

Candidate 3 evidence

Persuasive - Women's Rugby Needs to Change

She does not belong on the pitch. She is not strong enough to tackle. She has no clue what she is doing. This is not a sport for women. Men do it better!

These are typical comments young girls face when playing the supposed “men’s sport” of rugby. Girls are brought up in a society where they are expected to be polite, softly spoken and gentle. Certainly not rough, tough, or assertive. This outdated and stereotypical viewpoint must change, particularly regarding contact sports, and especially rugby. We need to encourage more girls to participate in rugby rather than putting obstacles in their way. Gender equality in rugby must be tackled by combatting stereotypes, access to adequate funding, challenging media perceptions and female specific training regimes, culminating in empowered female athletes both on and off the pitch.

Gender inequality is apparent throughout society, and particularly obvious on the rugby pitch. There are far fewer women employed in rugby than men, both contracted professional players and coaching staff. This is due to lack of funding, resources, training and opportunity. The gender pay gap report of the Scottish Rugby Union (SRU) is a clear example of a two-tier approach. Overall males were paid 50% more than females by the Scottish Rugby Union in 2022/23. How can professional female rugby players be expected to perform as well as male players when playing for their country while most need to work another job to compensate for the lack of pay? The coaching and playing workforce is 70% male and 30% female. During the 2022/23 season almost 90% of individuals in the upper quartile pay band were male. Without financial incentive, how do we entice women into professional sport? The truth is women rugby players are treated like second class athletes and while the lack of funding persists, performance standards will be lower. True equality will only be achieved when the effort and skill of female athletes is acknowledged as with their male colleagues.

Female rugby players are subject to outdated, misogynistic stereotypes; that they are not feminine or “girly”, but “big and bulky”. That they are not “masculine enough” but considered too weak or fragile. These ridiculous comments made about women’s bodies are quite frankly alarming. Rugby is designed for all shapes and sizes. Ilona Maher is a trailblazer and an extremely popular influence, who is a rugby-sevens player and a Paris 2024 bronze medalist for Team USA. She has one of the biggest followings as a female athlete on Instagram (4.5 million) and TikTok (3.2 million). She played for Bristol Bears in Premiership Women’s Rugby, where her presence brought a record of 9,240 fans to Ashton Gate Stadium when the Bears played Gloucestershire-Hartpury. Ilona wants to spread the message to people, especially women and girls, that you can be strong and muscular while still being feminine and pretty. She has become well known for wearing red lipstick on the pitch while playing, to tackle the stereotype of women not being feminine or pretty while

playing rugby. Ilona has become an enormously successful rugby player, bringing in more and more support for women's rugby, emphasising body positivity and female empowerment. Role models like Ilona highlight the necessity for change. To gain true gender equality in rugby, she cannot be the exception to people's perceptions of female rugby players. Her media presence has shone a spotlight on gender inequality in rugby, and this must be used to the advantage of future players.

Additionally, men's rugby receives far more media coverage than the women's game. It is not only women's rugby, but all sports historically dominated by males. Studies show that men's rugby gets over twice the amount of media coverage than all female sport combined. Dot Loves Data analysed New Zealand's sport online and found that women received less than 10% of overall coverage, men over 80%, the remainder was mixed male-female sport. While rugby made up 22% of all sports coverage, less than 2% of this was for the women's game. Since women's sport has such scarce media coverage, it is no wonder the general public know far more about men's sports, with some thinking women's sport is irrelevant and unimportant. If people are ignorant of the problem, we cannot expect them to get behind their female athletes. To gain gender equality within the game, there must also be equality in media coverage. This will increase awareness for both spectators and aspiring athletes.

Gender inequality in rugby is not limited to the pitch. The facilities at rugby stadiums for women are often less than desirable. Phyllis Stephan wrote for the Edinburgh Reporter about her experience of watching Scotland play Ireland at Murrayfield in 2015. She described lengthy queues for the female toilets, which were blocked, and an absence of running water. She reported that the female toilets were originally for males, fitted with only three cubicles plus urinals, the latter of course being of no use to females. Stephan's story describes brilliantly the SRU's historical treatment of females, be they spectators or players; as an after-thought, an add-on, an accessory. It's not only female rugby players who are treated harshly; female spectators are too. How do we prove that female rugby players are sought after, elite athletes if we cannot provide basic plumbing in stadiums? To gain equality on the pitch, the value of both male and female athletes must have equal consideration.

Women's injury rates at professional level highlight a darker consequence of gender inequality. The men's game has benefitted from considerable research into players' health. Only in 2023 did Edinburgh, Bath, and Cardiff Metropolitan Universities begin a two-year study to adapt the Activate program for women (originally designed for men) and which has been adopted by the England, Scotland, and Welsh Rugby Unions. It consists of specific exercise regimes to improve strength, agility, and balance, to reduce the number and impact of injuries, measured by the ongoing injuries sustained by female players. Females are also three to six times more likely to have knee ligament injuries than men, because

women tend to have wider hips and their knees tilt more inward, increasing the risk of an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) knee injury while jumping, pivoting and landing indicating more research is needed on how to prevent this type of injury. If they sustain an injury that needs surgery it is often many months, sometimes over a year, before they can play a full contact game again. This could possibly be career ending and highlights another disparity between men and women in the game. If we want to see equality in the game, we need more female athletes and we need to be able to train them to the peak of their physical endurance. If the experts in the field are men, and trained only to train men, we will never see female athletes reach their full potential.

In conclusion, women and girls deserve to be treated equally in rugby. They deserve fair pay, false stereotypes need to be dispelled, facilities levelled up, media coverage widened, and further research into women's injuries and rehabilitation conducted. Despite these inequalities, resilient and incredibly capable women and girls continue to play, and play well, a to date male dominated sport. Ideas, viewpoints and actions need to and should hopefully change in the near future, to highlight the amazing game that is women's rugby and to make young girls feel more confident taking it up as a hobby or even a career.

She does belong on the pitch. She is strong enough to tackle. She does know what she is doing. This is a sport for women. Women do it too!

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