

WALKING THE TIGHTROPES: NAVIGATING
ACCEPTABLE FEMININITY IN MEN'S PROFESSIONAL
SPORTS WORKPLACES

by

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Recent reports of toxic workplace environments regarding the treatment of non-player personnel in professional sports organizations like the NBA and NFL have highlighted just how little is known about this unique work environment. Previous research in the sociology of sport, organizational sociology, and gender studies suggests a strong relationship between masculine values of aggression and competition within sports cultures and workplace cultures. However, there is very little research on how gender affects the experiences of working women in professional sports organizations. This project aims to explore how these women's femininity is challenged and reinforced via their experience of their sports-centered occupations. The study consisted of interviewing eight self-selected women who work in non-player personnel roles in minor league baseball organizations across the United States, who each shared their experiences from current and past positions in professional sports. The findings of this study suggest that women are constantly navigating boundaries of acceptable behavior regarding their confidence, their appearance, and their parental status in ways that are in line with other industries but contextualized uniquely by the sports environment. This ultimately provides crucial context for understanding what working in professional sports is like for women, the gendered challenges they experience, and what types of experiences may be contributing to an increased number of reports about poor sports workplace environments.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Literature Review	4
Masculinity and Sport	4
Gender In the Workplace	6
Motherhood in the Workplace	8
Stereotype Threat	9
Intersections	9
The Gendered Sports Workplace	10
Methods	11
Findings	13
The Line Between Confidence and Being a “Bitch”	13
The Line Between Sexual Threat and Sex Appeal	17
The Line Between Good Worker and Good Mother	20
Continual Improvement	22
Conclusion	24
Appendix	27
Bibliography	30

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, women have made substantial, historic strides in attaining positions of power within the enterprise of professional sports. One such example is Major League Baseball's Kim Ng, the first and only female General Manager of a Big 4 professional sports franchise in North America (Gregory 2021). Women across different pro leagues are refereeing the highest levels of men's professional sport, and women's professional leagues and players are garnering more attention and sponsorships than ever before (Goldman 2021). Despite this headway, there are many contemporary examples that highlight numerous gender discrepancies on the playing field for female athletes. One prominent example is the pay gap present in United States National Team soccer. Differing pay structures meant that members of the women's soccer team—who have consistently been ranked among the best women's teams in the world—make significantly less than the men's team at every stage of FIFA play despite having the same team sponsors and partners. This is even though the men's team has not performed well in international competition in nearly a decade (Ellison 2020). Another example of gender inequality in sports was the 2020 NCAA Basketball March Madness Tournament. The women's tournament in Texas offered a single rack of dumbbells and yoga mats, limited food options, and small gift bags for the athletes. The men's tournament in Indiana had a full ballroom of exercise equipment, a variety of food selections, and larger gift bags. It wasn't until players and coaches brought the disparities to social media that the amenities were upgraded to be more equitable (Tschinkel 2021).

This reporting on women's sport and discrimination has showcased how sport is fraught with gender inequality, but players aren't the only women who work for sports organizations. Women also serve in front office roles— for example, as sales representatives and financial officers— and there is a severe lack of understanding as to how these women experience work cultures in professional sports organizations. Recent reports and investigations of harassment in the NBA and NFL make this research extremely pertinent. The Phoenix Suns' president Robert Sarver is under NBA league investigation due to allegations of racist comments, misogynistic comments, and fostering a toxic workplace. These allegations include (but are not limited to): passing around photos of his wife in a bikini while commenting on her ability to perform oral sex and asking a female employee if he "owned" her as a means of asking if she worked for the organization (Holmes 2021).

While this report is shocking, it is not isolated to the Suns' organization. The Portland Trailblazers' General Manager Neil Olshey was recently fired due to similar allegations of fostering a toxic work culture among non-player personnel (Deb 2021). In the NFL, the Washington Commanders were probed by the league due to their workplace culture— and these findings haven't been released to the public despite the United States Congress requiring the league to report its findings (Belson 2021).

Little systematic study has been dedicated to this unique organizational field, which is characterized by its close proximity to the actual athletic competitions that the organizations' teams take part in. These allegations brought forth by employees of professional teams especially highlight how women, who have historically been disadvantaged in traditional non-sport office workplaces, are still experiencing

discrimination and harassment. Given prior research—which will be elaborated upon in the upcoming section— we understand that certain characteristics, identities, and behaviors are socially stereotyped to gender as “feminine” or “masculine” constructs. These shape our assumptions of people’s attitudes and capabilities by virtue of gender. Thus, this study will serve as an initial window to view how women working in professional sports organizations experience their work cultures and if they perceive that the constructs of femininity are challenged or reinforced by virtue of their work environment.

Literature Review

Masculinity and Sport

Athletics are a unique, central structure in American society. Beyond entertainment value, sports serve as a societal structure for social organization and as a cultural practice that millions voluntarily participate in as fans, participants, or officials (Bass 2014). This omnipresence of sport in American culture makes it more than just games for fun; in reality, it is an important socializing institution for its participants and fans (Bass 2014).

Masculine values are central to sporting culture. These are understood as the emotional characteristics that society collectively understands to be associated with stereotypical manhood— for example, ambition, competitiveness, aggression, and so forth (Warm, Waddill, and Dunham 2004). Studies have indicated that masculine values of an individual are an effective predictor of whether an individual is a fan of sports. While not exclusively limited by gender identity, masculine values are more common among members of the population who identify as men (Warm, Waddill, and Dunham 2004). Despite the recent advances of women in professional sport occupations, men still overwhelmingly dominate the makeup of the athletic landscape. Beyond being the majority of those who play a sport, men are also typically the ones in adjacent roles training the athletes; managing the coaches, athletic directors, and sport agents; marketing the games; and reporting on the outcomes of competitions in media (Anderson 2009).

Gender theorists have long purported that sport serves as a crucial site for reproducing patriarchal structures and values (Pringle 2005). One such way is that

sporting cultures often serve and support an orthodox masculinity that privileges a specific group of hypermasculine men, and in these cultures, men often assert physical dominance and use homophobic language to distance themselves from femininity (Adams, Anderson, and McCormack 2010). They also embrace force, domination, and competition as a principal factor of their games (Connell 2005). The elements of athletic competition and hierarchy among men go beyond the game itself— they often serve as the organizing principles of a team and reinforce social dominance of men over women through off-field team dialogue and coaching tactics. For example, the game is often referred to as a “battle” or “war” that must be won, and poor play by a male athlete may lead to him being called a “bitch”— which is a feminized derogatory term (Schwartz 2021). Sometimes the rhetoric of these all-male peer groups, like that of the heteromasculine sporting culture so often present in a men’s sports team, can reinforce their dominance by using physical violence, especially toward women and homosexuals (Schwartz 2021).

One researched example of men receiving preference in sporting culture extends beyond the playing field and into the way their sports are reported on. Historically, media coverage of sports is highly gendered. Women’s athletics receive much less airtime on sports newscasts than men’s athletics and commentators use a “gender bland sexism” devoid of exciting, actionable language to talk about women’s competitions. Meanwhile, men receive much longer news segments, aggressive language descriptors in their commentary and in-depth play analysis. For example, men will be described as making “explosive, nasty, or game changing” plays whereas a woman will be described as making a “good” or “key” play, making the women’s coverage inherently less

exciting (Musto, Cooky, and Messner 2017). This gendered difference— specifically with regards to the men’s coverage— highlights just how entrenched masculine language and attitudes are embedded in all aspects of men’s sport. It begs further questions as to what other aspects of sport are affected by these attitudes, which is what this project explores further.

Gender In the Workplace

Contemporary research has long highlighted how gender operates in traditional places of work. Masculinity has long been pervasive in professional spheres because men were the primary income earners for much of modern history and made up most workers. Even as the number of women in the workforce has increased, work cultures continue to value independence, hard work, competition, and task-orientation— which are societally associated with manhood— especially at the management level (Vianen and Fischer 2002). Furthermore, having strong masculine values individually contributes to managerial ambition, especially for those looking to attain a management position (Vianen and Fischer 2002). This selection for masculine values, which are more perceived among men, means that fewer women are likely to be in management positions. This common type of workplace dynamic can have an impact on how women are treated in their place of work; women are approximately four times more likely than their male colleagues to experience gender discrimination and sexual harassment while on the job (Rosigno 2019).

The experience and performance of gender in organizations is highly nuanced. So much about a person’s values, strengths, and attributes is assumed by gender, and in a workplace environment, jobs can be sex-segregated in ways that promote a subtle

reinforcement of traditional gender norms (Ridgeway 2011). Often women looking to advance their careers within their workplace will attempt to both eschew and highlight different aspects of their womanhood in order to maintain their credibility and their competitiveness in organizational advancement. For example, they might opt not to have children and complete a traditionally male job within their workplace. At the same time, they might highlight their feminine appearance to access privileges with men working in the same organization based on sex appeal (Cohen 1998). The patriarchal workplace framework thus privileges and selects for masculinity and a certain sexualized femininity that still gratifies men, thereby limiting the acceptable kinds of femininity in the workplace.

One thing is clear: the experience of gender inequality has had exceptional staying power. This is because gender is an organizing principle fundamental to the way we categorize ourselves and each other. The inequalities of the past transform in the face of new social arrangements and perpetuate a modified form of the same inequalities, leading to these modern reports of discrimination and harassment against women (Ridgeway 2011).

Language promoting diversity within organizations is also largely skewed to favor the established hierarchy of those who hold the positions of power. In the diversity rhetoric of many companies, the differences between men and women are not conceptualized or explained as the result of inequality; rather, they are described as natural variations, like someone's sport team preference (Williams et al. 2014). As found in a study of oil companies where women are the minority, this can lead to a dilution of the importance of gender diversity within a company even for the women

employed there, who are more likely to oppose affirmative action programs that hire more women because it is seen as unfair to men (Williams et al. 2014).

Motherhood in the Workplace

Women navigate many social categories and expectations associated with their gender in their everyday lives. For many, one such expectation is that of motherhood. Women who are working and have children often have to balance these two roles carefully so that one does not detrimentally affect the other in the eyes of their social circles. Motherhood can become a salient descriptor in a worker's professional sphere; for instance, it can unfavorably bias evaluations of the worker's job competence and their suitability for positions of authority within their organization because they are seen to have substantial obligations— like the caretaking of children, which historically is a role associated with the mother— outside of work (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). These biases that motherhood status evokes can be more strongly discriminatory than gender alone; by juxtaposing the cultural definitions of the “good mother” and the “ideal worker”, motherhood can be perceived as an upper limit to their professional performance because of the time and emotional demands that caretaking requires of them (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). These two roles of mother and worker are also locationally distinct and ordered by cultural definition, especially given the social constructions of women's responsibility for domestic work and childcare. Being inside the home as a mother is supposed to be prioritized and being outside the home at a place of work is supposed to come second, which brings about a “double burden” for full-time working mothers trying to manage the expectations of these two roles in a socially satisfactory way (Chen et al., 2008).

Stereotype Threat

While women do experience overt types of discrimination in professional settings, other more subtle pressures can affect the way they experience their workplace. One such example is the presence of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat refers to a fear of confirming negative stereotypes about an identity group of an individual; this can be regarding several categories including race, gender, social class, or any other social category that a person identifies themselves as belonging to (Kortland and Kinas, 2019).

Harboring concerns about confirming negative gender stereotypes in a work context can hinder professional motivation and achievement, which serves to exacerbate workplace gender inequity (Kortland and Kinas, 2019). This phenomenon extends into several settings outside of the workplace. Stereotype threat has also been researched in the context of sport and athletic achievement; in athletes, data shows that the more stereotypically masculine a sport or activity is, the more of a detrimental effect stereotype threat can have on women's performance (Gentile et al., 2018). To combat the effects of stereotype threat in the workplace and in sport, research suggests that having informal mentors and sponsors, supportive supervisors, and strong social support can increase satisfaction among female employees (Kortland and Kinas, 2019). This type of social support may be especially invaluable in workplaces or professions that have been historically male dominated.

Intersections

In these discussions of gender, paid work, and sport, it would be amiss to not address how other aspects of one's social identity can create different lived experiences. Gender is not the only frame that affects how one experiences the social dynamics of

sport or work. Race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, trans identities, nonbinary identities, and other social identities have their own storied histories of exclusion and discrimination in these spaces (Bandy 2014). These can intersect with gender and with each other to compound the experiences of gender inequality (Ridgeway 2011). These intersections deserve multiple studies that analyze the history and mechanisms that reinforce them. Thus, to narrow the scope of this research to one of these social categories, the primary focus of this research will be to examine how women experience gender in a sports workplace.

The Gendered Sports Workplace

While research has been conducted on how gender interacts with sport and sports competition, very little research has been done on how gender affects the experiences of working women in professional sports organizations. A study conducted by Lauren Hindman and Nefertiti Walker (2020) has laid the groundwork for this avenue of study at the managerial level; their research found that women managers within minor league hockey teams experienced both overt and discrete acts of sexism while on the job, as well as the presence of an “old boys club” that perpetuated the sexism they experienced. Their research focused on the unique position of management; as such, the aim of my research project will be to extend their findings to those in a more diverse range of job levels in sports organizations.

Methods

To recruit participants for this research, a random generator of all Low A through AAA Minor League Baseball Teams selected a total of 16 teams to contact. This included 4 Low A teams, 5 High A teams, 3 AA teams, and 4 AAA teams. Each team's public front office directory was located through MiLB.com to email all employees on each team with available contact information and that met any of the following criteria: a feminine name, a feminine appearance in their profile picture, she/her pronouns in their website bio, or an androgynous name with no other gender identifiers readily available. Each recruitment email specified that this email was for a voluntary interview about their experience as a woman working in the sports industry. It also included a virtual calendar to make the interview scheduling more convenient for participation.

Interviews took place before the start of the spring season; after the season began, multiple women responded to outreach emails indicating that they were interested but did not have time to participate. In total, 8 women either responded to the recruitment email expressing interest in participating or scheduled an interview time slot, which were conducted on a rolling basis for approximately two months. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes each and was conducted over the video conference application Zoom. The employees, who have been anonymized with pseudonyms, represent 4 different teams at the High-A, AA, and AAA league levels. In these conversational interviews, participants were asked about their work history in professional sports, their team office dynamic, and gendered treatment and harassment of themselves or their colleagues in the industry. They were also asked to share any

additional information they felt comfortable with about their experience working in sports. A complete interview schedule can be found in the appendix.

The participants in this study each hold different job titles in their respective organizations. The age of participants ranges from early twenties to late sixties, and all the women interviewed were white. More detailed demographic information regarding each participation can be found in the appendix.

Each of these interviews were recorded using Zoom's audio record feature and transcribed using a combination of audio transcription software and manual transcription to ensure. The coding process was largely data driven by listening to each interview and categorizing segments according to emergent themes, connotation (positive or negative), and types of events. After finding commonalties between the interviewees' responses, the portions of transcripts surrounding the most prevalent themes were divided into three groups: confidence, appearance, and family. These categories provided valuable insight into how each of these themes are both encouraged and discouraged in certain contexts, which provide the basis for this study's findings.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how the social constructs of femininity are challenged and upheld in professional sports work environments, especially as more women enter this field of work. The eight participants in this research shared their experiences from their current and previous roles in the professional sports industry. Overall, the interviews for this study illuminated how the women who work in the professional sports front office must navigate several double standards— namely, about their confidence, their appearance, and their parental status— that are both similar and different to the tightropes women in other industries must walk. Women must assert themselves in the workplace to do their jobs well, but that confidence and assertiveness can also be spun to portray them in a negative light. They are also seen as inherently sexual in a way that threatens the attention and reputation of the teams they work for; however, they are also expected to uphold social constructs of femininity and beauty in the way they present themselves. Finally, having families and children is encouraged by virtue of their work environment, but the gendered responsibilities of parenting are a barrier to women who want to start a family and continue to work for their team.

The Line Between Confidence and Being a “Bitch”

Balancing positional authority and likability is something that women working in the professional sports industry must navigate to be successful in their roles. The women who took part in this study came into their positions in three primary ways. Some worked their way up through their baseball organization, some have worked in the sports industry across various sporting leagues, and some were hired into their roles

after having worked in other professional industries— and this variety allowed access to women working at various authority levels within their teams.

The ratio of men to women in all the teams contacted varied. Among those interviewed, some respondents reported an equal or overrepresentation of women in their workplace; Angelica, for instance, works in an organization with an unusual overrepresentation of women in the front office: “We have tons of females on staff. I would say it is probably 70/30 females to males.” However, most respondents characterized the ratio of men to women working in their organization full-time as unequal and male dominant. “For full time staff, I would say maybe 1% to 2% are females,” said Kate. Natalie, who has also worked for a National Football League organization prior to her current role, said of her time there and of her current organization:

“If you looked at [the NFL team] overall, it was probably male dominant— but within my department that I worked with specifically, it was predominantly female... And then here out of the 10 or 12 of us, I think there's— well, I know there's only two of us.”

Participants who came from organizations that were male dominant, like the one Natalie described, identified exuding confidence and asserting themselves as important in navigating spaces where they are the overwhelming minority. Holly said, “I've definitely had different points in time where I'm the only woman in a boardroom, but I don't let it affect what I'm doing, so I think that makes a huge difference. The work needs to be done, regardless of who I am. I let the work shine, you know, and that's what I think I should be evaluated off of, not by gender.” Erica stated that exuding confidence is important for her to assert her own competence and authority as a woman in a male-dominant industry: “[I] put up my guard more if I know that I'm going to talk

to a bunch of guys who do work around the stadium or something like that. I tend to go in, you know, with my shoulders back— more confident than I would if it was just a normal meeting.”

However, most participants expressed feeling as though the expectations of their gender identity have made their work roles more difficult to complete at some point in their career. For instance, Jordan indicated that she feels like she must do more work than her male colleagues to avoid the stereotype of being labeled a “bitch” by the men of the office:

“If a male colleague wouldn't finish a project or, you know, had trouble starting a project or something, it always seemed to fall on the women. It would be phrased like, ‘Oh, we will put this on your plate, because we know it will get done if it's on your plate.’ But it was only the two women, the other woman and I, that would have anything else added to our plates while all the guys were slacking. And it was clearly them not doing their job, but it still had to get done. So, it fell to the women, and we never really said no, and I think that was just because of our position and that we didn't want to be the B word in the office. So you just kind of say yes and do the work.”

Jordan’s experience is indicative of how stereotype threat can be evoked due to a workplace’s dynamic. For women in her situation, the implication that extra work needs to get done by them as an expectation because of their gender can lead to burnout and stress on the job. If the work can’t get done because of the negative stress, then that woman risks fulfilling a negative stereotype about women in general— in this case, being incompetent or being called a “bitch.”

Kate's current role with her organization involves both leadership and lots of public interface, and she reported that getting members of the public to recognize her as a source of authority has been difficult on account of her gender. “I've found some times where somebody will come up to me and just be kind of, you know, disrespectful, or

just not listening to what I would say. And then my coworker who was male— I'd be like, 'Listen, like, this person is just not listening to me, can you go talk to them?' And then he would go out there and they'd be completely different with their demeanor, and they would totally understand him." For Kate, negative assumptions about her knowledge of her organization's ticket practices and policies are being made by members of the public based on her gender. Meanwhile, her male colleague did not have to face that negative assumption, thereby creating a gendered obstacle in her ability to do her job.

Erica indicated having instances where vendors or contractors made assumptions about her knowledge of doing hands-on work around the stadium because of her femininity. "I would be on the phone with [a contractor] talking about, you know, troubleshooting [the video board] or something like that, and he was like, 'Isn't there a guy that can go do that for you?' And I was like, 'Why? I'm fully capable of doing that.' Like, this is my job."

Natalie is in a position of authority over interns with her current team. While she indicated that she's never been insulted directly to her face by colleagues, she knows that people have talked negatively about her behind her back— and that often, her gender and knowledge are conflated as an insult. "When I tell them to do something, it usually comes back to me being a bitch. I'm 'just a woman,' and I 'don't know what I'm talking about' kind of thing."

These experiences show that holding authority as a woman in a sports organization involves a careful negotiation of confidence and conforming to compliant behavior. When someone has a level of organizational authority that clashes with the

established gender hierarchy of their workplace or they don't complete additional labor being asked of them, they risk confirming negative stereotypes about women being incompetent or being a "bitch." Therefore, they must remain cognizant of how they are perceived by others in this male-dominated workplace.

The Line Between Sexual Threat and Sex Appeal

While participants indicated that overt acts of sexism or sexist comments are uncommon between coworkers of the same organization, occasional negative encounters with community members, other organizations, or athletes are more common and usually based upon their femininity and perceived attractiveness. Casey, who works as a Head Groundskeeper, described her experience being objectified by a visiting coach during her first baseball internship:

“One of the visiting team coaches made a comment to my boss saying, ‘Is she working?’ And he was like, ‘Yeah, it's my intern’. And [the coach] was like, ‘She working the game?’ He said, ‘Yes. She's full time staff. So she works the whole time I'm here.’ And he was like, ‘Well, do you think you could send her home? She's kind of a distraction for the team.’ And my boss looked at him and was like, ‘Unless you're going to rake the field? No, because I need the hands. I need the help. Unless you're going to drag mid-game, then nope, she's staying.’”

Despite now overseeing her ballpark's groundskeeping, Casey reported still receiving comments directly tied to her physical appearance from contractors she works with. “I went out to go check on the groundbreaking, and [the landscaper] goes, ‘How's the cutest groundskeeper in [town]?’ You could just say, ‘How are you?’ If I was a dude, you wouldn't say that.”

Some women feel desensitized to the sexualized comments made about them because of previous experiences working in sports. Laura, who has been interning and

working for sports teams since high school, indicated a specific instance where a team donor made a sexually charged comment in a meeting towards the younger women in the room:

“He basically indicated to us girls, ‘You know, the pussy has the power!’ And he looks at the two young females in the office and is like, ‘You know what I mean?’ And we’re kind of like, ‘No.’ It was definitely a weird situation. It definitely rocked the female intern we had at the time more than me— again, having gone through high school with boys, you know, calling us like water bitches, or ‘You should, like, give us water in a white t-shirt.’ This didn’t feel that different from that. So I was kind of like, ‘Oh, great. You’re objectifying women. Such a great guy, and now I’m just gonna always hate you.’”

Laura’s experience exemplifies how women are sexualized in informal conversation in this field of work. That sexualization is also formally codified in rules and expectations in how women are supposed to behave. The women interviewed indicated that being told what attire and behavior is appropriate with players is common. Natalie, who works with the same team as Laura, mentioned having conversations about appropriate attire and behavior with multiple organizations she’s worked for:

“I got sat down with the [NFL team] and told, like, ‘Don’t wear certain things to the office, always remain professional, don’t get too cozy with players.’ Like, you have to make sure that line, it’s there... I had to talk with my two female supervisors with the [NFL team], whereas when I came here, our GMs did have [the talk] with me— but it was two males in a room across from me. So it was kind of a completely different tone of conversation from where with the females, it was like, ‘Okay, they’re on my side, they’re looking out for me.’ With the male conversation, it was more threatening, like, ‘don’t do this’— a little bit more judgmental.”

Laura reported having a similar conversation to Natalie during her years interning and upon her hiring, adding how the expectation of maintaining appropriate, professional relationships seems to always fall on the women and not the men. “People

always will tell female employees or interns, ‘Don’t talk to the players, don’t get involved with the players,’ but nobody ever tells the players not to hit us up on Instagram.”

While women working in the sports world are sometimes blatantly reminded about keeping men’s sexuality under control by behaving in certain ways, as Laura articulated, there is still a pressure to meet social conventions of feminine appearance and beauty. Kate indicated that she felt it was hard to meet this standard with her team’s dress code, which catered more to masculine professional attire. “Khakis are not flattering. It’s not great for women, you know, at certain times of the month, shape-wise, all these types of things.” Sometimes, the reminders are more explicitly stated. Jordan indicated that she’s been explicitly told to dress in a more feminine manner because of her role with her team. “‘Oh, you know, you’re in broadcast and so you should probably wear nicer clothes and more makeup in the office,’ and that sort of thing... ‘Oh, you’re a woman and you’re in a broadcast position, you should look a certain way.’”

Again, there is a narrow range of behavior that women in professional sports must remain in to be taken seriously in their roles. Women are held responsible for maintaining acceptable exhibitions of their sexuality, but even with an emphasis on professional boundaries, there are still instances where comments are made about their bodies or appearance. At the same time, women are not allowed to totally eschew the social constructs of feminine appearance despite the industry’s historically masculine required dress— creating yet another tightrope that women in sports must walk to effectively do their jobs.

The Line Between Good Worker and Good Mother

Family, motherhood, and expectations for both are a complex web that women in professional sports organizations must navigate in both their professional and personal lives. Given the structure of working in minor league baseball, employees usually work longer than the typical 40-hour workweek during the season. As such, employees spend a lot of time with each other and are able to build extensive interpersonal relationships. All but one of the women explicitly described their organizations as a family. Natalie said of her workplace: “We're all pretty close; we work really long hours, so we know each other really well. We know each other's families— or, for me, my family's not here. So they basically are my family when it comes to certain things.” Laura said that her team “definitely kind of has a family vibe— like, our GM is out of the office right now for the next few weeks, and we're like, ‘Oh, Dad's gone.’ You know, ‘Who's supervising us?’” jokingly. We all get along with each other pretty well. Sometimes we're pulling pranks on each other, just kind of having fun, but you know, the kind of family that you can also rely on.” Angelica added that she is especially close with some of her female colleagues; “I threw a baby shower for one, and I married [officiated] one,” she said.

While the office feels like a family for most of those interviewed, a number of these women also have spouses and children outside of work. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020 and people started working remotely, Angelica felt the impact of shouldering both her role at work and her role at home as a caretaker to her children. “My children were eight and three at the time COVID started. So not only was I figuring out how to be a full-time working mom from home, but I was learning how to

teach, to do schoolwork, and still trying to have work meetings. It was a struggle,” she said. She noted that her colleagues were extremely supportive of each other during that period of remote work. “They all stepped up [and helped]. I never wanted to be a stay-at-home mom, and I never wanted to be a teacher, and I got both of that for a solid year almost. It was hard.”

Holly’s children are now older, but she recognizes the struggle of trying to balance work and the responsibilities of parenthood. “I do have three kids. And it's been, you know, it is a juggling act at times. They're mostly grown now, but there's definitely been times in my career where it was really hard to keep that juggling act going.” She added that she has seen gender affect the treatment of women and herself, regardless of what industry she has worked in; “There are demands outside of the workplace that family and life put on people. I think that [responsibility] is almost always talked about in regard to whether it's a woman or a male in that situation... I've had people that understand those demands, and I have had people that haven't understood it. Finding people in your court that really help and support you, it's important.”

Kate has had to reckon with the feasibility of starting a family in the sports industry because of how time-demanding her role is—which can require 70 hours a week when baseball is in season—and the gendered responsibilities of parenting. On top of this, she feels like it’s hard to get advice on what she should do because of the lack of women in her organization’s management:

“I got married a couple years ago, and now we're starting to think about having a family. And so for me, the thought of like, how do I balance this career choice and raising a family? Our higher management is all males, so it's not like I can go to them and ask them questions... because

most of them in terms of, you know, taking care of the kids, or going grocery shopping, doing the laundry, things like that— their wives are doing that... My husband already has to pick up a lot of slack while I'm gone. So it's kind of like, how do you be a working mom in a place where you can't, but you pretty much are always at?"

Most jobs require time commitment, but the sports industry's long hours— combined with a predominantly masculine environment and a culture where women are seen as responsible for childrearing— puts pressure on those women who are mothers or those who want to become one. While there are rich communities fostered within the teams by virtue of the nontraditional hours required to put on games and manage team affairs, it affects personal decisions about homelife, especially regarding parenting, where women are typically assumed to be the primary caregiver. Juggling the expectations of what their workplace role expects of them and what they want for themselves is a negotiation that has to be made between a woman's personal and professional life in a way unique to the sports industry.

Continual Improvement

Despite most participants reporting negative experiences in their work that they feel were tied to their gender, there was a strong consensus that gender relations in their field are improving over time, which they largely attributed to an increase in women and allied men working in the industry. Per Jordan, who has been in the industry for five years, "If anyone experiences sexism, it is quickly falling to the wayside. Even in my short time in sport— a relatively short time in sports— it's definitely gotten less and less just because I think that there are more women." Erica, who has worked in minor league baseball for nine years, said that she feels lucky to have substantial numbers of women also working in the organizations she's been a part of. "During my first few

years in, we actually had a majority of women, but there's actually been a good presence with every team that I've worked with so far, which has been nice.”

In a larger context, Angelica indicated that she has seen a change in both the professional sports industry and outside industries in how men interact with women: “Males in this industry now— I think this is most industries— they're a little more careful with how they work with people.” This may not reflect true attitude changes among men, but it does indicate that negative opinions and attitudes are not being outwardly directed toward women to the same degree that it used to. While she wouldn't describe the landscape as entirely equal yet, Erica feels a sense of camaraderie with the other women who work in baseball with her. “That's just the dynamic of knowing, you know, we're in a man's world. We have to stick together like that.”

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to see how the constructs of femininity are reinforced and challenged for women who work for professional sports organizations. Overall, the findings suggest that women must navigate narrow boundaries of acceptable femininity in the professional sports workplace in regard to their demeanor, their appearance, and their familial status. These findings are in line with prior research done in other types of office work. It is also reflective of studies conducted in other professional sports leagues, as shown in the work of Walker and Hindman in professional hockey (2020). The experiences of the participants are similar in many regards to the experiences of women in non-sports workplaces; however, the situational contexts of the experiences are largely unique to the job's interface with sport, especially with regard to on-field interactions with coaches and expectations surrounding interactions with players that would not happen often—if at all—in other workplaces.

This study ultimately contributes to the limited but growing body of research into sports business and gender. This matters because it exemplifies that progress toward gender equality is still necessary in not only the professional sports industry, but in all industries. This study specifically better our understanding of how women who work in the professional sports industry navigate the social expectations of their workplace, which requires their constant awareness and caution to stay within the bounds of acceptable behavior for their male-dominated organizations. Given the litany of allegations regarding gendered workplace misconduct surrounding America's top professional sports teams, these interviews provide important context of sports

workplace dynamics to aid in understanding of the day-to-day conditions and experiences that might be contributing to these increased reports.

One of the most surprising themes to emerge from the study was a strong focus on how motherhood impacts working for a sports organization. Participants often brought up their experiences in this regard without any prompting or specific questions. This theme's prevalence likely stems from the recency of COVID-19 restrictions, which were often mentioned alongside motherhood, and their impacts on how these women navigated working from home while minding children who were home from school. This topic, while addressed partially here, warrants further study to address the experience of motherhood more fully and working in the professional sports industry.

It is important to note that this study relies on the qualitative testimony of 8 women, meaning that this study may not reflect the experiences of every woman who has worked in a professional sports organization. There are many factors that affect the workplace experience beyond femininity, including racial identity and socioeconomic status, that would make for a fantastic line of new research. An intersectional approach combining gender and race might also reveal other unique experiences that women of color might have in this field. Additionally, some of the points raised by participants could not be addressed fully in this paper and require further research. One such example is how competition between women does or does not play into this work environment and dynamics between coworkers; further research, larger sample sizes, and even international studies are needed to compile a fuller picture of this theme and the experience of workplace femininity in this industry at large.

As someone who presents as traditionally feminine and has a traditionally feminine name, the women contacted for this study may have been more inclined to agree to participate in this research because of my own identity as a woman. They may also have felt more comfortable sharing the specific details of their workplace experiences because they expect their experiences to be relatable to other women, creating a natural rapport that has enabled me to collect data on this topic.

In summary, this pilot study provides an initial window into the experience of femininity in a professional sports front office environment. It elucidates how women who are working in professional sports organizations experience both challenges and reinforcement of gendered constructs by virtue of their working status and the uniqueness of a sports-centered work environment. It highlights that despite advances toward gender equality in the workplace, experiencing harassment and gendered assumptions isn't uncommon— and this reality provides much needed context to understand why women in other professional leagues are coming forward to report mistreatment in their organizations.

Appendix

Figure 1. Participant Information

Name*	Affiliation Level	Race	Job Type
Angelica	AA	White	Business Development
Jordan	AA	White	Broadcasting
Natalie	High A	White	Community Relations
Kate	AA	White	Promotions
Laura	High A	White	Ticketing
Erica	AAA	White	Marketing
Holly	AAA	White	Finance
Casey	AAA	White	Groundskeeping

*Names are pseudonyms

Figure 2. Interview Schedule

- 1) Where are you from? How did you become interested in your role?
- 2) What is your role with this organization? How long have you been working with X organization in your current role? How long have you been working within X organization total?
 - a) Have you ever worked for any other professional sports organizations?
- 3) Have you worked in a non-sport related position before?
 - a) What are some of the biggest differences between the organization you worked for previously and this one?

- 4) How is your department organized? What does your department/role do for the organization?
- 5) Using your best estimate, how would you characterize the ratio of men to women working in your department/organization?
- 6) How would you describe the atmosphere of the office? How friendly are colleagues in this office/department to one another?
 - a) Are women typically friendly with one another in the office?
- 7) How often does the sport (baseball) come up in the office informally?
 - a) Do any other topics often come up informally?
- 8) Do you feel like being a woman has made it easier, harder, or made no difference in your ability to navigate your current job?
 - a) If you have worked a previous role in a non-sport related organization, did being a woman make it easier, harder, or make no difference in your ability to navigate that job?
- 9) Have any of your colleagues made demeaning comments about you or your work based on your gender identity?
 - a) What types of comments were said?
 - b) Is this common in your place of work?
 - c) Do you believe this comment would have still been made in a different, non-sport related environment?
- 10) Have any of your colleagues made demeaning comments about other people based on their gender

- 11) Do you feel like your contributions to the organization are valued higher, the same, or less than your male colleagues because of your gender identity?
- 12) Is there anything else you'd like to share?

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