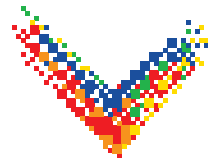


Creating an environment to optimise the potential of female athletes



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INTRODUCTION

Post Rio, many sports expressed a desire to explore how they could support their female athletes more effectively to optimise their performance potential in Tokyo, Paris, and beyond. Fast forward 5 years and Team GB make history by sending more female athletes than males to the Olympic Games. During this period, the EIS have worked collaboratively with St Mary's university to enhance our understanding of the elite female athlete, and how to create high performance environments that provide the best opportunity for them to thrive.

THE FINDINGS

The overarching message is this: if we want to improve the support for female athletes, we must strive towards a cultural shift. Sport reflects wider society, wherein gender stereotypes and gendered practices still prevail.

“When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.”

Alexander Den Heijer

This document provides a summary of findings generated from world class athletes, coaches, SSSM staff and senior leadership teams within the Great British high-performance system who contributed to this PhD project. It is hoped that sharing this insight across the network, alongside some informed recommendations, will serve to improve the support we provide to the female Olympians of the future.

The following examples illustrate how gendered biases within sport environments impact our female athletes:

1. A lot of female athletes still feel as though women's sport and female athletes are viewed as inferior compared to the males. This can impact them in the following ways:

- They feel undermined as athletes.
- Their sport achievements are devalued.
- They feel like second-class citizens.
- They do not feel empowered to perform.
- It destabilises their confidence as athletes.

“I feel like the starting point is getting people to recognise or agree that it is a thing... because if people don't see it [gender inequality] as a problem, they don't see why it should change” – female athlete

In general, the athletes appreciate when sport leaders acknowledge gendered discrepancies and vocalise their efforts toward change.

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THE FINDINGS

2. Across the sports, there were several examples of how male athletes receive preferential treatment. For example:

- Preferable training schedules.
- Bigger and better training facilities.
- Primetime competition schedules.
- Experienced coaches preferring to work with them.
- More social media attention.
- Portrayed as strong, competitive athletes (compared to females who are often publicly portrayed away from the sporting context).

“If I’m not worth the investment, then why would I have confidence that I’m going to perform brilliantly?”
– female athlete

In many cases, these behaviours were not intentional as people were not aware of when their actions, or those of others, favour male athletes. This highlights the need to start reflecting and talking about gender.

3. The menstrual cycle remains a taboo in sport.

“You just feel like it’s something that’s silent, you just have to get on with it as if you were a boy”
– female athlete

Male coaches reported:

- Feeling awkward talking about women’s health.
- Not knowing how to broach the subject with females.
- Feeling that others (i.e., female staff) are better placed to talk about women’s health.

Female athletes reported:

- Wanting to talk openly about their menstrual cycle.
- Wanting others (including males) to feel comfortable to talk about women’s health.
- Feeling that there is a competitive advantage to monitoring their cycles and adapting their training accordingly.

Even though it may feel uncomfortable to talk about, female athletes would prefer to have open conversations about their menstrual health as they feel there is a competitive advantage to be gained.

4. There remains an underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in elite sport. This impacts female athletes as they reported:

- Feeling as though they do not have a platform to raise their concerns.
- Feeling as though they cannot talk to anyone in a position of power that could make a difference for them and their experiences in sport.
- Feeling as though no one is fighting for them as females.

“In our organization the female athletes would struggle to get their voice heard because the women they talk to [female staff] don’t have a voice, it’s the way it is” – coach

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THE FINDINGS

5. Language is not always used appropriately in relation to women – sexist jokes are rife.

“Comments get thrown around constantly, just roll off the tongue like you’ll say to a boy ‘you’re doing it like a girl’ or something like that, which puts girls down, it puts them in a negative light.” – female athlete

- It might not be intentional, but sometimes jokes can undermine women’s sport achievements.
- Often, even when females don’t react in the moment, they hear the jokes and feel disrespected by them.

Whilst banter can create a light-hearted environment, when there are no boundaries to what is acceptable, jokes can undermine females and their sporting achievements.

6. What happens before the athletes reach the high-performance system is important. Coaches recognised that because there are fewer sporting opportunities for females:

- They are sometimes fast tracked through to the high-performance system and are immediately expected to train and perform at the elite level, despite their lack of prior training history and sport exposure.
- There are fewer post-retirement sport prospects for them, which mean they must explore alternative career options whilst they are training/competing.

“We’re the closest I’ve ever come across to a group of people working in development and performance at the same time. In the men’s world, you’d allow them to make mistakes and grow, get it wrong, get it right. You’re trying to do that with the women but you’re live on TV.” – coach

It is important to consider athletes’ previous sport experiences so that sports can provide optimal support for female athletes.

7. Female athletes are sometimes, often unintentionally, treated according to stereotypes rather than their individual personalities. For example:

- ‘Females cannot be pushed hard.’
- ‘Females do not want direct communication.’
- ‘Females do not want honest feedback from their coaches.’
- ‘Females need a softer approach to coaching.’

“I’d say we are treated differently sometimes, I think there’s an expectation that women are going to cry first or the women are going to be the first ones to bail out or not be able to push as hard, or to give up first.” – female athlete

It is important to remember, that there are more differences within a group of females than there are between a group of females and a group of males.

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THE FINDINGS

8. Gender is a salient aspect of the coach-athlete relationship.

Male coaches reported:

- Feeling uncomfortable pushing their female athletes for fear of being branded a bully.
- Finding it easier to work with male athletes who are more like them.

“You can’t be dealing with people like you did years ago... The media certainly, what’s gone on in the outside world in sport and also in the workplace, I think it affects what you do in here with the females.”
– coach

This is not to imply female coaches are better placed to work with female athletes, but rather, that it is important to recognise gender might be an influencing factor within the coach-athlete relationship.

9. In some sports, showing emotions and asking questions is still frowned upon.

Some of the coaches reported that:

- They do not have time to discuss athletes’ emotions during training.
- Questions from athletes can be perceived as a threat to their authority.
- They prefer an athlete to “put their big boy pants on” (coach) and “just get on with it” (coach).

Female athletes reported:

- Not always feeling comfortable displaying their emotions to their coaches.
- Sometimes feeling judged when they are emotional (e.g., crying).

Wanting to ask questions about their training programmes.

“Female athletes will expect you to stand there and have that conversation, which aint such a bad thing but when you’ve got the whole team to train, I aint, you know coaches haven’t got time.” – coach

Although the intention of this research was not to compare males and females, the female athletes suggested that a lot of the male athletes also sometimes feel a pressure to put on a brave face.

10. For a lot of the female athletes, they are having to navigate being a female in our society where women are associated with ‘traditional femininity’ and being a female in sport, where strength and performance are central. The females reported experiencing the following contradictions:

- In society they are expected to look ‘feminine’ – in sport they are expected to be strong and muscular.
- In society they are expected to be gentle and passive – in sport they are expected to be strong minded, independent, and competitive.
- In society they are expected to be tender – in sport they are expected to be forthright.
- In society they are expected to be risk averse – in sport they are expected to take risks.
- In society they are expected to be perfect – in sport they are expected to manage failure.
- In society they are expected to be a mother and look after their family – in sport they are expected to ‘win at all costs’.

“You’re creating success in your own way by being strong and by being a woman, so you’re kind of like breaking down those stereotypes of being a woman, weak, and won’t win at anything” – female athlete

Being aware of the many paradoxes female athletes’ face allows you to provide optimal support as they negotiate these challenges.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do your female athletes feel valued in your environment?

- How do you, as a sport, treat male and female athletes?
- Are there equal facilities and training programmes in your environment?
- Are you doing things the same or different? In what way? Why are you doing things the same/different?
- How do your female athletes like to be coached?

2. How do people feel and talk about women's sport and female athletes?

- Are people aware of their implicit beliefs?
- Can you encourage people to reflect honestly?
- How might people's views impact their applied practices?

3. How do your media platforms portray your female athletes?

- Do you have equal media representation for your male and female athletes? Consider both quality and quantity.
- How might the recent prevalence of media articles on women in sport impact your coaches' comfort in working with females?

4. Is the menstrual cycle discussed openly in your sport?

- Do the female athletes talk about their menstrual cycle and women's health to anyone in the sport? If so, who?
- Do you think male staff feel comfortable talking about women's health?
- How might you start to encourage people to talk about these topics?
- How might you educate people in these areas, so they have more confidence to talk about these topics?

5. What is the pathway to reaching the elite level for your female athletes?

- Have they been fast-tracked through the system? If so, how might you support their integration into the elite level?
- What financial prospect post-retirement are available to female athletes? How can your sport support your female athletes exploring a post-retirement career?

6. How many females are in leadership positions within your sport?

- Are the female athletes given regular opportunities for their voices to be heard by someone in a leadership position?
- How might you integrate the athletes' voice into your decision making?

7. How is language and banter used in your organisation?

- Do people make sexist jokes?
- How might you encourage people to challenge sexist jokes?

8. How are emotions perceived in your sport?

- Do your athletes have an opportunity to offload their emotions to their coaches outside of training hours?
- Is there an opportunity (and/or time) for athletes to ask questions about their training programmes?

9. To what extent are your athletes treated as individuals?

- How might you encourage people to avoid generalisations about 'females' and 'males'?

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PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

DOs	DON'Ts	RATIONALE
Acknowledge gender inequalities and vocalise the planned actions within your sport.	Deny gender inequalities and avoid conversations on this topic.	Recognising gender discrepancies and talking about change shows a willingness to progress.
Recognise the complexities involved in conversations around gender and schedule time to discuss them in meetings.	Try to find a quick fix in relation to working with female athletes.	Gender is a multifaceted area that requires several conversations, which involves a commitment to individual and systemic change.
Be cautious about the language you and others use in relation to females. Be bold and speak up if you hear something sexist.	Keep talking about and treating men's sport as better.	Female athletes internalise these comments and behaviours and it impacts their confidence.
Encourage people to reflect on their own gender biases in a non-judgmental space and to consider how their implicit beliefs might impact their practices.	Point the finger and shame people for their views and behaviours.	Being reflective in a non-judgmental way can allow people to be honest with themselves about how their beliefs are impacting their practices.
Question your sport's current practices around the treatment of male and female athletes.	Continue to do what you've always done without question.	Being reflective and opening the dialogue is the first step toward positive change.
Talk to your staff (particularly males) about their concerns working with female athletes.	Avoid these conversations and let your staff figure it out for themselves.	Providing a safe space to raise concerns allows people to agree strategies and gain confidence in what they are doing.
Ensure your internal media outlets are equal for men and women – through the amount and type of exposure.	Post images and articles without much thought.	Female athletes want to be portrayed as strong, competitive athletes.
Break the taboo - start talking about women's health and monitor hormonal fluctuations to optimise training adaptability.	Avoid conversations related to women's health and rely on female staff to support work in this space.	There are huge performance and health opportunities available by prioritising women's health. And female athletes want to talk about it!
Offer educational sessions around women's health and menstrual cycles to increase people's confidence talking about these topics.	Expect people to feel comfortable to talk about women's health without any guidance or education.	If people feel confident and more comfortable to talk about women's health, they are more likely to.

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PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

DOs	DON'Ts	RATIONALE
Consider female athletes' pathway to the elite system and provide support accordingly (e.g. a slower integration to provide a gradual exposure to the elite level).	Create high levels of challenge without high levels of support.	Any athlete (male or female) is likely to struggle with the demands of elite sport without sufficient training history. It is important to provide appropriate support for those fast-tracked.
Support female athlete's exploration of future career paths, particularly when post-retirement sport opportunities are lacking or insufficient.	Expect female athletes to ignore their careers and lives outside of sport.	There is much less financial stability post-retirement for female athletes, so it is important for them to plan for their lives after sport.
Ensure there are regular opportunities for female, and male, athletes to have their voices heard directly by people in positions of power.	Block the pathway from the athletes to those in leadership positions.	Many of the athletes reported not having their voice sufficiently heard by people in leadership positions.
Be cautious of using trivialising language and making sexist jokes. Be bold and challenge people if you hear anything inappropriate.	Ignore inappropriate language or jokes and pass it off as 'just banter'.	The aim is not to eliminate banter altogether, but rather to ensure your sport environment does not disrespect females and their sporting achievements.
Where possible, treat each athlete as an individual.	Avoid generalisations of 'females' and 'males'.	There are more differences within a group of females than there are between a group of males and females.
Speak to female athletes (particularly younger) about how their strength programmes may be impacting them on a personal level.	Ignore the impact of societal pressure on females and particularly how they relate to strength training and body image.	If a female is struggling with how they look, they may avoid doing strength training altogether.
Provide a non-pressurised, non-judgemental, and safe space for athletes to take risks and make mistakes.	Expect athletes to automatically feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes.	The expectations on women to be 'perfect' in our society can clash with the sport expectation to take risks and make mistakes.
Encourage frank conversations with female athletes without negative judgement.	Label females who are direct as 'bitchy' or 'bossy'.	Labelling females a certain way for being direct can deter them from having important conversations.

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PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

DOs	DON'Ts	RATIONALE
Allow time before or after training for athletes (male and female) to express their emotions.	View and frame displaying emotions as 'weakness'.	Suppressing athletes emotions can have major consequences to health and well-being.
Offer support to staff members on how to engage in emotional conversations so they feel comfortable in those situations.	Expect people to feel comfortable talking to people about their emotions.	If people don't feel comfortable around emotions, they will likely avoid them, which can result in less effective coaching and support for athletes.
Provide an opportunity for athletes to ask more questions about their training programmes.	View questions asked as a threat to authority.	Providing athletes with autonomy over their training can help with motivation.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

Gender is a highly complex topic that requires complex change.

There are no hard and fast rules or one simple way to create an environment that enables female athletes to thrive. In addition to individual strategies, a cultural shift is also needed. Cultural change involves an in-depth consideration of the intricacies within your unique setting and requires explorative and honest conversations to begin the process.

For more information or to discuss these findings in the context of your sport, please contact the EIS Psychology Team via Hannah.levi@eis2win.co.uk

**IF WE DO
NOT START
TALKING, WE
WILL NEVER
CHANGE.**