within the club environment (Fatima). Others specifically highlighted equitable provision of facilities, equipment and volunteers, whereby facilities were *'a bit more female friendly'* (Emily) and *'if the boys get new [equipment] we get new [equipment]'* (Olivia), and coaches and volunteers were *'happy to help out'* (Olivia). Moreover, most interviewees reported now having coaches for their team, some of which seemed to be strong advocates for women/girls' participation. For example, a head coach was *'trying to build up our female players, because he wants to hand over to one of them. So, when we look for coaches... we generally try to focus on the female community'*. (Jessica)

In contrast to these positive club environments, many interviewees reported unequal provision of resources for women's/girls' teams, compared to men's/boys' team. Women referenced examples of inequality in volunteers, equipment and facilities. For example, Nura explained that while the club leadership seemed supportive and financially invested in women and girls' teams, they were not *'as supportive as they are towards the men or the netball club'* (Nura). Zoe also indicated that the boys playing cricket *'would get priority over the nets'*, which would mean the girls *'had one net or [they] had to train on the oval without nets'*. There were also issues with equipment. Charlotte noted: *'This season, the men all got new uniforms, but we weren't getting new uniforms. We'll just give you left over stock of the old ones'* and Olivia added her team *'didn't have proper footballs and ... they weren't the right size'*. While several interviewees reported that facilities for women/girls were improving in terms of access and quality, others highlighted that despite improvements attributed to public policies, there continued to be club practices affecting women and girls: *'Obviously the council and government have really tried with all the upgrades that most places are getting, but again, the running of the club, and no sanitary bins, and the boys are using that facility before we are and then it's disgusting'*. (Charlotte) Further, in some club environments, the responsibility to develop and promote playing opportunities for women and girls fell to a

few committed individuals, particularly women themselves. This demonstrates the club's attempt to be more inclusive, but placed the responsibility back on women to action:

... it was pretty much put up to one or two people to do the recruiting of girls, not much of a club, but they [committee members] were still like 'hey, Nura do you want to put something on our social media, send it to me, we'll process it, we don't mind'. (Nura)

Because of these ongoing challenges, several interviewees felt they had to take on an advocacy role to ensure the ongoing needs of the women and girls' teams were met (Figure 2). Two women went as far as establishing their own women-only club due to the scarcity of playing opportunities and the absence of inclusivity and dedication towards women and girls in mixed-gender clubs, as illustrated by Jessica.

So, myself and a friend who runs the [town name] Cricket Association got together and said, 'well, why don't we make a club that has no alignment to any other male team' [...] my experiences now [in the women-only club Jessica created] are very similar to my experiences when I was at the female-only club for that 10-year period, but that two-year period [when she played in the mixed-gender club], it was very different, almost isolated, really, in comparison to the rest of the club. [In this club] it would have been a committee of men trying to figure out how to help this women's team, and they didn't really know how. Yeah. It's very different being at a female-only club. (Jessica)

The importance of women's advocacy is further demonstrated by other interviewees indicating the importance of having '*girls that are in the team are actually committee members*' to '*make sure we get female-friendly uniforms and we don't just get male uniforms*'. (Rebecca) Charlotte further highlighted:

... unless I'm advocating for it [upgrading the facilities] or the other girls are advocating for it, it's not going to happen, no... Especially with the president we have now, we have to keep advocating to be heard. I don't think we're at a point where we could stop or take a step back now. (Charlotte)

A player who was also herself on the club committee provided insights on how she had to navigate gendered power dynamics with men who did not want to relinquish control, further demonstrating the unequal gendered hierarchy in sport, and the importance of women represented in leadership:

I see all of the gender biases and they're worn fairly openly on the sleeves of the men who like to be in control. They actually really, really want to engage more women and girls in the club so there's a really positive aspect there. But they want to do it. They don't want women to be involved doing it. (Alice)

Interpersonal factors

Significant relationships (parents, siblings, friends) and social connectedness (feeling connected to others when playing) were strong enablers of girls and women's decisions to start playing male-dominated sports and to continue their participation. One particular gendered relational aspect was found in women and girls' relationships and interactions with boys and men (on and off the field). While this theme was strongly represented by negative comments, attitudes and behaviours, interviewees also reported positive and empowering relationships with men and boys, particularly with their coach.

First, several interviewees reported disrespectful, demeaning and condescending attitudes from boys and men, which often occurred in group settings and are likely continuing to influence social norms about women/girls' inclusion in male dominated sports. Chloe reported negative discourses towards the female game in general: *'Even just hearing men speak about women playing footy it's like, 'oh, that's cute, you're trying'. It's not, "yeah, she can play AFL [Australian Football League]"'*. (Chloe) In terms of relationships with peers, Kerry who participated in a mixed-gendered environment shared her frustration at unwanted feedback from male participants on her training: *'so a guy comes up and is just like 'why don't you put your foot up there?' Pretty much telling this person what to do even when they don't ask for it...'* Of greater concern, interviewees reported experiences of violence. This included sexual harassment by peers, with the complicity of coaches: *'boys on the sideline making fun of my 'big bouncing boobs'. Just stuff like that. Coaches making funny comments in changerooms and all of those sorts of things'*. (Alice) Violent behaviours were also used by spectators: *'[the men] were drinking on the sideline, yelling out to one of the players saying, 'Number 10, give us a twirl. Number 10 get up and go faster'. Little things like that can really affect someone's mindset'*. (Emily) Like Emily, Alice highlighted how damaging her experience had been, believing it was at the root of her advocacy to improve future women and girls' experiences (Figure 2).

Despite ongoing negative behaviours, some interviewees reported positive relationships with boys and men in their clubs: *'The men are all really, really welcoming. They'll even come and join into our training sessions sometimes if we need some extra help because they want to see us grow as much as we want to see ourselves grow'*. (Rebecca) Specifically, coaches' support in the interviewees' development had positively affected their confidence and belonging in the sport. Rebecca felt privileged recognising the challenges others had and continued to face: *'But luckily I had a coach that was pretty patient with me and helped me along the way...'*

Intrapersonal factors

The intrapersonal level includes aspects directly related to individuals such as psychological and physical factors, as well as demographics factors such age. Several interviewees described the strong positive emotional experiences associated with their participation. Some particularly enjoyed the opportunity provided by the sport to express their physicality: *'you can tackle people whereas you can't do it with most women's sport... I think that's what's driven me into consistently play'*. (Chloe) Others highlighted the overall wellbeing they gained from participating in sport, not only through improving their physical health but also their mental health and confidence, as summarised by Amanda:

I love how I feel when I play. I like me when I play. It's great for my mental health, for my physical health and it gives me this sense that I'm powerful and that I'm capable and - I don't know, I feel really proud of that.

Another strong aspect of women's/girls' experiences was the social purpose they attached to their participation in male-dominated sports, particularly to stop negative stereotypes as well as create social change and advance gender equality in their sport (Figure 2). This reflects the multi-layered influences on participation, whereby women/girls were motivated to participate in order to challenge social norms. For example, a player explained: *'I was*

kind of over boys telling me I couldn't do it because I was a girl, and it kind of just made me want to just prove them wrong. So I joined the club and I started playing. (Rebecca) Similarly Chloe felt a responsibility to challenge social norms about women being good enough particularly in front of male peers, stating: *if a guy's there and he's like, 'Chloe, come on, you can do this', you're like, well, I've got to make women look better so I want to push even harder.* (Chloe) The above comments reflect a sense of duty to challenge social norms about gender and sport, and it not only motivated women and girls' participation, it translated into a desire to promote participation to other women/girls in the sport, and to *'be a good role model to the young girls that are coming through [...]*. (Jessica) Indeed, interviewees believed their ongoing presence and advocacy was required to ensure women and girls' needs and rights to opportunities were assured: *'you have to keep fighting as well, you have to keep reminding them [men on the committee] and standing up for yourself.* (Sophie) This sense of social responsibility was present in the younger players as well, as illustrated by this quote from a 16-year-old Australian football participant, who wanted to keep participating to *'help those girls accomplish their dreams regardless of ethnicity, gender or age and yeah, this is my main source of motivation in sports.* (Fatima)

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of women and girls playing at the community club level in male-dominated sports in Victoria, Australia. A gendered perspective on the socio-ecological model (LaVoi and Dutove 2012) provided a theoretical lens through which to understand how women and girls' experiences in these sports were influenced at the individual, interpersonal, organisational and socio-cultural levels. As such, individual experiences in male-dominated sports were framed in a broader multi-systems and gendered perspective, which differentiates from micro-social and psychological theories that focus on understanding participation based on individual characteristics (e.g. motivation, skills, attitudes etc) (LaVoi and Dutove 2012; Sallis et al. 2006).

The main findings reveal the complex interlinkage between prevailing gendered norms, the club organisational culture and practices, and interpersonal dynamics with men and boys. At a societal level, gendered norms and stereotypes meant that men's leadership and participation in community club structures was often unchallenged and took precedence over women and girls' participation. At the same time, participation pathways for women and girls within club structures was sometimes devalued, with disrespectful, violent and discriminatory behaviours from peers, coaches, volunteers and spectators. Further, these playing pathways were underdeveloped and therefore impacting women and girls' playing skills (i.e. organisational/club level) and consequently reinforcing societal gendered norms that continue to devalue women's participation (e.g. girls are not as good boys). As a result, women and girls themselves became active agents to advance gender equity in their sport, displaying strong sense of duty to influence social change within club environments to improve playing opportunities for future women and girls. This extends the findings of others who reported that challenging negative societal and interpersonal gendered views can be a motivator for women and girls participation and retention in sport (Elliott, Bevan, and Litchfield 2019; Kernebone et al. 2021; Persson 2022). Being role models, 'giving back' and developing sports for future generations of girls have also been reported in studies with professional and elite athletes (Taylor et al. 2020). This study complements the evidence

that being an advocate and role model for women and girls in male-dominated sports extends to the community club level. Future research should explore the conditions that give rise to women and girls to either conform or resist and challenge the gendered power relations within the club, and how this relates to participation and retention in sport.

This study advances the literature by providing empirical evidence on how gendered sub-systems, i.e. interpersonal dynamics, sport organisations and socio-cultural norms, intersect and influence individuals, and extend the socio-ecological model to women and girls' experiences playing in male-dominated community sports (Fowlie, Eime, and Griffiths 2020; LaVoi and Dutove 2012). At the same time, the findings highlight the importance of promoting individual agency and empowering girls and women who wish to advocate for the broader development of opportunities for their peers as well as bring awareness of gender inequities at the broader socio-cultural level.

These main findings add weight to the argument also made by others (Newland, Encel, and Phillips 2020) that in male-dominated sports, girls'/women's teams are embedded into existing structures which have historically been controlled by men/boys, and are therefore not always well supported or resourced as well boys'/men's teams. Feminist sport scholars demonstrated through spatial and gender relation analyses of community sport participation in Australia and Norway (Jeanes et al. 2021; Pavlidis 2020; Persson 2022) that the way participants had access to diverse spaces in male-dominated community sports clubs was gendered and inequitable. This meant that women/girls not only had less access to high-quality facilities and equipment, but when they did, their experience tended to be negative because men had control over the space (Jeanes et al. 2021). These findings resonate with the experiences of women and girls in our study. Australian government policies at the Federal level and the State level in Victoria have strategically invested in gender-equity to increase women and girls' opportunities to play sport professionally and at the community level since the 1980s (Casey et al. 2019; McLachlan 2019). However, this study shows that community sport clubs continue to privilege men and boys' participation, not only through the way sport is managed but also through gendered interpersonal relationships. This study and the work of Jeanes et al. (2021) highlight the importance of changes within club environments and the development of sport policies, program and public advocacy campaigns that address the gendered culture and practices of sporting clubs. This includes addressing the prevailing gender biases and power imbalances in the wider sport sports community and addressing the underdeveloped participation pathways for women and girls (Jeanes et al. 2021; Casey et al. 2019). Therefore, government and organisational sport policy and advocacy movements should focus on gender equity initiatives at the community sport level and target and challenge unequal power dynamics between men and women to ensure inclusive and safe spaces for women and girls in male-dominated sport clubs (Jeanes et al. 2021; Pavlidis 2020). Scientific research and evaluation should examine the impact and effects of these policies in improving the sport clubs' environment for women and girls. Considering that local community sport clubs are primarily ran by volunteers (Swierzy, Wicker, and Breuer 2021), examining volunteers' capacity to enable social change in sport clubs is imperative.

Researchers have previously highlighted how sport serve as a setting for both inclusion and exclusion and is a site of '*entrenched inequalities along gender, race, nation and class lines*' p.407 (Spaaij, Farquharson, and Marjoribanks 2015). This current study found that

women who experienced exclusionary practices by their sports club were motivated to establish women-only clubs. This phenomenon was also reported by Newland (2019), who noted that female-only spaces can be potentially less intimidating. The strategy of establishing women-only clubs is in contention with inclusion and diversity policies of Australian sport (Spaaij, Knoppers, and Jeanes 2021) and is unlikely to address gender inequalities at the broader societal and organisational levels. However, providing gender segregated sport clubs could provide a more inclusive and safer space for sport club participation for some women and girls, particularly for women and girls who have experiences of gender-based violence (sexist comments and sexual harassment for the interviewees in our study). Research is uncovering the high frequency of violence against women in sport internationally (Forsdike and O'Sullivan 2022) and against girls playing in community sport in Australia (Pankowiak et al. 2022). Ensuring diverse choices to play male-dominated sports are available (i.e. in women-only spaces or mixed) may be important to ensure women and girls can feel safe when participating in sport and to guarantee they have the opportunities they want and need to play.

Furthering the argument of choice, agency and autonomy, our study demonstrates the importance for sport clubs and policies to centre women and girls' autonomy and agency as interviewees in our study showed a strong sense of advocacy for positive social change for women and girls in sport. This finding extends Elliott, Bevan, and Litchfield (2019) study, which reported that girls' sense of duty to break down gendered barriers and change the narrative of girls playing Australian football in the state of South Australia was a key factor for the girls' retention in the sport. However, we must be careful to not assume that all communities have strong individual or collective agency or that sport is always empowering and safe (Lim and Dixon 2017). Others have also recognised the important role men play in driving and supporting gender equality in community sport (Randle et al. 2022), and the need for men to critically reflect on their own personal connection to the systemic problem of gender inequities and how they can act in preventing it (Burrell 2021). This reinforces that all players regardless of gender are important agents of change to address gender inequities in sport. Research is needed to examine the extent to which women and girls who have dropped out from community sports also identified with a sense of duty and social responsibility, as this could confirm or challenge that the desire to advocate is a factor for retention in sport, as well as inform how girls and women can be supported in challenging existing social norms safely. This finding also indicates that sport organisations may want to pay particular attention to those women and girls who are passionate about advocacy as they could make excellent leaders in formal executive positions. Indeed, effective management of organisational change towards gender equity goals requires leaders to adopt advocacy behaviours (de Vries 2015).

One final compelling finding was that some women and girls were motivated by the thrill of being strong and physical on the field. Seeking and enjoying the physicality of traditionally male-only sports has been shown to be a source of enjoyment and empowerment for women and girls (Gilenstam, Karp, and Henriksson-Larsén 2008; Migliaccio and Berg 2007; Roster 2007). Elliott, Bevan, and Litchfield (2019) highlighted that contact and physical assertions '*comprised a vital source of attraction*' (p. 400) for adolescent girls to play Australian football. This finding is important because it shows that unlike stereotypical

ideals of femininity, girls and women do find ongoing joy in being physically active through expressing stereotypically masculine traits (Connell and Messerschmidt 2016; Cooky and Messner 2018). Sport governing bodies and clubs may want to develop marketing narratives that capture emotions around physicality to attract girls and women, as well as narratives for the wider community that normalise women and girls in male-dominated sports and promote respectful behaviours.

Limitations

The reader should consider the following limitations when interpreting and transferring the findings of this study to their own context. This study represented the views of women and girls highly involved and engaged in their sport, and thus made them strong key informants to talk about their experiences. Interviewees self-selected to participate in this research and therefore may be those who are some of the most passionate about their sport participation, which could potentially explain their level of advocacy. There is opportunity for further research to seek the voices of participants less involved in their clubs to add diversity of perspectives and further inform gender equity initiatives.

The SEM is useful to highlight how individual experience and choice is influenced by diverse system of influence. The analytical power of the SEM could reach fuller potential if data from individual experiences was combined with the perceptions of other groups involved in club sports as well as with other data such policy documents in order to highlight layers of understanding at the interpersonal level (i.e. coach-participant relationship), the club organisational level (i.e. club directors), and the policy level (i.e. policy makers and policy documents). The study by Taylor et al. (2020) provides a good example of this.

Finally, this study reports on the experiences of women and girls living in the State of Victoria in Australia, which has had important investment in gender-equity in sport (Casey et al. 2019; Change our Game 2023). We hope that through the thick descriptions of the data, transparency in our sampling strategy and interpretations, we have provided enough information for the readers to reflect on the value of this study to their own context. We draw on Smith's argument on the transferability of qualitative study findings' to others' context and call researchers to '*engage with the report [of the qualitative study], and then either support or reject the results as generalizable to them*' (Smith 2018, p. 142). Specifically, these findings could be transferred and applied to other social contexts in Australia, or other countries where stereotypical masculine activities, such as sports, are present. As sport is a male-dominated setting of social participation in many nations, which are also developing gender-equity policies and strategies (Council of Europe 2019), our findings suggest that addressing unequal gender relations will also be critical in other contexts.

Conclusions

Societal, cultural and organisational change, along with government initiatives, has led to increasing numbers of women and girls playing male-dominated sports, however their participation and retention in these sports remains much lower than that of men and boys. This study demonstrates that gendered factors at all levels of the socio-ecological model

impact women and girls' experiences playing male-dominated sports. Women and girls in male-dominated sports continue to contend with gendered social norms and stereotypes, and these societal views impact their playing experiences. Some women were motivated to challenge these social norms in society and in their club. In addition, there were diverse club environments and practices that could devalue women/girls' participation or even exclude and discriminate their participation.

Cultural and organisational changes take considerable time, especially when there is a need for significant shifts in social norms, as well as significant infrastructure developments. In order to better facilitate positive change, continued development of a whole-of-sport approach (i.e. multiple stakeholders and strategies influencing various SEM levels) to gender equity is critical to ensure sport is more equitable for all women and girls. The construction of infrastructure that develop and allocate spaces appropriate for women and girls-specific use, education programs and initiatives that challenge unconscious gender biases and support respectful and inclusive behaviours will be important to influence social, organisational and community environments for women and girls in male-dominated sports. In addition, ensuring women and girls are represented in governance and decision-making is needed to give them opportunities to advocate for change. However, all leaders must be continually encouraged to engage as meaningful agents of change to improve playing experiences for women and girls. It is critical for whole-of-sport stakeholders to be aware and address in partnership the challenges laid out in this study if male-dominated sports are to continue the growth in women and girls' participation, including their retention in the sport.

Acknowledgements

We thank the sporting organisations who assisted with advertising the study and the interviewees for sharing their sporting experiences. Thank you also to the reviewers whose feedback improved the work.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding

The work was supported by the Victorian Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions under Grant BMIN-2-20-3097. Dr Aurelie Pankowiak receives an Early Career Research Fellowship from VicHealth.

Data availability statement

The dataset is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request

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