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Ageing and Power in Sport: Intersectional Perspectives on Women, Ageism, and Generational Stereotypes: Women in Rugby¹

Abstract: *This paper examines how ageism and sexism intersect to shape the experiences, visibility, and value of women in sport, with particular attention to women in rugby. While male athletes often benefit from narratives of longevity, leadership, and accumulated expertise, women face early devaluation, intensified scrutiny of their ageing bodies, and structural barriers that shorten their athletic and professional trajectories. These dynamics are especially evident in rugby, a sport historically associated with masculinity, physical strength, and endurance, where women athletes frequently encounter gendered expectations regarding bodily appearance, performance, and age-appropriate participation. From a cultural perspective, women's bodies are produced, monitored, and evaluated within shifting institutional and aesthetic frameworks, revealing how ageism in sport functions as a form of embodied governance. In rugby, where athletic value is closely linked to physical capacity and resilience, ageing female athletes frequently confront assumptions about decline that are not applied with the same intensity to men. Media and cultural narratives continue to construct female athletes through stereotypes and prejudices, privileging youth, attractiveness, and narrowly defined femininity while overlooking the expertise, leadership, and sporting capital accumulated with age. This paper argues that ageism in sport is not a biological inevitability but a socially constructed process that reinforces gender inequality. Through the example of women in rugby, it demonstrates how ageing is shaped by institutional practices, cultural narratives, and gendered expectations rather than by physical change alone. Addressing ageism in sport therefore requires an intersectional understanding of how age, gender, embodiment, and cultural narratives shape women's opportunities, recognition, and participation across the lifespan.*

Keywords: *ageism; women in rugby; generational stereotypes; sexism in sport.*

¹ The author acknowledges the support from the Project 'Society, Sport and Integration', funded by Bulgarian National Science Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science (contract agreement No. КП-06-H75/14 from December 15, 2023).

State of research and methodology

Research on women, aging, and sport has expanded significantly over the last three decades, drawing on feminist theory, gender studies, philosophy of sport, and anthropology. International scholarship has demonstrated that women's sporting careers are shaped not only by physiological factors but also by social expectations concerning gender, age, appearance, and reproductive roles. Studies of ageism in sport have highlighted how older female athletes often become less visible in media representations and sporting institutions, while male athletes are more frequently celebrated for longevity, experience, and leadership. Within this broader field, feminist anthropological and historical scholarship from Bulgaria offers important insights into the cultural and social construction of gender throughout the life course. Although the intersection of aging and women's sport remains relatively underexplored in Bulgarian academic literature, the works of Anna Luleva, Georgeta Nazarska, Milena Angelova, Boryana Angelova-Igova, Anelia Kassabova, Ina Pachamanova, provide valuable conceptual perspectives for understanding how gendered inequalities are produced and reproduced in contemporary society. Georgeta Nazarska's research on the history of women's movements, education, and feminism demonstrates how women have historically encountered structural barriers to social participation, professional advancement, and public recognition. Her analyses of the Bulgarian women's movement and women's educational organizations reveal the long-term processes through which women sought intellectual, social, and political empowerment (Nazarska, 2007; 2024). Nazarska's work is particularly relevant for understanding how inequalities experienced by women athletes are embedded within broader historical patterns of gender discrimination and restricted access to public authority. Drawing on body studies, sport philosophy and sociology, Angelova-Igova examines the ways in which women athletes negotiate bodily pain, injury, performance expectations, and aging. The female sporting body presented as a site of discipline, sacrifice, and "hidden disability" highlights the pressures placed on women to maintain athletic performance despite physical decline or injury.

Anna Luleva contributes to the understanding of social transformations in post-socialist societies, identity formation, and the persistence of inequality under changing economic and political conditions. Her analyses of everyday life and social restructuring illuminate the broader contexts within which contemporary gender relations are negotiated. Such perspectives are useful for examining how age- and gender-

based inequalities in sport reflect wider social hierarchies within post-socialist societies. In the post-socialist period, as Milena Angelova shows, healthcare reforms shifted responsibility from the state to the individual, intensifying expectations of self-management and market-based access to care (Angelova, 2021). For ageing women in sport, this transformation reconfigures how injury, recovery, and long-term bodily maintenance are experienced, positioning the ageing athletic body within broader neoliberal demands for productivity and self-regulation. Ina Pachamanova (Pachamanova, 2015) argues that under state socialism in Bulgaria, women were constructed as both full economic actors and primary caregivers, as the state institutionalized their participation in paid labor while simultaneously reinforcing their responsibilities within the family. Her work shows that this dual positioning produced a specific socialist gender model that combined formal equality with persistent domestic expectations, shaping women's identities well beyond "the changes" in Bulgaria. Anelia Kassabova's research shows that the socialist regime promoted a dual-earner model in which women were integrated into full-time employment while remaining primary caregivers. Gender equality was officially endorsed, but in practice women carried a "double burden" of work and domestic labor. In response to demographic decline, the state intensified pro-family measures and moral discourse. However, social realities (urbanization, women's employment, generational change) increasingly challenged official ideals (Brunnbauer, Kassabova, 2009). Taken together, these scholars demonstrate that age and gender are not merely biological categories but socially and culturally produced forms of difference. However, despite the growing body of research on gender, embodiment, and social inequality, relatively little attention has been devoted specifically to aging women in sport, and even less to women participating in rugby. This gap is particularly significant because rugby represents a sporting environment in which questions of physical strength, endurance, bodily appearance, and gender norms become especially visible. The present study seeks to contribute to this emerging field by examining how ageism and sexism intersect in shaping the experiences of women rugby players.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary research strategy situated at the intersection of feminist anthropology, gender

studies, and philosophy of sport. The research is informed by an intersectional approach, which understands age and gender as mutually constitutive social categories that shape opportunities, recognition, and participation in sport.

The study combines three methodological approaches. It utilizes critical discourse analysis to examine the narratives through which women's aging in rugby is represented and understood. Particular attention is paid to recurring themes of physical decline, performance, femininity, leadership, experience, and bodily appearance. The analysis explores how these narratives differ from representations of aging male athletes and how they contribute to the production of ageist and sexist assumptions. Second, the research employs anthropological interpretation of cultural narratives concerning women's bodies. This approach allows the study to situate women's sporting experiences within broader cultural contexts and to examine how age-related expectations are socially produced and maintained. Third, the study incorporates feminist historical analysis on women's education and social participation. This perspective enables an examination of contemporary sporting inequalities as part of longer historical processes affecting women's access to public visibility, authority, and institutional recognition.

The theoretical framework is further informed by body studies and sport scholarship, particularly of the female athletic body. Attention is given to the ways women athletes experience aging through injury, bodily discipline, performance demands, and changing social expectations. Rather than treating aging as a purely biological phenomenon, the study conceptualizes it as a socially mediated process shaped by institutional practices, cultural narratives, and gendered norms.

By combining feminist anthropology, historical analysis, and critical studies of embodiment, this methodology seeks to illuminate how ageism operates within women's rugby and how older female athletes negotiate visibility, recognition, and value throughout their sporting careers.

Introduction: Women, Aging, Education, and the Female Body

Age in sport is never a neutral biological category but a deeply cultural and political construct that shapes who is valued, who is visible, and who is permitted to remain. These dynamics are particularly evident in rugby, a sport historically associated with masculinity, physical aggression, endurance, and bodily resilience. For much of its history,

rugby has functioned as a site for the production and celebration of hegemonic masculinity, with women's participation frequently framed as exceptional, inappropriate, or even transgressive. Rugby has long been structured around a culture of toughness that normalizes physical dominance and bodily impact (Dane et al., 2023, 2024). While such practices are valorized in men's rugby, women who engage in the same forms of contact often confront tensions with dominant ideals of femininity and may face sexism and homophobia (Dane, Foley, & Wilson, 2023). Although women's rugby has expanded in participation, visibility, and professionalization (World Rugby, 2022), it remains embedded in male-dominated structures that shape access, governance, and working conditions (Joncheray & Tlili, 2013). Injury prevention debates further reveal gendered assumptions. Tackle-related injuries are a major concern in women's rugby (West et al., 2022), yet risk is shaped not only by biomechanics but by institutional cultures that prioritize performance over health (Hendricks et al., 2023). Drawing on theories of gendered embodiment (Butler 1990; Shilling, 1993), recent research shows that women players navigate contradictory expectations placed on their sporting and social bodies. Despite persistent inequalities, they also demonstrate agency, reworking the embodied practices of rugby as sites of resilience, solidarity, and recognition (Dane & al., 2024). Although women's rugby has expanded dramatically at both amateur and elite levels over the past several decades, female players continue to negotiate sporting cultures that privilege youth, physical power, and traditionally masculine forms of athletic legitimacy.

The experience of aging among women cannot be understood solely through biological processes. Rather, it is shaped by social structures, educational opportunities, professional expectations, cultural norms, and philosophical understandings of the life course. Feminist scholarship has demonstrated that women often face forms of discrimination that intensify with age, affecting their access to education, employment, social status, and bodily autonomy (Tulle, 2015).

The second half of the nineteenth century marked the gradual emergence of organized movements for women's rights across Europe and North America. Industrialization, urbanization, and expanding educational opportunities enabled more women to participate in public debate and civic life, laying the groundwork for collective activism. Campaigns for access to education, property rights, employment opportunities, and eventually suffrage developed unevenly, often facing strong resistance grounded in religious, legal, and scientific arguments

about women's supposed natural roles (see particularly about women in sport in Donnelly, 2022, 25). While progress was slow and frequently limited to middle-class women, this period established the institutional foundations of first-wave feminism and introduced new claims about women's citizenship, intellectual capacity, and entitlement to public participation. Although the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a significant increase in the number of women graduating from higher education institutions, inequalities also in Bulgarian context persisted. As Georgetta Nazarska notes, women entered all fields of study, including medicine, agriculture, commerce, technology, economics, and the military. However, "unstable economies and ingrained patriarchal structures [...] still continue to negatively impact women's educational achievements" (Nazarska, 2007, 328-329). Even highly educated women frequently remained concentrated in occupations considered socially appropriate for women, such as teaching and social work, professions characterized by lower prestige and remuneration. Furthermore, women continued to encounter discriminatory hiring practices, limited opportunities for promotion, and conflicts between professional advancement and family responsibilities (Nazarska, 2007, 328-329). These issues are particularly relevant to the study of aging because educational attainment and professional opportunities significantly influence women's economic security and social position later in life. The disadvantages accumulated throughout the life course often become more visible during old age. The historical development of women's movements in Bulgaria offers an important perspective on women's self-realization and social participation. According to Nazarska (2024), studies of the first-wave feminist movement in Western Europe and the United States have emphasized the influence of Protestant revivalism, Spiritualism, and related religious movements on feminist thought. Scholars have shown that these currents reshaped social understandings of race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality, embedding women's emancipation within broader moral and spiritual reform agendas. However, such interpretive frameworks have rarely been applied to the Bulgarian women's movement. Nazarska argues that early Bulgarian feminism developed along a distinctly secular trajectory. In contrast to the United States, women's organizations in Bulgaria after the Crimean War emerged not on a religious foundation but on a secular, civic basis. Associations founded in towns such as Lom, Haskovo, Veles, Kalofer, and Svishtov were closely linked to local *chitalishta* (cultural centers), institutions shaped by Enlightenment and Masonic ideals of education,

rational progress, and self-improvement. Their statutes stressed the need to liberate women from ignorance through education and to cultivate practical competencies alongside moral refinement. Particularly significant was the establishment of the Sofia Women's Educational Society "Consciousness" (Saznanie) in 1897. Its stated aim was to promote a form of enlightenment that would awaken women's awareness of themselves as human beings endowed with dignity and capable of claiming just treatment. As Nazarska notes, the language of consciousness, elevation, and moral improvement suggests the influence of Theosophical currents among the society's founders. These ideals were later institutionalized within the Bulgarian Women's Union, which adopted as one of its objectives the intellectual and moral elevation of women and the improvement of their social position.

Placing this development in a broader European context reveals important parallels with the rise of modern sport, including rugby. In Victorian Britain, rugby emerged within a Protestant moral framework (Darbon, 2008) that linked physical discipline to spiritual and moral strength. The ideal of the "well-fit body and healthy soul" was central to Muscular Christianity, a movement that fused Protestant ethics with athleticism and promoted sport as a vehicle for character formation, self-control, and civic virtue. While Bulgarian feminism evolved within a more secular institutional landscape, it nonetheless shared the emphasis on discipline, education, and moral cultivation that underpinned both Enlightenment reformism and Victorian sporting culture. The later entrance of women into rugby thus intersects with these longer genealogies of bodily improvement and moral elevation. Women's participation in rugby can be read not merely as a challenge to masculine sporting space but also as an appropriation of the nineteenth-century ideal that linked bodily strength to ethical and civic worth. In this sense, women's rugby occupies a complex position: it disrupts gender hierarchies within a sport historically shaped by Protestant and Victorian ideals, while simultaneously embodying the enduring association between physical fitness, moral discipline, and social legitimacy (Darbon, 2007).

The female athlete's body often becomes a site of resistance against aging. Boryana Angelova-Igova argues that women athletes may resort to extreme strategies in order to maintain competitive advantage and prolong their careers. She discusses cases in which athletes artificially induced pregnancy before major competitions in order to increase pain tolerance, improve endurance, or explain irregularities in blood tests. These practices reveal the extent to which the athletic body

may become instrumentalized in pursuit of success. She further emphasizes that elite sport frequently normalizes pain and bodily sacrifice. The pursuit of records, championships, and medals may become more important than long-term health. Such practices are particularly significant in the context of aging because accumulated injuries often become more visible in later life, transforming sporting success into chronic pain, disability, or reduced mobility after retirement. From this perspective, aging in women's sport can be understood as a form of embodied tension. On the one hand, sport celebrates discipline, strength, endurance, and achievement. On the other hand, it often demands the denial of vulnerability, bodily limits, and mortality. Female athletes are expected simultaneously to maintain high levels of performance and to conform to broader cultural ideals of youthfulness and femininity. The aging body therefore becomes a visible reminder of biological finitude in a culture that frequently values women according to their appearance and physical capacity (Angelova-Igova, 2025). Ultimately, the aging female athlete represents a unique point of intersection between feminist theory, sociology of the body, philosophy of aging, and sport studies. It is important to witness how biological change interacts with gendered expectations, institutional structures, and cultural ideals of youth. Understanding aging in women's sport therefore requires moving beyond purely medical explanations and examining the broader social and cultural forces that shape women's bodies across the life course.

Post-socialist contexts illuminate how these norms endure. As Anna Luleva argues, post-socialist societies “reproduce old hierarchies through new forms of inequality,” (Luleva, 2016, 2024) a pattern clearly reflected in sport, where women's ageing bodies are often treated as liabilities rather than sources of expertise. Luleva's ethnographic work on gender, labour, and embodiment shows that the transition to neoliberal capitalism did not dismantle socialist-era expectations of women's self-sacrifice, discipline, and bodily conformity; instead, it intensified them by reframing the female body as a site of individual responsibility and market value. In this framework, ageing becomes a moralized category: older women are expected to remain productive, attractive, and self-regulating, yet they are simultaneously devalued when their bodies no longer align with youthful norms of femininity. Applied to sport – and rugby in particular – Luleva's insights reveal how post-socialist gender regimes cast the ageing female athlete as particularly transgressive: she violates the expectation that older women retreat from public physicality, and she disrupts the neoliberal ideal of

the eternally youthful, self-optimizing female body. The athletic competence, accumulated experience, and embodied authority thus become culturally unintelligible, exposing the deep continuity between socialist disciplinary norms and post-socialist market-driven inequalities.

Women find themselves at the intersection of multiple discriminations (Angelova-Igova, 2025) a condition that intensifies with age as cultural expectations of femininity collide with the physical demands and embodied histories of athletic life. These intersecting inequalities shape who is imagined as a legitimate rugby player and who is rendered invisible, reinforcing the idea that women's athletic value diminishes over time. Such assumptions cannot be separated from longer histories of women's restricted public roles. Georgetta Nazarska reminds us that "women have traditionally been restricted in their public roles," a legacy that continues to shape contemporary sporting cultures. Drawing on her broader argument that age functions as a historically contingent category shaping women's visibility, agency, and embodied experience, the aging female athlete can be understood as a figure who unsettles long-standing cultural scripts about femininity and physical decline. Age has been used to delimit what is considered "appropriate" female activity, often rendering older women invisible or marginal in public life. In the context of sport – and rugby in particular – these age norms intersect with the material transformations of the female body: increased muscular density, shifts in hormonal balance, changes in recovery time, and the visible marks of long-term athletic labor. Rather than signaling loss, these bodily changes reveal a form of embodied competence that challenges gendered expectations of fragility and youthfulness. The aging woman rugby player emerges as a counter-memory to dominant cultural imaginaries, asserting athleticism, resilience, and authority at stages of life traditionally coded as passive or post-productive.

Research on ageing, gender, and the body in post-socialist contexts further highlights how political economies of health shape embodied expectations across the life course. Milena Angelova's work on the Semashko model of socialist healthcare elucidates how state-organized medicine in the Eastern Bloc promoted universal access to preventive care, collective responsibility for well-being, and robust systems for monitoring physical health. Under this model, bodily maintenance was framed as a public good, and women, like men, were subject to standardized regimes of health surveillance and care that emphasized early detection, regular check-ups, and institutional responsibility for popu-

lation health (Angelova, 2021). In the context of sport, such state-oriented approaches to health assumed that active bodies – including those of women – were matters of public concern rather than purely individual projects. Angelova’s analysis also demonstrates how the collapse of socialist healthcare systems in the post-socialist period dismantled these collective structures, transferring responsibility for health entirely onto individual bodies. In the wake of market reforms, preventive care systems were weakened, and individuals – especially women – came to be positioned as autonomous managers of their own health through consumption, self-regulation, and personal risk avoidance. Anna Luleva’s research confirms this shift: post-socialist societies have not transcended older hierarchies of bodily discipline and self-sacrifice but have reframed them within neoliberal logics that moralize health as individual achievement. Ageing bodies, particularly those of women, are increasingly treated as sites of personal responsibility and market value, where success is measured in terms of self-optimization rather than collective well-being. When applied to the specific case of women in rugby, these transformations reveal how historical and institutional legacies of health governance continue to shape cultural expectations around the ageing female body. The Semashko model’s emphasis on structured care and collective accountability stands in contrast to contemporary neoliberal discourses that valorize “healthy lifestyles” while policing bodies through market-driven imperatives. In this context, ageing women rugby players must navigate not only gendered norms about femininity and athletic performance, but also broader cultural demands that frame health as an individualized project. Their bodies are evaluated not only according to sporting criteria but also in relation to shifting expectations about risk, self-management, and bodily capital – expectations rooted in both socialist healthcare traditions and their post-socialist neoliberal transformations. (Woodward, 2009).

Within rugby, ageing is not a neutral biological process but a gendered cultural construct that assigns differential value to male and female athletic bodies. Male rugby players are commonly celebrated for longevity, leadership, tactical acumen, and the authority derived from accumulated experience. Veteran status in men’s rugby is frequently framed as an asset, symbolizing resilience, mentorship, and sporting intelligence. In contrast, women encounter earlier processes of devaluation, heightened surveillance of their ageing bodies, and structural constraints that curtail both the duration of their playing careers and their access to post-competitive roles within the sport.

These asymmetries are sustained through the historiographical marginalization of women's rugby. As Hendrik Snyders demonstrates, the official historical record has largely privileged formally sanctioned men's competitions as the primary locus of legitimacy, thereby excluding women's participation from institutional memory. Early women's matches—ranging from the 1909 encounter between female and male teams to intervarsity competitions in the late 1960s and university-based tournaments in the 1980s—were treated as novelties or deviations rather than as integral components of rugby's development. Such dismissals reflect a broader epistemological reliance on formal recognition and archival inscription as criteria of sporting value. Consequently, women's rugby has been narratively constructed as belated and discontinuous, obscuring a longer, though marginalized, history of participation. (Snyders, 2021)

This historiographical erasure has significant implications for the politics of ageing. When earlier generations of women players are excluded from the archive, ageing athletes are deprived of historical lineage, symbolic capital, and the authority that derives from recognized continuity. The absence of institutional memory reinforces contemporary ageism by positioning older women players as anomalous rather than as bearers of embodied expertise. Women rugby players thus occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of ageism and sexism, where the ageing female body becomes a site onto which broader cultural anxieties about femininity, productivity, and physical decline are projected.

Within this framework, aging becomes a moralized category. Older women are expected to remain productive, attractive, healthy, and self-disciplined while simultaneously facing devaluation once their bodies no longer conform to dominant ideals of youthful femininity. In rugby, these contradictions become particularly visible. Older women rugby players challenge multiple social expectations simultaneously: they remain physically active in a highly demanding contact sport; they continue to occupy public spaces traditionally coded as masculine; and they embody forms of strength, muscularity, and athletic competence that exceed conventional representations of femininity. The ageing rugby player therefore emerges as a figure who disrupts both post-socialist and neoliberal ideals of the eternally youthful female body.

This challenge is embodied in the rugby-playing body itself. As women age, their bodies bear the marks of long-term athletic labour: changes in muscular composition, recovery time, hormonal balance,

and accumulated injury. Yet these changes do not necessarily signify decline. Instead, they often reflect years of acquired expertise, resilience, and embodied knowledge.

The historical development of women's rugby further demonstrates how gendered age norms have shaped sporting participation. During the First World War, women briefly entered public sporting spaces as men left for military service (Hargreaves, 2002). Although wartime conditions created openings for women to engage in rugby and other sports traditionally reserved for men, their participation was rarely acknowledged as legitimate athletic achievement. Instead, such activities were commonly framed as forms of patriotic contribution or charitable spectacle, temporarily acceptable because they aligned with national necessity rather than because women were recognized as athletes in their own right. In the contemporary period, women's rugby exposes a different but equally complex tension within neoliberal cultures of health. Across many Western societies, physical fitness, self-discipline, and active lifestyles are promoted as indicators of responsible citizenship and empowered femininity. Women are encouraged to treat their bodies as ongoing projects of optimization, self-care, and aesthetic management. Yet rugby unsettles these normative expectations. As a full-contact sport characterized by collision, injury risk, and muscular intensity, it produces forms of embodiment that frequently exceed dominant ideals of slenderness, delicacy, bodily containment. Women rugby players thus inhabit an ambivalent position: they are applauded as disciplined, health-conscious subjects, yet simultaneously regarded as transgressive for embracing aggression, strength, and corporeal practices historically coded as masculine.

These tensions reflect broader processes through which gender is naturalized in sport. As numerous scholars have argued, sport remains one of the social arenas in which biological explanations are most frequently used to justify inequalities (Hargreaves, 2002). Pierre Bourdieu describes this process as the mutual reinforcement of "the socialization of the biological and the biologification of the social", whereby historically produced differences come to appear natural and inevitable. Rugby provides a particularly powerful example of this mechanism because assumptions about physical strength, aggression, endurance, and contact are routinely invoked to reinforce gender distinctions.

Similarly, Paul Willis critiques the romanticized image of sport as a neutral arena of merit and fair play, arguing that such representa-

tions largely reflect male experiences. Women athletes are rarely permitted to exist simply as athletes; they are simultaneously evaluated according to standards of attractiveness, sexuality, motherhood, and femininity. Women rugby players experience these pressures acutely because their bodies often challenge conventional gender norms. For older players, these tensions become even more pronounced as ageism intersects with sexism to produce distinctive forms of exclusion, invisibility, and devaluation (Willis, 2014).

During the First World War, women briefly stepped into the spotlight as men left for the trenches, and “opportunities emerged for them to step into the spotlight in sport,” yet these matches were framed as charitable entertainment rather than legitimate athletic competition. Their participation was “far more palatable to the public” because it served the war effort, not because women were recognized as athletes in their own right. This historical framing continues to influence how women’s rugby is perceived, valued, and institutionalized (Hargreaves, 2002).

These gendered histories intersect with contemporary neoliberal discourses that redefine health, embodiment, and responsibility. In the UK, shifting labour structures and neoliberal “projects of the self” have increasingly positioned physical activity, leisure, and self-care as key markers of individual success and the “good life.” As scholars note, the production of “healthy citizens” has become a central political concern, driven both by policy efforts to address persistent health inequalities and by social movements advocating for the inclusion of previously marginalized populations (Branchu, 2023). Yet these discourses are inseparable from biopower and capitalist gain: individuals are encouraged to manage their diets, activity levels, and mental states as personal responsibilities, while “fit” and “sporty” identities become contemporary markers of empowered femininity and distinction among women. Rugby complicates these narratives. Everyday participation in a full-contact sport appears to contradict the ideals of self-care, bodily protection, and the pursuit of hegemonic, successful femininity. Women who choose rugby thus inhabit a paradoxical position: they are celebrated as active, disciplined subjects within neoliberal health regimes, yet simultaneously marked as deviant for embracing risk, physicality, and forms of embodiment that exceed normative feminine scripts.

The cultural naturalization of gendered expectations in sport has been extensively theorized. Sport is a space where “the naturalization

of representations is arguably at its plainest,” precisely because biological explanations are so often invoked to justify social hierarchies. Sport becomes a terrain where bodies are valued, evaluated, and disciplined—where knowledge and morality conflate and are imposed on bodies that are “ranked, judged, discussed, but also felt, lived and shaped.” Women athletes according to Willis are never permitted to be “just athletes”; they are sexualized, reduced to mothers or potential heterosexual partners, or denied femininity altogether. These theoretical perspectives deepen the analysis of women’s rugby by showing how age, gender, power intersect not only in discourse but in the lived and disciplined experiences of players (Willis, 2014; Branchu, 2023).

Within this broader cultural field, rugby culture itself offers a counterpoint. The sport’s internal logic rewards experience, tactical intelligence, and embodied knowledge – qualities that often deepen with age. Coaching manuals emphasize that “every forward should be completely familiar with her position and should aspire to understand how to play every other position in the pack,” because unexpected absences require adaptability and deep tactical understanding. The backfield must be able to “pass and catch under any condition” and “assemble and hold a loose ruck or maul until the forwards arrive.” At higher levels, rugby becomes “a highly choreographed exercise more than a hard-hitting contact sport,” where players anticipate one another’s movements and act as a unified whole. This choreography depends on embodied memory and the subtle reading of teammates—capacities that contradict cultural narratives of female athletic decline.

Ethnographic accounts further reveal rugby as a space of care, solidarity, and bodily joy. Rugby involves “the pains and pleasures of play, the injuries, the care, the solidarity, the bruises and the recruitment of new players.” Women who feel excluded from other sports – because they are “too small,” “too big,” or insufficiently feminine – often find belonging in rugby. One teenage girl described the joy of “finally fitting in,” while another, considered overweight by school standards, became “impossible to tackle” and went on to become a key club player. These stories reveal rugby as a space where normative hierarchies of femininity are disrupted and where diverse bodies are not only accepted but embraced.

This collective dimension resonates with Karl Mannheim’s insight that generations become meaningful when peers share a “common location” in historical time and respond collectively to events (Luleva, 2024). A rugby team achieves its highest form when players think,

move, and anticipate “as a single unit,” each “subliminally” knowing where her teammate will go next. The shared experiential horizon created through training, positional interchangeability, and embodied anticipation mirrors Mannheim’s generational unit: a collective capable of unified response to external stimuli. The team’s ability to react instantly to penalties, restarts, or open-field changes exemplifies a form of collective intelligence that exceeds individual skill and becomes a mode of shared agency. Yet this collective power exists alongside the sport’s masculine histories. Rugby has long been tied to the making of men, elite schooling, and hegemonic masculinity. As Bourdieu notes, “to understand a sport... one must locate its position in the space of sports,” and rugby’s position has historically been aligned with male elites and national identity. Women have steadily reshaped this terrain. Figures like Ali Donnelly – described as a “player, coach, media manager, campaigner and journalist of renown” – demonstrate the transformative power of women’s leadership. Laurie O’Reilly, a foundational figure in New Zealand women’s rugby, insisted: “You are rugby players who happen to be women, not women who happen to be rugby players.” Such reframing challenges the assumption that rugby is inherently male and opens space for women to claim authority, expertise, longevity within the sport.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal that ageing in women’s rugby is not a natural decline but a contested cultural process. Older women athletes bring tactical intelligence, leadership, embodied resilience, and community-building capacity. Their presence challenges the cultural scripts that equate athletic value with youth and femininity. Women’s rugby thus becomes a site where ageing can be reimagined as a form of accumulated power rather than a deficit. By recognizing this, we can begin to envision sporting cultures that honor women’s contributions across the entire lifespan and resist the naturalized hierarchies that have long constrained them.

As Branchu notes, “the myth of the lesbian athlete” remains one of the most persistent stereotypes attached to women’s rugby players, functioning – as Waldron (2016) argues – as “a form of social control ... for all women in sport to avoid” (Branchu, 2023, 337). The book shows that players respond to this stereotype through various forms of “heterosexing” the practice, including promoting the team as “cute,” “straight,” and “fitter than the rest of the league,” strategies that attempt to counteract the stigma attached to women who participate in a physi-

cally demanding, contact-heavy sport. All these tactics operate in relation to two dominant, ideal-typical stereotypes: the “butch lesbian rugby player” and the “girly girl.” Both are rooted in patriarchal visions of femininity, one casting athletic women as deviant and the other as fragile. By defining their own femininity and carving out a space in which women can inhabit athletic identities without being reduced to these oppositional images, players reveal how deeply such oppressive categories continue to structure hierarchies of femininity. Rather than interpreting these strategies as indicators of women’s “degree” of feminist commitment, the book argues that they are all political practices aimed at transforming the symbolic reputation of women’s rugby and its players (Branchu, 2023, 166).

Women’s rugby ultimately offers a powerful lens through which to rethink the “doing” of gender in postfeminist times. As Branchu+ observes, the sport’s internal culture values “diversity” and embraces a wide range of body shapes, strengths, and abilities, enabling players to develop alternative understandings of femininity and of their own embodied capacities. Rugby’s ethos of finding and championing “whichever strength an individual has” creates a space in which femininity cannot be anchored in frailty or narrow aesthetic norms. Within this homosocial environment, motivations for performing womanhood become expansive rather than restrictive, allowing women – including ageing athletes—to inhabit athletic identities that exceed patriarchal expectations. The continued growth of the sport signals that such spaces are not only attractive but necessary: they offer women a rare arena in which to renegotiate gender, reclaim bodily authority, and cultivate forms of strength that dominant cultural narratives have historically denied them. (Branchu, 2023, 171).

Conclusion

Taken together, these historiographical, theoretical, and ethnographic perspectives reveal that ageing in women’s rugby cannot be understood as biological inevitability or athletic decline. Rather, it emerges as a socially structured and politically mediated process shaped by gendered archives, neoliberal health regimes, and persistent cultural hierarchies. The marginalization of earlier generations of women players, as shown by Hendrik Snyders, has deprived ageing athletes of symbolic continuity and institutional recognition. This absence reinforces ageism by positioning older women as anomalies instead of as custodians of embodied expertise and collective memory.

Theoretical insights from Pierre Bourdieu and Paul Willis clarify how sport naturalizes historically produced inequalities, making gendered and age-based distinctions appear self-evident. Yet women's rugby simultaneously destabilizes these hierarchies. As Charlotte Branchu demonstrates, players actively negotiate and transform dominant stereotypes, producing alternative modes of femininity grounded in strength, solidarity, and corporeal reflexivity. The ageing rugby body, marked by accumulated labour, tactical intelligence, and resilience, challenges the cultural equation of value with youth.

The Bulgarian scholarship discussed earlier deepens this analysis by situating these dynamics within post-socialist transformations. Anna Luleva's concept of the post-socialist gender order shows how older hierarchies persist through new inequalities, shaping expectations about appropriate femininity and life stages. Georgeta Nazarska's historical work reveals long continuities in the restriction of women's public participation, reminding us that exclusion from institutional memory is not incidental but structurally embedded. Boryana Angelova-Igova's analyses of the female athletic body further complicate narratives of decline by foregrounding pain, discipline, and adaptation as constitutive elements of embodied experience rather than signs of failure. Meanwhile, Milena Angelova's study of the Semashko health system demonstrates how socialist governance linked women's bodies to productivity, demographic policy, and medicalized norms of vitality – legacies that continue to inform contemporary expectations of "healthy ageing."

Within this broader cultural and historical field, women's rugby becomes a critical site for reimagining ageing. It exposes how age and gender intersect not only in discourse but in muscle memory, injury, recovery, and collective choreography. It reveals that older women athletes are not marginal residues of a youth-centered sport but bearers of embodied capital, tactical intelligence, and intergenerational continuity. Most importantly, it challenges the moralization of ageing femininity under both post-socialist and neoliberal regimes by demonstrating that strength, aggression, solidarity, and longevity are not deviations from womanhood but viable forms of it.

Ageing in women's rugby thus appears not as decline, but as accumulation – of knowledge, resilience, authority, and shared history. Recognizing this shifts the analytical lens from loss to power and opens the possibility of sporting cultures that honour women's participation across the life course rather than confining athletic legitimacy to youth.

The case of women's rugby illustrates these dynamics particularly clearly. While older male rugby players are frequently celebrated as experienced leaders whose knowledge benefits the team, women often face intensified scrutiny regarding their bodies, appearance, and athletic legitimacy. Their continued participation disrupts dominant cultural scripts that associate female value with youthfulness and physical attractiveness. In doing so, ageing women rugby players challenge both traditional gender norms and contemporary neoliberal expectations that position the female body as an object of continuous self-management and self-optimization.

At the same time, the experiences of older women rugby players reveal alternative understandings of ageing. Rather than signifying loss, ageing may represent the accumulation of embodied knowledge, technical expertise, resilience, leadership, and social capital. The ageing athletic body can therefore be understood not as evidence of diminished value but as a site of experience and authority. In this sense, women rugby players create counter-narratives that resist dominant cultural representations of ageing women as passive, fragile, or socially irrelevant.

The study also demonstrates that sport functions as an important arena for the reproduction and contestation of social inequalities. Ageism and sexism operate not independently but through intersecting mechanisms that shape opportunities, recognition, media visibility, and institutional support. Understanding these processes requires moving beyond biological explanations and adopting an intersectional perspective attentive to the cultural production of age and gender.

Ultimately, women's rugby offers a valuable lens through which to examine broader questions concerning ageing, embodiment, and social justice. The growing visibility of women in rugby challenges long-standing assumptions about who belongs in sport and whose bodies are considered legitimate sporting bodies. Recognizing the experiences and contributions of ageing women athletes is therefore not only a matter of sporting inclusion but also part of a broader effort to challenge ageist and sexist structures that continue to shape women's lives across the lifespan. Future research should further explore the lived experiences of older women athletes, particularly within post-socialist contexts, in order to better understand how age, gender, and embodiment are negotiated in contemporary sport and society.

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