

Anti-Misogyny in Sport

What is misogyny?

If you look up misogyny in the dictionary, it will tell you that the word means a hatred for women. Whilst that is the literal meaning, it does not reflect the reality of misogyny that women and girls experience every day in 2024.

Misogyny is not just hatred for women (although it does include it). It is contempt for women, prejudice against women and malice towards them. It is, fundamentally, about power; specifically preserving male power and traditional gender roles. Misogyny is an underlying belief whereas sexism is more about active discrimination. Further, sexism is discrimination based on sex, either sex, whereas misogyny is specifically targeted at women and girls.

“Misogyny is a way of thinking that upholds the primary status of men and a sense of male entitlement, while subordinating women and limiting their power and freedom.”

Baroness Kennedy of the Shaws

What needs to change to tackle misogyny in sport?

- Government departments and arms-length bodies need to introduce anti-misogyny policies and training.
- Government funding of sports organisations should be conditional on:
 - Anti-misogyny policies and training being put in place.
 - 50-50 representation of the sexes on their boards.
- The UK Government should introduce dedicated legislation against misogyny so that it becomes a criminal offence to, for example, threaten rape.



The relationship between misogyny and sport

Sport can be a fertile ground for misogyny although in an ideal world it would help to counter it.

Currently gender stereotypes place sport as central to masculinity. Boys are surrounded by messages that being good at sport is essential to their identity. In contrast stereotypes place little value on sport for girls. Sport is therefore seen as a male domain.

- This exclusion of women and girls from sport is innately misogynistic as it is joyful and has huge benefits.
- Misogyny is directed towards those women who break the stereotyping rules, whether by playing, commentating or taking any leadership role in sport.
- The leadership of sports organisations is dominated by men. Without gender balanced leadership it is hard to systematically tackle misogyny in sport.
- Sport's innate physicality exposes women and girls to particular and often sexualised scrutiny, criticism and objectification.
- Because we are conditioned to think the value of sport is wrapped up with winning, rather than teamwork, leadership or skill, success in sport is judged in absolute terms. Given men are stronger and faster, and boys equipped with skills from a young age, they will inevitably have an advantage. This can also fuel contempt and misogynistic narratives.

It will take men and women working together to tackle misogyny in sport. Male allies who understand that stamping out misogyny requires them to challenge and change biases, actions and behaviour are vital.

We can't close the gender play gap if we don't stamp out misogyny in sport and in wider society.

What about the law?

Unlike other types of discrimination, such as racism and homophobia, misogyny is not criminalised in any of the home nations. The current system of anti-discrimination laws is, rightly, aimed at protecting minorities. Women are not a minority.

For this reason, Women in Sport believes that there should be standalone legislation that criminalises certain types of behaviour motivated by misogyny. The Scottish Government's proposed new offences related to misogyny offers a model we believe could work. We urge all governments in the UK to introduce misogyny legislation.



Get in touch

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