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## **Women In the weighing room: gendered discourses of exclusion in English flat-racing<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Women jockeys are a small minority on the thoroughbred racetrack and secure significantly fewer racing mounts than their male counterparts. This suggests female jockeys are facing discriminatory barriers, in one of the only major professional sports where men and women compete against each other on equal terms. This exploratory study considers discriminatory barriers that exist and the effects they have on women's comparative profile and participation in the flat racing industry. Six participants were recruited for the study from different areas within the industry, and with at least three years experience. Information was derived from semi structured individual interviews. The data was analysed using discourse analysis techniques. Five main themes were evident: a culture of sexism, including the sense that women are more nurturing; opportunities, including for women to become trainers; body shape and strength; risk and danger; industry fashion and trends.

The results from this study suggest women face discrimination in horseracing on account of a number of factors, the three main perceived reasons are due to their physical strength, body shape and the tradition and history embedded within the industry. Whilst there is a shift starting to occur where more women are coming through in flat racing, this is slow. Participants consider that women may find these barriers and perceptions held by others difficult to overcome, which may result in their inability to achieve equality in this sport. Given the exploratory character of the study, conclusions are tentative and we propose a number of areas for further research.

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Horse racing sits uncomfortably with the frames of reference that shape much of the work in sports studies: the Sport of Kings is also the racing industry, the athlete in sport's various forms is a combined human and animal form so that, for instance, national Olympic equestrian teams include a horse and rider together and an injury to the horse means that the rider is also out of competition, and in racing parlance, the 'sportsman' is the audience member who places a bet, not the horse and rider/driver

team. Unlike many other sports, these equestrian pastimes are, at least in their commercial forms, obviously industrial – so much so that we speak of a ‘racing industry’ that has, as one of its major functions, the assertion of the quality of the national bloodstock industry. In this world, the quality of a nation’s horses and their performance in various racing forms is the product of a combination of bloodlines and training. Arguably, then, horseracing is about testing the horse and about demonstrating its superiority. The challenges to the horse are tests of its strength, its bravery, its speed – and it is obvious to observers that an event that centres on large and heavy animals running at high speed in a bunch must be dangerous to any human participant, even more so when that running includes jumping over hedges and ditches. As we see from the occasional deaths of and much more common significant injuries to participants (horses and humans) horse racing is dangerous.

In part because of this actuality of danger, in part because of the deep-seated class linked traditions of the sport, and in part because of its commercial form and focus, the racing industry is highly gendered in both form and content. This paper explores the gendered character of the contemporary English labour market, and gendered discourses that limit women’s opportunities in that industry to argue that women are systematically discriminated against in the industry, and suggest that there are fruitful areas for further research, including the extent to which those discourses are used by women to ameliorate the effects of that exclusion.

Women’s participation in sport has been limited by three principal things; medical arguments that women could be physically damaged; aesthetic arguments that sportswomen are unattractive; and social arguments that sports behaviours undermine ideals of femininity.<sup>2</sup> In horse racing, as in many other sports, these arguments are linked to a closely held and cherished sense of tradition, as may be seen in the formal dress both of the race goers and of the horses themselves. The conventions of the sport are deeply rooted and are arguably displayed most obviously by the composition of the workforce of jockeys. There are currently well over a hundred professional male flat racing jockeys in England, but fewer than a dozen female jockeys. In terms of performance-on-the-day, jockeys are the high-profile human performer, and the ‘celebrities’ of the sector. This preponderance of men in the jockey population seems to be the result of a glass ceiling whereby women may progress so far through the

industry but are prevented from advancing further, as seen in the much larger proportion of women stable hands.

Although there are a number of successful women jockeys in British flat racing, horseracing remains a sport where discrimination against women is rife. The top women jockeys do not often ride the best horses and women outside of these few do not often secure any mounts at all. Despite this discrimination displayed through race riding, women are often the preferred exercise riders at racing yards, and women are often the preferred stable hands over men. Yet despite all these discriminatory forms, horse racing remains one of the few sports where men and women compete against each other on close to equal formal terms. While there may be clearly identified labour markets for women in golf, tennis and athletics, leaving aside mixed doubles, and rare cases such as Annika Sorrenstam, Michelle Wie or Katie Hnida sports remain rigidly gender distinct and segregated.

Our intention in this study has been to map the broad contours of gender discrimination the racing industry labour force. Our premise, which was largely sustained, was that women in the horseracing industry remain discriminated against for three main reasons: their physical strength and capabilities, their body shape, and the history and traditions that have created and are embedded within the institution. Our starting point then may be summed up by the Director of the British Racing School who stated that “you will find more male chauvinism in racing than in any other industry”.<sup>3</sup> In looking to sketch the contours of sexism in racing, we set out to explore the forms that that ‘chauvinism’ takes.

Our analysis focuses on England, but the body of literature – minimal that it is – on which we draw does not. There are some extremely good scholarly historical analyses of the world of racing – where Wray Vamplew, Mike Huggins, and Joyce Kay have set the standard in the UK – alongside exceptional popular and scholarly anthropologies of the equestrian world – particularly by Rebecca Cassidy and Kate Fox.<sup>4</sup> Despite the quality and range of this work, there remains a the lack of analyses of horse racing’s labour markets: Janet Winter’s analyses of trade unions in the industry and especially the 1975 stable lads strike stand out as some of the few scholarly explorations of industry’s British workforce, and for investigations of gender in the racing industry’s labour market we have been limited to the extremely good work by Ray & Grimes in

North America, Dave Tolich and others in New Zealand, and by Susana Hedenborg and Mats Grieff in Sweden.<sup>5</sup> These analyses draw on evidence from flat racing, steeplechasing, and harness racing (or trotting, in the southern hemisphere) and point to marked national differences – most notably in the Swedish evidence. Our analysis centres on flat racing – partly because of convenience of access to participants, and partly to manage the number of possible variables in a small exploratory study.

The marginalisation of women in the English racing industry is not just a product of or linked to these gendered dynamics in sport, but also to those in the British labour force. The most obvious sign of gender inequality is the earnings gap between men and women. In April 2008, as we were finishing the initial set of data collection women's median hourly earnings excluding overtime were 12.8% below that of men (0.3% higher than the 2007 gap).<sup>6</sup> This earnings gap is intensified when we consider the greater impact of workforce casualisation and low-wage labour precariousness in the service industries where women make up a large proportion of the workforce, and the ideals of women's 'nurturing' natures hold sway – a set of views we see in the validation of women's roles as stable hands.

Women working in the racing industry participate in one the UK's major spectator sports. Each year, a little under 2/3 of all meetings are flat races: for instance, of the 1,342 race meetings took place across the 59 racetracks in the UK in 2006, 832 were flat and 506 jumps.<sup>7</sup> Professional horseracing is strictly regulated. The Jockey Club, established in 1750, is a private thoroughbred breed registry that regulates the production of thoroughbred racehorses, and also creates the "rules of racing". The Jockey Club and local race associations appoint stewards for each track who are accountable for the enforcement of rules and regulations.<sup>8</sup> Within this regulated environment, experienced journeymen jockeys are "free agents" who are permitted to contract (normally through an agent) with owners and trainers to ride certain horses in specific races. To attain this status jockeys serve an apprenticeship with a licensed trainer. Many jockeys enter into the profession by first working as a groom or exercise rider. Subsequently, by sponsoring aspiring jockeys in races, trainers can then choose the most promising for apprenticeships.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the apprenticeship the trainer will control the mounts the jockey will ride and also many aspects of the jockey's personal life-style. As the apprentice jockey is given general on the job training, trainers try to retrieve their educational costs through low wages and long working hours.

The British Horseracing Authority (BHA) governs and regulates the sport. It is the BHA's role to ensure the sport develops successfully.<sup>10</sup> It runs the industry as competitive entertainment, compiling fixture lists and race programmes and manages finances concerned with the industry. It has 120 employees but is indirectly responsible for 100,000 people involved in the sport. The BHA was set up in 1993 and whilst the Jockey Club enforces the rules the BHA handles the promotion and marketing of the sport liaising with owners, sponsors and race goers.

Women's pathways to participation in this industry have had to confront a series of implicit and explicit underpinning gender rules. As was the case in much of the rest of the world, associations with horses acquired a masculinist patina because of their links to agricultural and related labour and to warfare, links that had begun to weaken from early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> Despite this cultural shift, women remained excluded from competition in equestrian sports until after the 1939-45 war, being admitted to Olympic dressage competition in 1952, show jumping in 1956, and eventing in 1960.

Participation in competitive racing was, however, slower. In the USA, for instance, women riders were prevented from having racing licenses by the jockeys' labour union and early attempts by women to race were blocked by boycotts from male jockeys in an example of "co-worker discrimination".<sup>12</sup> The first female amateur jockeys began to intermittently compete with men in British flat racing and steeple chases during the early 1900s, although they were not granted professional licenses until 1970.<sup>13</sup> Although it is now 40 years since women began work as professional competitive jockeys, they remain in the sport's second tier: at present in the UK, a top male flat jockey could reasonably expect to secure twenty or more rides a week. In contrast a top female flat jockey would be extremely successful if she secured at least ten mounts per week. This mounts differential highlights the inequalities in horseracing.<sup>14</sup>

This differential also applies off the track. In 2006 the annual average number of professional jockeys totalled 430; of these 113 were flat, 136 apprentices, 87 jumps and 103 conditional. Women comprised approximately 11% percent of these, with the highest percentage in apprentices on the flat and the lowest in jumps.<sup>15</sup> Women trainers were only licensed from the mid 1960s, although in the US at least there is evidence of women trainers before this time, including Mary Klein whose 'Indian Maiden' won the Kentucky Oaks in 1959, 1960, and 1961 while she was still officially a

head 'lad': this masking of women's senior work roles behind lower status job titles is a common experience for women in professional work, not only in the racing industry. The BHA in 2010 listed 112 licensed women trainers, out of a total of 572 (or 19.6%). This is an improvement on the sport's past: Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the rules of most racing clubs kept membership numbers small and excluded women. Indeed, the Jockey Club rules banned women from owning horses. By the later nineteenth century in the UK, however, many women did own horses, among those was the Duchess of Montrose, and racing clubs often turned a blind eye to this aristocratic flouting of the rules so long as appearances were preserved. Gendered identity rules may have even encouraged people's investment in racing amongst the upper classes.<sup>16</sup>

The highest percentages of women racing industry employees are as stable hands. In Britain despite the removal of formal barriers to women's participation in the upper echelon of the flat racing industry and a large number of women working in the industry, they remain a minority on the racetrack. This exclusion does not apply in the same way in training arena: in 2007 the distribution of stable 'lads' and 'lasses' in the UK showed that women accounted for 1,683 of the workforce and men 1,625, with 77 as trainee stable 'lads', and 96 'lasses'.<sup>17</sup> These figures, where women make up 51.1% of the stable hand workforce, must be seen in contrast to the very low number of women trainers (19.6% in 2010) and jockeys (11% on the flat) and may be productively compared to women's exclusion from executive positions in other industries where they comprise a significant proportion of the labour force, and relates to the widespread view that women are 'naturally' more nurturing and caring and therefore make good or better grooms.

The empirical evidence suggests that women are receiving a significant fewer opportunities to race than equally qualified men, and are disproportionately represented in relatively disempowered roles in the industry as well as in supporting roles. However, because of the distinctive status of racing as a place of formal equality of competition between men and women it provides us with a rare instance of a practice where that gendered rules and hierarchies of a complex labour force and market meet the conventions and rules of gender coded sports.

## **Methodology**



Given the paucity of UK (or any other) literature on women's experiences of work in the equestrian labour force, we decided that a small exploratory study was justified to provide us with a sketch of the area and consider whether our analysis of the secondary sources suggesting a rich and distinctive research area was correct and justified, all this taking account of the resources at our disposal and other time demands. Our research design therefore considered these issues and our view that exploring gender relations and dynamics in this setting meant that we needed to ensure that our data included a reasonable set of material to allow some assessment of men's and women's views and experiences. We therefore opted for snowball sampling as a non-probability technique suitable for qualitative research leading to a small sample of 6 but with a form of paired samples. Initial contacts were made through Laura-Jayne's professional networks in the industry. The participants were: 1 female flat jockey, 1 male flat jockey, 1 male flat trainer, 1 travelling head female, 1 male stable hand, and 1 female stable hand. The ages of the participants ranged from the youngest starting with the stable hands at 20 years (male) and 22 years (female) to 54 years (travelling head female) and 55 years (male trainer). All participants had at least three years experience in the professional racing industry, which we hoped would provide a diversity of views as well as sufficient experience to grant those views some validity.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, working from a schedule that was refined and adjusted as the data collection progressed, where questions acted as prompts to cover a smaller range of topics probing the participant's thoughts about women's involvement and equity in horseracing. The interviews were conducted in one of the main training centres in England, in a region with over 1000 horses in training. We note that the participants were less talkative than initially expected, and combined with Laura-Jayne's relative inexperience as an interviewer the data set is less rich than initially expected. However, her involvement in and knowledge of the sector and the industry mitigated this limitation: she brought a subtle sense of insider-knowledge, with the findings further enhanced by rigorous triangulation of the data.

## **Discussion**

Our analysis suggests five main themes for further exploration and investigation: first, a culture of sexism, including the sense that women are more nurturing; second but related, the provision and 'actualisation' of opportunities, including for women to become trainers; third, the impact of risk and danger; fourth, the impact of differences in body shape and strength; and finally, a hard to classify sense of industry fashion and trends. These themes point to the complex interplay sport and labour market dynamics in the gendered formation of British horse racing.

### **Cultures of sexism, aka 'Girls' make better stable hands.**

The overall consensus among participants is that women are far more caring and nurturing towards their horses: in the words of the woman jockey: "Girls give their horses more 'tlc' [tender loving care]" while the travelling head 'girl' suggested that for women it is "a natural thing to look after something". This does not seem specifically British – as Hedenborg notes the Swedish experience suggests that women are held to be more nurturing and caring and therefore to make better grooms.<sup>18</sup> For some in the industry, this ascription of care and nurture to women means that women as stable hands are held to reveal their feelings towards their horses more: as the male stable hand stated, "the girls in our yard especially, um they love their horses and they treat them very good". It is not just men in the industry who hold this view: the female stable hand echoed this suggesting that "girls are more nurturing towards their horses, get more emotionally attached".

One of the dangers of this sort of myth, that women have caring nurturing natures, is its limiting power when adopted by those it serves to subjugate. For instance, the female stable hand claimed that many women are happy to stay as stable 'lasses' because they thoroughly enjoy the job, it is extremely fulfilling to them, they build the relationships with their horses, and do not want for any further progression in the industry. This may not be simply buying into the myth – many of Hedenborg's participants could not clearly delineate their leisure from their work.<sup>19</sup> She also stated that many stable hands do not want to be put in the 'limelight' and are much happier to work behind the scenes of the industry. Although she seemed to buy into the myth, she also identified the limits of its power by suggesting that many women could be deterred from progressing through the industry because they would have to engage more actively with this male dominated world.

Although seeming to hold a number of views that might be seen as retrograde, the male stable hand showed a level of sensitivity to women's experiences in the sector when he noted that being a stable hand would not be the best job there is to be gained in the industry: "to be fair it's not exactly a nice life or a nice lifestyle, the pay wouldn't be that great, there's not much for girls, that don't make it in racing I think. They can be stable hands and that but it's not really a nice lifestyle". Wages in the sector are low and working hours long and unsociable, a problem exacerbated because trainers try to retrieve their educational costs through low wages and long working hours.<sup>20</sup>

Daily practice suggests a complex view of the impact of the myth of 'women's caring natures' in work organisation. Part of this apparent complexity could be the result of distance from everyday activities in the yard. For instance, both the female and male jockey suggested women were given the easier horses to ride in the yard: Cassidy, in her ethnography of Newmarket, also notes that many female stable hands are likely to get the easier horses to ride.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the travelling head 'girl' stated that this would not necessarily happen. While she accepted that trainers tend to put females on different horses to the males, these are not necessarily on the easier horses to ride. As the trainer suggested, different horses suit different people: his view is that women tend to suit the horses that are more nervous and would give them a pat and calm them down, whereas the men would tend to give them a slap and bully them to behave. Many industry participants, not only in our small study, focus their discussion of this topic on colts: our female jockey was explicit here: "when you have colts you need a few good lads around to slap them and keep them in line". This is almost identical to a view expressed by a stable lad interviewed by Cassidy who stated, 'if you've got a big strong colt you want a lad on it.'<sup>22</sup> Our trainer, however, seems to think that the 'gentle touch' can be just as useful as a 'firm masculine hand' in controlling a feisty colt.

One of the challenges in making sense of the industry participants' views is the discourse of strength – both human and equine. The female stable hand suggested that trainers put women on a horse that needs a lot of looking after, and men on a horse that needs 'riding' and more strength. The male stable hand believed the men should be riding the harder horses in the yard than the women stating, "not that there's anything wrong with the girls or anything, it's just life isn't it". Although he did go on to suggest, "I think there's girls in the yard capable of riding nearly every horse they just

don't get the chances sometime, coz trainers can be sexist", recognising the ways gendered rules have an impact in racing yards as workplaces. His acceptance of this as normality seemed to be shared by women in our sample, and anecdotally is a view widely held by women in the industry. It also ties into a sense that women stable hands are 'protected' from the more physical jobs by male stable hands.<sup>23</sup>

The sense of 'protection', however, is undermined by the sexist elements of men's interactions with women: in common with many sporting and work settings, this is portrayed as banter and its significance downplayed. For instance, the female jockey was of the view that "the same sexist banter goes on everywhere, doesn't matter if your male or female. Same in everyday office job". This view was also shared by the female stable hand. That this is a coping mechanism rather than grounded in experience is borne out by the simple observation that both had only ever worked in the racing industry, and it is therefore unlikely that they know if it is different from another job. The male stable hand was explicit about the function of this banter as 'light hearted' and all part of the fun of the job, "there's always a bit of banter towards the girls in the yard, it wouldn't run that smoothly if there wasn't like, very boring if not". The trainer emphasised this point by saying that he had not witnessed any of this banter, but he had heard about it and proceeded to laugh, again suggesting that at least for the men in the industry it is seen as 'light hearted'. The feelings gained from the women working in the industry suggested that they accepted this as just a bit of entertainment and part of the job and were not, or could not afford to be, offended by it. This sense of acceptance is also borne out in Cassidy's ethnographic work, where many female stable hands reported that they tolerated this sort of discrimination because it suited them and allowed their continued involvement in the industry.<sup>24</sup>

Although the workplace culture makes it potentially an uncomfortable place for women, there were ways that the women could also use it to their advantage. The travelling head 'girl' suggested that women could actually get away with a lot more than men with the boss, and believed that being a woman meant that she got on better with the owners in her yard as well. Once again, this is consistent with Cassidy's argument that female stable hands have a tendency to get along better with male trainers.<sup>25</sup> Rather than seeing this as a career advantage women in the racing industry, these tensions centred on sexual appeal may be better seen as a disadvantage for women in that it is consistent with patriarchal ideals of women. We note, however, that these patriarchal

workplace discourses are subtle and require careful site or industry specific exploration beyond that we have been able to conduct here.

Despite this limited advantage, the men and women interviewed all seemed to consider that there are not, in the words of the woman stable hand, “a lot of career opportunities for someone that doesn’t want to ride as a jockey”. This suggests the females who are stable hands must do the job for the love of it and their desire to work with horses. As with the discourses of sexual appeal, a fruitful area for further exploration is the strength of the construct of women’s ‘love of horses’ as a compensatory mechanism mitigating frustration at or justifying women’s limited opportunities in the industry. For instance, a young man entering the industry may not see working as a stable hand as a particularly inspiring job because he does not see himself as sharing the same love of the horses as the women do. This ideology of women’s greater love of horses may mean that he feels he has to share in the assumed, or ideologically determined, aspirations with other men to progress further in the industry, and become a jockey. Many see becoming a jockey, in the words of the woman stable hand, as a “big ego thing; it is a big competition, at being the best”. Here, once again, we see the discourse of women’s ‘caring natures’ militating against women’s aspirations to ride because an assumption of ‘caring’ undermines the legitimate adoption of the competitive approach required to be a successful jockey.

## **Opportunities and Equality**

Participants’ views of the extent of opportunities for women in the industry were contradictory. Despite increasing numbers of women jockeys in flat racing, there was a view, born out by the data about the number of rides, that it is more difficult for a woman to secure rides. For instance, the woman jockey suggested that there could be fewer opportunities because there are fewer women jockeys – that is, that it is a numbers thing only – but also held the view that there are more opportunities now than there were. The response of the trainer to this line of questioning was more informative, when he stated that “I do use girls over the flat as some horses suit girls”. Although we cannot be sure, it may be that the subtext here is that he will use women jockeys when men are not suitable – but that male jockeys are preferred. This may not be his view, but an assessment of the views of owners, the ultimate decision makers in jockey selection: he goes on to say, “it’s a male dominated game and half the trouble is trying

to get the owners to put them up". There is little doubt that owners are likely to opt for recognised 'names' in the jockey world, the bases and rationale for of owners' choices of jockey merit investigation if the perception of limited opportunities for women jockeys is to be clarified and, if real (we do not doubt that it is), combated.

There is, however, some evidence that there are more women steeplechase riders in Ireland – again we have not been able to locate any analyses of the Irish industry that consider this but it was raised during field work. However, our participants were of the view that it is more difficult for women to be accepted and achieve as jockeys on the flat and almost impossible over jumps in Britain. For instance, the trainer stated that over jumps he would always prefer to book a male over a female to ride his horses, but suggests that it is different on the flat, "I think Hayley Turner is as good as any guy riding; she rides a bit for me. There are a lot of good girls riding". There was a shared opinion amongst the participants that you have to be good to make it as a male jockey but of exceptionally high ability as a female to stand out and be given the opportunities. Women who make it as jockeys were described as needed "a gift", as being "terribly good" (travelling head 'girl'), as being "exceptional" (woman stable hand). What is more, there was a view that once a woman jockey no longer claims her weight allowance (the weight advantage granted to apprentices) she may be at a disadvantage because owners and trainers seem more reluctant to book her for their mounts as she no longer holds any clear advantage over the male. Whereas apprentices may be able to use their claim to hold a competitive advantage over less successful jockeys who have lost their weight advantage, the women participants seemed to see disadvantage as more that just that of a lighter apprentice, but as distinctly gendered.

The strength of this gendered culture means that the majority of participants believed there will never be a time in the racing industry where men and women jockeys would be equal. The differential in the number of rides men and women secure was a powerful influence on the woman jockey's assessment of her opportunities in the industry, but others, including the travelling head woman and the male jockey both saw a difference between potential for greater equality in flat racing than in steeplechasing. Whereas the view expressed by the women was that women's skills would lead to this greater equality, the male jockey put it down primarily to a weight advantage: "women are coming through and women are going to get more opportunities because they are lighter, the weight will allow women to come through because there won't be any boys

that can do it". However, in doing so he seems to ignore the subtle forms of discrimination will continue against women which may interfere in the careers of these riders, including those the trainer drew on in his assessment of the views of owners.

## **Women Trainers**

Unlike jockeys, women have entered training in larger a proportion, in part because success is seen in some settings as being as much about the horses as it is the trainer. The trainer in our sample was explicit: "female trainers have broken through and improved more over the years, if they have got the horses then they're as good as the men". One of the factors may be that elements such as strength, body shape, and weight do not come into it as they would for a jockey. We found little assessment of the path to training in the research literature, but at least amongst our participants there was a view that it is much easier to become a trainer than to become a jockey. It seems that a key issue in determining success as and of a trainer is the attitude of owners and their decisions about which yards they place their horses in. We have seen no British material assessing the qualities of a 'good' trainer, but note Hedenborg's and Grieff's discussions of the perceived qualities of Swedish women harness racing trainers as including 'caring natures'.<sup>26</sup> The deep-seated character of the gendered discourses in the industry means that it is likely that the reasons that are seen as making women good to work with horses also contribute to the justification of women's higher proportion in the training rather than the riding workforce.

The preferences that the staff had in relation to working for a male or female trainer were mixed. The travelling head 'girl' suggested that she got more advantages by working for a male trainer. She believed that women could persuade the boss and get away with a lot more things, a view consistent with one of Cassidy's participants in her Newmarket ethnography, a stable hand who stated, "if we want a day off we might bat our eyelids at the boss".<sup>27</sup> The female stable hand in our study, proposed a different reason for her preference stating, "I find it easier to work for a male trainer, with a female I found that trying to put my opinion across was undermining her". It is tempting to read this as a feminist recognition of women's relative precariousness in the industry's upper echelons.

## **Danger**

A theme that runs through much of the evidence is a view that women may be deterred by and need protection from the element of fear or danger evident in the sport. The trainer believes this is one of the reasons why there are few women in jump racing because of the threat of bad falls. He noted a number of bad falls that have occurred, "Jane Thompson years ago ... got killed at Sedgefield, Sharon Murgatroyd she was a very good rider, she had a bad fall one day at Bangor and was paralysed from the neck down". We could not locate any analyses of fall-related injuries in the research literature that suggest a gendered pattern to injury types, seriousness or significance. Despite this, the trainer seemed to imply that women's fall-related injuries are more serious and that this is because women may fall differently. Noting the absence of research findings either way, we doubt there is anything significant in this and suggest that the highlighting of individual serious cases may be a consequence of disquiet over women's increasing presence in a previously masculinised domain. That said, the issue is worthy of further investigation. Although we generally unconvinced that either flat racing or steeplechasing is any more dangerous for women than for men, the differential impact of this sense of danger pervaded our participant's responses. Both the male stable hand and travelling head 'girl' believed the risks associated with the sport deter women from taking part.

This danger element and the threat of bad falls functioned among this flat racing sample as one of the main reasons why there are so few women in jump racing, notwithstanding the perception that women are more involved in Irish steeplechasing than British. The man jockey was explicit about risk and danger, claiming "women cannot take the injuries, on the flat the injuries are less. They are, pure and simple" as a reason for more female jockeys achieving success on the flat. It could be the owners and trainers also who are reluctant to give woman rides over jumps because they are worried about the threat of bad falls, or believe it is too rough for a female. This discourse of danger is, we suggest, a significant factor in the gendering of sport and its associated industry, and is often presented as a discourse of protection.

### **Physical attributes**

Susana Hedenborg has argued that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish women faced a range of arguments against permitting them to be jockeys, most notably that they



were not good enough, did not have enough experience and were not strong enough.<sup>28</sup> These three arguments appear in our small sample's views, although they tended to be framed as a lack of strength and a difference in body shapes. The female jockey herself suggested, "there probably are more girls wanting to do it, but the simple fact is there not good enough, men are better jockeys, because of strength and body shape". The male jockey supported this view stating, "I don't think women jockeys are as good as males, because would an eight stone male and an eight stone female connect the same punch? Would they? I don't know ask a doctor but me not knowing would say that they don't". The male stable hand suggested that even the males find it difficult to ride some horses let alone the females, suggesting it is physical strength which plays a large role in race riding.

Physical shape is thought to play a role alongside strength, the travelling head 'girl' spoke about a woman's physical appearance, suggesting that a combination of hips and breasts result in body shape and weight distribution that mean that women are less likely to be considered suitable jockeys, and while we accept that this may be true, we also note that the body shapes of most men limit their ability to be jockeys. Furthermore, as Tolich & Bell have suggested in their study of New Zealand male jockeys, most struggle to keep their weight, size and shape.<sup>29</sup> However, as the women jockey in our group noted, "most female flat jockeys from behind if they had their hair cut short would look like a lad, their not your normal female figure". We consider it likely that this distinction based in strength and shape has more impact in steeplechasing than it does in flat racing. It may well be the case that more physical strength is required to ride over jumps, and that there may be some differences in the body shapes of men and women jockeys. This could be a reason why women have more opportunities on the flat because they do not face so much discrimination concerned with perceptions of body shape differences, and because flat racing requires less physical strength. We suspect however that this might be a justification after the fact of women's greater exclusion from steeplechasing than from flat racing.

The significance of strength was also linked to track surfaces with a view that not only were women more able to hold their own on the flat, but that the easier-to-ride on artificial tracks, made from fibre sand, lessened women's strength deficit. Our male jockey claimed that "it's only recently that we've got man made tracks and between a man-made track and a grass track takes a lot more strength. On a man-made track

women can be as strong as men, no two ways about it". He suggested that this is why women have broken through in the USA and seem to have a greater win-rate there. We have not come across this view in either the research literature or elsewhere in the sector, and it may be an idiosyncratic position that was not supported by any other participants. The travelling head 'girl' just as vehemently opposed the idea as she believed that jockeys have to be equal on all different surfaces. She did believe more women are finding opportunities to ride on the flat but believed that this was due to shifting views of women's abilities and their role in the industry, not physical strength.

This emphasis on strength and body shape is challenged from within the sector however. Several participants recognised that the system is weighted in favour of men, who got more opportunities to ride, and had greater experience and skills, so got more opportunities to ride. The trainer's emphasis on the role of the owner in jockey selection meant that, in his view, everyone outside the top ten jockeys who are riding at present is discriminated against regardless to whether they are male or female, because they will not have the opportunities of the top jockeys; this is a success-breed-success analysis. The female stable hand suggested if she owned racehorses she would prefer them to be ridden in races by males, not because of physical strength but because men have more opportunities and because they more experienced. These views suggest that the experience factor Hedenborg identified is a self perpetuating cycle of exclusion.<sup>30</sup>

The second factor weakening an emphasis on strength is the argument that it is this technical ability when it comes to riding on the flat which is important and wins races, not which jockey is the strongest. There is merit in exploring further the view expressed by the male jockey that there could be a difference between males' and females' technical abilities as a result of training systems in the industry. These emphases on experience and technical skills suggest that there is a strong cultural element in women's exclusion that is obscured behind strength and body-shape claims. We note that rates of organisational cultural and social change often are very slow and see no reason to reject in the British context Ray and Grimes' US-derived argument that tradition and organisational barriers limit women's ability to compete with men on equal terms on the racetrack.<sup>31</sup>

## **Fashion**

The final factor that we detect in our participants' discussions of gender experiences in the racing industry is the fickle fashions it exhibits. Owners have a great influence in the booking of jockeys for their horses. Most yards have their own jockeys attached to them who will ride the majority of the horses. In the view of the trainer, the vast majority of owners 'will go with the first stable jockey, but some have their own preferences, "It's a game of fashion, always has been". This suggests that whichever jockey is doing well at the time will be chosen by the owners to ride and all further owners will follow suit, therefore making it virtually impossible for the jockeys not in the top ranks to secure rides. In this, fashion links to and reinforces the role of riders' experience in maintaining the self-perpetuating cycle of inclusion and exclusion.

Whether women get booked to ride therefore depends on the power of owners and trainers in shaping fashion as emphasised by Ray and Grimes and by Fox when they stress the importance of networks of owners and trainers.<sup>32</sup> However our evidence also suggests that securing rides can also be seen to depend on horses and perceptions of whether a particular jockey suits them. The female stable hand also comments on this suggesting, "obviously we have our stable jockeys but if a certain horse may go better for a girl then the boss will be willing to allow that". Some horses may respond better to the gentler ridden approach given by that of a female.<sup>33</sup> It was also suggested by the female jockey that if the female knows the horse well and has ridden the horse in training, the trainer may have a tendency to use the female opposed to a male who does not know the horse, meaning that there may also be circumstances where a woman jockey linked to a specific stable has an advantage over men. Whether this advantage is enough to undermine the industry's embedded gender rules remains moot. The male jockey strongly believed that "trainers and owners will have no choice but to book female jockeys because, women would be the only choice they'd have". This highlights a sense that there are long term changes in the industry that could see a time when women may prove more successful than men on the flat. This view suggests a need to explore whether there is an ideological link between this view and the 'racing tribe's' view that jumps are a more authentic form of racing, where there is a greater adherence to cultures of amateurism and a more embedded class awareness.

## **Conclusion**

Our small exploratory investigation therefore suggests that women's experiences of work in the racing industry are shaped by five factors. There is a deep-seated culture of sexism that holds that women are more nurturing and make better stable hands, and in turn limits women's opportunities in the work force's upper echelons: training and riding. Linked closely to this culture of sexism is the third factor – a dualistic discourse of danger, especially in steeplechasing, and protection. The fourth factor is centred on a series of views about strength and body shape which seems to obscure the limited opportunities for women jockeys, and may be linked to other concerns about differential technical abilities. Finally, the deeply rooted culture of sexism is maintained by fashion, habit and a sense of tradition in the industry. These five factors feature in industry participants discourse as tropes centred on physical strength, body shape, and the industry's history and traditions. We are not making any claims for these findings other than to suggest that they raise more questions and answer few if any; after all, the study is exploratory. These questions have both scholarly significance – women's experiences of one of the few sports industries where men and women work and compete alongside and with each other on formally equal terms – and policy implications should the racing industry embark on a gender equity programme. In both forms, we consider them to be important, and worthy of further investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura-Jayne Roberts conducted all of the field work and data collection as well as the first stage of analysis and writing, Malcolm MacLean's contribution is in assistance with subsequent analysis, development of the argument and the second stage of writing.

<sup>2</sup> Kay 'Sport and Gender'

<sup>3</sup> Cassidy *Sport of Kings* p 36.

<sup>4</sup> Vamplew *The Turf*, Vamplew and Kay *Encyclopaedia of British Horseracing*, Huggins *Flat Racing and British Society*, Huggins *Horse-racing and British Society*, Fox *The Racing Tribe*, Cassidy *Sport of Kings*, Cassidy *Horse People*.

<sup>5</sup> Winters 'Industrial Relations-Lite?', Winters 'we don't want to frighten the horses', Tolich and Bell 'The Commodification of Jockey's Working Bodies', Ray and Grimes 'Jockeying for Position', Hedenborg 'Female Jockeys', Hedenborg 'Trainers of Racehorses in Twentieth

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Century Sweden', Hedenborg *Arbete på stallbacken*, Grieff "Presumably I am Like a Mother to the Horses I Tend'.

<sup>6</sup> Office of National Statistics *2008 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings*

<sup>7</sup> Coward 'What We Do'

<sup>8</sup> Vamplew 'Reduced Horse Power'

<sup>9</sup> White *The Racegoers Encyclopaedia*

<sup>10</sup> Coward 'What We Do'

<sup>11</sup> Hedenborg 'Female Jockeys', Hedenborg 'The Popular Horse'

<sup>12</sup> Ray and Grimes 'Jockeying' p 50.

<sup>13</sup> Cassidy *Sport of Kings*

<sup>14</sup> White *Racegoers*

<sup>15</sup> Coward 'What We Do'

<sup>16</sup> Huggins *Flat Racing*

<sup>17</sup> Coward 'What We Do'

<sup>18</sup> Hedenborg 'Female Jockeys'

<sup>19</sup> Hedenborg *Arbete på stallbacken*

<sup>20</sup> White *Racegoers*

<sup>21</sup> Cassidy *Sport of Kings*

<sup>22</sup> Cassidy *Sport of Kings* p 109

<sup>23</sup> Cassidy *Sport of Kings*, Cassidy *Horse People*

<sup>24</sup> Cassidy *Sport of Kings*, Cassidy *Horse People*

<sup>25</sup> Cassidy *Sport of Kings*

<sup>26</sup> Hedenborg 'Trainers', Grieff 'Presumably'

<sup>27</sup> Cassidy *Sport of Kings* p 110

<sup>28</sup> Hedenborg 'Female Jockeys'

<sup>29</sup> Tolich and Bell 'Commodification'

<sup>30</sup> Hedenborg 'Female Jockeys'

<sup>31</sup> Ray and Grimes 'Jockeying'

<sup>32</sup> Ray and Grimes 'Jockeying', Cassidy *Horse People*, Fox *The Racing Tribe*

<sup>33</sup> Cassidy *Sport of Kings*