Aspiring Against the Odds: Women Strength and Conditioning Coaches in a Gendered Landscape

Aspiring Against the Odds: Women Strength and Conditioning Coaches in a Gendered Landscape

Journal:	*International Review for the Sociology of Sport*
Manuscript ID	IRSS-25-0200.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Research Article
Keywords:	culture, gender performance, marginalization, male hegemony, Raymond Williams
Abstract:	Strength and Conditioning (S&C) remains a male-dominated profession, with women significantly underrepresented and facing persistent structural, cultural, and interpersonal barriers. While existing research has focused on experienced practitioners, this study explores the experiences and aspirations of women at the early stages of their S&C careers. Drawing on Raymond Williams' (1980) framework of dominant, residual, and emergent culture, this qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with twelve aspiring women S&C coaches. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: the underrepresentation of women in S&C leadership, experiences of mansplaining, and navigating gendered power dynamics. Participants highlighted the need to constantly prove legitimacy, often in environments shaped by hegemonic masculinity. While emergent cultural shifts, such as mentorship programmes, show potential for change, these remain constrained by enduring dominant and residual cultural norms. The findings underscore the importance of systemic reform, ethical mentorship, and inclusive professional development pathways that extend beyond surface-level diversity initiatives. This study contributes to a growing body of literature advocating for structural and cultural transformation in S&C, arguing that meaningful change requires dismantling the deeply embedded gendered norms that continue to marginalise women in the profession.

Abstract

Strength and Conditioning (S&C) remains a male-dominated profession with women significantly underrepresented and facing persistent structural, cultural, and interpersonal barriers. While existing research has focused on experienced practitioners, this study explores the experiences and aspirations of women at the early stages of their S&C careers. Drawing on Raymond Williams' (1980) framework of dominant, residual, and emergent culture, this qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with twelve aspiring women S&C coaches. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: the underrepresentation of women in S&C leadership, experiences of mansplaining, and navigating gendered power dynamics. Participants highlighted the need to constantly prove legitimacy, often in environments shaped by hegemonic masculinity. While emergent cultural shifts, such as mentorship programmes, show potential for change, these remain constrained by enduring dominant and residual cultural norms. The findings underscore the importance of systemic reform, ethical mentorship, and inclusive professional development pathways that extend beyond surface-level diversity initiatives. This study contributes to a growing body of literature advocating for structural and cultural transformation in S&C, arguing that meaningful change requires dismantling the deeply embedded gendered norms that continue to marginalise women in the profession.

Introduction

Strength and Conditioning (S&C) remains an extensively male-dominated profession with women significantly underrepresented across all levels (Figueroa & Roper, 2023; Thomas et al., 2021). In 2016, a survey by the UK Strength and Conditioning Association (UKSCA) reported that only 7% of its members were women (Medlin-Silver et al., 2017). Similarly, in the United States, women constitute only 16.4% of Division I S&C coaches within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (Lapchick et al., 2022). The National Strength and Conditioning Association's (NSCA) 2022 coaches survey also reflects this trend, with only 18% of respondents working in college or university settings identifying as women (Employers Council, 2022).

The strikingly low representation of women S&C coaches raises concerns, especially as demand for these professionals continues to surge. The field is projected to experience a 20% job growth from 2018 to 2028 (Zippia, n.d.) with some academic institutions forecasting a similar 20% increase in S&C coach numbers by 2031 (Logan University, n.d.). This upward trajectory underscores the growing recognition of S&C's critical role in enhancing athletic performance and development. As the profession expands, a crucial question remains: will women share equally in these emerging opportunities or will S&C continue to be predominantly male dominated?

Despite gender being a prominent construct in social sciences, there are still limited socio-cultural analyses of women's experiences of S&C. However, existing research documents significant gender disparities in S&C (Laskowski & Ebben, 2016; Thomas et al., 2021; Figueroa & Roper, 2023), highlighting that: (1) women in S&C are frequently relegated to assistant roles, (2) often feel undervalued (Laskowski & Ebben, 2016), and (3) are compelled to adopt behaviours that align with dominant masculine norms (Thomas et al., 2021).These factors have contributed to the severe underrepresentation of women S&C coaches across all sports. The resulting scarcity of women mentors and prevalence of tokenistic hiring practices

further restrict career advancement opportunities for women in the field (Figueroa & Roper, 2023).

A contributing factor to these gendered dynamics is that S&C education at universities and accreditation pathways (such as those offered by the UKSCA and NSCA) remain extensively focused on technical and physiological competencies, with limited emphasis on psychosocial and sociocultural dimensions of coaching (Callary et al., 2023; Szedlak et al., 2025). This omission means that coaches are rarely encouraged to critically reflect on how language, behaviour, or professional norms may reinforce exclusionary cultures. Rather than being intentionally discriminatory, many S&C coaches simply reproduce what has been normalised and legitimised within the profession. This is not to imply that all expressions of masculinity are inherently problematic. Rather, tensions arise when orthodox forms of masculinity, marked by emotional stoicism, physical dominance, and authoritative leadership, are positioned as the primary route to professional credibility (Szedlak et al., 2025). This narrow construction excludes and devalues alternative identities and relational approaches, particularly those shaped by inclusive frameworks. Embracing a more expansive and critically reflexive approach to coach education would open space for diverse expressions of gender identity, enabling masculinity to coexist alongside other ways of being without serving as the default. Such a shift is vital to fostering a more equitable, inclusive, and socially responsive coaching culture within S&C.

While the majority of studies include participants with professional experience ranging from 1 to 26 years, which provide valuable insights into the barriers, workplace cultures, and career trajectories of established women S&C coaches, no research has focused specifically on the perspectives and experiences of women who strive for a career in S&C but have not yet gained full time employment. Gaining the perspectives of aspiring coaches is critical because of the increasing reports of harassment, bullying, and exclusion experienced by women in both sport and wider workplace contexts (Riddle & Heaton, 2023; Larsson et al., 2023).

While early-career challenges such as unclear development pathways, limited mentorship, and competitive internships are common to novice coaches of all genders (Callary et al., 2023), this study specifically examines how these challenges are experienced by women. Existing research shows that women entering the S&C profession must contend not only with these universal entry-level barriers, but also with a professional culture that remains heavily shaped by hegemonic masculinity, particularly in relation to authority, confidence, and emotional restraint (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Thomas et al., 2021). These normative expectations often create a double-bind for women, who must demonstrate technical competence while simultaneously managing their self-presentation to gain legitimacy in male-dominated settings. For example, Abitz et al. (2023) offer a compelling autoethnographic account of a young female S&C coach negotiating her identity within the hypermasculine environment of American football. Despite her technical proficiency, she faced persistent emotional exhaustion, the burden of impression management, and a striking lack of psychosocial support. These dynamics collectively undermined her confidence and sense of belonging. Her experience illustrates how, even in the earliest stages of professional development, women encounter gendered scrutiny and emotional labour that distinctly shape their self-perceptions, behaviour, and career trajectories in ways not typically experienced by their male counterparts.

By focusing on this formative stage, we can better understand how dominant cultural norms are internalised, resisted, or negotiated from the outset—insights that are vital for informing both individual career persistence and the broader potential for cultural transformation within the S&C profession. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to explore how women in the early stages of their S&C careers experience and navigate the gendered cultural norms that characterise the profession. In doing so, we seek to generate timely and relevant insights into how more inclusive, equitable, and supportive entry pathways can be cultivated for aspiring coaches.

Theoretical Framework

To analyse the experiences of women wishing to pursue a career as an S&C coach, Raymond Williams' (1980) framework of dominant, residual and emergent cultures is deployed, as a lens to understand the cultural tensions shaping the profession. Williams' framework provides a dynamic, historical perspective on cultural change, demonstrating how dominant ideologies sustain themselves, how past traditions persist, and how new cultural formations emerge and challenge existing norms (Pope, 2010). Each component of the framework is discussed below in the context of S&C.

Dominant Culture: Hegemonic Masculinity in S&C

The term dominant culture refers to the prevailing social norms, ideologies, and practices that shape lived experience and sustain structural power (Williams, 1980). Within the context of S&C, dominant culture resonates strongly with Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity, a culturally legitimised form of masculinity that privileges attributes such as strength, stoicism, authority, and competitiveness, while subordinating alternative masculinities and femininities. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) later reconceptualised hegemonic masculinity as a social practice embedded in institutions and everyday life, shaped by evolving power relations and legitimised through both cultural acceptance and institutional reinforcement. Extending this framework, Yang (2020) argues that hegemonic masculinity should be understood as a legitimating practice, maintained through dynamic processes of consent and authority, historically situated and reproduced in shifting cultural contexts. Within S&C, these dynamics are visible in exclusionary practices that shape perceptions of credibility, restrict access to leadership, and reinforce gendered professional expectations (Laskowski & Ebben, 2016; Medlin-Silver et al., 2017).

Male dominance in S&C manifests both numerically and normatively (Gruber & Morgan, 2005). Men overwhelmingly occupy coaching and leadership roles, particularly at elite levels, and the profession continues to valorise masculine-coded traits such as physical strength, emotional detachment, and authoritative command (Thomas et al., 2021; Figueroa & Roper, 2023). Women in S&C are frequently subjected to scrutiny, especially when coaching male athletes, and must often over-perform to prove their competence (Thomas et al., 2023). Many modify their behaviours to align with dominant masculine expectations (Abitz et al., 2023), which produces a double-bind because conforming too closely risks being deemed "unfeminine," while deviating invites doubts about professional legitimacy (Thomas et al., 2021).

Despite its widespread use, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has faced substantial critique. Pringle (2005) warns against its overapplication in the sociology of sport, arguing that it can produce analytical tunnel vision thereby obscuring intra-masculine differences and

alternative expressions of power. Reddy et al. (2019) contend that Connell's framework tends to underplay material and institutional domination, suggesting that gendered power should also be examined through Bourdieu's lens of symbolic capital and organisational structures. This is particularly salient in S&C, where professional advancement often hinges on informal, male-dominated networks and access to gendered forms of capital (Massey & Vincent, 2013).

To expand upon these critiques, Anderson (2005, 2008) differentiates orthodox masculinity (characterized by aggression, antifemininity, and compulsory heterosexuality) from inclusive masculinity, which arises in settings marked by diminished homophobia and looser gender policing. While hegemonic masculinity represents the dominant cultural ideal, orthodox masculinity denotes the behavioural expression and institutionalisation of that ideal. In male-dominated fields such as S&C, orthodox masculinity remains entrenched, limiting space for relational, emotionally expressive masculinities without professional or social penalty. Although inclusive masculinities have been documented in feminised sport contexts like cheerleading (Anderson, 2005), they remain largely absent in S&C, where women often feel compelled to adapt to dominant masculine norms for credibility (Thomas et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the existence of alternative masculinities, however marginal, reinforces Williams' (1980) insight that dominant culture is never static. Rather, it is continually negotiated, contested, and reshaped through interpersonal and institutional struggles, making the S&C profession a key arena for examining the intersections of gender, power, and cultural resistance.

Since male coaches and administrators tend to mentor and promote other men, access to social capital necessary for advancement remains largely restricted to male networks (Massey & Vincent, 2013). This process is known as homologous reproduction, whereby those in positions of power tend to recruit and promote individuals who resemble themselves in gender, race and appearance reinforcing existing hierarchies and excluding those who deviate from the dominant norm (Darvin & Lubke, 2021). These exclusionary practices provide a solid scaffolding for hegemonic masculinity as the defining culture in S&C, which makes gaining leadership positions in elite sport challenging for women (Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). The concept of selective tradition also helps to explain how dominant cultures maintain power by superficially integrating elements of gender inclusion initiatives (Williams, 1980). Ingham and Hardy (1984) explain how marginalised groups may be included in sport organisations, but only in ways that do not threaten existing hierarchies. While diversity programmes and policies exist (see *Emergent Culture* below), they rarely address the entrenched biases that shape hiring, leadership pathways, and professional expectations (Thomas et al., 2023). As a result, men continue to dominate S&C, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and related cultural norms (Lord & Kavaliauskas, 2023).

Residual Culture

Williams (1980) defines residual culture as historical traditions that continue to influence the present, even as they lose formal authority. For instance, dominant groups sustain their power through institutionalised and management practices that appear to evolve and pay heed to emerging norms but largely reinforce established norms (Pope, 2010). In S&C, traditional gender exclusions persist despite efforts to create a more inclusive environment. Historically, S&C was male exclusive, rooted in traditional weightlifting and power-based training, which were a male preserve and inherently masculine (Medlin-Silver et al., 2017). Despite initiatives

for gender equality (e.g., NSCA Women's Committee Mentoring Program), these roots still shape expectations of what an S&C coach should look like; i.e., physically dominant, assertive, and aggressive (Figueroa & Roper, 2023). Women who do not conform to these masculine ideals often face implicit challenges to their expertise and authority (Thomas et al., 2021). A continuing residual element of S&C is the segregation of coaching practice by gender. Women in S&C are often relegated to coaching women's teams, while men are more commonly assigned to both male and female teams (Massey & Vincent, 2013; Laskowski & Ebben, 2016). This reflects long-standing gender divisions across sports, where men are perceived as more suitable to physically demanding and leadership roles, while women are steered towards assistant positions (Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Although such practices are not always explicit, the presence of emergent cultural norms continues to limit women's career progression in elite S&C environments (Thomas et al., 2023)

Williams (1980) describes how aspects of residual culture are often repurposed rather than entirely replaced, which is evident in the leadership structures within the industry. Hiring decisions are still largely influenced by male networks and social capital, reinforcing a culture where women must work harder to achieve legitimacy (Thomas et al., 2023). Such obstacles persist not only through overt exclusion, but through the presence of "residual culture" (Williams, 1980) – the lingering influence of historically dominant masculine traditions, assumptions, and practices that remain embedded within institutional structures and professional networks. Though actively challenged, it appears that these residual elements continue to shape opportunity structures, professional recognition, and career advancement pathways for women in ways that subtly, but continuously disadvantage them in S&C.

Emergent Culture: Challenging the Status Quo in S&C

Emergent culture represents new social movements, progressive ideas, and institutional changes that challenge dominant norms (Williams et al., 1977). These emergent elements arise in response to disenchantment with dominant culture and seek to introduce alternative practices and ideologies in the hope of eventually replacing the existing norms (Pope, 2010). Despite S&C culture being largely shaped by traditions, hegemonic masculinity, and related institutional practices, an emergent culture is present, characterised by growing advocacy for gender equity, mentorship programmes, and inclusive hiring policies (Figueroa & Roper, 2023). For example, to increase the number of women S&C coaches and to challenge the masculine dominance within the industry, the NSCA established the Women's Committee to support and advance women in the profession. This committee has created spaces for women S&C coaches to access mentorship, professional development, and leadership opportunities (NSCA, n.d.). Additionally, the UKSCA has recently partnered with the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews (R&A) to launch an exclusive S&C placement at the American International Group (AIG) Women's Open, aimed at supporting early-career practitioners (UKSCA, 2025). This S&C placement initiative appears to be the first of its kind in the UK, representing a significant milestone in addressing gender disparities in the field. Nevertheless, it is worth contextualising this development within its historical trajectory. Despite decades of gender inequality in S&C, structural interventions specifically designed to create equitable pathways for women have only recently materialised. Furthermore, the long-term sustainability of such initiatives remains uncertain, particularly because of shifting political narratives and funding landscapes that may impact diversity-focused programmes.

Williams (1980) describes emergent cultures as sites of contention, where new values and practices attempt to reshape the status quo. However, as Bryson (2008) notes, dominant groups often incorporate select aspects of emergent movements without fundamentally altering existing power structures. For example, while organisations have introduced diversity initiatives, many fail to address deeper cultural biases and systemic barriers that prevent real-term advancement of the profession. Recent research underscores the need to reform S&C coach education by integrating psychosocial competencies alongside traditional physiological knowledge (Callary et al., 2023, 2024; Szedlak et al., 2025). For instance, Callary et al. (2023) engaged UKSCA stakeholders (tutors, assessors, board members) to define key psychosocial S&C competencies (pedagogical, philosophical, psychological, and sociocultural) from the perspectives of both researchers and practitioners. A total of 30 UKSCA stakeholders were interviewed (male = 27, female = 3), representing over 90% of the organisation's leadership. While some stakeholders mentioned race, gender, and sexuality, none addressed broader issues of social justice, politics, micropolitics, or privilege, especially regarding the dominance of white, male, able-bodied S&C coaches (Callary et al., 2023). Szedlak et al. (2025) also found that UK S&C education remains largely driven by performance-scientific discourses and orthodox masculinity, limiting the holistic development of both coaches and athletes. Another example of discrimination is when discriminatory coaching practices, such as covert sexist microaggressions towards female coaches are dismissed as banter and part of the 'workforce fraternity'. The emotional strain required of female coaches to manage such hostile work environment remains part of the dominant culture and largely unacknowledged (Thomas et al. 2021).

Due to the persisting gender disparities in S&C, this study explores the lived experiences of women at the early stages of their S&C careers by building on Williams' (1980) dominant-residual-emergent cultural framework. By situating women's perspectives within the broader S&C cultural landscape, this research explores barriers, opportunities, and emerging cultural shifts shaping the progression of their career trajectories. It is pertinent to note that culture is not static, but ever-shifting, and the relevance of Williams' framework lies in its capacity to tease-out cultural negotiations and tensions that can lead to social change (Bryson 2008).

Method

Research Design

This study followed a constructivist research paradigm, which asserts that individuals develop their own subjective meanings of their experiences within society (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). This approach was chosen to derive meaning from semi-structured interviews, which were then organised into themes. The primary focus of this study was the participants' experiences as aspiring S&C coaches, explored through in-depth discussions. An interview-based approach to data collection was selected as it facilitated the development of a personal connection between the researcher and participants, allowing for in-depth explorations through probing and clarification when new information emerged (Hennink et al., 2011).

Participants

After gaining institutional ethical approval and obtaining informed consent, primary data were collected between May 2023 and October 2024 from 12 female participants (Table 1).

Participants were purposively sampled from the population of women S&C coaches using professional networks and snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) with recruitment conducted primarily via social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn.

All participants volunteered to participate in the study with ages ranging from 19 to 35 years. All participants completed S&C modules at undergraduate level, two also completed S&C modules at postgraduate level, and two were preparing to gain UKSCA accreditation. Five participants had completed an internship, which is widely recognised by both S&C organisations and academia as a foundational step in becoming an S&C coach (Hedrick, 2024; Matin, 2022). Additionally, seven participants held fitness instructor and personal training qualifications – a common entry route to a career in S&C with experience of working in a gym environment. Such roles provide hands-on experience in fitness instruction, client management, and programme design. Practical experience as a personal trainer or fitness instructor enables aspiring S&C coaches to develop key competencies, including exercise prescription, athlete assessment, and communication skills, which are essential for entering the S&C profession (Hedrick, 2024). All participants are referred to by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

[Please insert Table 1 about here]

Data Collection

An interview guide was used to structure the interviews (Norman, 2010) (see Table 2). The interview schedule devised for this research focused on:

a) participants' background in sport,
b) what motivated them to pursue a career in S&C,
c) participants' experiences of completing an S&C course, qualification, accreditation, or internship, and
d) participants' advice for organisations on how they can support women in S&C coaching.

At the end of each interview, participants were given an opportunity to provide any additional information if they felt there was something else relevant to the research (Talmy & Richards, 2011). All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams by the first author at a time and date chosen by the interviewees. Participants turned their cameras off, and the Microsoft Teams platform recorded their voice data with their permission. Interviews lasted an average of 42 minutes, ranging from 26 to 56 minutes. The length of each interview varied based on participants' experiences and the depth of their responses. Once verbatim transcribed, the interviews generated 8 hours and 28 minutes of data.

[Please insert Table 2 about here]

Data Analysis

Using the six-phase framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019), our interview data underwent reflexive thematic analysis. This analytic process was guided by both deductive and inductive strategies, whereby we drew on existing theoretical concepts while remaining open to novel and unexpected insights grounded in participants' narratives. This hybrid

approach aligned with our interpretivist paradigm, which views meaning as socially constructed and recognises the researcher's active role in theme development (Trainor & Bundon, 2021).

The first phase involved familiarisation with the data. All authors read each transcript multiple times and noted significant statements relating to participants' experiences as aspiring S&C coaches (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). We then independently generated initial codes that captured meaningful features of the data. These codes were collated into preliminary themes, which were then shared and refined collaboratively.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) remaining phases, we reviewed, defined, and named themes through ongoing reflexive discussions. These discussions allowed us to explore connections between participant accounts and the theoretical framing of the study, particularly the cultural tensions described in Williams's (1980) dominant, residual, and emergent framework. Rather than treating themes as objectively "emerging" from the data, we viewed them as actively constructed through interpretive analysis, shaped by our positionalities, theoretical lenses, and repeated engagement with the dataset. This reflexive approach enabled us to move beyond descriptive content toward latent meanings and the structural and cultural dynamics shaping participants' experiences (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). This iterative and reflective process ensured the final themes were analytically rigorous, theoretically informed, and meaningfully situated in the lived realities of participants.

Methodological Rigor

As part of our data interpretation process, we considered how, and to what extent, our own positionalities may have influenced the research (see Thomas et al., 2021). The lead author identifies as a White, cisgender, heterosexual male academic and qualified strength and conditioning coach. The second and third authors are White, heterosexual, married women, both mothers, and qualified sports coaches and educators. The fourth author is a White, cisgender, heterosexual male academic, a father, and a migrant. He identifies as a critical sociologist whose work focuses on understanding and empowering marginalised and disenfranchised populations. To capitalise on the diversity of author perspectives, we regularly engaged in extensive discussions on the framing of interview questions, data analysis, and interpretation.

Positionality played a central role throughout both data collection and analysis. The first author's identity, experiences, and standpoint inevitably shaped interactions with participants and the meaning derived from the data. For instance, the first author's professional background and perceived both insider and outsider status influenced what participants chose to share, how they framed their experiences, and the degree of openness or guardedness they exhibited. In some cases, shared disciplinary or professional backgrounds fostered trust and rapport, while in others, differences created moments of reflection on power relations and representation.

To further support the credibility of our findings and ensure methodological rigour, we employed several trustworthiness strategies, including the use of critical friends and member reflection. Co-authors acted as critical friends and challenged interpretations in a constructive and theoretically diverse manner. This process involved questioning initial assumptions,

interrogating emerging patterns, and encouraging deeper engagement with data extracts that might otherwise have been overlooked. Through regular dialogue and reflection, the critical friends supported the first author in moving beyond taken-for-granted meanings and exploring alternative interpretations grounded in participants' lived realities. As Smith and McGannon (2018) acknowledge, critical friends play an important role in facilitating reflective dialogue that challenges assumptions, deepens reflexivity, and strengthens interpretive rigour. In line with their work, this collaborative process contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the analysis by ensuring that the findings remained sensitive to the complexities and nuances of participants' experiences. For example, the first author initially interpreted several participant narratives about the absence of women in senior roles as reflecting a theme of "Lack of Female Role Models and Career Visibility in S&C." However, the other authors encouraged a shift away from this surface-level framing towards a more theoretically grounded analysis. This prompted the first author to consider how underrepresentation functioned not only as a numerical absence, but also as a manifestation of dominant and residual cultural logics that shape perceptions of leadership, authority, and bodily credibility within the profession. This led to the development of a more nuanced theme such as "Underrepresentation of Women in S&C Leadership," which engaged more critically with structural power, bodily capital, and gendered professional identity. Critical friends also enhanced reflexivity by highlighting that the first author, as a male researcher, may have underestimated the emotional strain expressed by participants. This prompted a re-examination of transcripts with greater attention to the affective dimensions of participants' stories, ultimately leading to the inclusion of insights into emotional exhaustion, impression management, and their cumulative impact on career aspirations. This process helped ensure that emergent themes more accurately reflected the gendered nuances embedded in participants' experiences.

In addition to these internal discussions, the interpretation of key themes was shared with participants as part of a member reflection process, enabling them to comment, elaborate, or suggest refinements (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This process confirmed the relevance and resonance of the themes with participants lived realities and reinforced the study's commitment to prioritising participants' voice. By combining critical dialogue among researchers with input from participants, the thematic development process prioritised interpretive depth, trustworthiness, and reflexivity, helping to ensure that the final themes were analytically rigorous and meaningful. Thus, following extensive discussions and repeated engagement with the transcripts, we identified and agreed upon three key themes: Underrepresentation of Women in S&C Leadership, Mansplaining – Men Know Better?, and Navigating Gender and Power in S&C. These themes, identified through an analysis informed by both the research question and the existing literature on S&C, are discussed below in relation to Williams's (1980) cultural shift framework.

Findings and Discussion

Underrepresentation of women in S&C leadership

The underrepresentation of women in S&C is widely acknowledged (see Lapchick, 2022; Laskowski & Ebben, 2016). All participants in this study were acutely aware of such underrepresentation. Women's conspicuous absence reinforces dominant cultural assumptions about who "belongs" in S&C. Regarding this conspicuous absence, Kate stated:

> "I feel I haven't really come across many female S&C coaches... I feel it's very male dominated, which makes it a lot harder for me to … have like role models in the industry and people to talk to. I've had a look on LinkedIn like loads of times to try and find some, like, female S&C coaches and there definitely isn't as many. But I suppose it shows a need for it really."

This challenge was echoed by Sally: "I couldn't name a single high-profile female S&C coach outside of the one I worked with." These quotations reflect a residual culture, where historical exclusions and traditions continue to influence present-day norms. That is, despite the growth of the profession, the conspicuous absence of women in leadership roles continues to shape perceptions of who an S&C coach is. The "ideal" S&C coach being male was consistently reinforced by participants. For example, Robin noted that a S&C coach is "A big guy, a muscular guy." Becky explained that: "A lot of people pick a coach because they're so muscular... like, 'I want to look like them.'... Whereas if it comes to a female coach and we're, like, smaller... it's like, 'I don't really want those results.'". These comments underscore the extent to which physical appearance mediates perceptions of credibility and authority. In S&C, the body functions as a form of bodily capital (Edmonds, 2018), a visible, physical currency through which expertise is signalled, legitimised, and socially validated. Lean, muscular male physiques are frequently interpreted as embodied proof of competence, reinforcing the assumption that professional expertise is not only demonstrable through performance but also recognisable on sight. This visual economy disproportionately disadvantages women, whose bodies may not directly conform to dominant masculine ideals. As a result, credibility in S&C becomes contingent not solely on skill, experience, or qualifications, but also on the ability to embody normative expectations of physicality, further entrenching gendered hierarchies within the profession.

Together, there reflections reveal early-career women's acute awareness of enduring masculine hegemony in the profession. The dominant culture operates through three interconnected mechanisms: 1) Structural reproduction of power leading to privileged groups maintaining their status through institutional systems that normalise masculine authority (Ingham & Hardy, 1984). This perpetuation occurs through formal hierarchies that disproportionately position men in leadership, promote criteria that implicitly favour masculine-coded behaviours and attributes and allocate resources to reinforce existing power distributions. 2) Cultural reinforcement mechanisms, through which dominant masculine culture reproduces itself in everyday interactions, such as authority and expertise become visually coded through male physical characteristics (e.g., size, muscularity). In essence, professional competence becomes implicitly linked with traditionally masculine traits and physical presence becomes conflated with legitimate knowledge and leadership skills. 3) Embodied professional identity prompts early-career women to recognise that professional credibility is not merely about knowledge, qualifications or skills, but about how expertise is physically embodied and performed in ways that privilege masculinity. This awareness reflects their understanding of how power operates in S&C structures, manifesting in everyday cultural practices that naturalise male dominance while positioning women as naturally less capable regardless of their qualifications. One of the participants, Daisy, traced the residual culture of male hegemony to broader historical societal norms: "It all generally stems back to history — women were stay-at-home mums... it's always been seen as more of a manly thing — to get hot, get sweaty, to understand the biology of how your body moves". Robin supported this interpretation and explained how this has influenced the profession:

> I think it's like come from history, where sport was mainly for males. Females were not allowed to compete. It was said that exercise wasn't healthy for females, etc. And even though things are changing nowadays all those things take a while to change and as well I really think S&C is not that attractive for females. It's hard. It's physically demanding. It requires a lot. It's not just training people; it's a lot of management. Lots of, you know, even if you're employed as an S&C coach, it's more like you're self-employed, you have to do a lot of management yourself. You have to plan a lot. You have to deal with people, deal with business. It requires lots of different skills. Yeah, so I feel it's more made for males, and I think that's OK, but also the obvious thing is that females who want to go in there should have the chance, which I think they have to some extent.

These reflections illuminate the complex interplay between residual and dominant cultural forces that systematically marginalise women in S&C. This dynamic operates through complementary mechanisms. Bryson (2008) explains how multiple cultural dimensions work in concert to limit women's full participation and recognition. Specifically, residual culture preserves historical practices and attitudes from earlier social formations, embedding gender biases within institutional memory even as organisations subscribe to inclusion (Williams, 1980). Dominant culture actively reinforces contemporary power structures through everyday interactions and assumptions about expertise and authority. In other words, organisations may adopt inclusive language and policies (forms of emergent culture) while tacitly preserving exclusionary practices. Consequently, formal commitments to gender equality coexist with informal systems that undermine women's perceived competence and belonging, leading to progressive organisational policies clashing with deeply embedded professional traditions that naturalise male dominance. This tension between emergent and residual cultural practices is ever-present in S&C. As noted by Robin, women have a chance in S&C, but only "to some extent". The persistence of residual cultural elements reveals how gendered assumptions become encoded in professional practices, creating resistance to meaningful change even when formal barriers are removed. In S&C, women navigate environments where historical biases remain active, constraining their professional recognition despite organisational commitments to gender inclusion.

Linked to the underrepresentation of women in S&C is the challenge of gaining credibility and being a successful practitioner to achieve a full time S&C position. Becky remarked: "I feel like you'd go for a more masculine S&C coach who has the bigger build to reflect what he can get his athletes to do." Such comments illustrate how a muscular physique, a trait traditionally associated with men, continues to shape who is seen as capable or credible in S&C coaching roles. Becky reflected on pursuing a career in S&C: "Even if I step into the career, it's just a bit of a dead-end... men are always going to be put before us." This sense of predetermined limitation was not just perceived; it was reinforced through some of the participants' early experiences. Sally's internship account provides a compelling illustration of the gendered dynamics in S&C:

> I'd say it's quite difficult, quite challenging, because you're always shadowing a male S&C coach. They'll give you students and say: 'You lead this,' but they'll never truly listen because you're a woman. I had one guy at [a school] and it took me six months to get him to realise I knew what I was talking about. He was learning to do a clean, the Olympic lifts, and the S&C coach didn't even know how to do it himself. He was just sat there, trying to figure it out, and then looked at me and said, 'I ain't got a clue.

> Can you do it?' So, I gave the cues, fixed it, and the athlete nailed it. Then the athlete goes: 'Oh, you know what you're talking about.' And I'm like, yeah, that's taken you six or seven months to realise. And this guy was only 15. So, it's drilled into you early, listen to the guy, he's strong, he'll know what he's doing. Compared to me.

This example captures the essence of what Gruber and Morgan (2005) describe as normative male dominance, a construct of dominant culture that places men in default positions of authority and knowledge. Sally's experience further highlights the double bind many women face (Thomas et al., 2021); if they adopt masculine behaviours and act assertively, they risk being perceived as unfeminine. On the other hand, if they don't buy into the dominant norms, their competence can be dismissed. Darcey, a gym manager, described how her authority was continuously unrecognised: "I was asked if my male colleague was my manager. It's always assumed the male is more, higher up... particularly in sport [or] gym settings." Even when women occupy leadership roles, deeply embedded dominant and residual cultural assumptions continue to erode their credibility, reinforcing a traditional model of expertise that favours men. Sam's reflection as a youth athlete also reveals how these assumptions begin early: "We never had S&C [in football] all the way through. It wasn't like a priority for us. It was more for the lads. I reckon... maybe 'cause they didn't want us to be that muscular." Here, strength and physical development are treated as inherently male domains, which presents another instance of residual culture shaping who receives training, support and development opportunities from a young age**.** These ideas and values are themselves cultural forces that actively shape social practices and lived experience (McGuigan & Moran, 2014).

Ultimately, the combined impact of numerical and normative dominance (Gruber & Morgan, 2005) influenced participants' accounts on who is perceived as credible within the industry. Few participants reported seeing women in leadership roles within S&C, whether in academic settings, elite sport, or accredited by professional bodies. Daisy stated: "There were no female lecturers in my S&C modules. Darcey shared: "I've had a look at female strength & conditioning coaches who are accredited by the UKSCA, and it was like two in [name of city], maybe two or three in [name of city] these are big cities and there's not a lot." Participants' experiences reveal how male numerical dominance in S&C (Gruber & Morgan, 2005) intertwines with normative expectations to create a self-reinforcing system of exclusion. Women in S&C occupy a contradictory position—simultaneously present yet positioned as exceptions that prove the rule. This dynamic reflects the presence of tokenism, where women's inclusion is highly visible, but largely symbolic, offering the appearance of progress while leaving existing power structures intact (Laskowski & Ebben, 2016; Thomas et al., 2021; Figueroa & Roper, 2023). Their very exceptionality reinforces rather than challenges the underlying assumption of masculine dominance in the field. Darcey's experience of being mistaken for a subordinate despite managing a gym perfectly exemplifies what Williams (1980) identifies as "incorporation" – a process whereby dominant cultures absorb potential challenges in ways that preserve existing power dynamics. This misrecognition serves as a powerful regulatory mechanism that maintains hierarchical gender relations despite women's formal authority positions and subtly signals that women's presence remains an anomaly rather than legitimate belonging. As Bryson (2008) observes, this form of incorporation allows for women's participation, but only in forms that are "tolerated rather than transformative." Women's physical presence in S&C spaces becomes permitted without disrupting the underlying cultural framework that codes expertise, authority and competence as masculine. This dynamic reveals how gender inequality persists not simply through explicit exclusion, but

through more subtle processes of cultural absorption that neutralise potential challenges to hegemonic masculinity.

Mansplaining – Men Know Better (?)

While increasing women representation in S&C is important, participants repeatedly pointed to the interpersonal interactions in dominant cultural norms, particularly through subtle behaviours that reinforce male authority. A key expression of this dynamic was *mansplaining* which is considered a verbal assertion of male intellectual superiority, regardless of a woman's capability (Solnit, 2012; De Rycker, 2022). These interactions serve not only as microaggressions, but as cultural practices deeply rooted in both dominant and residual forms of gendered power. Within Williams' (1980) framework, *mansplaining* exemplifies dominant cultural norms in action. It reflects the normative male dominance of the S&C profession, where women's authority is frequently questioned and male expertise is presumed. This aligns with Briggs et al.'s (2023) concept of *competence-questioning communication*, in which subtle mechanisms, such as condescending explanations, interruptions, and voice nonrecognition, undermine the credibility of women. Such behaviours are not merely individual misjudgements; they are embedded expressions of a hegemonic culture that continue to treat male authority as the default (Connell, 1987; Thomas et al., 2021).

Helen recalled a frustrating experience where her technical knowledge was questioned: "he was saying about a piece of our equipment that was a little bit outdated…He got quite shirty about it. And he started trying to explain to me why it was outdated… I kind of had to say to him, I do know, I do understand. This illustrates both the dominant requirement for women to continually prove themselves and the residual belief that technical knowledge is best held, and conveyed, by men. The frustration of having professional competence questioned based on gender, is a common experience among women in male-dominated fields (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi 2023). Sally recalled an incident during her internship where a male peer assumed greater coaching authority simply because of his gender:

> So, me and another guy were coaching the clean and jerk. The athlete did a clean & jerk and cleaned it straight into his mouth... I went in to give cues, so he did not injure himself, and the other coach – the male coach – went: 'Ah ah ah, I've got it. I'm a man.' And I was like, OK, that's fine. Bearing in mind that male had never been taught Olympic lifts, had never done them himself and had no idea what he was doing. He believed his coaching would be better than mine.

This interaction exemplifies dominant culture in action, the unquestioned assumption that being male equates to competence in S&C. Equally, it reflects residual cultural practices, where the historical positioning of S&C as a masculine domain continues to inform present-day authority structures (Medlin-Silver et al., 2017). Darcey described similar patterns of dismissal, tied to unconscious biases that structure social interaction:

> When males come into the gym, they always go to the male colleague and ask them a question first before they ask me, even though I have a higher academic background than anyone else in the gym… I'm always second asked so it can be tied into always sort of have to prove, prove your worth and I don't know if necessarily it's deliberate by the people asking. So, I don't know if it's deliberately. I don't think it's

> deliberately done. I think it's sort of, it's that unconscious bias it's unconsciously done.

This reflects Edmonds' (2018) argument that in S&C, bodily capital often overshadows academic credentials, leading to situations where visual markers of masculinity are prioritised over demonstrable expertise. These experiences reveal the embedded, dominant gender hierarchy that positions men as more credible by default. As Bierema (2020) notes, male dominance is often upheld through subtle, well-meaning behaviours that reinforce societal norms. De Rycker (2022) describes this as *interactional inhospitableness* which is a communication landscape whereby women's expertise is continually undermined. Consistent with Thomas et al. (2021), participants described the cumulative emotional strain of constantly needing to validate and prove their competence. For some, this led to frustration. Alice described having her idea for a women-only gym class shut down quickly by a male decision-maker:

> We don't want special treatment obviously, but we just want equal opportunities… maybe listen a little more. I felt like when I was talking about why we need this women's gym class, we got shut down quite quickly just off one person's opinion.

While the class was eventually approved, a sign of progress, the initial dismissal reflects tokenistic engagement with women's perspectives. As Murray et al. (2022) argue, female coaches are often 'heard but not listened to,' where their input is acknowledged only superficially, without altering decision-making powers or challenging underlying biases (i.e., emergent culture). In this case, the approval of the class did not stem from an equal dialogue, but rather occurred despite early resistance, highlighting how dominant masculine norms continue to shape which ideas are taken seriously. In this case, gender-inclusive initiatives, are superficially integrated without fundamentally challenging existing power structures (Bryson, 2008).

For many participants, these constant microaggressions created a slow but persistent barrier to legitimacy. Darcey described her ability to persevere: "It never personally put me off, but it's tiring." Leah's story added another dimension to this tension. As an aspiring S&C coach with a Master's degree in S&C, she reflected on the dismissiveness she faced from male peers:

> They're very centred around football and what happens in the men's game… but it's not the men's game, it's completely different. So yeah, that's always hard because female players aren't just smaller men that play [football]… There's a whole host of things you have to think about or take into consideration.

Leah also noted how her knowledge of women's football was undermined by men claiming superior understanding:

> [They'd say] drop down a peg or two… because they know more about football on the whole, let alone in the women's game.

Across these accounts, mansplaining is not an isolated behaviour but a cultural mechanism that operates at the intersection of dominant and residual practices and may also serve to restrict any emergent culture. It enforces male authority while drawing on longstanding beliefs about women's inferiority in S&C. The male experience continues to serve as the default reference point in coaching and education (Jewkes et al., 2015; Szedlak et al., 2025),

marginalising women's perspectives and reinforcing male hegemony. As such, it becomes both a symptom and a tool of broader systemic exclusion in which aspiring women S&C coaches must navigate. These findings align with previous research on gender bias in sports coaching, where male-dominated cultures and residual practices create structural barriers to women's advancement (Norman, 2021).

"He Wanted to Date Me": Navigating Gender and Power in S&C

Gender is not merely a fixed identity assigned at birth, but a performance enacted through bodily expression, interactions, and cultural expectations (McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009; Fisher et al., 2018). In S&C, the body becomes a site where gender is read and interpreted according to dominant cultural scripts. These interpretations frequently equate professional credibility with masculine-coded traits such as muscularity, athleticism, and bodily control. As Edmonds (2018) argues, bodily capital in S&C is not just about appearance, but it actively shapes how authority is performed, assessed, and legitimised within a masculine-coded professional culture. Women's bodies, in this context, are subject to heightened scrutiny, where deviation from dominant bodily norms can result in exclusion and marginalisation. Gendered norms in sport and fitness spaces are further reinforced through repetition and surveillance, shaping how femininity and authority are embodied, rewarded, or penalised (Dworkin, 2001; Brace-Govan, 2004). Consequently, women's experiences in S&C are shaped not only by their gender, but by how their gender performances are interpreted in relation to the masculine-coded norms of the profession.

Driven by hegemonic masculinity, cultural practices within S&C serve to ideologically validate the dominant social positions of men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity, as dominant cultural formation, provides a useful lens through which to explain the contrasting experiences of two participants who completed the same internship under the same male S&C mentor but had markedly different experiences. Annie, who has masculine-coded traits (i.e., tall with a mesomorphic physique), had a positive experience with both the mentor and the internship. She reflected on the mentor's behaviour, stating: "He was again really lovely. And had total respect of everyone and was really like happy and friendly to help us and wanted to encourage us...". It is not unusual for women who exhibit a strong physical appearance to gain conditional acceptance within male-dominated spaces like S&C (Figueroa & Roper, 2023). Annie embodying physical power may have led the mentor to view her as more aligned with the dominant culture of S&C, thereby granting her professional respect.

In contrast, Sally, who displayed more traditionally feminine traits (i.e., shorter, slighter build and less muscular), experienced increasing control, leading to workplace misogyny. Her male mentor actively monitored her interactions with male peers, often separating her from male interns:

> Looking back, if I even like, we went off into groups and partners. And if I even laughed with like a guy, he (the S&C mentor) moved me from that group to another one, and like, split us up. And looking back, it was really quite weird that I didn't, I didn't pick up on it.

This monitoring and control of her interactions reflect a gendered power structure in sport, where men exert authority over women's autonomy and professional relationships (LaVoi & Wasend, 2018). This form of surveillance is a characteristic of residual cultural practices (Williams, 2005), where past gender norms, such as the need to control women's behaviour in mixed-gender environments, remain embedded within present organisational structures. In that residual cultures are maintained through "selective tradition," whereby historical ideologies no longer serve contemporary goals, but continue to shape interactions and expectations (Bryson 2008).

Sally's experience escalated when the mentor changed jobs and began sending sexually explicit messages: "He wanted to date me, was basically inviting himself around [to] my house and sending me pictures of himself that I really didn't want to see."

Sally's reflection reveals how the intersection of gender norms and masculine authority associated with residual and dominant culture, respectively, create conditions residual gender beliefs and dominant masculine authority creates conditions where workplace misogyny can flourish. The positioning of women as passive, approachable, and subordinate – alongside the reinforcement of male dominance – establishes dangerous power dynamics within S&C. These gendered norms represent more than historical remnants (i.e., residual culture). In fact, they constitute active, contemporary forces that structure professional interactions in environments where masculine authority is naturalised and remains still unchallenged (i.e., dominant culture). This creates contexts where workplace misogyny becomes not merely possible but predictable – a systemic outcome rather than isolated incidents. In such environments, these intertwined norms can foster conditions where workplace misogyny s rationalised as a natural assertion of male dominance (Williams 1980; McGuigan & Moran, 2014).

Annie and Sally's contrasting experiences highlight how hegemonic masculinity operates within mentorship structures, where women who align more closely with dominant masculine norms receive professional validation, while those who are perceived as more traditionally feminine face objectification and control (Connell, 1987; Thomas et al., 2021). Sally's experience also reflects the surveillance of women in male-dominated professions (Williams, 1980; LaVoi & Wasend, 2018), a feature of residual gender norms that persist despite formal efforts to increase gender inclusivity in S&C coaching.

Whilst no other participants in this study reported direct, workplace misogyny of this nature, Leah, another participant with experience of shadowing male S&C coaches in football, confirmed that such behaviour is not uncommon in the profession:

> It [workplace misogyny] absolutely does happen. You get the passing comments, which again, I'm lucky that recently I've been in better environments where that doesn't happen, but you absolutely get the comments that are very probably sexualised compared to normal. Unfortunately, yeah, that happens.

Other aspiring women S&C coaches recounted forms of sexual workplace misogyny as part of their prior athletic careers, and notably most S&C coaches will have some athletic background prior to focusing on an S&C career (Hartshorn et al. 2016). For example, during Holly's athletic career as a Thai boxer, she spoke candidly about the sexualisation she faced, particularly during weigh-ins, where wearing minimal clothing led to inappropriate comments: *"You can get comments of people almost sexualising you because you've got minimal clothing*

on." On social media, these comments were often accompanied by body shaming with remarks such as *"you're too big"* or *"go eat something."* When she attempted to share her discomfort, her male peers often dismissed her concerns as humour: *"They're like, it's not even a big thing. It was just a joke."* These experiences reflect the broader issue of microaggressions and workplace misogyny being trivialised as banter, a dynamic which reinforces masculine control and silences women's discomfort in performance spaces (Thomas et al. 2021). Despite these challenges as an athlete, Holly remains determined to pursue a career in S&C. Her current internship with a women's football team has been a positive and affirming experience, offering a contrast to her earlier encounters in male-dominated sports. She reflected: *"I'm very happy with what I'm doing moving into strength and conditioning at the minute... I enjoy taking the warmups and helping the football team with their fitness... so from starting out, it hasn't changed. I'm still looking at going into that sector."* Her resilience highlights how safe, inclusive environments can empower aspiring women S&C coaches to continue to pursue the profession as a viable career, even in the face of gendered adversity. Holly's positive experience reflects an emergent culture as it represents a potential shift in the cultural practices of how women are respected and empowered (Williams 2005), which contrasts with her earlier experiences as an athlete.

These accounts underscore the necessity of safeguarding measures, ethical mentorship structures, and cultural change in S&C. While emergent cultural shifts, such as mentorship schemes for women in S&C, attempt to address these power imbalances, this study highlights how dominant and residual cultural elements continue to influence women's early experiences in the profession. Addressing these issues requires not just mentorship opportunities, but also clear policies, accountability measures, and cultural shifts that actively challenge the persistence of hegemonic masculinity within dominant and residual culture in S&C.

Conclusion - Compound Challenges for Women in S&C

While establishing a career in S&C presents inherent challenges for all practitioners due to the demanding high-performance standards in a competitive field, this study reveals how gender creates a distinct layer of obstacle for women. Early-career female S&C coaches demonstrate acute awareness and firsthand experience of gendered barriers that systematically undermine their professional standing. Their accounts document a multifaceted landscape of challenges: pervasive underrepresentation, persistent credibility questioning, controlling interactions like mansplaining, and in some cases, overt workplace misogyny. These experiences reflect how dominant and residual cultural forces within S&C impose additional burdens on women, creating an environment where they consistently feel pressured to prove themselves beyond standards applied to male counterparts.

The persistent nature of these challenges raises critical questions about accountability within the field. Organisations, professional bodies, and leaders possess both the power and responsibility to create meaningful structural change, shaping emergent culture in S&C. While emergent cultural shifts have produced some promising developments such as targeted mentorship programmes and diversity initiatives, these interventions often fail to address long-standing foundational issue: the deeply entrenched dominant culture of hegemonic masculinity at the core of S&C (Szedlak et al., 2025). Authentic progress requires leadership committed not merely to superficial inclusion and changes that are only skin-deep, but to systematically dismantling the dominant and residual culture that perpetuate gender inequalities.

Importantly, professional accreditation bodies such as the UKSCA have not remained indifferent to the cultural challenges facing the field. In recent years, they have collaborated with academics and practitioners to develop educational resources aimed at cultivating psychosocial competencies among S&C coaches. These initiatives are not merely symbolic gestures; rather, they represent a deliberate effort to embed equity-oriented practices within coach education. For instance, the UKSCA has supported programmes focused on inclusive coaching, ethical decision-making, and relational awareness, areas increasingly recognized as essential for advancing the profession (Callary et al., 2024). The design and delivery of workshops addressing the interpersonal and cultural dimensions of coaching, including gender dynamics, communication styles, and power relations, reflect a growing commitment to producing coaches who are not only technically skilled but also socially attuned and ethically grounded (Szedlak et al., 2023).

These interventions suggest that professional bodies are not only aware of the issues raised in this study, but are actively working to foster meaningful cultural transformation within the field. However, such efforts do not occur in isolation. The broader political climate also shapes the cultural terrain in which professional organisations operate. For example, in the United States, the NSCA recently rebranded its 'Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion' (DEI) Committee as L.I.F.T. (Leaders in Inclusivity, Females and Training, NSCA, n.d.). While the new title continues to gesture towards inclusion, some interpret this reframing as a strategic response to increasingly polarised cultural debates surrounding DEI, particularly in the second Trump presidency. This shift may reflect an attempt to maintain institutional legitimacy across a divided political landscape without appearing overtly ideological. Such developments illustrate how dominant and residual cultural tensions extend beyond organisational boundaries and intersect with wider socio-political narratives. As Bryson (2008) reminds us, cultures are not fixed entities, but dynamic terrains of negotiation and contestation, where progressive gains (particularly in gender equity) can be incorporated, diluted, or reversed depending on prevailing ideological forces. In this light, the actions of professional bodies must be understood not only as internal reforms, but as situated responses to broader cultural currents, with implications for how equity is imagined, enacted, and sustained within the profession.

Achieving authentic inclusivity in S&C requires more than symbolic gestures or surface-level diversity initiatives. It demands fundamental cultural transformations. Professional organisations, educational institutions, and the leaders of those must critically examine and reform the entrenched norms and practices that continue to marginalise women at every career stage, from early-career professionals, as documented in this study, to experienced practitioners (Figueroa & Roper, 2023; Thomas et al., 2021). Without coordinated, intentional efforts, the profession risks perpetuating culturally residual inequalities, limiting not only women's opportunities to participate and thrive, but also restricting the field's potential for innovation and growth through diverse perspectives and talents.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all participants who generously shared their time and experiences for this study.

References

Abitz CL. Gearity BT, Kuklick CR and Potrac P (2023) “He trusts me”: Navigating the male weight room: Emotions and reflective practice of a young, female strength and conditioning coach. *Sports Coaching Review* 12 (1): 1–21.

Anderson E (2005) Orthodox and inclusive masculinity: Competing masculinities among heterosexual men in a feminized terrain. *Sociological Perspectives* 48(3): 337–355.

Anderson E (2008) “I used to think women were weak”: Orthodox masculinity, gender segregation, and sport. *Sociological Forum 23* (2): 257–280.

Bierema LL (2020) Ladies and gentlemen, your implicit bias is showing: Gender hegemony and its impact on HRD research and practice. *Human Resource Development International 23*(5): 473–490.

Brace-Govan J (2004) Weighty matters: Control of women's access to physical strength. *The Sociological Review* 52 (4): pp.503-531.

Braun V and Clarke V (2019) Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11(4): 589–597.

Briggs CQ, Gardner DM and Ryan AM (2023) Competence-questioning communication and gender: Exploring mansplaining, ignoring, and interruption behaviors. *Journal of Business and Psychology* 38(6): 1325–1353.

Bryson J (2008) Dominant, emergent, and residual culture: the dynamics of organizational change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 21 (6): 743-757.

Callary B, Gearity BT, Eagles K and Szedlak C (2023) Defining psychosocial strength and conditioning coaching competencies: A participatory action research approach. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching* 18 (2): 382-391.

Callary B, Gearity B, Eagles K and Szedlak C (2024) Planning for the development of strength and conditioning coaches’ psychosocial competencies. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 16(6): 534-551.

Clarke V and Braun V (2017) Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12(3): 297–298.

Connell R (1987) *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics.* Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

Connell RW and Messerschmidt JW (2005) Hegemonic masculinity. *Gender & Society* 19(6): 829–859.

Creswell JW and Creswell JD (2009) *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 3rd edition. London: Sage.

Darvin L and Lubke L (2021) Assistant coach hiring trends: An updated investigation of homologous reproduction in intercollegiate women's sport. *Sports Coaching Review* 10(1): 38–60.

De Rycker T (2022) Interactional inhospitableness: A re-analysis of the mansplaining incident in Rebecca Solnit's (2008) essay "Men Explain Things to Me". *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies 28*(4): 137–151.

Dworkin SL (2001) "Holding back": negotiating a glass ceiling on women's muscular strength. *Sociological perspectives* 44(3): 333-350.

Edmonds S (2018) Bodily capital and the strength and conditioning professional. *Strength & Conditioning Journal* 40(6): 9–14.

Employers Council (2022) *National Strength & Conditioning Association's coaches survey*. Available at: https://www.nsca.com/globalassets/tools/2022-nsca-strength-conditioning-coaches-salary-survey--final-report-v.2-webrez.pdf?srsltid=AfmBOor4brmhGgxfGF3T1otrzJMIsaX25N7OOiLxN-aPWbSibkJfqySU (Accessed: 8 May 2025)

Figueroa YL and Roper EA (2023) For the love of strength: Experiences of female strength and conditioning coaches. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal 31*(1): 23–32.

Fisher MJR, Berbary LA and Misener KE (2018) Narratives of negotiation and transformation: Women's experiences within a mixed-gendered gym. *Leisure Sciences* 40(6): 477-493.

Galsanjigmed E and Sekiguchi T (2023) Challenges women experience in leadership careers: An integrative review. *Merits* 3(2): 366–389.

Gruber J and Morgan P (2005) *In the company of men: Male dominance and sexual harassment*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Hartshorn MD, Read PJ, Bishop C and Turner AN (2016) Profile of a strength and conditioning coach: Backgrounds, duties, and perceptions. *Strength and Conditioning Journal* 38(6): 89–94.

Hedrick A (2016) How to launch a successful strength coach career in National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA). Available at: https://www.nsca.com/globalassets/professional-development/nsca_career_guide.pdf?srsltid=AfmBOopPcvJ8bo4i2YDAncYYQbjD61YsLDbrByjD79qcDJw2HYYa41Jy

Hennink M, Hutter I and Bailey A (2011) *Qualitative research methods.* London: Sage.

Ingham A and Hardy S (1984) Sport: Structuration, subjugation and hegemony. *Theory, Culture & Society* 2(2): 85-103.

Jewkes R, Morrell R, Hearn J, Lundqvist E, Blackbeard D, Lindegger G, Quayle M, Sikweyiya Y and Gottzén L (2015) Hegemonic masculinity: Combining theory and practice in gender interventions. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17(S2): S112–S127.

Karazi-Presler T and Wasserman V (2024) "Hold your nose and harness these men": Sexual vulnerability in a hyper-masculine organization–A barrier or a resource? *Organization* 31(3): 547-566.

Lapchick RE, Ervin A, Franks L, Gregory D, Johnson J, Kula A, Oliver K, Smiley Z, Smith A, Wade A and Zimmerman D (2022) *The 2022 Racial and Gender Report Card: College Sport*. Report, The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, University of Central Florida.

Larsson NP, Craven L and Madsen IE (2023) The role of gender composition in workplace sexual harassment. *European Journal of Public Health* 33(S2): ckad160-1327.

Laskowski KD and Ebben WP (2016) Profile of women collegiate strength and conditioning coaches. *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* 30(12): 3481–3493.

LaVoi NM, Wasend M and Baeth A (2018) Exploring the gender divide in current day sport coaching. In: *Professional advances in sports coaching.* London: Routledge, pp. 101-112.

Lo J, Jaswal S, Yeung M, Chattu VK, Bani-Fatemi A, Howe A, Yazdani A, Gohar B, Gross DP and Nowrouzi-Kia B (2024) A systematic review of the literature: Gender-based violence in the construction and natural resources industry. *AIMS public health* 11(2): p.654.

Logan University (n.d.). Master of Science in Strength and Conditioning. Available at: https://www.logan.edu/academics/master-of-science-in-strength-and-conditioning/ (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

Lord R and Kavaliauskas M (2023) Sociological tools for improving women's representation and experiences in strength and conditioning coaching. *Strength & Conditioning Journal* 45 (1): 40-48.

Martin E (2021) Perceived Benefits of Participating in an Undergraduate Strength and Conditioning Internship. *International Journal of Kinesiology in Higher Education* 5(4): 115-131.

Massey CD and Vincent J (2013) A job analysis of major college female strength and conditioning coaches. *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* 27(7): 2000–2012.

McGuigan J and Moran M (2014) Raymond Williams and sociology. *The Sociological Review* 62(1): pp.167-188.

McGrath SA and Chananie-Hill RA (2009) "Big freaky-looking women": Normalizing gender transgression through bodybuilding. *Sociology of sport journal* 26(2): 235-254.

Medlin-Silver N, Lampard P and Bunsell T (2017) Strength in numbers: An explorative study into the experiences of female strength and conditioning coaches in the UK. In A Milner & J Braddock (eds), Women in sports: Breaking barriers, facing obstacles. USA: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Murray P, Lord R and Lorimer R (2022) 'It's just a case of chipping away': A postfeminist analysis of female coaches' gendered experiences in grassroots sport. *Sport, Education and Society* 27(4): 475–488.

National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) (n.d.) Women's mentorship program. Available at: https://www.nsca.com/membership/volunteer-leadership-opportunities/womens-mentorship-program/ (Accessed: 8 April 2025).

National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) (n.d.) NSCA Committees Available at: https://www.nsca.com/membership/volunteer-leadership-opportunities/committee/ (Accessed: 30 July 2025).

Norman L (2010) Feeling second best: Elite women coaches' experiences. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 27(1): 89–104.

Norman L (2021) *Improving gender equity in sports coaching*. London: Routledge.

Patton M (2015) *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). London, UK: Sage.

Pope SW (2010) 'Embracing Cultural Contexts and Critical Reflexivity: (Re)presenting the Global Sports Industry in Research and Practice'. *European Sport Management Quarterly* 10(4): 509-524.

Pringle R (2005) Masculinities, sport, and power: A critical comparison of Gramscian and Foucauldian inspired theoretical tools. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 29*(3): 256–278. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723505276228

Reddy R, Sharma A K and Jha, M (2019) Hegemonic masculinity or masculine domination: Toward a comprehensive social theory of gender. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy 39*(3/4): 296–310.

Riddle K and Heaton K (2023) Antecedents to sexual harassment of women in selected male-dominated occupations: a systematic review. *Workplace health & safety* 71(8): pp.356-365.

Sartore-Baldwin ML (2013) The professional experiences and work-related outcomes of male and female Division I strength and conditioning coaches. *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* 27(3): 831–838.

Silvestri M (2017) 'Police Culture and Gender: Revisiting the 'Cult of Masculinity'', Policing. *A Journal of Policy and Practice* 11(3): pp. 289–300.

Solnit R (2012) Men explain things to me: Facts didn't get in their way. In: Tom Dispatch Available at: https://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175584/rebecca_solnit_the_ archipelago_of_ignorance (Accessed: 4 April 2025).

Sparkes A and Smith B (2013) *Qualitative research methods in sport, exercise and health: From process to product*. London: Routledge.

Szedlak C, Callary B and Gearity BT (2023) Psychosocial coaching practice: An introductory workshop. *Professional Strength & Conditioning* 68: 5-7

Szedlak C, Callary B, Eagles K and Gearity BT (2025) An exploration of how dominant discourses steer UK strength and conditioning coach education. *Sport, Education and Society* 30(4): 470-483.

Talmy S and Richards K (2011) Theorizing qualitative research interviews in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics* 32(1): 1–5.

Thomas G, Devine K and Molnár G (2023) Experiences and perceptions of women strength and conditioning coaches: A scoping review. *International Sport Coaching Journal* 10(2): 1–13.

Thomas G, Guinan J and Molnár G (2021) 'It's not particularly P.C., you know...': Women coaches performing gender in strength and conditioning. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 30(1): 1–11.

Trainor LR and Bundon A (2021) Developing the craft: Reflexive accounts of doing reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 13(5): 705–726.

UK Strength and Conditioning Association (2025) UKSCA partners with the R&A to launch exclusive S&C placement at the 2025 AIG Women's Open. Available at: https://uksca.org.uk/blog/50/uksca-partners-with-the-ra-to-launch-exclusive-sc-placement-at-the-2025-aig-womens-open (accessed 8 April 2025).

Williams R (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Williams R (1980) *Culture and Materialism*. London: Verso.

Yang Y (2020) What's hegemonic about hegemonic masculinity? *Legitimation and beyond*. *Sociological Theory* 38(4): 318–333.

Zippia (n.d.) Job outlook for strength and conditioning coaches in the United States. Available at: https://www.zippia.com/strength-and-conditioning-coach-jobs/trends/ (accessed 8 April 2025).

	Pseudonym	Age	Internship	Sport(s) involved in the Internship	Mentor	Relevant Qualifications	Sporting background	Worked in a gym environment	Length of interview	Date of interview
1	Kate	21	No	-	No	S&C modules at university Starting UKSCA	Dance, karate, Tennis & netball	No	26:34	24/05/23
2	Annie	35	Yes	Male Rugby first team – academy. Rowing male/female	Yes (woman)	BSc S&C modules at university Level 2 FI/Level 3 PT	Swimming, Boxing & Cross-fit	Yes	52:09	2/06/23
3	Daisy	21	Yes	Women's football	Yes (man)	BSc S&C modules at university	Dance, Netball, Football	No	51:03	14/06/23
4	Sally	22	Yes	School Sports. Male Rugby first team – academy	Yes (man)	BSc S&C modules at university CrossFit level one	Badminton, Swimming & Cross-fit	Yes	51:21	30/08/23
5	Holly	19	Yes	Women's football	Yes (man)	BSc S&C modules at university Level 2 FI	Muay Thia	No	36:25	13/02/24
6	Becky	19	No	-	Yes (man)	S&C modules at university Level 3 PT	Netball	Yes	26:14	12/03/24
7	Sam	19	No	-	No	BSc S&C modules at university	Football	No	18:24	14/05/24
8	Darcey	31	No	-	Yes (man & woman)	BSc S&C modules at university Working towards UKSCA	Professional Dancer/ martial arts	Yes	56:18	30/05/24

9	**Robin**	**25**	**Yes**	**University teams. Including Football and volleyball both male and female and rugby male only**	**No**	**BSc in S&C MSc by research**	**Softball Basketball &volleyball**	**No**	**43:13**	**19/06/24**
10	**Alice**	**23**	**No**	**-**	**Yes (woman)**	**S&C modules in BSc Level 2 FI/Level 3 PT**	**Rugby**	**Yes**	**56:19**	**10/02/24**
11	**Helen**	**35**	**No**	**-**	**No**	**S&C modules at university Level 2 FI/Level 3 PT**	**Netball, Rounders, Hockey**	**Yes**	**39.11**	**10/10/24**
12	**Leah**	**31**	**No but shadowing S&C in Football**	-	**Yes (man)**	**S&C modules in MSc British Weightlifting L1 1. Level 2 FI/Level 3 PT**	**Football**	**Yes**	**50.57**	**23/10/24**

Table 2. Interview Questions
1. Can you tell us a little bit about your background? Were you involved in sports as a child?
2. What made you decide to be an S&C coach?
3. Have you got a role model or someone you look up to in S&C?
4. Have you got a mentor?
5. What S&C courses/ qualifications have you completed /been doing?
6. How many women were/are on that course?
7. Are/were there more men than women on your course? Why do you think there are fewer women completing S&C courses than males?
8. Do you think there is an underrepresentation of women S&C coaches? If so, why?
9. Tell us about your S&C coaching experience so far?
10. Are you aware of any challenges women specifically face in S&C? How have you become aware of those challenges?
11. During your S&C journey so far, have you felt like you wanted to change your goal of becoming an S&C coach?
12. What do you think people typically think of when they hear the term S&C coach? Why might that be?
13. What changes or improvements do you hope to see for women in the industry?
14. What type of S&C coach do you want to be? In terms of your behavior/ coaching style, for example?
15. Does your course include gender education awareness within the industry?
16. Do you have any advice for organisations and governing bodies on how they can support women in S&C coaching?
17. Is there anything you would like to add?