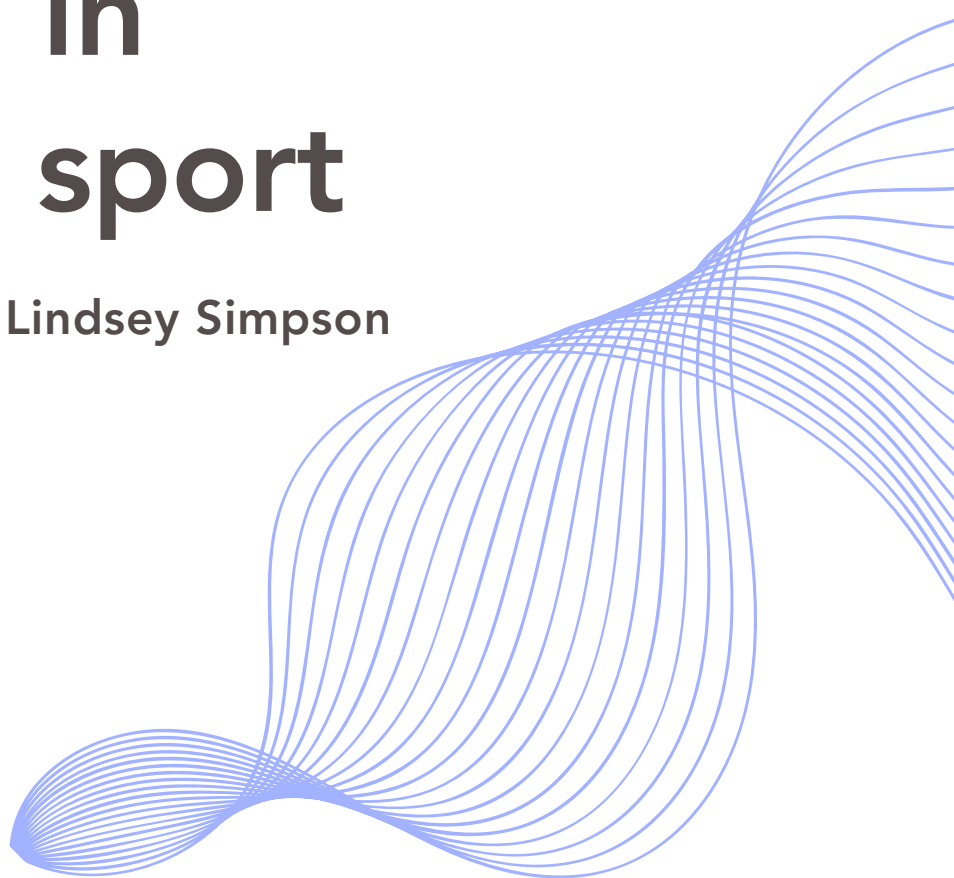


January 2026

This report contains themes some readers may find distressing.
Sources of support are listed on page 27.

Women's experiences of sexual misconduct working in UK elite sport

Summary report by Lindsey Simpson



Executive summary

This is a workforce report exploring women's experiences of sexual misconduct working in UK elite sport in the last five years. It includes and goes beyond the coach-athlete relationship, with occupations ranging from TV producers and lawyers to physios and administrators. In January 2025, UK members of the Women's Sports Collective were invited to take part in an anonymous online survey if they worked in elite sport*; 260 responded. The survey had three sections covering demographics, 16 different types of sexual misconduct behaviours, and participants' views about how employers and governing bodies are addressing the issues.

The headline findings showed that in the previous five years:

- 88% of participants have been the target of at least one form of sexual misconduct behaviour, 87% at least one form of sexual harassment behaviour, 40% at least one form of sexual assault behaviour, and 2% had experienced rape in the workplace or a work-related setting.
- 93% said the perpetrator was 'always' or 'mostly' male.
- There were variations in how participants categorised the misconduct behaviours they had experienced. The more severe the misconduct, the more likely women were to see it as such, with only 100% congruence in the most severe category of rape.

Overall, 38% of participants expressed positive sentiments about governing bodies addressing the issues, and 46% in employers doing so. Women who had experienced sexual misconduct were half as confident in organisations addressing the issues compared to women who had not.

The findings suggest the sector needs to take a more comprehensive approach to fully understand the issues, and bolder action to address what is happening. Doing so will support organisations to meet the duty of care they have as employers, and their ability to attract and retain female talent. Recommendations are made for further research.

**See page 8 for the definition of elite sport used in this study*

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Please note: figures have been rounded up or down to the nearest percentage throughout this report.

About this report

The goal for this research was to map levels of sexual misconduct experienced by women working in UK elite sport in the last five years, and to use the insights to help drive change if needed. The findings strongly suggest that sexual misconduct is a common experience for women working across elite sport and that many organisations are not doing enough.

One of the reasons for inadequate responses to tackling the issues may be that sexual safety and misconduct can be a challenging and emotive subject to research. When this survey launched, I was unsure if anyone would respond, but 260 women did. Thank you to everyone who took part. I greatly appreciate the time and trust you gave to do this and your willingness to share your experiences. By doing so, you have played an important role in shining a light on the issues to help drive improvements in women's health, safety and wellbeing at work.

The findings in this report represent the first of its kind - quantitative, UK sector-specific data that looks at 16 types of adult-to-adult sexual misconduct behaviours experienced by women working in a wide variety of roles across 40 sports, including and beyond the coach-athlete inner circle. This broader view is vital if we are to understand and identify the system-level changes needed to rewire culture alongside policy and physical infrastructure to improve safety and wellbeing outcomes in sport.

Understanding that being the target of sexual misconduct is a common experience, particularly for women and girls, this report is written to meet you where you are:

- If you have experienced sexual misconduct, you will see that you are not alone. Many people have been targeted. If you need help and support, organisations are listed on page 27. Please seek help if you are struggling - you can always do this confidentially.
- If you have not experienced sexual misconduct at work, you may realise that many women around you probably have, and the forms this may take. This report can help you understand the shape and scale of the issues and how you could effectively respond.
- If you feel able, or are in a position of power or influence, use this report to start or accelerate conversations about what is being done to prevent sexual misconduct in work-related contexts, and to support those who have experienced it. See pages 21-25.

This research was a significant undertaking reliant on the support and trust of others to make it happen. In particular, thank you to:

- Sue Anstiss and Kate Hannon for allowing me access to the Women's Sport Collective to gather the data, and for the superb advice and support they gave over the 18 months it took to realise the project.
- Dr Jonathan Houdmont, research supervisor for my MSc in Workplace Health and Wellbeing, University of Nottingham, for his unstinting support, expert guidance and collaboration. This included support to secure ethical approval, and hours of detailed discussions, often tackling sensitive and confronting material.
- De Skinner for her support, interest and encouragement.

Despite the findings in this report, and sexual misconduct in wider society, we can be hopeful. History shows us that societies can become more equitable and safe in fundamental ways. While progress often feels far too slow, it was only in 1986 that Jean Porcelli's work-related complaint resulted in the 'first definitive ruling by a British court'¹ that sexual harassment constituted discrimination within the terms of the Sexual Discrimination Act (1975), laying a vital legal pathway to promote change.

Greater awareness of the perpetrators, forms and prevalence of sexual misconduct is part of accelerating change by continuing to dismantle the systems and culture that have failed women and girls for so long. And I hope that this research helps call in men, women, and non-binary people to this work; sexual misconduct takes a toll on all of society. It is in all our interests, and our gift, to take action in some form. Gathering and sharing data and insight is part of that process, giving changemakers the evidence to powerfully and specifically articulate the issues and drive progress for the benefit of sport and wider society.

Lindsey Simpson

January 2026

Which behaviours were explored?

There is no universal definition of sexual misconduct, however sexual harassment is described in the [Equality Act \(2010\)](#) as unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, whether the motivation behind the act is sexual or not. Behaviour must have the purpose or effect of a violation of dignity or the creation of an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. Below is a list of the sixteen forms of sexual misconduct explored in this research. These categories largely replicate those tested in a large-scale study into the wellbeing of the surgical workforce².

Harassment

- Jokes with sexual content
- Displaying sexualised pictures in shared spaces/contexts
- Digital/online communications - unwanted, sexual
- Unwanted/inappropriate physical advances - sexual
- Unwanted sexual talk
- Uninvited comments about your body
- Asked for a date despite previous refusal
- Offered career opportunities for sexual favour
- Threatened for refusing a sexual favour
- Deliberate, inappropriate infringing of your body space

Assault

- Forced into physical contact for career opportunities
- Non-consensual touching excluding genitals/breasts
- Non-consensual touching of genitals/breasts
- Self-fondling by perpetrator (masturbation)

Rape

- Rape in the workplace
- Rape - other work contexts e.g. conferences, travel, social events

On 9-12 pages, you will see composite scores across all the data and the three sub-categories above (harassment, assault and rape).

Who took part?

In January 2025, members of The Women's Sport Collective were invited to take part in this survey if they worked in UK elite sport. Elite sport was defined as national, professional, or semi-professional contexts and/or sport in a high-performance setting where people are paid to work. Members could also pass the survey link to colleagues. The survey was anonymous and 260 people responded. Figures have been rounded up or down to the nearest per cent. All questions had a 'prefer not to say' option.

- 99% identify as women.
- 60% are under 40, and 39% over 40, with the largest sub-group (34%) in the 31-40 age bracket.
- 90% identify as white, 2% Black, 2% Asian, 5% mixed ethnicity.
- 79% identify as heterosexual, 10% as gay/lesbian and 9% as bisexual.
- 7% identify as having a disability.
- 40% have worked in sport for 0-5 years, 45% for 6-20 years and 13% have worked in sport for more than 20 years.
- 55% of participants work in only one sport, with 40 sports named across all participants. The most represented in rank order were football, rugby, cricket, golf and tennis, although 100 participants did not say which sport(s) they worked in.
- 33% say their work includes Paralympic sport.
- 71% work in 'very high' or 'high' profile sports, 19% in 'average' profile, and 10% in 'low' or 'very low' profile sports.
- Job roles varied widely, from EDI leads to TV producers. The most common were sports administration (20%), marketing, communications & PR (14%), sports coach (11%), journalist and broadcasters (8%), commercial and legal (8%), management (7%), medical (5%), and data and insight (4%).
- 5% are current elite athletes, with 22% former elite athletes.

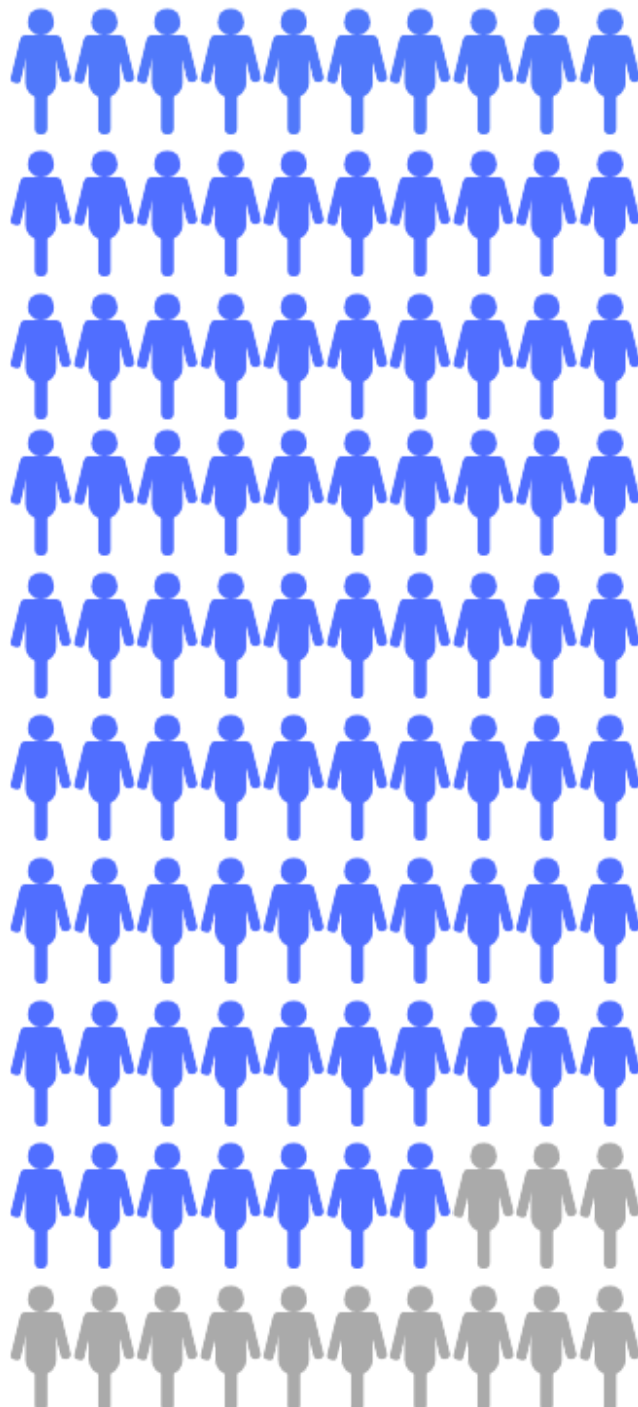
Sexual misconduct

88% of respondents have been the target of at least one sexual misconduct behaviour in a work-related setting in UK elite sport in the previous five years.



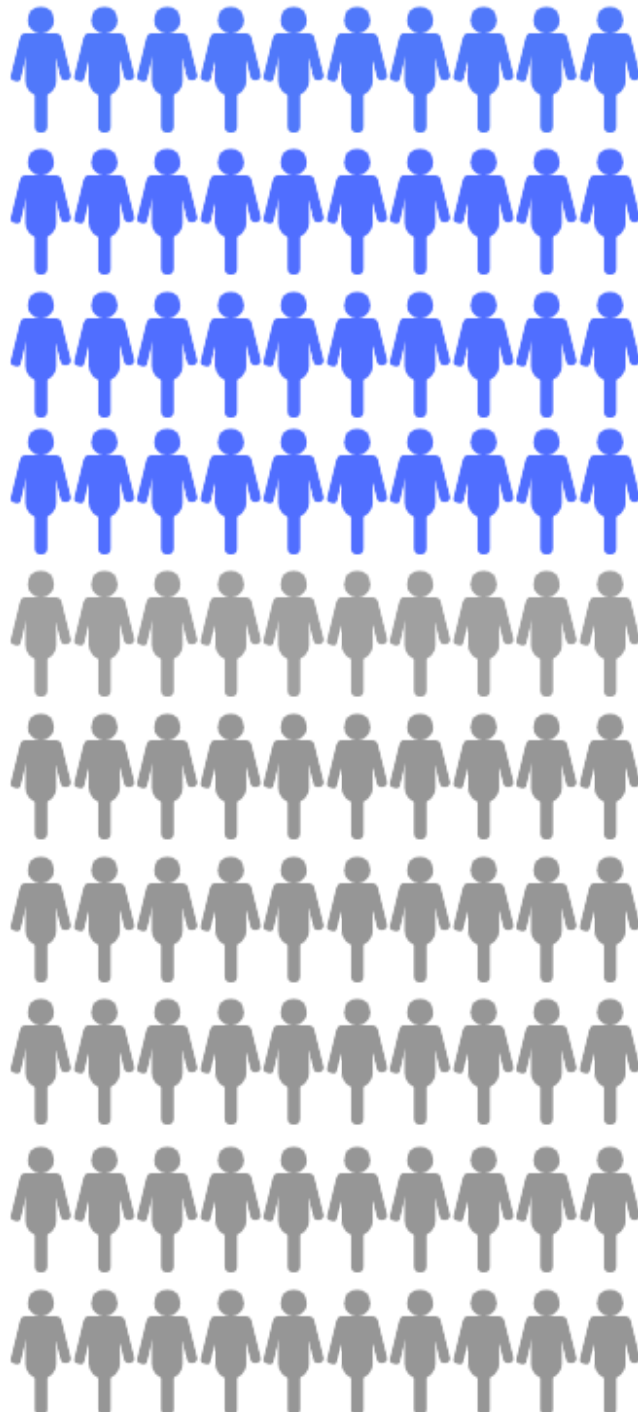
Sexual harassment

87% of respondents have been the target of at least one sexual harassment behaviour in a work-related setting in UK elite sport in the previous five years.



Sexual assault

40% of respondents have been the target of at least one sexual assault behaviour in a work-related setting in UK elite sport in the previous five years.



Rape

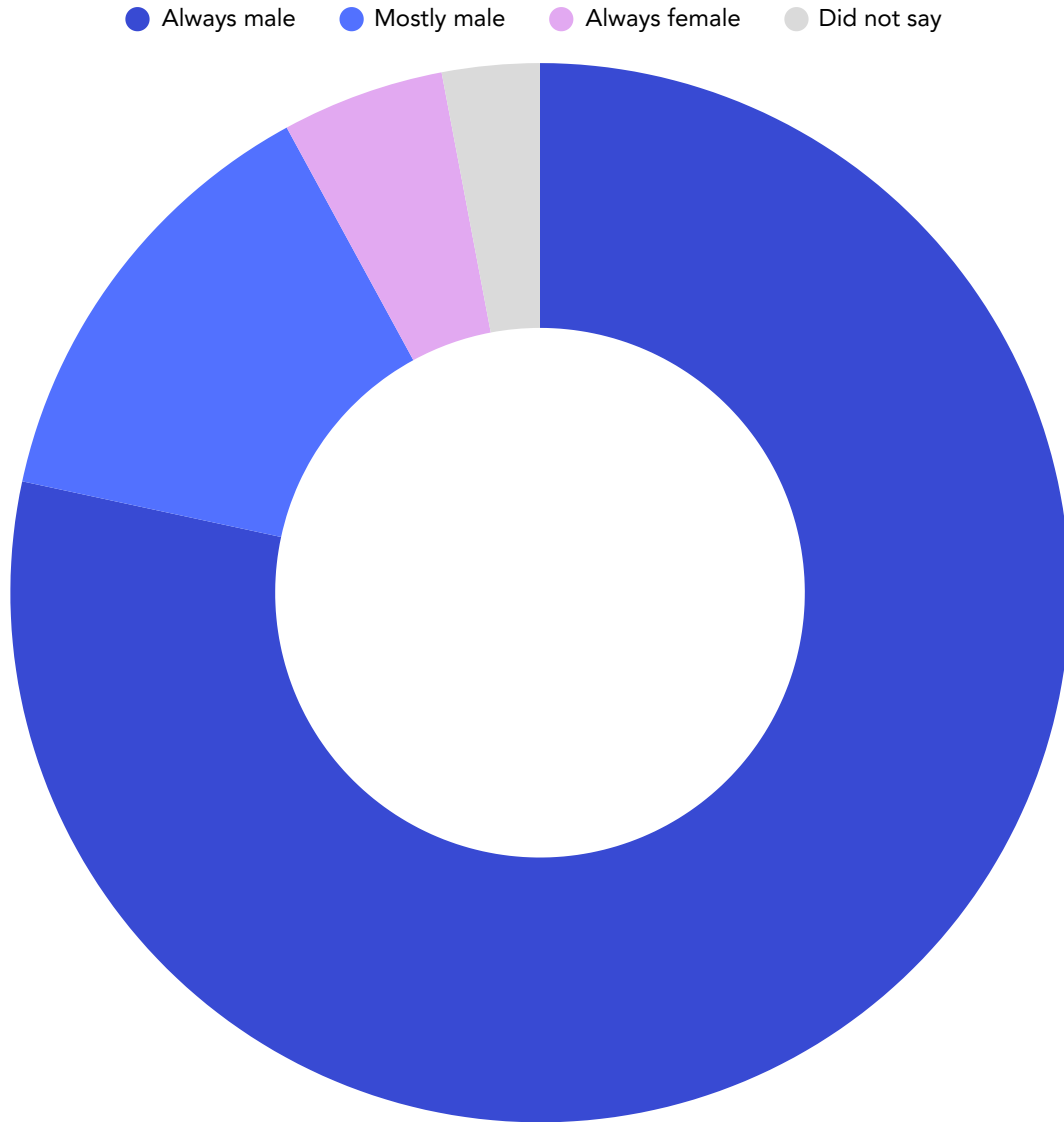
2% of respondents have been the target of rape in a workplace or a work-related setting in UK elite sport in the previous five years.



Headline details

- In terms of sexual harassment, 'jokes with sexual content' are the most common form of sexual misconduct, reported by 81% of women, followed by 'uninvited/inappropriate comments about your body' (63%).
- Unwanted touching of a sexual nature (excluding genitals and breasts) was the most common sexual assault behaviour, with 32% of women reporting this, followed by 'forced physical contact for career opportunities' at 22%.
- Six rapes (2%) were reported in the study with one respondent reporting two occurrences. Five of the six rapes were reported in work-related contexts outside the main workplace; this could mean, for example, during work-related travel or social events.
- Across harassment and assault behaviours, there is a 23 percentage point gap between participants identifying behaviours that have happened to them (88%) and perceiving them as sexual misconduct (65%). See page 16.
- 93% of those who perceived that sexual misconduct had taken place said the perpetrator was always, or in most cases, male. See page 14.
- The sample size meant it was unfeasible to statistically assess intersectional effects. However, it should be noted that despite being a small group in the sample (19 participants), women who identified as living with a disability showed a much higher abuse rate than any other minority grouping, including reporting three of the six rapes.
- Less than half the sample expressed positive sentiments about governing bodies (39%) and employers (46%) addressing issues of sexual misconduct. See pages 17 and 18.

Perpetrator identity



Many women reported multiple instances of sexual misconduct. When the perpetrator was known, 79% of respondents said the perpetrator was 'always male', with an additional 14% saying 'mostly male'. Other women were cited as 'always' the perpetrator by 5%.

Verbatim comments

While the survey was predominantly quantitative, participants could leave comments on a few questions to clarify their responses. Twenty-seven respondents left a comment on the question asking about the perpetrator(s), if known. Below is a sample of these comments illustrating the key themes.

“There are so few women in leadership positions in sport that it is rare that blokes are held accountable for their actions”

“There are a handful of older, male directors/senior figures who have a reputation for being sleazy and younger female staff are advised to avoid being too close to these men”

“Jokes and comments have been made by both women and men”

“The majority of my experiences of sexually inappropriate conduct have been from those attending on match day (fans). The culture is that it is tolerated/acceptable”

“Has predominantly occurred in activation/hospitality environment with guests who have been drinking”

“Kisses on the cheeks or hugs when I’ve gone in for a handshake - and all the men get handshakes - inappropriate jokes but standard ‘banter’. Almost always senior men in c-suite roles”

Was there a gap between identifying incidents of being a target of sexual misconduct and perceiving them as such?

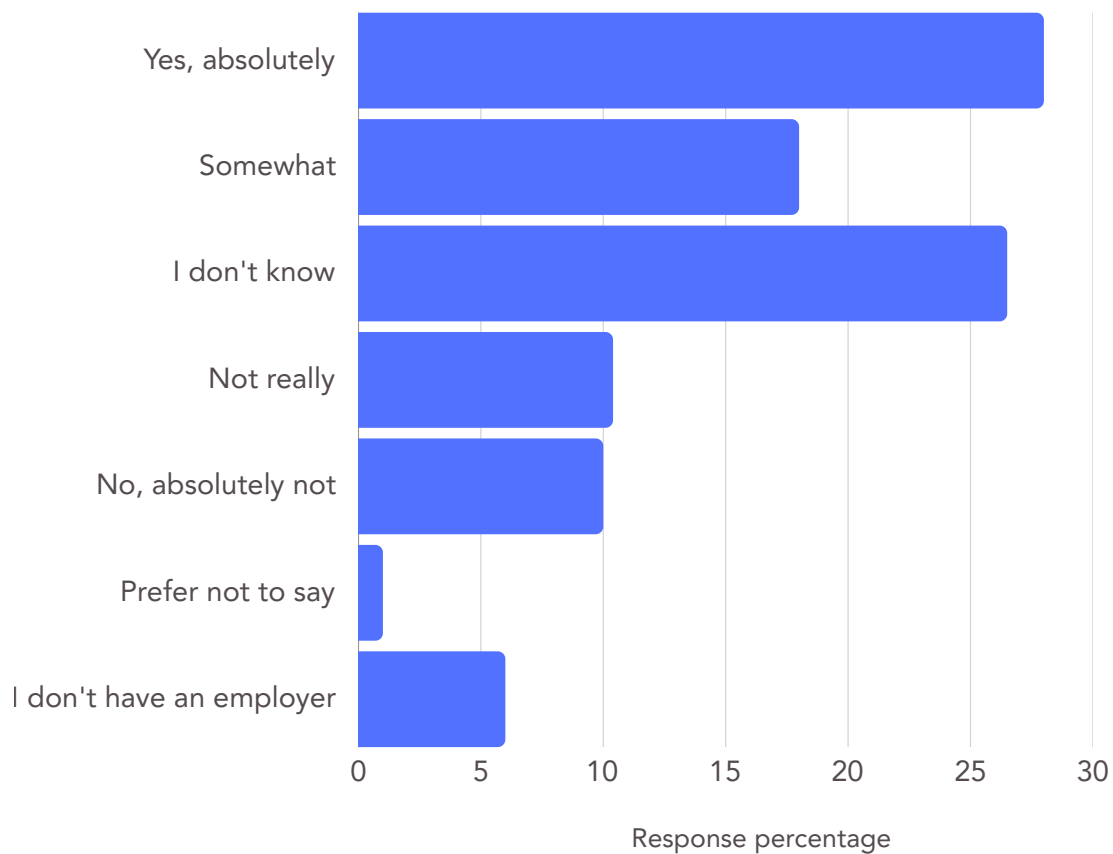
Yes. While 88% of participants answered that they were a target of at least one of the misconduct behaviours from the list of 16, only 65% then indicated they perceived their experiences as sexual misconduct in a later question - a 23 percentage point difference. This data showed a clear relationship between the severity of the sexual misconduct and women's perception of having experienced it; congruence increased with the severity of the behaviour. Specifically, 66% of those reporting sexual harassment said they perceived these contacts as sexual misconduct, while 85% of those identifying as a target of assault perceived these contacts as sexual misconduct. There was 100% congruence in the most severe category of rape.

More research is needed to explain these findings in a sport-specific context, exploring factors such as how sexual misconduct is defined and understood, as well as the cultural norms around the pervasiveness and tolerance of sexual misconduct, especially in the harassment and assault categories, where such behaviours seem common.

Are employers addressing the issues?

Participants were asked if they believed their employer adequately addresses issues of sexual misconduct. The chart below shows that of those with an employer (94%), only 46% expressed positive sentiments, and within that group, only 29% were 'absolutely' confident.

Do you believe your employer adequately addresses issues of sexual misconduct?



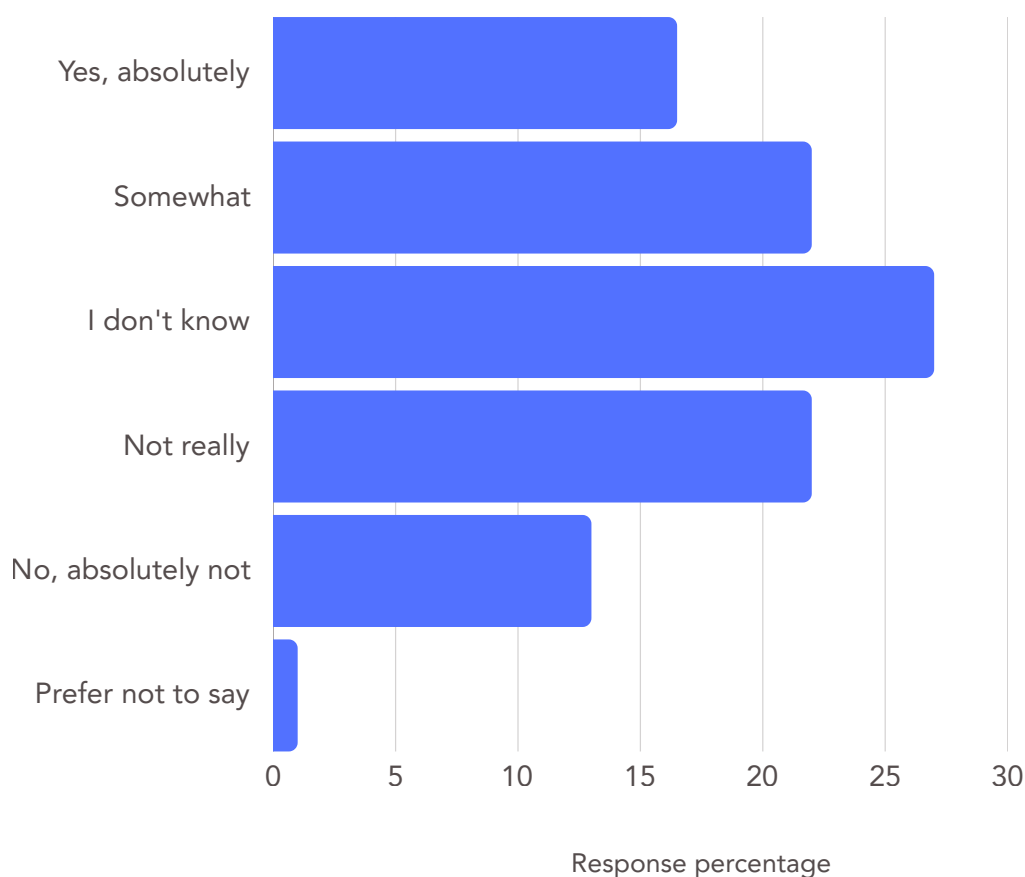
This finding matters because employers have a proactive duty to take reasonable steps to protect employees from key foreseeable risks which includes sexual harassment - Equality Act (2010), and Worker Protection Amendment (2023).

Are governing bodies addressing the issues?

Participants were asked if they believed that the governing body of their primary sport adequately addresses issues of sexual misconduct.

The chart below shows that only 39% expressed positive sentiments, and within that group, only 17% were 'absolutely' confident. Overall, in comparison to employers, women working in elite sport have less confidence in their governing body than their employer.

Do you believe that the organisations that govern your primary sport adequately address issues of sexual misconduct?



Was there a relationship between categorising experiences of sexual misconduct as such and women's belief in organisations addressing the issues?

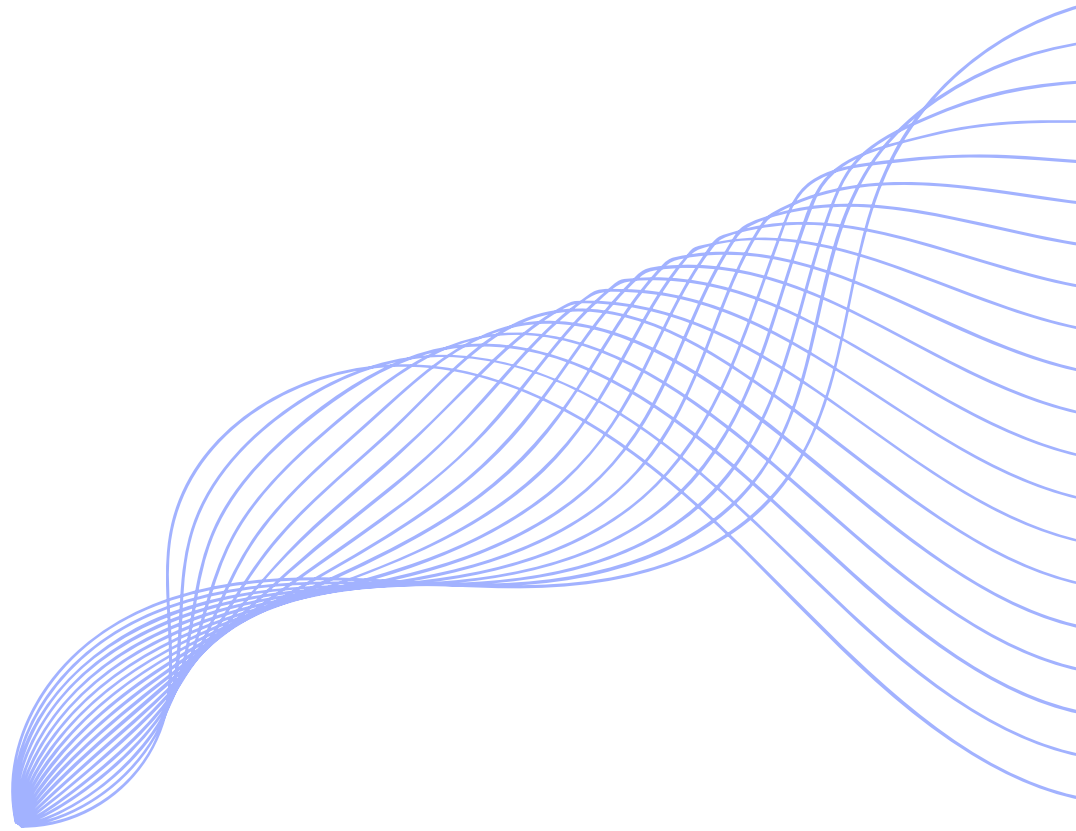
Yes, the women who categorised the sexual harassment, assault and rapes they had been a target of as sexual misconduct were around half as confident in organisations addressing the issues compared to those who did not.

Specifically, 21% of the group that perceived their experiences as sexual misconduct said that their employer was doing enough, compared to 44% of the group that did not.

For governing bodies, 12% of the group that categorised their experiences as sexual misconduct felt governing bodies were doing enough compared to 23% of the group that did not.

However, more research is needed to understand what organisations are actually doing, and the drivers behind the lack of confidence most women in this survey have in sporting organisations dealing with the issues.

More than one in five participants has been forced into unwanted physical contact in exchange for training or career development in their work in elite sport in the last five years



Analysis

This research suggests that there is a significant sexual safety issue for women working in UK elite sport, and in the vast majority of cases, women are being targeted by men. And while anecdotally women may expect this to be the case, this report provides quantitative data indicating the size and shape of the problem using 16 categories of behaviour and a recent (previous five years) time frame. These findings align with high-frequency signals in sport-specific qualitative studies³, and build on the sexual harassment-specific findings in the Women in Football Annual Survey 2025⁴.

A holistic view

How an issue is framed affects if and how people come to it, and how they seek to address it. This research suggests a more holistic lens may be needed. Why? Because while the athlete experience is fundamental to the existence of elite sport and rightly demands research attention, the great majority of people who work in the elite sport ecosystem are not elite athletes⁵. This study therefore considers the wider female workforce, including and beyond the inner circle of the coach-athlete relationship. It creates an initial map of this broader group, many of whom are largely ignored in existing sports research. Surfacing their experiences may be an important step towards improving safety for all women working in the sector and dismantling some of the barriers to progress that mean women remain underrepresented in the positions of power, money, and influence that shape sport.

Practical implications - individuals

At an individual level, this study means that women working in elite sport who have experienced sexual misconduct can see that they are probably in the majority.

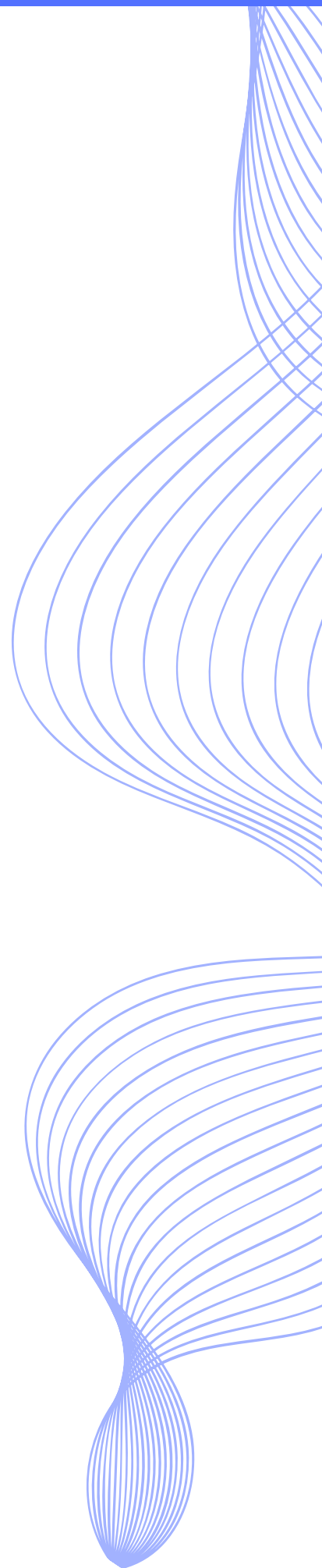
This realisation and validation - through specific figures - may be beneficial in a context where sexual misconduct can be normalised or dismissed, and where women may be expected to put up with it as part of the deal of working in sport³. And, if women feel the need to be constantly vigilant, these findings legitimise their concerns and the exhaustion that can come from this⁶. If women do not know how to report what has happened to them, or do not feel confident doing so, they can see that these results suggest a systemic issue. This is backed by national data showing that half the targets of work-related sexual misconduct are likely to be adversely affected in their careers if they do take action to address what has happened⁷.

Practical implications - organisations

For employers and governing bodies, the implications are twofold.

Firstly, within these findings are illegal and criminal acts; if organisations are not meeting requirements in risk assessment and mitigation, as this research suggests many are not, they expose themselves to negative legal, reputational, and commercial consequences.

Secondly, the levels of sexual misconduct found in this study may be harming elite sport's ability to attract and retain female talent, undermining efforts to increase inclusivity and representation, and create more balanced and effective power structures that deliver better organisational outcomes⁸.



Indeed, the lack of diversity in the characteristics of participants in this research may indicate that certain groups feel it is unsafe to share their experiences, even when data is gathered one step removed from their employer or funding body as in this study. Whatever the reasons, more research is needed to explore the intersectional nature of being a target of sexual misconduct and the impacts this is having on high-level sport.

Of course, this study does not explore whether participants' views on organisations reflect what organisations are actually doing. Whatever the reality, these findings indicate that employers and sporting bodies need to take bolder action. This means work to understand, control, and mitigate the general and sport-specific risks that sexual misconduct presents to their organisations and people, and to demonstrate and communicate this clearly to both inhibit perpetrators and protect those being targeted.

Practical implications - system level

Administrators and leaders should consider if the approaches they have in place at a system level are effective in tackling sexual misconduct across the workforce in the elite sports ecosystem, and if they have the evidence to support these views. A lack of formal reports of sexual misconduct is not proof that all is well; sexual misconduct is routinely and widely underreported. And this research suggests that in the elite sport-specific context, more than half the female workforce has a lack of belief in organisations addressing the issues, which may be a deterrent to reporting through formal channels. Approaches that focus upstream on identifying risks and preventing the harm caused by sexual misconduct are the ultimate goal. These create cultures where everyone can thrive. When this happens, it also means more workforce energy, goodwill and resources to build up organisations and impact, which are otherwise needed to tackle avoidable damage and distress.

Further research

This study provides unique data as a baseline for further research. It makes an initial exploration of the 'what' and answers the question, 'is there a problem to address in elite sport?' with a quantified 'yes'. The next step is to further calibrate and extend the sport-specific map. This will help understand causal relationships, especially those that may be unique to elite sport as a work environment, and identify effective solutions and case studies. This should include:

- Gathering more data on women who are underrepresented in this data set, in particular to investigate the intersectional effects for those with protected characteristics.
- Understanding more of the 'why' - the stories behind the numbers. A broad range of cultural factors are probably in the mix, likely to include the patriarchal origins of organised sport, male power and dominance in leadership and decision-making roles, a long and rich history in wider society of the oppression and objectification of women, as well as the impact of intersectionality. The role of banter, part of sport's DNA, should also be considered. While it can be a prosocial form of behaviour, there can be a fine line between banter and misconduct.

Such work should include all genders, in particular men - as targets, witnesses and allies - not just perpetrators. Men's perspectives are largely missing from the literature, even though their involvement, beliefs and behaviour are critical to progress.

Final thoughts

What happens in elite sport matters, not just to those who are directly involved as the workforce or fans, but in the spaces where teams and athletes transcend it, such as business, media and fashion.

Elite sport's profile means that how the sector tackles issues such as sexual misconduct can have a disproportionate effect on wider culture - for better or worse.

Of course, work-related sexual misconduct is not unique to sport, and my goal in sharing this research is not to damage it. On the contrary, this research aims to more accurately describe and frame the issues to inform and encourage realistic conversations that recognise the harms experienced across the entire workforce and help drive action that meets the problems head-on. It makes sense on a commercial, legal and human level, and doing so can amplify the unique ways in which sport is a force for good.

A next step

To have a real impact, research requires action. If you have found this report insightful, please share it with your colleagues to help raise awareness, facilitate meaningful conversations and drive positive change.

Lindsey Simpson



Lindsey is a trusted communications consultant and wellbeing practitioner with 30 years' experience in consultancy, agency and in-house roles, specialising in research, strategy, engagement and facilitation.

Her work supports the development of high-performing cultures where both organisations and their people thrive.

Standout projects include leading the UK's Fitness & Active Leisure Workforce State of Mind Survey, co-founding and creating The Good Work Pledge, and workforce wellbeing projects for a range of sporting organisations from governing bodies to trusts and clubs.

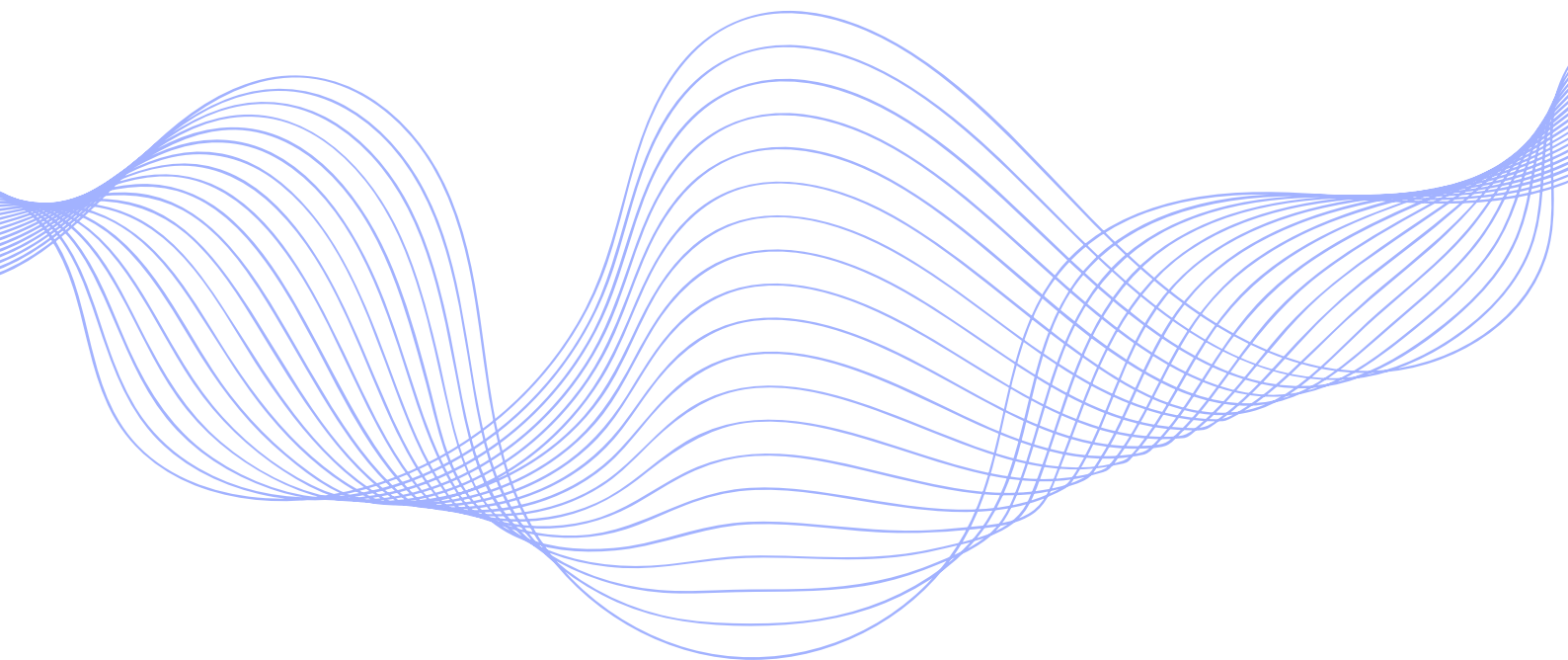
She holds a BA in Sport and Recreation, and an MSc in Workplace Health and Wellbeing. A speaker, trainer and podcast guest, she presents and comments on wellbeing and the workforce, strategy, leadership and communication.

Find Lindsey on [LinkedIn](#) or email lindsey@sparkteamcomms.com

Sources of support

If the themes in this report cause you distress or discomfort, support can be sought from the following organisations:

- England or Wales: Rape Crisis
rapecrisis.org.uk or call 0808 500 2222
- Scotland: Rape Crisis Scotland
rapecrisisscotland.org.uk or call 08088 010302
- Northern Ireland: Rape Crisis Northern Ireland
rapecrisisni.org.uk or call 0800 0246 991



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