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To cite this article: Ashley Rogers, Miriam Snellgrove & Samantha Punch (2022) Between equality and discrimination: the paradox of the women's game in the mind-sport bridge, World Leisure Journal, 64:4, 342-360, DOI: [10.1080/16078055.2022.2051068](https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2022.2051068)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2022.2051068>



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Published online: 13 Apr 2022.



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Between equality and discrimination: the paradox of the women's game in the mind-sport bridge

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ABSTRACT

Gender differences in the sporting world are long-standing and historic. Couched often as biologically given, differences in the uptake, training and playing of sport, from hobby to elite Olympian, are riven with discourses, practices and attitudes regarding the different aptitudes of men and women. Recognizing the ways these gendered differences operate is contentious and problematic, particularly in relation to women-only spaces. Such spaces can be used to promote the development and skills of women while simultaneously perpetuating and reinforcing women's difference and inequality to men. Using the case study of bridge (the card game), we analyse the ways in which the women's game is viewed as *both* hindering women's progression in the game whilst also providing women spaces to compete internationally. Findings from an email questionnaire with tournament and club players show how the women's game encapsulates both inequality and opportunity. The women's game remains a divisive issue within the bridge world as it provides competitive opportunities for women at an elite level, whilst simultaneously being viewed as technically inferior and discriminatory. The paper argues that the tensions and ambivalences of the paradox of women-only spaces reflect ongoing hetero-patriarchal discourses within sporting and leisure contexts.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 May 2021
Accepted 21 November 2021

KEYWORDS

Bridge; mind-sport;
inequality; segregation;
space

Introduction

In sport and leisure, gender differences are long-standing and historic. From explaining why so few women compete and reach elite levels across all sport and leisure practices, to concerns about differences in pay, skill and training (MCoCs, 2020) – research demonstrates that women continue to face a range of structural inequalities and everyday forms of discrimination and sexism. Much of the discussion around elite sport, focusses on the physical differences between men and women and explains the lack of representation and success at the top as reflective of women's inferior physicality. Debates about women's

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ability to hit a golf/tennis ball as far or as fast as a man (Alvarez, 2017) centre chiefly around comparing elite women with elite men, where women consistently underperform in the various metrics used (Thibault et al., 2010). Where women do excel in these metrics, doubts are then raised over their gender (see Caster Semenya furore) and whether a woman is really a woman if she performs as well or better than a man (Longman, 2016). These issues are further complicated by discussions around trans athletes and in particular trans women, whose presence in women's athletics for example, is seen as disadvantaging other women (Newberry, 2021). These debates highlight that ideas about sex as binary and physical strength as a biological given, clash with women's increased participation in sport alongside notions of gender fluidity.

However, if contentions around physicality are removed from the equation, and the sport and leisure activity is not one that requires physical strength, divisions and discriminations still endure. Yong (2008) points out that there are fewer than 1% of women Grandmasters in chess, with some commentators arguing this is due to women's inferior brains and poor reasoning skills (Smerdon, 2020). Thus, brains replace physicality as the key variable in justifying women's lack of representation and success at the top. As Fine (2013) points out, this form of neurosexism allows inequalities present, not only in sport, but education and other arenas, to be explained away as genetic and neurological, rather than socially learned and culturally reproduced (see Punch et al., 2021). What is clear, is that engaging in a physical sport and/or a mind-sport, reveals ongoing issues around who can and cannot participate and how women's bodies/minds are policed in particular ways when they do.

As a result, there are ongoing debates about the need for women to be able to access women-only spaces, whether that is specific leisure classes, workshops or support groups. Welling (2020) points out that much of this call for women-only spaces is due to women feeling intimidated and unwelcome in spaces historically designed for and used by men (gyms, for example). In a world that constantly scrutinizes women's bodies, clothing and lifestyle choices, Kerpen (2019) argues that women-only spaces are important in enabling them to "feel empowered and understood". In sport and leisure, women-only games have existed alongside men's, though with considerably less pay, media coverage and status granted to them (Bodenner, 2015). This is most noticeably exemplified during the *Women's Football World Cup* (2019) in contrast to the World Cup where the male body and player is linguistically and practically positioned as the de-facto norm. The separation and segregation of men and women into different sporting leagues has long-term consequences for women's participation as well as ongoing difficulties in recognizing women's play as equal in terms of pay (MCoCS, 2020). As Claus (2020) argues, until women's games are marketed properly, they will continue to be seen as a less skilled and inferior option compared to their male counterparts.

This article uses the case study of bridge (the card game) to explore and unpack the women's game within a mind-sport.¹ Using qualitative email questionnaire data, we demonstrate the ways in which inequality, difference and opportunity operate within bridge. The women's game is a contentious area in bridge, with some players arguing for its continued need in providing women opportunities to compete and play at the top. However, the women's game is widely considered to be less skilled than the open game (where both men and women can play, but which tends to be dominated by men). By playing in women-only events, women will be competing in a field that is

viewed as operating at a lower standard by the wider bridge community (Punch, 2021). Hence, women's bridge can be both enabling and constraining in terms of their progression in the game.

Given the aim of this paper is to outline the ways in which bridge players articulate their experiences and views of the women's game, we take as our basis an understanding of gender, sexism and power as socially situated, institutionally organized and personally experienced. Drawing on feminist conceptualisations, we contend that gender is an embodied experience that reveals how "hidden power relations construct common-sense truths" (Pomerantz et al., 2013, p. 188). Further, we critique ideas of gender inequality as a personal problem as such perspectives reinforce a status quo that privileges an androcentric worldview and language (Parks & Robertson, 2005). Such views situate everyday acts of discrimination as an individual problem that women can successfully deal with by themselves, rather than one of embedded structural inequality (Bates, 2014).

Given the huge strides women have made in educational attainment and workplace participation, an individualized worldview can enable women to feel empowered to challenge sexism and discrimination without having to position themselves as a victim of forces beyond their control (Pomerantz et al., 2013, p. 189). However, the "multiplicity of experiences" (Pomerantz et al., 2013 p. 189) means that women also identify and recognize collective inequality and the detrimental impacts it has on their lives. These contradictions, between an individualized empowerment narrative of capability and personal choice, contrasted with endemic institutionalized inequality, reveal the difficulties in challenging and changing everyday language, behaviour and practice. The success of neoliberal individualized discourses is to undermine and dismiss discrimination as the "opinion" of a few "difficult women" (Lewis, 2020), thereby neutering the possibility to bring about much-needed institutional and organizational change. Before turning to the ways in which bridge players engage in and reproduce *both* individualized and structural accounts of (in)equality, we discuss the ways in which gender segregation and differences in sport and leisure have been researched.

Gender segregation in sport and leisure

Up until the 1980s, taking feminist accounts of women's participation in leisure seriously remained a niche activity. According to Henderson (2013), this neglect to investigate the role of leisure in women's lives, resulted in women's experiences being absent, segregated, or tied up in debates about sex versus gender and women's lack of physicality in comparison to their male peers. However, since the mid-90s onwards, there has been a flourishing of accounts that seek to document different leisure and sporting activities women engage in and the various challenges they face. This paper reviews the ways in which difference, segregation and women-only spaces are explored as limiting and enabling women to participate in leisure seriously.

Feminist scholars point out that women's role in leisure is predominantly characterized by one of inequality stemming largely from their roles within the domestic sphere and parenthood in particular (Šikić-Mićanović et al., 2021; Valtchanov & Parry, 2017). This has meant that provision for women's leisure has been limited, while policies around leisure practice and uptake have been dictated by male involvement and interests.

This is notably seen in the language of such policies that call for “getting more women into leisure”, thereby suggesting it is women who are limiting their participation, rather than the constraints of time, money and patriarchal ideologies (Tzu & Tsai, 2011). Women’s participation and involvement in a range of activities is also constrained by mobility issues relating to public transport and the ability to access leisure from home (Green & Singleton, 2006). As a result, Henderson et al. (2002) have argued for women’s leisure to take place in spaces women already use (for example, health and shopping centres), as well as advocating for women-only activity groups to enable women to feel less threatened and observed by the male gaze.

However, Kay (2003) points out that much of the focus on leisure research has been on women in heterosexual relationships and that less attention has been given to other personal and family configurations. Kay calls for greater focus on the ways in which people “do gender” in their relationships as well as in their leisure lives. This feeds into recent research exploring how women resist gendered ideologies through their leisure practices (McKeown & Parry, 2018). For example, Evans and Gagnon’s (2019) study of competitive climbing showed that, contrary to much of existing leisure research that focussed on the constraints women faced when trying to pursue a leisure activity, women reported fewer constraints and were even more motivated to climb than their male counterparts. Despite being represented in the media as a masculine sport, once integrated into the climbing community, these gender differences were found to be negligible. The authors suggest this could be based on the unique nature of climbing which is “us versus the wall” rather than “us versus each other” (Evans & Gagnon, 2019, p. 457) and that certain leisure activities may be more gender-inclusive than others.

However, accounts of inclusion, disruption and resistance to dominant patriarchal and heteronormative leisured lives are challenged by a number of studies that point out enduring inequalities. McGinnis et al.’s (2005) research into golf, shows how a sport that arguably does not privilege one gender over the other in terms of physical fitness and strength, still reproduces ideas about *lady* golfers as tokenistic and not the norm. Focussing on the social psychological aspects of these attitudes, their research demonstrates how female recreational golfers have to continually combat culturally ingrained assumptions that golf is a masculine sport. The research concludes that women have to engage in a range of individual and collective strategies to combat their visible presence as different by often reproducing hegemonic masculine ideas around success. Women are then co-opted into reinforcing the status quo of the sport, rather than disrupting and challenging it. This is often achieved through ideas around “social closure” where the dominant narrative of golf being young, male and able-bodied is produced in such a way as to exclude anybody else from belonging to the category of “good golfer” (McGinnis et al., 2005, p. 317).

Such exclusionary practices are also found in McAnirlin and Maddox’s (2020) research into outdoor hiking. Outdoor recreation has been presented as the “last of the male domain” (Saunders & Sharp, 2002, p. 318) and is recognized as a gendered space. McAnirlin and Maddox (2020) demonstrate the ways in which ideas around empowerment, being healthy, vulnerability and navigation uneasily co-exist for women hikers. Although hikers in the study expressed views about the freedom of being outdoors in a space to “learn new skills” (McAnirlin & Maddox, 2020, p. 8), there were also concerns about being left alone in the wilderness and the reproduction

of stereotypical ideas that women cannot navigate. Despite navigation being a skill that can be taught and learned, the authors conclude that the cultural perception of women as bad navigators is a more powerful explanatory force than the desire for many women in the study to prove to themselves (and others) their capacity to learn to navigate. McAnirlin and Maddox (2020) also argue that casual sexist comments presented as harmless and funny by other male hikers, do lasting damage to women's enjoyment and desire to participate in outdoor recreation.

Ideas around skill and achievement being innately biologically given rather than socially learned are also present in research by Howard (2014a; 2014b). Engaging in longitudinal quantitative data analysis of international chess tournaments, Howard (2014b, p. 1) argues that "controlling for opportunity, interest and extent of practice" even amongst the dedicated players, elite female competitors had less natural talent for chess than their male counterparts. Howard goes on to suggest that while a number of proactive initiatives to encourage women to play chess has resulted in more women having greater opportunities for competitive play, men on average still presented essentialist advantages in developing and executing chess strategy. However, de Bruin et al. (2008) and Veličković and Radovanović (2018, p. 359) challenge Howard's findings and suggest that there are a range of factors that stop women from achieving success similar to their male counterparts. These include, but are not limited to, the feminization of caring responsibilities; the financial glass ceiling for women in the public sphere; as well as the socialization process of femininity. Therefore, the equality of opportunity found within chess tournaments does not sufficiently control the social factors which influence the variance in performance amongst men and women in an objective, rigorous and / or valid way.

The challenge of operating in the leisure and sporting spaces dominated and shaped by hegemonic masculinity and sexist language and tropes has resulted in some scholars recommending the need for women-only gender-segregated leisured spaces. The starting point for Sisjord's (2013) account of competitive women snowboarders is that increasing participation in the sport means women-only training camps and sessions. The research suggests that within women-only training camps where women support, encourage and "push each other" (Sisjord, 2013, p. 513), competition (often constructed as a masculine space) is enjoyed and regarded in a positive light. In contrast, Wachs (2002) challenges the idea of "separate but equal" sport and leisure spaces as reifying difference, and thereby creating a paradox that reinforces inequality instead of addressing it. Using the case study of co-educational softball, Wachs (2002) explores the ways in which enduring ideas around male physical superiority can be challenged and tested when gender mixing occurs in a sport. However, the study concludes that the rules, management and umpiring of the game result in privileging male sporting prowess in particular ways that ends up reinforcing ideas about male superiority. This illustrates how "gender difference and equal opportunity are simultaneously reproduced, challenged, and negotiated" (Wachs, 2002, p. 314).

The above studies indicate that women's involvement, constraint and participation in a variety of leisure and sporting activities are mediated by the inclusivity of the activity, enduring gendered ideologies and the possibilities to challenge, disrupt and overturn existing gendered discourses in an empowering manner. Rather than seeing women's engagement in sport and leisure as a binary between belonging and exclusion, many

of the studies show *both* exclusion and belonging operating simultaneously, thereby creating complicated and messy spaces that women have to navigate. The studies also reveal how bringing about change and calling out inequality, is rendered difficult due to the competing and contradictory discourses at play both within the distinct leisured worlds and within the participants themselves. This paper explores the ways that similar ambivalences and tensions are played out within women's bridge.

Women's bridge

Bridge is a four-player card game, played by two partnerships and developed from seventeenth-century whist (see Punch & Snellgrove, 2021 for a more detailed description of the game). As a mind-sport, bridge is not a game where prior physical strength is required and arguably might be assumed to be free of the gendered concerns about male/female differences that dominate physical sports, such as tennis, swimming and athletics. However, despite relying on mental agility and skilful reading of a partner's and opponents' hands (Punch & Snellgrove, 2021), bridge faces ongoing issues relating to ingrained gendered assumptions and sexism encapsulated in the women's game (see Punch & Rogers, 2022).

To compete at international level, bridge is divided into categories based on gender and age: juniors (under 26 years), women, open (no restrictions) and seniors (over 62 years). These categories are set by the World Bridge Federation, which is a gendered institution in itself (see Punch et al., 2021). National bridge organizations divide a few annual national events by these categories, but regional level organizations and local bridge clubs tend not to organize competitions based on age and gender. At junior level when competing against other countries, there is also an under 26 years women-only event. Thus, the category of women's bridge is mostly relevant in terms of representing one's country at elite level whether as a youth or adult player. When a national women's event is taking place, some countries run a parallel men's event, but there is not a specific men-only category in bridge.² The American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) used to hold men-only and women-only events, but in 1985 they faced legal action by Jill Levin, a bridge player and student lawyer at Columbia University in New York. Her contention was that by holding some men-only events, from which women were barred, the ACBL was denying women the right to play at the highest level. The lawsuit was resolved in 1990 when the ACBL replaced its men-only events with open events.

The "open" category is where anyone can play, but in practice, it is dominated by adult men at international level. For example, in European Championships, the open category would only have 1–3 women competing compared with approximately 180 men. Instead, the women compete in the parallel women's event at the European Championships. Similarly, the top junior or senior players are most likely to compete in their own specific category event rather than in the open teams. The open is widely regarded as the toughest competition category at national and international levels (Punch, 2021). In 2016, a new international category of "mixed" was introduced where there must be one man and one woman in each bridge partnership.

The following quotation from our study raises the issue of whether or not the existence of women-only competitions opens or closes spaces for women:

The fact that in World Bridge, competitions and widely elsewhere, women have “women’s bridge” and men do not have “men’s bridge” is a millstone round the necks of bridge feminists I think. That seems to me to admit that (if you’ll excuse me exaggerating to put the point over) women need their own event to have a chance. (N° 76: Male International, 55+)

This quotation reflects that, on the one hand, women-only “limited” tournaments offer women the chance to play competitively against each other at international level. As our data below demonstrates, such opportunities are not available to many men (arguably of a similar standard) who have to compete in the tougher, not restricted, open game. While on the other hand, the gender segregation further entrenches perceptions about women’s inability to play higher level competitive bridge. Such negative gendered stereotypes can have a detrimental impact on women being able to develop a serious partnership with a male player, as most aspiring male players will prefer to play with other men (see Punch, 2021). After discussing the methods used, this paper explores such complexities surrounding the simultaneous benefits and barriers that women’s bridge offers female players.

Methods

The research team consisted of the Bridge Player (BP) and Non-Bridge Players (NBP). This was an important dynamic in not only the design of the research but for the storage, organization, and analysis of data (for a further discussion of the methods and of the combined insider/outside research team, see Punch & Rogers, 2022). The *Bridging Gender* study is part of the *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) research which received ethical clearance through the University of Stirling Ethics Committee. The aim was to explore players’ understandings of sexism and whether or not they believed any changes were needed with regard to equality in the game. In order to gather as many voices as possible on gender relations from the global bridge community, email questionnaires were chosen as the most appropriate and feasible method of data collection (Walker, 2013). Using an internet-based method offered several benefits, including the geographical reach of potential participants and greater flexibility which allowed them the time and space to review the questions and think about their answers before responding.

The email questionnaire consisted of eight questions that investigated participants’ understanding of the term “sexism” and if, how, and why they believed that it was or was not a term relevant to the game of bridge. It also gathered data regarding the players’ level of play, age, gender and geographical location, however, no categories around class and ethnicity were asked for or explored. Players’ self-selected gender and level of play (for example, club, tournament, international, professional) are included after each quotation throughout the paper. No word limit was placed on responses in order to increase bridge players’ control over their participation as well as to gather as much in-depth data as possible. Given that the BP is a well-known member of the bridge community, the decision was made for the BP to focus on recruiting participants for the project. The incoming raw data would be dealt with by the NBP using a dedicated email account to which only the NBP had access. What this meant in practice was that the BP posted the questions and email address on to the Bridge Winners online forum, as

well as using her participation at international bridge events to snowball further participants. All data were anonymized by the NBP, although it should be noted that some respondents highlighted that they were happy to be identified. All participants were aware that by completing the questionnaire, they may be including some identifiable anecdotes, but the NBP anonymized such stories as much as possible. Coded identifiers were allocated to each of the questionnaire responses indicating gender, age range, and level of play.

Given the often-low uptake of email questionnaires (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006), due to concerns around anonymity and the lack of incentives (Dommeyer & Moriarty, 2000), we were pleased with 151 responses. This was perhaps due to our method of recruiting participants by using an online forum and the responses snowballing from there. In addition, both men (56%) and women³ (44%) bridge players seemed keen to voice their opinions and experiences on sexism. Out of the four age categories in the questionnaire, 60% of participants fell in to the 55 and over category, 28% in the 35-54, 7% in the 25-34 and 5% in the under 25 age category. This largely reflects the demographics of the bridge community, with there being fewer younger players. The majority of responses came from the UK and the USA, from both tournament and international players, likely as a result of snowballing from the Bridge Winners blogsite and bridge events that the BP attended. Thus, this study does not capture the perspectives of social and casual bridge players nor those who do not speak English.

The qualitative answers varied in length from a few sentences to a couple of paragraphs and were analysed in two stages. First, given that the questions were open-ended, thematic analysis revealed not only various answers to the questions posed but also a number of other themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The team took a largely abductive approach as the identification of themes was also guided by knowledge gained from previous research as part of the broader project's aims of exploring interactions, motivations and challenges to playing and uptake of bridge. Hence, we moved back and forth between inductive and deductive approaches (Graneheim et al., 2017). The second stage involved a closer reading of the data, unpacking broader themes using latent content analysis to construct a coding scheme of answers for each question. Such an approach allowed for the underlying meaning between the lines in the text to be fully explored (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). For example, this included whether someone does or does not consider there to be issues around gender equality, even if they did not use those exact words (Downe-Wambolt, 1992).

Responses that engaged with women's bridge were not only in answer to a question on suggested changes to bridge competitions or a desire to keep bridge as it is, but women-only tournaments were also discussed across responses to all the questions. While the research team were not surprised at their mention, responses reveal that the relationship between equality, sexism and space are far more complicated than they may first appear to many players. The following three sections present bridge players' opinions regarding the existence of women-only bridge and its relationship to inequality in the women's game.

The women's game: a second tier?

Players' responses across the questionnaire illustrate that the situation of women-only events is complex. On the one hand, they are considered to reinforce sexism, difference

and a two-tier system of play and skill. On the other hand, they are important spaces for women to develop and compete in a less pressured arena relatively free of the sexism that is faced inside and outside of the bridge community. At the international level, as there is no game only for men, the existence of women-only events were suggested to be a form of sexism themselves, in favour of women. Such comments were largely from male players, but women expressed this concern too.

Many women can play for their country, have their expenses paid, become world champions – all these benefits which are denied to those excellent male players who are of a similar standard, but not good enough for the open team. (N° 126: Female Tournament, 35–54)

Arguably, the fact that women's events exist at all = sexism in bridge, but I wouldn't be without them because currently women need their own arena to succeed. (N° 83: Female International, 35–54)

They also encourage the undesirable belief that women want to have it both ways – being treated as equals for some purposes, but getting special treatment for others. (N° 140: Male Tournament, 35–54)

In our sample, many men and, to a lesser extent, women players opined that if there are issues with regards to equality then women's bridge should not exist. Yet, as the above quotations reveal, there are a multitude of factors relating to the existence of the women's game. For some, there is a women-only category because it is needed to accommodate different levels of skill or opportunities for success; two factors that respondents often linked together. Many suggested, as above, that for women to succeed at high levels, there needs to be a women-only game. Such views tended to be expressed in conjunction with the belief that there is a difference in skill level between men and women players and that the mere existence of a women's category itself, reinforces that.

These events perpetuate the belief that women are intrinsically less good at bridge than men. (N° 140: Male Tournament, 35–54)

In some ways the women's game probably helps to reinforce second tier-ness but obviously in another it does raise the profile of women who would otherwise be few in number at international level. (N° 137: Female Tournament, 35–54)

Events such as the Lady Milne do not encourage equality – they are seen as opening doors for women gaining experience. In many cases this is not a stepping stone but a tunnel. If you are good enough to play at this level, surely you would wish to test yourself further. (N° 12: Female International, 55+)

The presence of women's bridge was not solely related to skill, but to other factors, too. Women expressed that there are often fewer opportunities to develop skills and be “exposed to the same kind of competition” as men (N° 119: Female Tournament, 35–54) because bridge is often like an “old boys club” (N° 99: Female Tournament, 35–54). Although the existence of a women's category may go some way to addressing the issue of it being perceived as a “man's game” (N° 131: Female International, 55+), “the existence of women's teams encourages the perception that these are for women while open teams are for men” (N° 82: Female Tournament, 55+). With the perception of women's bridge, and thus women, being lower skilled, women expressed that it was often difficult to move out of the women's game and into the open.

It's like the top level of bridge players in our country think a female bridge player is automatically content once she has made the women's team and she wouldn't have any further aspirations to play open events. (N° 8: Female International, under 25)

[T]he problem arises when women do look for a breakthrough in the open. Most of the time men would pick less skilled teammates and partners over a more skilled, but female, player. I have personal experience in this matter. (N° 71: Female Professional, 35–54)

It could be considered that by having a women-only category, it is easier for women to be excluded from other events, and they are, therefore, “side-lined, ‘*Oh, she can play in the women's team*’” (N° 114: Female International, 55+). The perceived challenges for women to partner with men reinforce the understanding of open bridge as a male-dominated activity, and the data suggests that women can only maximise their skill development if they play with and/or against men. Once again this reinforces that the status to be achieved is that of men and their apparent skill in open bridge. According to the data, by women only playing with and against women, there is less chance to interact with “higher” skill levels and thus women “set their sights lower” (N° 88: Male Tournament, 55+) because they are not being “challenged if the standard is worse” (N° 138: Male International, 25–34).

Having fewer opportunities to develop skills and be “exposed to the same kind of competition” (N° 119: Female Tournament, 35–54) was highlighted by women as well as men. Furthermore, it was suggested that women are more likely to take part in a competition they think they could win because they “believe it is ‘easier’ to qualify” (N° 105: Male Tournament, 25–34), as opposed to one where they “feel they might lose” (N° 123: Male Club, under 25). Overall, there is a more general assumption that “the average male competitive bridge player is better than the average female competitive bridge player” (N° 98: Male Tournament, 25–34) and this runs through a number of the responses.

Playing like a man

Men's success in bridge, and thus the perception that they are better skilled was not only linked to them having access to more opportunities, but to characteristics that were deemed to afford them greater success, which in turn reiterated the perception that men are better players. The standard of “man” was therefore seen as the goal:

There is also a saying that “she plays bridge like a man” – meaning that this woman is actually good at bridge. This notion is well embedded in the bridge culture (both the male and the female). (N° 148: Female International, 35–54)

Much of this success was afforded to a number of factors and the most cited were that men and women's brains are fundamentally different, with some suggesting that men's brains are wired in a way that makes them better at the game. This has been debunked elsewhere (Punch et al., 2021). The notion of gendered traits is presented by participants in relation to physiology and biology, as well as in terms of social learning of behaviours and characteristics that are masculine or feminine. These are mentioned by women as well as men, and perhaps even more so in terms of ability to concentrate – although it should be noted that in comparison to men, women are more likely to emphasize the need, pressure and expectation for women to be *thinking* about other things as opposed to being *distracted* by them.

One female professional player, aged 25–34, suggested that distraction is about sensitivity and needing a “strong psyche to move on when something goes wrong”. She commented that “most of the women think about the mistake and the disaster they just had and [then] make a lot more disasters”. However, Punch (2021) discusses how men can also struggle to forget errors in the moment. Other relevant characteristics that were identified included women being less competitive, aggressive, or feeling more pressured.

Women do not work as hard as men, because there is not as much competition among women. (N° 71: Female Professional, 35–54)

For me they are the proof that women at least believe they are weaker and want their own competition to win honour and medals. (N° 136: Male International, 35–54)

One male tournament player, aged 55 or over, observed that bridge could be considered as an “aggressive game”, and “boys are generally conditioned to play more aggressive games from an early age” (N° 89: Male Tournament, 55+). When growing up, it was also expressed that boys are encouraged more to be “singled-minded about their pursuits, whereas girls are encouraged to multi-task” (N° 114: Female International, 55+). Overall, “competitiveness”, “obsessiveness” and “ability to concentrate” are cited as male characteristics that reflect their better skill and success in the game (see also Punch et al., 2021). The fact that the open game is seen as the gold standard of play, reinforces the idea that the women-only game and women’s bridge are inferior, and “women who play like men” an impossible bar for many female bridge players to achieve. Perceptions of women’s bridge thus hinder the cause for gender equality.

The paradox of the women’s game

Given these recognized challenges, participants were divided between the continued need for the women’s game and the desire to abolish it. As one female respondent argued, “frankly I do not think there should be anything called ‘women’s bridge’ – an insult imposed on ourselves” (N° 119: Female Tournament, 35–54). Other responses drew attention to bridge being a mind-sport, and thus no need for a women-only category.

[E]radicate single sex competitions and trials etc. etc. It’s a mind sport. You are basically inferring the brains are different. (N° 120: Male Tournament, 25–34)

Abolishing women-only events is therefore tied to both the desire for gender equality and to the reinforcement of women needing their own category that is of a lower skill. This leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, according to this bridge player:

[B]ecause women have an event to play in catered to them, it must be assumed that they are not suited to playing in open events. (N° 65: Male International, under25)

When women’s bridge is positioned as one of the changes needed to address equality and sexism, it is considered as a hindrance, demeaning, limiting and unfair; entrenching existing beliefs about women’s abilities. While the abolishment of women’s bridge was presented as a solution for addressing gender equality in bridge, many players – particularly women, and a few men too – highlighted that there was not a simple solution to sexism and inequality. There was acknowledgement of wider issues. Both men and (more frequently) women bridge players pointed out that women may be constrained by factors such as childcare

and other caring duties, which often give men “an unfair advantage” with regard to time (No 104: Male Tournament, 35–54). This includes time to practice, time to play, time to concentrate. For example, women tend always to be wondering how their child is doing (N° 99: Female Tournament, 35–54) while men are more able to “forget all the rest” of their lives (N° 107: Male International, 55+). Three elements in the data point to this. The first is that there is a belief that there is something inherent in women which means they cannot switch off from the rest of their lives (e.g. N° 126: Female Tournament, 35–54). The second is that for women to “switch off”, they would need to situate themselves outside of gender expectations (e.g. N° 114: Female International, 55+). Thirdly, women are often “less willing to forgo everything else and single-mindedly pursue a game that more often than not does not pay the bills” (N° 99: Female Tournament, 35-54). As one player remarked:

Once a couple has children, women almost always have the default responsibility for them ... while it is acceptable for a father to go off on a 2-week rugby tour, it's much less acceptable for a mother to disappear to Budapest for a fortnight to play bridge. (N° 114: Female International, 55+)

Thus, aspects of sexism in other areas of life also factor into the existence of a women-only category.

I believe in the long run that getting rid of the women's event would be helpful for promoting equal bridge. It would however not be possible to end them right away as this would create isolation of so many female bridge players during a long time before something actually happened. I believe gradual change is the key. I don't think ending women's events would help all kinds of problems though, but it would help with the perception of female bridge players as worse or unserious bridge players. (N° 8: Female Professional, under 25)

Removing women's bridge is presented as a step toward changing perceptions but doing so may not necessarily produce the change that is assumed here. As one bridge coach recognized:

I guess this is where the subject of women's only bridge comes in. Does it discriminate by acknowledging women are different, or give them an opportunity for development that is needed because the main game is sexist or an unpleasant environment for some women to play in? I can see the pros and cons, but feel we might not need gender segregated events if open bridge were developed better. As it stands (as a junior coach) I can see it as a useful tool to help players who might not otherwise get sufficient exposure. (N° 97: Male Tournament, 35–54)

The coach's quote demonstrates that the complexity of the debates around women's bridge cannot be disconnected from exposure to and inclusion in the “main game”. The situation is unlikely to improve if men and women continue to hold the same beliefs about not only women players – whether in relation to their skill, their character or their performance at the bridge table – but women in general.

While I think there is some inherent sexism in having women and mixed events, that doesn't mean that I think they should be eliminated, especially while other sexism remains. (N° 46: Male Tournament, 35–54)

Many women indicated that they enjoy playing the women-only game. Players also emphasized that it presents opportunities for women that take into consideration a broader range of structural factors *other than* how women might be perceived.

I think it is essential to support this [the women's game] and to encourage those women that have an interest in it. For me this is because it gives women more opportunities to experience playing, competing and especially winning. (N^o 135: Female Tournament, 35–54)

Across the data, despite the greater number of suggestions being to abolish women's bridge, those which expressed concern around such a change, moved beyond perceptions of women and referred to other constraints relating to broader conditions and expectations of society. In those cases, the women-only game was presented as a valuable space. The argument to remove women's bridge is largely centred on changing the perception that women players are lower skilled, but there is rarely acknowledgement that these perceptions are deeply entrenched. Such views are linked to wider social constructions of women and womanhood, as well as men and masculinity, and are often couched in a simplistic view of "equality". Women's bridge is thus a space of contestation, which is accurately summed up by two women players:

I do not see how more women could get into open teams while separate women's teams continue to exist, but abolishing women's teams would have to be done at world level and would take years. Moreover, abolishing women's teams could be counterproductive as it would reduce opportunities for women to play at international level. (N^o 82: Female Tournament, 55+)

I'm in two minds about segregated events; they simultaneously give females more opportunities (at one end) and limit them (at the other)? (N^o 17: Female Tournament, 25–34)

Discussion

As a non-physical activity, women's bridge provides a useful insight into the complexities of women-only spaces in leisure and sport that go beyond physiology. As a mind-sport, and with the identification that men's and women's brains are not radically different (Fine, 2013) then it could easily be assumed that there is no need to provide a separate category of women's events. However, as the data demonstrates, ideas about the different cognitive abilities between men and women are actively reproduced by both genders. For some, this is explained through a socialisation process, whereby learning to do gender "correctly" means that certain attributes around "competitiveness", "focus" and "aggression" are more masculine and are therefore skills that give men an edge in tournament bridge (for further discussion of elite bridge see Punch, 2021).

In addition, gendered stereotypes are compounded by women's key involvement in the domestic space and the everyday and ongoing challenge of juggling caring responsibilities with playing a mind-sport. Female players are facing the well-documented challenges of combining serious leisure with other gendered roles (Šikić-Mićanović et al., 2021; Tzu & Tsai, 2011). Arguably then, women-only games are a much-needed solution to the everyday inequalities and sexism that confront tournament bridge players. As Henderson et al. (2002) have argued, women need spaces designed with them in mind that meet their specific requirements and are free from the limiting effects of the male gaze. Sisjord (2013) extends this view by showing how women-only training and competing spaces enabled women to develop confidence and further enhance their skills. As is evident in the email data, women bridge players commented favourably on the ways in which the women-only game provided opportunities to develop their bridge skills and

compete internationally, experiences that, without the women's game they would have a hard time accessing. The women-only events mean that women have space to play, a space that takes into consideration other factors that may impact on their time, dedication to, enjoyment of, or concentration on the game, thus drawing them more towards women's bridge. Therefore, the need for the women's game is clearly and robustly defended.

However, the existence of women's bridge creates the perception and belief that women are inferior players and can only compete amongst themselves. As Wachs (2002) points out, separate but equal gendered spaces, produce the paradox that actually reinforces inequality rather than tackles it. This is further compounded by there being only two elite women in the world who compete at the top of the open game (compared with approximately 80 world-class male players), who would be widely regarded as similar to their male counterparts in skill, competitiveness and focus. Thus, women's bridge faces a double stigma – that of separating women from men and simultaneously meaning that the way women learn and develop is always contrasted to their male counterparts (and not in a favourable manner). As McGinnis et al. (2005) found, the few women that make it to the top have to perform masculine traits in their gameplay in order to be taken seriously. As our data has shown, telling a woman she plays like a man is: “The biggest compliment I can pay any of my female partners ... it says it all really” (N° 83: Female International, 35–54). The following quote sums up the ambivalence that many women feel regarding the conundrum of women's bridge:

I'm afraid scrapping the women's game, though I'm completely against it as I love it, would lead to greater equality. (N° 126: Female Tournament, 35–54)

What is clear from our data, is that women's bridge does two things simultaneously: it enables and provides opportunities to develop and play competitively that would otherwise be impossible for many women to access. However, it is viewed as lesser than the open game and exacerbates the idea of women's bridge being less skilled. Alongside this, the very premise of the women's game is seen as unfair to other male bridge players who are not granted the same opportunities to play in international competitive tournaments because their only route to play is through the tougher, more competitive, open game. As one participant put it “If women aren't as successful as men why should they ... have a special event to the exclusion of all the other unsuccessful groups?” (N° 113: Male Professional, 55+). This brings us to the underlying challenge: namely, whose voice and experiences matter “most” in these contexts? This is not simply a case of male versus female perspectives, or women versus women as many of our participants referred to the various advantages *and* disadvantages the women's game afforded them. This results in a paradox between the women's game enabling *and* constraining women, being seen as the problem *and* the solution.

Furthermore, it needs to be recognized that competitive bridge does not take place in a utopian, gender-equal universe. This research is framed within an understanding of gender being informed and moulded by the patriarchal forces that shape our societies (Pomerantz et al., 2013). Much of the success of the paradox of women's bridge can be explained as a way to maintain and sustain a status quo that simultaneously states it recognizes gender inequality (hence the women's game), while also granting that equality a lesser status within the competitive bridge world. This is not something external to

the actions and behaviours of individual bridge players, but *actively* performed and reproduced by the players themselves, as our data demonstrates. Women's bridge, therefore, clearly reveals how patriarchal ideologies around success and inclusion are watered down and presented as an insoluble conundrum.

To get rid of women's bridge is to remove a needed women-only space, but to keep it reinforces difference and skill-based inequality. This complexity is harnessed and reinvigorated by often acrimonious debates within the bridge world about the "problem" of women's bridge (Lall, 2016). This paper argues that such polarizing debates serve to perpetuate and reinforce a status quo where any change or challenge to this paradox is placed within a binary of either for/against women's bridge. Such binaries are successful at diverting attention away from the larger issue at hand: namely, the ways in which patriarchy continues to effectively reproduce and reinvigorate itself at the expense of women and (some) men within sport and leisure contexts (Henderson, 2013; Tzu & Tsai, 2011; Valtchanov & Parry, 2017).

Conclusion

Women-only spaces in sport and leisure have a complex history. Often intended as enabling inclusion and access to spaces that are designed for and inhabited by men, they can inadvertently emphasize gendered differences, marginalize women's participation and widen the equality gap. In the context of the patriarchal and sexist nature of society, women's spaces and by extension women's games (in sport and leisure) are deemed less successful and less skilled. Using the case study of the mind-sport bridge, this paper has demonstrated the ways in which tensions are played out in connection to the women-only game.

The paper has shown that while there are two polarized views regarding women-only participation in a mind-sport, in practice the two positions mesh together in contradictory ways, leaving no simple solution to resolve the tensions. One perspective is that women's bridge should be kept as a safe and necessary space to enable women to develop skills and represent their country. Whilst the other view is that it should be abolished because it perpetuates the devaluing of women's bridge skills and is detrimental to their progression. The complexities surrounding the implications of its existence, entwined with sexism and ingrained gendered assumptions about women's bridge abilities, reveals how patriarchal norms around gender and success are actively reproduced by bridge players.

Gender segregation of tournaments provides opportunities to women who face structural barriers both within the bridge world and within other areas of their lives. Their time-constrained lives, particularly within the domestic and childcare spheres, tend not to allow them to dedicate as much time to leisure in the same way as men. Yet having women-only events where the playing standard is actively constructed as "lower" and "less pressured" feeds into the cycle of reproducing inequality as well as echoing stereotypical views of women's bridge. As a contested and problematic yet enabling space, women's bridge provides both opportunities and barriers for female players. Many women value the space but recognize that it can be problematic in terms of perception, and ultimately it can be seen to hinder success, not promote it. Thus, closing spaces off may mean further exclusion in ways that some are blind to, particularly the men who refer to women's bridge as "unfair" to male players.

The women's game therefore inhabits the space of being exclusionary *and* enabling, sexist *and* inclusive, the problem *and* the solution. This paper has revealed how these dualisms operate to position women players against other women players and women against men, thereby making women-only mind-sport an issue that is impossible to resolve to everyone's satisfaction. We argue that such complexity illustrates the ongoing ways in which the norms of a patriarchal society are reinforced, with the major winner being the maintenance of the current status-quo and change occurring at a glacial pace.

This paper has implications for other women-only spaces, which are debated as being either an enabler or a hindrance for women's participation in leisure or sport (for example chess or e-sports), when in practice they are likely to be simultaneously both. The ways in which women-only bridge has been harnessed as an either/or debate is not a useful approach when considering how the paradox of women's bridge might be addressed. To avoid the continuation of broader patriarchal ideologies being actively performed and reproduced by both male and female players, attention could be turned to consider new ways of challenging or changing existing frameworks. Nevertheless, when developing safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces whilst avoiding circular debates about the "problem" of the women's game, there needs to be recognition of the complexities involved in tackling systemic patriarchal structures where both men *and* women are complicit actors. Alongside this, recognition of the intersections of class, age and ethnicity operating within other competitive mind-sports is required. Whilst this paper has shown the ways that everyday sexism and gendered discourses are reproduced by both men and women within the bridge world, further research into the challenges faced by those from low income, diverse backgrounds and young and older players would, perhaps, further complicate an understanding of the need for the women's game. The tensions and ambivalences of the paradox of women-only spaces have wider ramifications beyond the world of sport and leisure.

Notes

1. A mind-sport as the word suggests is a sport that utilises the mind most strongly in its execution rather than the physical body. For further discussion on the distinction between sport and mind-sport see Kobiela (2018).
2. This is similar to chess where there are open categories and women-only events. Women-only events in chess were added to try and encourage more women to play the game. For further information, see Root (2020), <https://en.chessbase.com/post/why-there-s-a-separate-world-chess-championship-for-women>.
3. Gender is used here in a binary form. The authors would like to highlight that they do not view gender in this way, but the use of this binary form represents how the participants surveyed categorised their gender identity.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank all the participants for taking the time to respond to the email questionnaire.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA; see www.bridgemindsport.org).

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