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# “Women shouldn’t play rugby” – the gendered and embodied experiences of women players in rugby union

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on interview data, we use gender and embodiment literature to understand the experiences, attitudes, and behaviours of women rugby players in relation to tackle performance and safety. Sampling, data collection, and data analysis were guided by principles and techniques of the grounded theory method. Participants’ experiences illustrate the processes through which women struggle to claim space in rugby. Constraining gender norms, the inferiorisation of women’s athletic achievements, and inequitable playing conditions are at the centre of this struggle. Organisational support and cultural acceptance are predicated on conformity to masculinist models of performance and behaviour whilst preserving the ideals of femininity. However, women’s embodied persistence and agency can challenge the gendered status quo in rugby and reshape the field of play. Revising rugby structures to include more nuanced models for performance development, including commensurate support for the women’s game both in financial sense and in terms of identity could enhance safety and performance in women’s rugby.

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## KEYWORDS

Gender; embodiment; injury; performance

## Introduction

Rugby and a culture of toughness within, normalises using one’s body for physical dominance through violent bodily actions (e.g. tackling, rucking, fending, and grabbing) (Dane et al. 2023). However, women conducting these bodily actions are considered contrary to the cultural feminine ideals (Pfister 2010) and run the risk of being scrutinised and subjected to sexism and homophobia (Dane, Foley, and Wilson 2023). For rugby, the sport has long been dominated by men in nearly every aspect of the game. However, women’s rugby has more recently evolved in terms of participation, performance pathways, and professionalism (World Rugby 2022). Nonetheless, the deep-rooted male dominated culture of the game has led to a persistent struggle for women in terms of equality of access, participation, employment, and governance (Jonchery and Tiili 2013).

With the recent boom in women’s rugby, marked by increased representation and deepening professionalisation (World Rugby 2022), it is timely to examine women’s experiences in Rugby from a gender equality perspective (Guardian 2023). The male-dominated context in which women rugby players train and perform, and the persistent presence of male stakeholders and androcentric training practices, raise questions about whether current approaches to player safety and performance are conducive to optimal playing experiences for women. Gender is understood as socially

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constructed and governed by regulatory norms, shaping embodied selves through repeated gendered performances. This research centres the experiences of a purposive sample of women's rugby players to explore their attitudes and embodied behaviours in relation to tackle performance and safety. We first offer an overview of the evolution of women's rugby, the literature on gender and health protection in rugby, and outline gender and sport frameworks (Wellard 2016; Woodward 2020) and theories of gendered embodiment (Butler 1990) to critically assess how women rugby players navigate the tensions shaping the gendered performance of play. This is followed by an account of the methodology we used in this study and the reporting of key findings. We find persistence of a playing culture in which women rugby players are expected to navigate multiple and often contradictory demands on their sporting and social bodies and where structures of rugby maintain an unequal playing field for women's rugby. Yet women players also illustrate situated agentic response to such demands, where gendered embodied performance of the tackle acts as a site of care, conviviality and pleasure that maintains women's persistence in the sport. We discuss the findings and conclude with a summary statement.

### *The evolution of women's rugby*

Women's rugby can empower women through the development of speed, strength, technical skills, and confidence (Dane et al. 2022). The introduction of professionalism and increased visibility of women's rugby has enabled challenge to inequities and societal views about the relevance, success, and sustainability of women's rugby (World Rugby 2022). While on the surface, these developments present opportunities to provide a platform for sport participation and gender inclusion, recent news reports on women's rugby have highlighted concerns of sexism, cultural insensitivity and sexual harassment (Guardian 2023). The sport's governing body World Rugby has created strategic plans to improve growth, inclusivity, and safety of women's rugby (World Rugby 2022). For instance, new, expanded and/or re-branded women's teams and competitions have placed equitable remuneration and treatment of women at the forefront of discussions. Nonetheless, inequalities remain in the structures and material conditions of play.

### *Gender and health protection in rugby*

Rugby is one of the few team collision sports with consistent rules of contact for both women and men. Scepticism about women's collision sports like rugby is fuelled by concerns about women's physical 'inferiority' and the potential risk of injury (Dane, Foley, and Wilson 2023; Micelotta, Washington, and Docekalova 2018). In women's rugby, tackle-related injuries make up 67% of match injuries and can have lasting consequences on a player's physical and mental health (West et al. 2022). To minimise this risk of injury, World Rugby has committed to developing evidence-informed tackle safety strategies (World Rugby 2022). While the search for medical certainty in relation to player protection in rugby continues, researchers have called for a deeper understanding of the socioecological structures (individual, interpersonal, organisational, community) and contextual factors that influence injury risk and the implementation of injury mitigation interventions (Hendricks et al. 2023). An important contribution to the area has come from scholars drawing on lived experiences to understand the inter-related factors, actors and cultures that shape rugby injuries (Dane, Foley, and Wilson 2023; Liston et al. 2016). Liston et al. (2016) found that players' understandings of injury risk were framed by institutional structures and cultural values ('culture of risk' see Nixon 1992) which rewarded risk taking and prioritised performance over health-related values. Thus, the multifactorial nature of sports injuries arises from complex interactions among a web of determinants that include gender (Parsons, Coen, and Bekker 2021). One way to explore the role of gender in shaping women's sport is to recognise the centrality of the body, understood in physical and social terms (Shilling 1993). Researchers have previously analysed women rugby players' relations (and outsiders' reactions) to their bodies and injuries (bruises) (Adjepong 2016;

Branchu 2023; Gill 2007). Research has also demonstrated that women's athletes' embodiment is shaped by racialised and gendered logics (Adjepong 2016; Gill 2007; Hardy 2015; Joncheray and Tlili 2013; Kanemasu and Molnar 2020) reflected in the disciplinary processes of competitive sport (Berg, Duffy, and Dubois 2023; Chase 2006; Joncheray, Level, and Richard 2016; Kerr 2018). Whilst the above literature has shed light on women's experience in rugby and wider contact sports, this study offers an important contribution by providing an embodied perspective to understand the dynamic interplay between players bodily experiences, the performance context of women's rugby and the circumstances that shape their tackle-related decisions. The influence of gender and embodiment on tackle performance and safety within rugby is under-explored, and its significance for tackle-related injury prevention efforts is insufficiently examined. Therefore, analysis of women's rugby players' embodied performance and safety in relation to tackling also helps us understand how such activity provides possibilities for recognition and valuation of women's distinctive experience of play.

### *Gendered embodied approaches to sport*

Embodied performances are the key currency of sport established on principles such as competition, winning and overcoming opponents traditionally coded in masculinist terms (Theberge 2003; Wellard 2016). Embodied selves can comply with and/or resist gendered expectations and regulatory systems of sport (Woodward 2020). However, gender norms (Fiske and Stevens 1993) and the gendered organisations and cultures that maintain them (Woodward 2020) persist in powerful ways to shape behaviour in providing scripts for the most acceptable performance of gender (Butler 1990). As highlighted in the performance contexts of ice hockey and Australian Football, women must engage in embodied behaviours and physical acts to legitimise their participation in contact sports (Elliott, Bevan, and Litchfield 2019; Theberge 2003). Women who play collision sport may then face negative consequences for failing to 'stick to the script' as they enact gender performances that contradict gendered societal expectations (Blinde and Taub 1992; Butler 1998). Gimlin (2007) has called this diversity in what bodies do and represent 'body work'. Other forms of gendered expectation include how women may feel pressure to display or to suppress certain emotions to suit the emotional and cultural demands of the spaces they interact within; known as emotional labour (Gimlin 2007). Players experience a dissonance between two incompatible roles: the more traditional feminine role and the athletic role which is embedded in traditions of masculinity and aggression (Chase 2006).

Doing gender while playing rugby requires embodied and emotional labour. It also presents opportunities for women to celebrate participation on their own terms, rather than in comparison to men. Socially constructing differences between women and men is a powerful technique to maintain male hegemony in sport; maintaining men as the universal norm (LaVoi et al. 2007). Women rugby players' assessments of their embodied performances of play, specifically related to the act of tackling, are a key site to theorise women athletes' agency as gendered actors manoeuvring between opportunities and constraints within a traditionally hypermasculine sporting context. Players engage in embodied performances, cognisant of gendered social scripts (Butler 1990), which generate conflicting normative expectations that demand emotional labour (Gimlin 2007) of managing their bodies and themselves within a system and culture that is misaligned with the challenges they face.

Yet embodied performances can act as location to revise such scripts, suggesting women players' as agentic performers. This is less identifiable as overt resistance and rather more commonly performed as ambivalence and solidarity gained in the face of a lesser status in the field of play. Butler's (1990) perspective on embodiment includes agency as part of performativity itself. Agency from the Butlerian perspective may exceed that which has enabled it, it may become discontinuous with what has initiated it and, it may condition rather than only be conditioned (Zaharijević 2021). In other words, bodies matter in understanding how we claim agency in a social context, for Butler how *we become* through repeated acts that suggest we are never quite determined, never fully voluntary, yet we can enact new constitutive terms that allow us new possibilities (Zaharijević 2021, 27).

Understanding the performance of agency in this way can illuminate how women's sporting bodies assemble and enact individual and collective performances that may offer relief from normative constructs of play. Understanding the embodied performance of play as site of contest, cooperation but also care, conviviality (Ratna 2024) and promise could explain the persistence of women players despite their subordinate status. It also enriches our analysis of how women players employ ambivalence and affect (Sobande and Emejulu 2021) in how they understand and enact their gendered embodied lives in ways that could generate new registers of legibility for safety and performance in women's rugby.

The data reported in this paper arises from a study on women rugby players' experiences of tackle injury and tackle skill development (Dane, Foley, and Wilson 2023, b). While the project from which data is derived did not initially privilege gender as a key variable, as data collection and analysis proceeded, gender emerged as a construct that accounted for and explained behaviours and experiences of participants. In what follows, we then focus on gender as an analytical lens to assess player experiences, attitudes and practices in relation to tackle safety and performance.

## Methods

### Design

Grounded theory as a qualitative approach has been used extensively in sports research. A key aspect of grounded theory methodology is the focus on how people act and/or behave in different contexts and how these contexts (i.e. 'conditions') shaped or give rise to further actions, behaviours, and experiences (in grounded theory terms, 'consequences') in the phenomenon under study (in our case, women's experience of playing competitive rugby). A constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006, 2014) was used to examine women's experience of playing competitive rugby, a function partly of the first author's own background as an elite rugby player and her experiences of playing competitive rugby. Constructivist grounded theory includes a commitment to co-construction of data between the researcher(s) and participants. In our study, co-construction reflected a commitment to including both the inner subjective and communal realities that shape elite sport competition for women. Each interview (see later in subsection *data collection*) was shaped by the interaction between the researcher and participants, with the researcher capturing data from the participants' viewpoint and subsequently conceptualising their experiences to generate more data. 'Insider status' (Charmaz 2014) including an awareness of the key challenges in women's rugby was in this respect a key asset in facilitating the first author to access the interior 'life world' of these women athletes and sensitivity to the data. At the same time, the first author took care to avoid imposing her own experiences onto participants' accounts. To this end, field notes, memos and pseudonymised transcripts (see later in subsection *data collection*) were consulted with the wider author team to check and challenge analytical interpretations. The first author also logged personal insights about the data in the context of her own playing experience. Her personal log combined with field notes and memos enabled her to be reflexive about the data. Collectively, the research team's interdisciplinarity expertise (grounded theory method in health research (GF), sports and exercise medicine (KD, FW), and feminist analysis of gendered organisations (PC)) allowed for a grounded analysis of the everyday social realities of women's play within the gendered logic of the institutions, practices and broader societal construction of women's rugby.

### Setting, recruitment and participants

Following ethical approval from a local university ethics committee, study information was circulated via a study poster in rugby social media pages to facilitate recruiting of women rugby participants. To be eligible, participants had to be >18 years old; playing senior women's rugby; playing rugby for at least one year; be able to communicate in English. Interested participants then contacted the first

author and an interview time was arranged. Participants were provided with a verbal explanation of the study, informed that their involvement was voluntary and reminded about anonymity and confidentiality. Participants provided written informed consent and completed a brief questionnaire which included participants' age, playing position, the highest level of competition achieved and years playing rugby.

The sample comprised twenty-one participants from Europe ( $n = 16$ ), South Africa ( $n = 2$ ), and Canada ( $n = 3$ ). Participants competed at various levels with club, university, or international teams with a range of 1–20 years playing experience. Initial sampling ( $n = 14$ ) was convenient by participant self-selection. To increase the diversity and inclusivity of the sample, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants ( $n = 2$ ) from global south settings. Sampling then proceeded from purposive to theoretical ( $n = 5$ ) based on emergent findings in the data (Morse and Clark 2019). For example, when gender-related factors were emerging as key contexts that shaped how women rugby players experienced rugby, the researchers continued to sample participants for variation in these contexts (e.g. players at different levels of competition, and those who started playing rugby earlier or later in life). Sampling ceased when the data were 'saturated' for variation and meaning i.e. when no conceptually significant data were emerging from additional interviews (Charmaz 2014). Participants' age ranged between 20 and 48 years (mean = 31 years). Playing experience ranged between 12 months and 20 years (mean = 10.6 years), from club to international level. Participants' first introduction to rugby varied between 5 and 32 years, but most participants ( $n = 16$ ) started playing rugby in adulthood.

### **Data collection**

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary data source for this study. The interview guide was informed by the findings of a scoping review on the match demands in female field collision sports (Dane et al. 2022). The interview guide contained initial questions which focused on building rapport with participants and included gathering information on topics such as 'Tell me about your playing career to date?' and, 'What comes to mind when you think about tackling?' After this initial phase, questions became more focused on gathering information on what factors players perceived to influence tackle injury and performance. Questions such as 'Tell me about any barriers and facilitators you have experienced to playing rugby?' formed the basis of this section of the interview. During data collection, gender emerged as a construct shaping participants experiences of tackle safety and performance with questions adapted to clarify understanding and elicit further contextual information. Each participant completed the semi-structured interview via the video conferencing platform Zoom®. Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai®. Interviews lasted between 35 and 67 minutes in duration. All data were then pseudonymised. To preserve the confidentiality of participants, unique reference numbers were used for each participant (e.g. P5 denoting participant #5). Field notes were compiled after each interview to help further contextualise the data for analysis.

### **Data analysis**

The dataset was read through a gendered lens to surface how players experienced rugby as a gendered embodied and social practice. Placing the data within a gendered framework also afforded a deeper analysis of the material, societal and cultural constraints that players face as they inhabit a context that maintains a masculinist framework of influence and social power. Following each interview, field notes and case-based memo reflections were compiled by the interviewers (KD and FW) to foreground interview data for analysis. KD conducted the analysis and was guided in the analysis by GF. The data were analysed using initial, focused, and theoretical coding (Charmaz 2014). In initial coding, transcript data were broken down into units of meaning (codes) that described and conceptualised the data being coded (e.g. inclusivity, trusting

teammates). Codes were aggregated to form tentative concepts by comparing data with data and identifying similarities and differences in the data. For example, key codes such as ‘recognising gender scripts’ and ‘female frailty’ were aggregated to form the concept of ‘Women don’t play rugby’. In the focused coding phase, key concepts were interrogated through a framework of focusing on the ‘conditions’ and ‘consequences’ of participants’ behaviours and experiences. This stage of coding formed key categories (larger concepts) that could explain participants’ experiences. For example, and continuing on from the above-mentioned initial coding phase, in addition to the concept of ‘Women don’t play rugby’, further concepts of ‘Inequitable playing conditions’ and ‘Women’s rugby is not “real rugby”’ were merged into a comprehensive category of *The position of women’s rugby*, in which the afore-mentioned concepts that constituted this category were included as subcategories representing different processes underpinning the category. We memoed our theorising about these concepts and then pursued theoretical saturation for these descriptions in the data. At this point, clear social constructions of gender emerged in the data. In the final stage of coding (i.e. theoretical coding), we then integrated categories underpinned by gender to explain how gender shaped participants’ experiences, attitudes, and behaviours.

## Findings

In our analysis of the data, we find that participants’ participation in women’s rugby was marked by everyday experiences of gendered marginalisation where women players are subjected to critique and surveillance of their embodied selves as ‘space invaders’ in a masculinist institution and culture (Puwar 2004). The embodied reality of women rugby players is still regarded as transgressive of both a masculine coded practice and traditional feminine physicality. These double bind characterises experiences of women who enter into spaces where male power has been firmly entrenched in ways that undermine women’s presence and achievement. The findings of the study indicate how women players navigate this broader gendered socio-cultural landscape demonstrating critique yet also ambivalence and commitment to the act of play as they manage the realities of injury and at times alternative approaches to tackle performance. The findings reported here are presented in two categories: 1) The position of women’s rugby; 2) how women shape the field of rugby.

### The position of women’s rugby

Participants experiences, attitudes, and behaviours in relation to tackle performance and safety were rooted in an acute awareness of their position in the sport. Experiences of constraining gender norms, the inferiorisation of women’s athletic achievements, and inequitable playing conditions were primary to how participants embodied and oriented themselves towards tackle performance and safety within the rugby subculture.

#### *Women don’t play rugby: “not a thing that women should do, as a nice proper lady”*

Gaining acceptance in rugby frequently required participants to navigate external preconceptions, ‘stereotypical comments’ (P14) and ‘old fashioned attitudes’ (P2) towards their rugby involvement. A comment that represented other participants’ experiences, detailed the justification and explanation required to convince outsiders of their status and belonging in the sport:

Going to things like [international rugby] camps and ...<sup>1</sup> a taxi driver says, “what are you doing here?” and we will say “I’m here for an international rugby camp” and they’re like, “you’re too small” or “you can’t, you don’t look like a rugby player”. They’re expecting a stereotypical person that they’ve got in their mind that I don’t necessarily fit into. They expect us to look a little bit more feminine but then they expect us to be more masculine as a rugby player probably ... but I try to just get on with it ... I think that in reality [women rugby players] are a bit more comfortable with who they are. It doesn’t really matter if they’re masculine or feminine whatever. (P12)

The above remark illustrates the liminality that women rugby players can experience in the context of public perceptions of their physicality as woman athletes. It also reveals the weary resignation about such stereotypes and the additional emotional work required to set the record straight and retain legitimacy.

For participants, being 'outsized' as a woman's body was a source of critique rather than their athletic achievements. Participants perceived that their achievements and excellence were sidelined by others due to preoccupation with physical form and alignment or misalignment with gendered norms of embodiment. For example, another participant detailed the specific gaze on her body that emerged when it was revealed that she was a rugby player:

Being on a night out and one of my friends mentioned to a group of guys about me playing rugby for [international team], and they all got excited. Suddenly a few lads googled you and they end up judging you, the way you look the whole time. People judge how you look as opposed to acknowledging that you play a sport for your country. (P13)

Participants also contended with public perceptions that 'women are not conditioned to hit each other' (P12) and that rugby tends to be seen as a 'dangerous' (P8) game for women but not for men. In this regard, masculinist standards of physical strength and violence associated with the sport were seen as incompatible with a woman's body and supposedly feminine disposition. Injury in the sport was a specific site where the risks associated with rugby were seen as too high for a woman's body to absorb. P8 communicated:

My husband's saying things like 'please be careful' and I have got an injury at the moment, and he is saying 'what if this happens again?' ... I don't see him saying that to my brother who plays, and he's had his fair share of injuries ... I don't think there's ever any conversation around 'Oh do you maybe think you should give rugby up because it is quite dangerous?'

Participants in general communicated a keen awareness of and exasperation with the double standards applied to the risks associated with the women's game. The participant's account immediately above reveals the depth of stereotypical gender norms that surround women's play, and deep-seated beliefs about women's fragility and incapacity to maintain a career in high intensity contact sport. It also indicates the surveillant posture of the spouse and the emotional work of assurance that was most likely required in this exchange. The de-legitimisation of women's bodies as athletic and resilient and the warning and dread communicated about future injuries also presumably exacts an emotional toll on the player. Such remarks also indicate an effort to limit and/or control the horizons of women's athletic bodies and may indicate other intent and attitudes around the supposed risks that contact sport poses for potential reproductive capacity.

The prevailing discourse that women's bodies are incompatible with rugby created the impossible bind for participants in conforming to either a stereotypically desired woman's body or an undesirable form in gender normative terms that may still fail standards of 'real' rugby athleticism. From the perspective of participants themselves, it did not seem contradictory to them to be a woman and to play rugby, employing an ambivalent position allowed them to champion the sport. Women's play was characterised as physical and skilful, aesthetically pleasing, pleasurable and enriching, a worthy pursuit to encourage amongst younger women and girls:

I think the physicality of it is great, and when it is done right it is a beautiful game ... There's more young girls taking up the sport which is great to see ... Rugby is on the right pathway, and we just need to continue doing the right things and be role models for those young girls coming through. (P19)

Overall, participants indicated a commitment to doing the sport 'right' embodying the ideal and exemplary player acting as a beacon for the next generations. Through perseverance and continued participation, rather than overt critique, stoicism of participants afforded others the imagined possibility of what women athletes can be.

### ***Women's rugby is not 'real rugby': "The standard is male"***

Participants described being 'judged always in comparison to your male counterparts as opposed to a female sport' (P13), a comparison by others which was perceived to position women rugby players as distinctly different from and inferior to men's rugby. Such comparisons encouraged participants themselves to emulate and draw comparisons to men:

Obviously I see the difference between men and women's rugby because we don't have the physicality. We don't have the speed of the men. But as far as tackling goes, we don't hold back, there's no "oh I'm sorry", it's the same I would say ... Men's rugby has been put on TV for decades now, because it's exciting it's thrilling you know it fills stadiums but so does women's rugby ... [but] we're starting to fill stadiums now. So why isn't it on TV more? (P9)

Biological comparisons appeared to be internalised and perpetuated by participants. The tackle, however, is defined as a site where women players affirm their physical commitment and seek affirmation and interest from the public. Yet, this was lacking; their male counterparts were lauded, while the public and media were perceived as critical of women's skills and performances:

There's a try from the men's game and it's the best try in the world because he ran around six people, and then a try from the women's game with the exact same thing and it's all about "oh women can't tackle" ... as opposed to celebrating the person who scored the try ... It is just viewed differently. (P6)

The same kind of play and tactics are interpreted in a different way, with gendered assumptions that question the skill, courage and aptitude of women's tackling abilities. Participants expressed specific frustration about gender stereotypical media coverage of women's rugby. P5 commented:

It's annoying too then because if you look at the way that [X international team] promotes the women's game, they never use any of the props. They never use any of the different body shapes, they use the girls that are poster girls that look good in an [X international] Jersey ... so the Union itself is not promoting the way the game is.

Indeed, from the perspectives of participants, media emphasis on normative femininity and desirable bodies did little but perpetuate the ongoing marginalisation of women's rugby, placing pressure on participants to demonstrate their legitimacy in this arena:

There's still a kind of stigma around that because if you introduce yourself to anyone nowadays ... and they say, "touch rugby?" ... "Is it not sore?" ... I don't think men get those questions ... They are immediately a superhero wherever they go...but we are on a path of making it a product worth selling and worth watching but it's still a far way out ... When the quality of rugby picks up and when they see that we can do similar things as the men can do on the field, I think that will definitely make it better. (P21)

Participants internalised and reproduced the rhetoric that 'real rugby' was associated with men's rugby, aware of the double standards, yet underlining the male norm against which tackling performances are evaluated. This placed participants in a liminal position, where on one hand, they are assessed in terms of gender normative constructs in relation to their physicality (embodiment) and behaviours, and on another hand, they aspired to emulate core masculine rugby attitudes and practices in play. In these dual positions, participants illustrated the tensions of playing in a system designed for men and embracing aspects of the men's game but without parity of esteem. Ambivalence towards such incompatibilities allowed women players to persist and in some cases resist in the game.

### ***Inequitable playing conditions: "A money pit for Unions"***

Aside from the mental load of navigating the de-legitimisation of women's rugby, gender asymmetries in access to facilities and resources also underscored to participants the subordinate status of women's compared to men's rugby. Lack of parity in access to resources and infrastructure limits women's opportunity for optimal performance and safe participation:

We're at the mercy of the men in the club and what they want to do is the priority and then we have to fit in and around them ... They get the priority of changing rooms, training pitches, what time the game is, and we fit in and around them usually ... I definitely don't think I'll see any full equality in my career unfortunately. (P13)

Participants indicated that men's rugby bodies and their interests were afforded first preference with women's teams relegated to fitting in around their requirements. In this sense, participants perceived that their embodied needs as athletes were accorded secondary status and that their physicality was framed as less valuable and less in need of high-level support and expertise, particularly when injured. Yet, participants still socialised within this stratification, accepted sub-optimal playing conditions, and were encouraged to be grateful for the opportunity:

We are very lucky that we have gym one night a week, a [strength and conditioning coach] on board this year ... I would say we are quite lucky in that sense ... physio on match day and anything else you would have to pay out of your own pocket ... Maybe that should be standard for [premier division] teams, should it? ... It's probably just resources, the women's game isn't funded as well as the men's game ... Women have the awful perception of "Sure it has always been done this way" we always know that we are on the back foot, the men have it and we don't. (P6)

Less access to physiotherapy and medical support has implications for player physicality, tackle safety, well-being and ultimately embodiment. In this sense, the burden of body work fell disproportionately on women players diminishing their capacity to restore and repair. This reflects a direct contradiction in how gender stereotypical assumptions place women's bodies in a position of greater fragility than men, while also denying women access to the same level of care, protection, and expertise that men receive. Overall, participants revealed a number of invisible exclusionary mechanisms that pressure women to conform to the masculinist models of tackle performance and safety.

## How women shape the field of rugby

Although participants' bodies were largely marked as being 'out of place' in the rugby landscape, they did not change themselves to suit gendered ideals or blindly conform to traditional rugby codes. Instead, they employed tactics to actively shape their participation, employing ambivalence where needed, constructing solidarity from their experience of subordination while carving out distinctive forms of play. The following category highlights ways in which participants' embodiments of tackle performance and safety was reshaped through overt performances of distinct values, playing styles, and behaviours.

### *Values and actions: "safe place for a lot of people"*

While inequitable training environments persist and some individuals (e.g. outsiders) were viewed by participants as holding stereotypical views of women's rugby, the internal environment among teammates demonstrates a different dynamic, where diversity is normalised and embraced. Participants recalled how experiences of 'maltreatment' (P4) from rugby organisations 'creates a bond like no other' (P15) and served as catalysts for even greater 'camaraderie' (P1), effort and success:

You have the adversity you face before you get on the pitch ... we had just been f\*\*\*\*d over by the [X Rugby Union], that was another unifying experience through adversity, it brings a group together to perform ... Those experiences were crucial to the development of the team to lead them to a successful environment. (P4)

The players' performed their agency through resisting, adapting and forging alternative trajectories rather than simply tolerating the myriad challenges they encounter on a daily basis. Participants described the team environment as a safe place 'for all kinds of misfits' (P7) in which people can be themselves and feel included in their sport:

It's lovely when you're in the environment, people just get it, never an issue. I always say to people who are considering joining rugby that once you're in it and it's almost like a bubble of understanding that everyone forgets it, but if you're outside it looking in ... there's just these extreme gender stereotypes and extreme views on the aggression of it. (P13)

While participants may feel self-conscious about their bodies in social situations outside of sport, within the rugby training environment they valued and felt proud of their bodies:

There is more of a variety of body shapes and types ... Our captain is basically round, small and wide. But you have really tall, quite big people and small, quite slight people and there's a place for them, we need all those different people. There is a girl who's really tall, a big person ... I've noticed in the changing room that she seems quite self-conscious about her body ... and I just think that rugby is such a great place for her to be ... I doubt very much as a woman that she's really been rewarded for being that way in the past and rugby does reward you for that. (P12)

Participants embraced the diverse range of physicality that is required for excellence in rugby while indicating awareness of the lack of currency that some body types hold for women outside of the sport. Despite being objects of scrutiny and being discredited in terms of their tackling abilities and athleticism, many of the participants still felt empowered by using their bodies for the physicality of the game:

I like making big tackles and the physicality of it and leading from the front ... There's a feeling you get playing, that's not really replicated in those other sports. (P2)

The physicality of the sport allowed players to redefine the limits of their strength and abilities and to enact embodied performances underlined by conviviality and community. Although practices were shaped by rugby values of strength, solidarity, and physical engagement, women players reworked these masculinist constructs to accommodate their own embodiment and experiences of inclusivity, trust and safety for teammates. Respect is not given but earned by demonstrating physical sacrifice for the team and rugby values:

If I'm putting my body on the line I'm hoping the person beside me is putting their body on the line and that's when success comes ... you see people lying [on the ground], you think 'you better be dead there on the ground if you lay down for that two minutes while we are defending'. (P6)

Yet this also included resignification of normative narratives around play by acknowledging emotional and affective aspects of the tackle and play more broadly. Managing emotions in the context of the physicality of the game had to be actively negotiated prior to matches to perform tackles effectively:

There are games where I was absolutely s\*\*\*\*\*g myself ... I reckon on any pitch there are half of the players s\*\*\*\*\*g themselves about who is running at them ... We knew that each other was scared. But you just crack on don't you, just play. You internalise a lot of it [fear] ... zone out of the fear and pretend it's not there. (P18)

This emotional work around the physical challenge of the tackle operated not only as performative (affective alignment with the group) but also as formative where shared affectivity (physical and emotional) fostered solidarity. Although participants accepted many of the terms and conditions inherent to the men's game especially the acceptance of injury, they did resist other elements of the masculinist rugby culture. For example, questions were raised by participants regarding the extent of bodily discipline (e.g. playing through concussion) and there was discomfort expressed towards acts of 'hitting to hurt' (P13) the opposition. Most participants were relatively open to the idea of showing empathy towards others and indicated that they resisted acts of play intended to injure opponents:

If you do end up hitting someone late or hurting them, you do go automatically over and look to see if they're okay. It is one of the nice characteristics of the game ... you don't actually go out to hurt them and I think that is a lovely characteristic. [of the game] (P5)

The above quote partly reveals the value system surrounding tackling that can be upheld within the 'sisterhood' (P17) dimension of women's rugby. Indeed, participants' integration of emotions such as

remorse or empathy for injurious tackles challenged the masculinist ideals and conventional image of the rugby player:

Women's rugby is not just beating each other up on the floor or hitting each other off the ball. Women's rugby is playing a sport that is disciplined, that is fast and exciting. When you get people watching the high-level stuff it changes their perception a little bit. (P18)

Overall, skill, discipline and a care ethic for injured opponents rather than just physical force were emphasised by participants as central to the sport.

## Discussion

Despite increasing participation and recognition of women's rugby, in many ways, women remain uninvited guests of the game. The purpose of the current study was to explore the embodied experiences, attitudes, and behaviours of women rugby players in relation to tackle performance and safety. Deeply embedded gender norms shape the social and organisational structures, playing conditions, and societal perceptions that serve to marginalise women's rugby, undermining their opportunity to safely participate and thrive in the sport. These sporting structures incorporate conflicting norms such as the emulation of masculine models of affect and performance while endeavouring to uphold feminine ideals. This creates an unwinnable scenario for women rugby players as they work to manage the conflicting demands placed on their bodies and behaviours; to act like women but play like men. However, by adopting forms of ambivalence around some elements of the game and working to normalise their practices, including the diversity of women's embodiment and capabilities, participants are engaged in reshaping rugby and legitimising their sport.

The findings draw attention to how women are treated as 'bodies out of place' in the rugby setting (Puwar 2004). To claim space, women negotiate stereotypes ascribed to them, including doubts, normative, and material obstacles to their participation and tackle safety. Rugby is filled with practices and narratives that seem contradictory from the outside (McGannon et al. 2019). For individuals who play, there is a prevailing sense of optimism regarding the evolving public profile of women's rugby which is seen as a catalyst for a shift in attitudes and support. Yet, as Pfister (2010) argues, achieving this poses a notable challenge, particularly when binary understandings of women's capabilities and value persist (deJonge et al. 2023). For participants, these gendered understandings were internalised and passed down to, and reproduced through schools, clubs, institutions, and wider society which makes it difficult for women to prioritise other ways of knowing and using their bodies.

Women rugby players are implored to fit into men's space and emulate the tackling attitudes and actions of men (deJonge et al. 2023; McGannon et al. 2019). Women players engage in the emotional work of managing external perceptions, the lack of parity with men's Rugby as well as crafting their distinct approach to play. They do this alongside body work that involves risk-taking (e.g. acts of 'putting your body on the line') that aligns them with the 'sport ethic' that incurs a higher frequency and severity of tackle-related injuries, potentially impacting long-term health (Berg, Duffy, and Dubois 2023; Dane, Foley, and Wilson 2023). This is especially the case given the lack of fit between women's embodied realities and the androcentric approach to tackle performance within the sport. In the context of tackling, women are also placed at physical and social risk (Joncheray and Tlili 2013), when women behave like men, they run the risk of being subjected to stigma whereas if they behave like women, they appear 'unfit for the job' (Blinde and Taub 1992; Hardy 2015).

Although we have moved to an age of 'gender-equitable spaces' (Bobenrieth 2016, 17), the reality for women in broader contact sports (e.g. boxing, see McGannon et al. 2019), as well as for women in the present study, indicates that women do not enjoy the support, financial or otherwise to equal opportunity and favourable conditions for optimal experiences of tackle safety and performance. As Malcolm (2021, 1) pointed out, 'limited or substandard healthcare

runs contrary to the guiding principles of safeguarding in sport'. Facing contradictory demands placed participants in a liminal position at times where their embrace of elements of male play and culture forced them to manage status inequalities. At the same time in the act of gendered embodied performativity of play, they display agency, resistance and revision to produce a space of conviviality, solidarity and inclusion that supports their persistence in this sport.

Undoubtedly, the women involved in this study had enjoyable and rewarding playing experiences. Part of what makes the sport attractive to women is its valorisation of all body shapes and abilities. Similar to findings in women's basketball and boxing (Bennett et al. 2016; McGannon et al. 2019), participants in the present study engaged in the validation of their bodies and practices as worthy and legitimate. Participants engaged in subtle practices that challenged the legitimate use of the rugby body, embracing tackle-related physicality and aggression while also expressing compassion and empathy for teammates and opposition without being ridiculed or ostracised. This creates tensions yet also serves as a source of reinvention for tackle contact within the women's game in what Berg et al. (2023) refer to as the duality of the 'feminine sport ethic'. A duality was expressed by participants through celebration of physical dominance, competitiveness, and playing through pain and injury that all reflect masculine norms, whilst still framing their experiences of rugby in feminine terms of friendship, inclusivity, and community.

Our findings did not identify 'female apologetic' behaviours (Adjepong 2016; Hardy 2015) or consistent public facing acts of overt resistance (Broad 2001; Chase 2006; Gill 2007). Instead, women engaged in covert resistance and strategically employed ambivalence about their lesser status while negotiating their own needs within the constraints of social pressures and suboptimal conditions. The present study extends findings in women's ice hockey where players participate in compensatory embodied tackle-related behaviours to affirm their legitimacy (Theberge 2003). Women may evaluate the social and structural arrangements negatively and yet still adopt an ambivalence to aspects of play that enable them to operate contingencies to compensate for what they feel they cannot change (Barnes 1988). It could be said that participants were merely *playing the game* to gain legitimacy in a field in which they often appear to be a collective add-on. Although women are embracing alternatives to the androcentric tackle performance models, they are still conforming to the 'sport ethic' which rugby would be better off without (Dane, Foley, and Wilson 2023; Nixon 1992). In light of the negative health consequences of tackle injuries, we are prompted to ask, how can tackle safety be better regulated within a sporting context like rugby and other women's sports that lack equitable resources and medical supports? Yet insisting on a more complex assessment of women's embodied performative agency may help researchers to think more critically about the relationship between embodiment and safety supports in sporting organisations like rugby.

A limitation of the present study is the greater representation of participants from Europe which may limit the wider applicability of findings (given cultural and socio-economic differences between rugby settings in the global north and those in the global south). Further research would benefit from an intersectional examination, with a representation of rugby players from a much wider pool of rugby nations worldwide. Encompassing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds will lend more insight into the key factors shaping the experiences of women rugby players in relation to tackle performance and safety. Scholars may wish to expand upon this work by interviewing other stakeholders (e.g. family, coaches, policymakers and medical supports) to better understand the influence of gender and embodiment on tackle safety and performance. We did not arrive at a theory per se to explain the experiences, attitudes and behaviours of women's rugby players in relation to tackle performance and safety. However, employing grounded theory methods and procedures enabled the generation of highly conceptualised categories (Timonen, Foley, and Conlon 2018), viewed through a gendered lens to explain participants' experiences of tackle safety and performance in women's rugby union. The findings encourage researchers and stakeholders to consider the importance of these aspects when seeking to enhance tackle safety and performance in women's rugby and potentially in other contact sports.

## Conclusion

Women in rugby have made overwhelming progress with increased participation, filling of stadia, and the breaking of records. Yet the lived experience and embodiment of tackle performance and safety reported in this study is of constrained progress, where women aspire to play rugby on their own terms while negotiating deeply embedded gender norms, inequitable playing conditions, and androcentric cultural codes. Our findings illustrate the complex nature of women rugby players' position within the sport, how they embody tackle performance and safety, and how they are shaping the field of play with potential consequences for safe participation and meaningful growth in performance. While systematic changes are needed, women's persistence and adoption of alternative models to tackle performance and safety can challenge the gendered status quo and reshape the rugby field. Underlying tensions within women's rugby, particularly regarding embodiments of tackle safety and performance, could be alleviated in part by working towards nuanced performance models and equitable playing conditions. Moving forward, we recommend that researchers build upon our findings through diverse research methodologies, to further interrogate *why* and *how* certain knowledges and practices become normative, and *when* and *why* they may be resisted. For example, researchers may use ethnographies to examine *how* conviviality, resistance and agency are enacted within team-related match and training contact processes and across multiple stakeholders (e.g. coaches, opponents, teammates, spectators). Equally, within a sporting subculture where pain is normalised and injury disclosure is limited, future research may use body-mapping as a reflective tool to explore players' embodiments and negotiation of tackle-related safety, which interviewing may not fully capture. Collectively, such future research may be important for protecting women rugby players from tackle-related injuries and developing equitable sport opportunities to support the overall health, performance, and social benefits of participation in women's contact sports.

## Note

1. ... refer to spaces where words have been omitted that are irrelevant to the meaning of the quote.

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## Data availability statement

Data are available upon reasonable request. Please contact the corresponding author.

## Ethics approval

This study involves human participants and was approved by Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin. Application No: 20210906. Participants gave informed consent to participate in the study before taking part.

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