



McCormack Thought Leadership Spotlight

Invisible and Under the Spotlight: Surviving Sexism in Men's Professional Sport

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September 2020

Recent media coverage has shone a spotlight at the workplace discrimination and harassment experienced by women working in the sport industry, from the [Washington NFL team](#) to the [Dallas Mavericks](#). But for many women working in sport, sexism is nothing new. As Janet Fink shared in her [2015 Earle F. Zeigler Lecture](#), sexism is “commonly overt yet simultaneously unnoticed” in the industry. Our recent research, published in the *Journal of Sport Management*, demonstrates how sport organizational culture creates a work environment in which sexism is a daily occurrence from women.

The [study](#), “Sexism in Professional Sports: How Women Managers Experience and Survive Sport Organizational Culture,” specifically examined men’s professional sport organizations and involved interviews with and journals from nearly a dozen women managers, capturing just under one thousand hours of both their historical and day-to-day experiences of sexism.

The Diminishment and Objectification of Women Managers

What we found was that women described an informal workplace culture that contributed to the perpetuation of sexism along two axes: the diminishment of women’s contributions and the objectification of women’s bodies. Intellectually, the women were challenged and questioned by both clients and colleagues, who doubted their abilities and knowledge of their jobs. In many instances, women were simply overlooked or ignored. One woman’s boss would never speak to her directly, while another’s assistant general manager’s obvious efforts to ignore her prompted coworkers to joke “perhaps [she is] invisible.”

Meanwhile, women’s appearances and sexuality were front and center. Most notably, women faced assumptions that they worked in sports to date (and sleep with) the players. They reported informal vetting during job interviews and policies regulating their interactions with athletes, inside and outside of work. Women are met with rumors and innuendos, such as one team president suggesting a manager likes her coffee “like she likes [her] d***”, after he heard some women had been near the basketball court, with mostly Black players, during a practice. Additionally, women encountered what one manager called “constant” comments about their appearance and dress. One woman overheard a colleague say, “I can’t wait for you girls to wear sundresses all of the time,” while another described how men on the arena event staff treated women “like we’re meat,” by staring, commenting, and even taking pictures of a woman’s backside.

Repercussions Stemming from Sexism

These dual forces of sexism lead to repercussions for women working in men’s professional sports. First, psychologically, women must manage a range of emotional responses to sexism, described by women as ranging from anxious to angry and from confused to discouraged. These emotions can distract women from their job duties and lead to underperformance—as one woman put it, “I’m still able to do my job but it mentally affects how I approach it.”

Second, women also face professional repercussions. At its most severe, women are denied positions, such as a woman who was told she was not considered for a promotion because “you’re a mom, you have a home, we wouldn’t think of relocating you.” But consequences are often more subtle, such as adjusting work duties when women’s access to certain locations (such as the locker room) are restricted due to fraternization stereotypes and losing potential sales commission or development opportunities when customers and supervisors favor male colleagues, reminiscent of the “old boys’ club” long discussed in sport.

Recommendations for Men's Professional Sport Organizations

These alarming findings bring attention to the need for men's professional sport organizations to address sexism in their workplaces. Our research suggests several recommendations organizations should consider. First, don't mistake women's participation in a workplace culture as their endorsement of it. Women may laugh at sexist jokes and may police other women's behaviors because they view this as a means to survive in the sport industry.

Additionally, workplace culture will not be fixed simply by hiring more women in the organization. While many women in this study worked at male-dominated teams, others worked for organizations with gender equity in the front office (one organization was even led by a woman executive). Yet they all reported similar experiences of sexism. The culture must be addressed, not just the numbers – inclusion, not just diversity.

Sport organizations also should not wait for women to report sexism, or assume that since it has not been reported, it is not happening. Women in the study rarely reported sexism to supervisors or human resources, both because they minimized the behavior and because they did not think any action would be taken. Instead, be proactive about watching for sexism and educating employees about the subject.

Lastly, while sexism from colleagues and supervisors must be addressed, sport organizations should also consider how to respond to sexism from players, fans, sponsors, and vendors. Women in the study reported unwanted physical contact from both athletes and fans, while sponsors and vendors often made sexist comments or ignored women in favor of male colleagues. While these interactions are often outside of sport organizations' authority as the employers, such sexism is often just as damaging psychologically and even professionally for women. Sport organizations should recognize these situations and develop policies on how to respond to best protect their employees.

Sexism in the sport workplace is regularly overt and hostile, and sometimes crosses the line into sexual harassment. But, as our study demonstrates, it is also a subtle, every day experience for women working in the industry. As sport organizations look to address the dearth of women in their organizations and particularly in leadership positions, they should consider how this organizational culture of sexism impacts their employees.

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