



Bridge: A MindSport For All
Connects People, Challenges Minds

Bridging Sexism:

Gender Inequality at and away from the Bridge Table

Ashley Rogers, Miriam Snellgrove and Samantha Punch

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Introduction

Gender inequalities emerge in many areas of society at work and at home as well as in sporting, education and political arenas. This paper is based on a *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) study about sexism and bridge which built on previous research exploring gender inequalities and elite-level bridge (Punch, Graham, MacPherson and Snellgrove, 2021). Over recent years there have been several discussions about sexism on the Bridge Winners blogsite (for example, Lall, 2016). Hence sexism had emerged both in our research with elite players as well as within the wider bridge community and both of these prompted us to undertake a specific study on sexism and bridge via an email survey.

This working paper presents the preliminary findings from this research which aimed to explore the ways that sexism is defined and understood in the bridge community. It provides examples of sexism at and away from the bridge table that are given by both men and women players. Punch and Rogers (2021) discuss the resistance encountered when conducting the *Bridging Gender* research. The below extract describes the methods process:

The project sought players' views and experiences via a qualitative email survey. It explored participants' knowledge of the term sexism, particularly in relation to its relevance for understanding interactions between men and women in the bridge world. They were asked if they had observed or been aware of forms of gender bias, or indeed if they had no such experiences. ... The exploratory survey provided a space for players of all levels to voice their opinions as the first project had only focused on elite players' perspectives. ... Polarized reactions emerged both in relation to the research as well as to the subject matter, revealing tensions on both micro and macro levels. The research sought a better understanding of the spectrum of views and our longer-term goal was to try to achieve greater inclusivity for women participating in the game.

We received over 150 responses from 84 male and 67 female bridge players from across the world. They varied in age (18-75 years) and experience, including club, tournament, international and professional players. (Punch and Rogers, 2021, p.8)

Understandings of Sexism

We asked participants what they understood by the term 'sexism' in relation to bridge? The most common responses are listed in the table, with those in italics being less frequent than the ones above.

How is sexism defined?
Different treatment based on gender (consciously or subconsciously)
Assumptions , eg. women will be worse players/thinking men are better/ treating women as inferior/ less ability/ judgement of skill based on gender/ preconceptions/ woman less competent/ women ranked lower, women less capable
Patronising language, gestures, interactions, terms like LOL, demeaning attitude, belittling, condescension
Discrimination , prejudice, oppression
<i>Same as sexism in rest of society</i>

<i>No men's only event, only women's only events exist/ existence of women's only events</i>
--

<i>Not sure</i>

Overall, there is a recognition that sexism involves different attitudes and gestural elements, as well as the treatment of a person depending on their gender. Sexism was defined as a:

Social construct which systematically devalues female players during bridge play and associated interactions. (N° 34: Male Tournament, 25-34)

Other respondents referred to the institutional structures and individual support where men are more valued than women, which, over time, becomes part of the culture of bridge and part of the bridge community (N° 93: Male International, 25-34). It becomes normalised. Some of this is manifested in gestural and language based ways, such as calling women 'love' or patronising them (recognised by N° 94: Male Tournament, 25-34) and can include a range of "demeaning remarks/attitude[s] about women players" (N° 42: Male Tournament, 55+).

There is also the recognition of behaviours more akin to harassment, "when male players make sexist comments or even inappropriate body contact" (N° 93: Female Tournament, 35-54). This is echoed by N° 106 (Female Tournament, 55+) who highlighted that sexism can be witnessed at the table when "a guy make[s] sexist comments/innuendos/or attempts to intimidate a female player into goofing up her game because she is shaken up". These comments are often considered to be "put downs" (N° 131: Female International, 55+), even if they are said "in jest".

These issues highlight the different attitudes towards women that can influence not only their game but could also be considered to reinforce the gap between men and women in bridge playing. It is often why "women players are then overlooked and lesser male players [are] selected instead" (N° 78: Female International, 55+). There is therefore the identification of what could be considered as insignificant issues to others that in some cases are displays of preferential treatment towards men, or ways to remove some level of choice from women.

Some of the responses indicate that there is a notion of a 'culture of masculinity' within the bridge community. One male respondent (N° 93: Male International, 25-34) describes a culture of masculinity as being "deeply embedded" in the game of bridge, which influences women's opportunities to be involved in the game not only from an early age but also throughout, where women may not always be supported institutionally and selection may at times be based on gender. He also suggests that "men tend to be much more encouraging of promising male players" which often results in a "self-sustaining homosocial culture; a self-regulating regime of sustaining male dominance at the top of the game" (N° 93: Male

International, 25-34). It was recognised that this can be linked to the amount of time women are able to put in to playing bridge. Several participants referred to women finding it harder to get in good teams or partnerships.

Overall, there is acknowledgement by both male and female respondents that women are likely to have been involved in bridge for less time than men, which can be explained from an early age of not being encouraged to be involved, or perceiving it as a boy’s game, to later in life when other responsibilities take priority – whether through choice, expectation or necessity. Women may feel excluded or further discouraged, which could mean that not only are they less likely to spend time playing, but developing relationships with men in bridge may be more difficult as men tend to be more likely to help other men, and in turn form partnerships with them.

Is sexism a relevant and/or useful term in understanding the social dynamics between men and women in the game of bridge?

Overall, more women agree that it is a relevant term which carries some explanatory or descriptive power in relation to bridge (see tables below). More men in both age categories believed that it was not relevant, and this was notable more in the over 55 age category where almost half of those responding were explicit about their answer that it was not.

UNDER 55

	Male	Female
Agree it is a relevant term	47% (15)	65% (17)
Disagree	25% (8)	12% (3)
Not sure/Can’t be easily categorised	28% (9)	23% (6)
Total	32	26

55+

	Male	Female
Agree it is a relevant term	28% (14)	51% (18)
Disagree	48% (24)	31% (11)
Not sure/Can’t be easily categorised	24% (12)	17% (6)
Total	50	35

Responses from women

- Men are presented as better than women and in a more formal way in the media
- Assuming male players are better (eg N° 8: Female Professional, under 25; N° 1: Female Tournament, 35-54; N° 69: Female International, 55+)

- There is not a “comfortable or welcoming environment” created for women (N° 22: Female Tournament, under 25)
- Tolerance of women being shouted at by male partners (N° 21: Female Professional, 25-34)
- Less acceptance of women going “out to play cards” (N° 21: Female Professional, 25-34)
- Where there is “patronising or derogatory language” that becomes “commonplace, even on the part of directors” (N° 114: Female International, 55+)
- Women being “routinely overlooked for selection, both by players seeking teammates for tournaments and by international selectors” (N° 114: Female International, 55+).

Some women mentioned that although sexism was perceived as relevant, it was not something they “thought about until recently and doesn’t spoil my enjoyment of the game, but something I’ve been reflecting on” (N° 17: Female Tournament, 25-34). It was also recognised that sexism “happens the other way too” and there is “no question it’s both ways sometimes” (N° 106: Female, 55+). Several suggested that the negative connotations of the term sexism do not apply only to bridge (N° 4: Female International, 55+).

Responses from men

For men there is a majority feeling that sexism is not a useful or relevant term. For those that believe it is, they highlight reasons such as:

- Thinking that men are better than women and looking down on women (N° 15: Male International, 35-54) and the “weak part in any mixed pair is still (considered to be) the woman” (N° 103: Male Tournament, 35-54).
- Women have a tougher slog (N° 13: Male International, 35-54)
- Men wanting to have sex with women rather than playing bridge with them (N° 42: Male Tournament, 55+).
- The idea that “bridge is only a reflection of our society [and] sexism exists in society at large therefore it must in bridge – and it does”. (N° 65: Male International, under25)

There was also some caution expressed whereby one respondent believed it is relevant and useful “up to a point” but that he “can see a trend towards the use of the term being hijacked by the politically chattering classes” (N° 41: Male Tournament, 55+). It was also suggested that it would only be useful to a “limited extent” (N° 113: Male Professional, 55+). It was also suggested that it is not “any more relevant than in any other group’s social dynamics” (N° 123: Male Club, under25). Others suggested that “bridge is actually very sexism free” (N° 94: Male Tournament, 25-34). This is supported by N° 36 (Male Club, 55+) who also suggested that “there is little or no sexism in bridge”. This was echoed by N° 118: Male International, 35-54) who suggested that “I don’t think sexism in bridge is much of an

explanation for anything. More likely, female under performance compared to men is an explanation for sexism”.

Summary: Is Sexism Relevant in the Bridge World?

Overall, there continues to be a mix of responses which are not simply separated in to yes or no answers. There is a clear difference in the number of women suggesting that it is a useful term than the number of men and this is likely to be because women are often the ones that experience sexist attitudes or treatment. It should also be combined with the notion that some of this treatment or attitudes may be deeply embedded and has become the norm, not only in bridge but in broader society, and so there is an element of the unconscious at play. There does appear to be more resistance to the term amongst men than amongst women, but those women who also resist the term ‘sexism’ do so in a similar way to the men. At times, this could be interpreted as a defence of bridge, which may suggest underlying concerns of bringing negativity to it. Unsurprisingly, those without experiences of sexism are unlikely to suggest that it is relevant or useful but overall it does appear that women seem to be more attuned to it than men.

In relation to social dynamics and ways of interacting, it is suggested that no offence should be taken if something is said in jest, or if people wish to complement each other, or flirt. This highlights the tension that exists when using the term sexism as there are many aspects of it which may be considered as flirting by some, but may offend others. This is an overarching issue with this research in general, and therefore this aspect of it should perhaps be considered more at an individual level in some way. Flirting could perhaps be considered to be something that is not only one-way and if it is reciprocated there is less chance for there to be offence taken. However, in some cases there may need to be greater social awareness of what is or is not acceptable. This is likely to differ by individual and by country, age or ethnicity.

Women’s Examples of Sexism in Bridge

Only 8% (5 of 62 total responses) of female players had not experienced or could not think of any examples of sexism, all over 35 years old. Women’s examples range from terms used to address women, use of language and the objectification of women, through to the interactions they have with men and with the wider institution of organised bridge. 92% were able to highlight first or second hand experiences of sexism specifically in relation to playing bridge.

Representation of women

- Less media coverage (Nº 26: Female International, under 25)
- Women presented as ‘girls’ in media (Nº 26: Female International, under 25)
- Women not represented at the top level in international competitions reveals something is going on (Nº 21: Female Professional, 25-34)

- The way we talk about female bridge players, including gender every time we refer to their achievement, is what bothers me the most (Nº 147: Female International, 35-54).

Several pointed out that top women players are often referred to as “one of the best female players”. For instance this has been used about Marion Michielsen, who could be considered one of the best bridge players in the world independent of gender.

Assumptions about women’s abilities

- Women seen as worse bridge players (Nº 26: Female International, under 25; Nº 60: Female Tournament, 35-54; Nº 73: Female Tournament, 55+; Nº 74: Female International, 55+; Nº 130: Female Tournament, 55+)
- Treated like a complete beginner and patronised (Nº 33: Female Tournament, under 25)
- Thinking “you play like a man” is a complement (Nº 69: Female International, 55+).
- Needing to beg to be hired even when doing well (Nº 62: Female Professional, 55+)
- It not entering someone’s head that the woman might be the captain (Nº 90: Female International, 55+)
- Woman being left out of a match in favour of a man of lesser ability (Nº 80: Female Tournament, 55+)
- Women are often talked about as worse bridge players than men. “They are only women players”, and often I believe good women players are being underestimated in terms of bridge skills just because they are women. This has often resulted in some men whose bridge skills are much worse than mine actually talking down to me – or only talking to the male player I play with. Or talking (in another the language) about me at the table. (Nº 148: Female International, 35-54)

Institution

- Not getting offers to play in good teams when men are getting offers (Nº 8: Female International, under 25).
- Men befriend men, and then chose their friends as bridge partners. Thus girls/women get excluded from bridge partnership, and thus excluded from representing your country internationally - even though the captain considers you a better player than some of the players chosen for the team (personal experience from junior bridge). (Nº 147: Female International, 35-54)
- Sexist attitudes encouraged by those in charge.
- Not being considered for open national team even though results and experience validate candidacy (Nº 71: Female Professional, 35-54)
- Men are passed the device to check the score about 90% of the time (Nº 18: Female Professional, 35-54)
- Women struggling to move out of women’s events (Nº 27: Female International, 55+)

- That women should play in ladies events as the men couldn't play in that and the open is for them (N° 131: Female International, 55+)
- Men more likely to hold executive offices in EBU but women always do the tea (N° 82: Female Tournament, 55+)

Objectification and comments

- Being told that experts are only likely to want to speak to you because they want to sleep with you. (N° 8: Female International, under 25).
- Compliments based on appearance and not on play. (N° 8: Female International, under 25)
- Attempt at groping under the table (N° 92: Female Tournament, under 25)
- Assumption that male-female teams involve sleeping with each other (N° 92: Female Tournament, under 25; N° 17: Female Tournament, 25-34)
- Male bridge players being heard rating women according to attractiveness (N° 33: Female Tournament, under 25)
- Sexual harassment during play and in the bar in the evening after play (N° 147: Female International, 35-54) Being called sweetie or honey, which appears to be condescending (N° 8: Female International, under 25)
- "You should do up the buttons on your polo shirt, you look like a slut", said to N° 92 (Female Tournament, under 25).
- No rudeness per se, but regularly being called 'darling', 'love', 'honey' etc. or comments made on appearance. (N° 33: Female Tournament, under 25)
- Demeaning and disrespectful conversation (N° 21: Female Professional, 25-34)
- "Non-regular partners commenting how nice it is to play with a 'pretty young lady'" (N° 17: Female Tournament, 25-34)
- Denigrating or undermining comments – e.g. "not man enough to open it 4S" (N° 60: Female Tournament, 35-54; N° 5: Female Club, 55+)
- Frivolous comments on appearance/accessories
- Inappropriate comments regarding physical appearance (N° 106: Female, 55+).
- "Being addressed as 'dear' by a director. (When I protested, he said "But I don't know your name. What am I supposed to call you?" "You don't actually need to call me anything, but for the sake of argument what would you have called me if I'd been a man?" "Sir". "In that case Madam will do fine")." (N° 114: Female International, 55+)
- Men talking down to women (N° 10: Female International, 55+) Patronising. (N° 64: Female Tournament, 55+)
- "She must be sleeping with him" (N° 12: Female International, 55+, see also N° 32: Female Tournament, 55)

Play

- Passing the Bridgmate to male partner (N° 92: Female Tournament, under 25; N° 137: Female Tournament, 35-54 and N° 143: Female Tournament, 35-54)

- Men shouting at women partners at the table (N° 21: Female Professional, 25-34; N° 4: Female International, 55+)
- In husband wife situations, female partners criticised more by male partners (N° 1: Female Tournament, 35-54)
- Ignoring women's opinion (N° 5: Female Club, 55+)

Other points:

In relation to the comments made about rating women in terms of appearance, one woman suggested that she had become more tolerant of it, although would be more likely now to challenge it than when she was younger. Another woman highlighted that although she faced patronising behaviour in the past she does not experience that now, and believes she has been "pretty lucky in getting help and support from experienced male players". (N° 75: Female International, 35-54). The gender imbalance was also considered to work in favour of women, since there are separate women's games which means that many women can play internationally. Although the majority of data indicate that men are more likely to want to play with men, one woman suggested that they were in fact more likely to want to play with a woman (N° 128: Female Tournament, 55+) and this was therefore to the advantage of women.

Men's Examples of Sexism in Bridge

Overall, men highlight similar examples to women. Examples of sexism cited by male players are the existence of women's events, although this is more in relation to the perpetuation of the idea that women are less skilled. The notion that women are not as good at playing bridge is highlighted by men, yet there is still uncertainty and confusion over why or whether or not it is fact. Issues of choosing partners based on gender, and the idea of women having or not having opportunities based on their gender also relates to the comments, attitudes and jokes which tend to surround women and their looks, or the way they play bridge. Men did not tend to mention the way that women are objectified in the same way that women did in their responses, and there was only one male that made reference to the way female bridge players are represented. From the responses, 16.8% of male respondents (13 of 77) did not have any examples to provide, and over half of these were in the over 55 age category.

Play

- Heard "that's such a woman's bid" (N° 84: Male International, under 25)
- Bridgmate being handed to male as he is 'in charge' (N° 105: Male Tournament, 25-34)
- Comments in relation to style of play - "Bid like a woman"/ "Bid like a man" (N° 136: Male International, 35-54)

- “Hogging contracts” when playing with wife or another woman (N° 23: Male International, 35-54; N° 25: Male International, 55+)

Institution

- Junior level boys paired with boys (N° 94: Male Tournament, 25-34) or pairing with a female more generally seen as unfavourable (N° 20: Male International, 55+; N° 24: Male Tournament, 55+). This also links to attitudes about women, below.
- Women’s only events (N° 98: Male Tournament, 25-34; N° 84: Male International, under25; N° 133: Male International, 35-54; N° 111: Male Tournament, 35-54; N° 45: Male Tournament, 55+; N° 81: Male International, 55+; N° 35: Male International, 55+; N° 48: Male International, 55+)
 - “incentivises women to play against inferior opponents... [r]esults in them learning less and ultimately playing inferior bridge themselves” (N° 98: Male Tournament, 25-34)
 - “Having championships for women. It’s like the para-olympics; they can’t compete on equal terms.” (N° 70: Male International, 35-54)
 - “Assumption that open events are for men” (N° 25: Male International, 55+)
- Female directors being asked to find a ‘real director’ (N° 112: Male Tournament, 55+)
- Refusing to have a woman on the team because she is a woman (N° 31: Male Tournament, 35-54)
- “People may respect the thoughts of a man more than a woman” (N° 58: Male 25-34)
- Fewer opportunities for female professionals to be hired for open competition (N° 46: Male Tournament 35-54)
- Number of masterpoints needed for women only comps was less than for open (N° 108: Male Tournament, 35-54)
- Women tend to do the catering (N° 53: Male International, 55+)
- Forming/avoiding a partnership based on a person’s sex rather than based on their expertise or compatibility. (N° 122: Male International, 55+)
- Sponsors prefer males (N° 37: Male Tournament, 55+)

Attitudes towards women

- “General belittling behaviour of some men towards female partners. In my experience this is much more prevalent in club bridge compared to higher level bridge” (N° 34: Male Tournament, 25-34, also N° 117: Male Tournament, 55+).
- Assumption that male is better in mixed pairs (N° 105: Male Tournament, 25-34), the man is the ‘boss’ (N° 15: Male International, 35-54). Relatedly see N° 103: Male Tournament, 35-54, N° 97: Male Tournament, 35-54, N° 66: Male Professional,

- 55+, N° 35: Male International, 55+, N° 49: Male International, 55+, N° 115: Male Professional, 55+). Assumption that female players are less skilled (N° 46: Male Tournament, 35-54)
- Perhaps terms like LOL (never heard about little old gentleman). (N° 136: Male International, 35-54)
 - Women can get opportunities based on their looks (N° 133: Male Professional, 35-54; N° 15: Male International, 35-54)
 - Men lecturing women in a way they wouldn't do with their male partners (N° 15: Male International, 35-54)
 - Assuming the man only plays with the woman because he is attracted to her (N° 15: Male International, 35-54)
 - Sexist jokes (N° 15: Male International, 35-54; N° 107: Male International, 55+)
 - Comments (N° 25: Male International, 55+; N° 35: Male International, 55+) "Ladies bridge is hopeless" (N° 52: Male Tournament, 35-54)
 - "They hand out green points for fun" (N° 52: Male Tournament, 35-54)
 - "It's hard to say – there is plenty of banter which expresses sexist views, some by people who actually believe the view (and thus is sexism in the pure sense), and some by people who don't actually believe the view (and therefore not sexism in the pure sense but still potentially as offensive)." (N° 23: Male Professional, 35-54)
 - Automatically using male identifiers (eg. "he") (N° 108: Male Tournament, 35-54)
 - Assumptions (gender neutral language): Assuming that a player or partnership will play a lesser part in team-decisions, talks, etc. because of their sex. (N° 24: Male Tournament, 55+)
 - Assuming that a player/partnership will overestimate their own worth because of their sex. (N° 24: Male Tournament, 55+)
 - Assuming that a player will behave with certain attributes e.g. arrogance, passive-aggression, because of their sex. (N° 24: Male Tournament, 55+)
 - Assuming that it is OK to behave towards someone in a certain way because of their sex. (N° 24: Male Tournament, 55+)

There was a level of uncertainty about the extent to which women's performance or success could be attributed to sexism. One respondent expressed that "bridge is quite unusual in that a player can become expert without the help of many other people so I would not accept sexism as an excuse for poor performance" (N° 118: Male International, 35-54). It was recognised that some of the issues which could be defined as sexism in bridge, were reflections of broader forms of sexism in everyday life. The awareness of an assumption that men are better at bridge than women is present in many responses, alongside a recognition that often women do not have the same opportunities to contribute their voice and skills to bridge, as do men.

Discussion and Conclusion

Participants were asked if there were possible changes that could be made to improve gender equality in the bridge community. Of the 62 women and 78 men who answered this question, 39 women (63%) and 45 men (58%) suggested a change. The remaining responses were unclear what might be done (24% of women and 19% of men), and a minority did not offer any suggestion (13% of women and 23% of men). Six male respondents out of 78 suggested that there were already equal opportunities so no changes should be made. The most common suggestion by both men (38 of 45 who suggested a change) and women (19 of 39) was to remove women-only events, with eight men and two women recognising both positives and negatives to its elimination. Only one female and one male specifically said that women's only events should remain. Interestingly although the women's game provides opportunities, the majority of participants in this study would like to see it abolished.

Overall, there is an understanding of the term sexism, and a recognition that in bridge it often means the assumption that men are better at bridge than women. This in turn means that women can be treated differently either by not being chosen as partners, or by feeling excluded. The existence of women's events is highlighted as being an important space for women but it is also further recognised as being an issue in relation to sexism. Women's bridge can contribute to the idea that because women have their own space, they may not have the skills to play in men's spaces (which are actually open spaces), or that they do not wish to because they cannot compete at that level.

Some behaviours are highlighted as problematic, although they can be contested, as some terminologies or ways of interacting are also suggested to be harmless. Sexism in bridge is more readily recognised when behaviours are repeated, unwanted and differential attitudes towards men and women in bridge become normalised. In turn, the ramifications of the gender differential treatment and attitudes become reinforced in the bridge community and further supported institutionally. Overall, the majority of respondents acknowledged that sexism exists in the bridge world.

The findings from this study showed that although women's only events are often cited as a form of sexism, by both men and women, it was also frequently seen as a cause of the negative views of women's bridge. Many suggested that abolishing women's bridge would be a potential solution to gender inequality in bridge, whilst others did not think that it would be effective. What is clear is that there are ambivalences and contradictions surrounding the ways that women's bridge is perceived, with no clear solution to whether it should be eliminated or not. Potential solutions for addressing gender inequalities and sexism will be discussed at the BAMSA conference in June 2021. See Rogers, Snellgrove and Punch (2021) for further discussion on the simultaneous ways that the women's game is both enabling and constraining for women.

Whilst in this study there were a minority views that sexism does not exist in the bridge world and other views that it is not a problem, the majority of respondents recognise that it is an issue and steps should be taken to address it. What those steps should be is less clear but a range of suggestions were made in relation to training, governance, language and challenging assumptions. Thus, despite some resistance and denial, most responses identified instances of sexism in a number of practices related to bridge including players' initial involvement in playing, the time committed to the game, perceptions of abilities, and gender bias during play.

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BAMSA Project Lead: Professor Samantha Punch

Email: bamsa@stir.ac.uk



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