

# Myth of Meritocracy: How Motorsport Can Appear Neutral while Concealing the Reality of Gendered Bias

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the persistence of gendered outcomes in motorsport, focusing on Formula One and aims to support the claim that this continuance in unequal outcome is due to systematic exclusion, which is masked by neutral rules and performative progression. This paper uses scholarly analysis and studies of the psychology behind sport and the misogyny in all levels of motorsport to apply to Formula One. It moves through the development pathway, public perceptions, and beyond the track roles to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the issue throughout the sport. This paper then moves to modern initiatives aiming to combat the assumption of masculinity in both drivers and leaders, however it also addresses the limitations of these programs and the risk they pose. The purpose of this paper is to expose audiences to not only the concealed systematic inequalities of motorsport, but also their own underlying bias in an attempt to eliminate unfounded stereotypes.

**Keywords:** Gender Equity; Formula One; Gender Discrimination; Sexism; Feminism; Meritocracy; Gendered Language; Sport Sciences

## INTRODUCTION

A Formula One driver sits inches from the road, completely in tune with their car, flying through the track at speeds exceeding 200 miles per hour. In this sport, focus is everything. Helmet on, world out. Vision narrows, decision-making accelerates, and the driver and machine operate as an integrated system, optimized for precision rather than physical dominance.

And yet, despite no explicit mention of gender, most audiences will imagine the driver as male, a response that reflects broader sport–gender stereotypes that

associate competitive, high-speed sports with men rather than women, even when no biological basis dictates such an association (1). Motorsport therefore presents a useful case for examining the relationship between formal equality and gendered participation. The cars are not built exclusively for the male anatomy, nor does competitive driving depend on the upper-body strength or other sex-linked physical advantages that distinguish many conventional sporting competitions. In fact, “race vehicles are essentially the same regardless of the driver’s gender and sex” (2). Furthermore, research “found no differences in the physiological responses to automobile racing between male and female drivers,” suggesting that the physical requirements of high-speed racing do not inherently favor one sex over the other (3).

If rules and required skills are not sex-dependent, persistent disparities in participation and advancement warrant examination of the institutional and social factors that may contribute to them. Formula One presents itself

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as a uniquely equal sport, with drivers as genderless competitors, and motorsport as a whole is widely considered one of the few sports where men and women can compete against each other equally (4). Nevertheless, women remain substantially underrepresented at the highest levels of competition and within many influential positions across the sport. The standards for successful “performance are historically grounded in the values and experiences of men, and they use evaluative standards that disadvantage women,” creating barriers to advancement within the sport (5). While they are technically evaluated by the same standards, “they don’t do them well enough to receive equal support” (4). This distinction provides the central problem examined in this paper: whether formally gender-neutral participation necessarily produces gender-neutral opportunities and outcomes.

This marginalization is not just a matter of perception, women remain almost entirely absent from the highest levels of Formula One and other elite motorsport roles. Although motorsport operates within a formally gender-neutral regulatory framework, empirical data indicates substantial underrepresentation, with female drivers constituting just 10% of global participants and no full-time female F1 driver since 1976, according to a 2023 study conducted by More Than Equal, a non-profit dedicated to supporting women in motorsport (6).

When women do reach the ‘genderless’ competition, they are rarely treated as neutral participants, constantly being re-gendered by media, commentary, and marketing. This increases the tension on female competitors as they are simultaneously asked to be “understood as somehow genderless drivers” but also “still ‘essentially’ feminine” (2).

The absence of women from the sport cannot be attributed to ability alone on the basis of the available evidence; the organization of Formula One provides several institutional contexts in which access and advancement can occur. Formula One is widely conceptualized as the pinnacle of single-seater motorsport. Quantitative framing around lap times, qualifying gaps, and points totals reinforces the assumption that success is purely skill-driven, despite the underlying influences of economic backing and machine performance (7).

## **HISTORICAL AND MERITOCRATIC FOUNDATIONS**

Historically, competitive sport has been coded as

distinctly masculine. Marion Müller, a professor of Sociology with a focus on gender studies, argues that the link between physical and socio-psychological differences in gender were not popularized until the nineteenth century, when these differences were linked to growing “gender characters,” or exaggerated versions of gender stereotypes (4). This link cemented the social gender order as something inherently natural and undisputable, leaving it largely unchanged today (4). Despite the removal of explicit gender-based restrictions in the 20th and 21st centuries, these historical understandings provide important context for examining contemporary patterns of participation and opportunity in sport.

As competitive sport became institutionalized as a male domain, women’s exclusion required justification rather than explanation. Women were excluded on the basis of presumed physiological weakness, moral fragility, and social impropriety, positioning athletic competition as incompatible with femininity rather than inaccessible due to discrimination (8). These assumptions were soon embedded into the design of elite sport itself. These historical patterns established male participation as a normative model within competitive sport, while women’s participation was more often treated as exceptional or ‘other.’ This is what marks Formula 1 as a particularly revealing case. In a sport that appears to negate the bodily arguments used to exclude women, gender inequality persists, not through explicit prohibition, but through inherited structures that shape who is able to enter, advance, and succeed.

With no gender-based divisions, the sport appears open to anyone. Müller points out, though, that formal equality at the rules level often hides differences in who actually has access to the sport (4). Systems that are formally equal may nevertheless produce unequal outcomes, and formal neutrality can make such disparities less visible or less readily interpreted as structural problems (4). The persistent gender gap warrants examination of the factors operating beyond the formal rules.

When success is understood simply as “whoever is fastest,” persistent gender disparities require little additional explanation; it is assumed that the minority is simply less skilled. As Coakley argues, meritocratic ideals can individualize unequal outcomes by attributing women’s underrepresentation to differences in ability rather than to structural inequalities (4). Within Formula One, this framing can obscure differences in the opportunities available to drivers before performance is evaluated on the track.

## ACCESS AND THE DEVELOPMENT PIPELINE

Before anyone can reach the level of Formula One, they must work their way through the ranks. It begins with karting at a young age, where the vast majority of drivers begin their careers (9). From there, drivers progress through the single-seater series, moving from Formula 4 to Formula 3 and Formula 2, with each level representing a higher degree of competition (10). While it is formally available to aspiring racers of all genders, the available participation data indicates that gender disparities are already present at this stage of the pathway. According to F1 Academy data, while tens of thousands of young girls participate in casual karting annually, girls make up only 6.4% of competitive cadet racers (aged 8–12), and female drivers account for just 5% of all official competition license holders (11). Before performance can determine advancement, a driver must first have the opportunity to develop that performance.

Access to a kart, a track, and proper coaching costs money, with 2021 estimates placing the cost of a single national competitive season in the UK at around £30,000 (12). By the time a driver reaches Formula 2, seats become prohibitively expensive, with a minimum entry cost of €60,000 per season in addition to the team fees, much of which must be provided by sponsors or other connections (9, 13). These costs indicate that financial resources and sponsorship can be relevant to progression through the pathway, meaning that performance alone may not determine which drivers are able to continue advancing. Recent research examining women's careers across multiple motorsport categories found that sponsorship and digital visibility play a significant role in shaping career opportunities, while unequal access to sponsorship limits long-term participation and advancement for many female drivers (14). Given the

historical male predominance of motorsport, existing research has also examined the role of family networks, sponsorship relationships, and development pathways in shaping access (9, 15). These networks may contribute to the persistence of existing participation patterns.

By the junior formulas, the problem shifts from initial access to continued selection and investment. Advancement is no longer just about lap times; it also depends on sponsorship, development affiliations, visibility, and the judgments of teams and investors (4). Existing research suggests that familiarity, sponsorship, and established development networks may advantage candidates who already resemble previous successful drivers (9). Women can be perceived as riskier investments because they have historically been less represented within elite development systems (9). Sponsors factor into this too: drivers who fit the familiar image of Formula One can be easier to sell and less likely to scare off investment (15). Consequently, female representation rapidly diminishes in elite development pipelines, with women making up just 4% of drivers in top-tier global talent rankings and holding under 3% of official F1 team academy seats historically (6).

## GENDERED EVALUATION AND CREDIBILITY

Even after entering the competitive pipeline, performance is not interpreted in a social vacuum. The evaluation of talent continues to operate through culturally charged expectations. Traits like aggressiveness, boldness, and taking calculated risks, qualities that may be praised in male drivers can be interpreted differently when displayed by women. These qualities can therefore become subject to a gendered interpretation, in which the same behavior may be read differently depending on who displays it. Messner's

**Table 1.** Comparative indicators of gender representation across participation, technical roles, and leadership in Formula One. These figures describe differences in representation across stages and occupational categories; they do not, by themselves, establish the mechanisms producing those differences.

| Indicator                                             | Men  | Women | Source |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|--------|
| Licensed competitors across FIA-recognized motorsport | ~90% | ~10%  | 6      |
| Full-time Formula One drivers since 1976              | 354  | 0     | 6; 16  |
| Formula One team principals (2026)                    | 11   | 0     | 17     |
| Formula One technical trackside workforce             | ~95% | ~5%   | 18     |
| Formula One overall corporate workforce               | ~72% | ~28%  | 19     |

work on masculinity shows this pattern isn't unique to motorsport; sports constantly reward behaviors coded as male and penalize those coded as female (20).

Research on gendered evaluation suggests that female drivers may be subject to a 'prove-it-again' bias that requires continuous validation of her ability, whereas male drivers with average results are more readily advanced on perceived future potential and reputation (21). Over time, such evaluative patterns may influence which drivers receive opportunities for advancement and continued visibility. Drivers who do not immediately fit Formula One's established image may receive fewer opportunities to gain the experience that later makes candidates appear "safe."

Formula One depends heavily on trust and credibility. Beyond measurable performance, team selection may also involve assessments of cultural fit, reliability under pressure, and interpersonal trust (4). For women, existing research suggests that these networks can be more limited, potentially reducing access to the informal forms of support associated with advancement (4). This means that "women must perform better than men to be considered very competent" (21). Unequal access to professional trust may therefore affect how performance is evaluated and how opportunities are distributed. Women are not evaluated once, but constantly, under conditions where mistakes are remembered longer and success is treated as provisional (22). Qualitative research on gendered evaluation suggests that women may encounter greater scrutiny of their competence, although the extent to which such patterns operate consistently across Formula One remains difficult to establish from the available evidence (22).

Even when women make it to the elite level of motorsport, especially as drivers, they are often marked as nothing more than a notable exception, not comparable to their male counterparts. This was the case with Shawna Robinson, an American former professional stock car racing driver who faced criticism that was explicitly connected to her gender (2). The case illustrates how gender can become relevant to perceptions of competence and ability within motorsport.

At the center of this dynamic is the relationship between the driver and their car. Many drivers form a personal relationship with their cars, some even naming their cars, such as four time World Champion Max Verstappen and his 2023 season car "Rocky" (23). Fans, commentators, and team members often understand a driver as an integrated part of the vehicle, demonstrating the "cyborg" identity, when the driver

and the car are truly inseparable, with the driver being "most recognizable when in correspondence to their car" (2). However, Pflugfelder argues that this identity is historically associated with motorsport's masculine norms and that the driver-car relationship can be disrupted when the driver is female (2). This framework can make it more difficult for female drivers to be understood as equal because their own "driver-car identity is considered something less than a unified cyborg identity because motorsports' dominant gender is male," once again contributing to the otherness of female racers (2).

## **GENDERED WORKPLACE STRUCTURES AND AUTHORITY**

The meritocratic model also becomes less sufficient once success is measured not by lap time alone, but by who receives authority over the systems producing that performance. Formula One is governed by the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), the authority that oversees all "the technical, sporting and financial regulations" for a wide variety of motorsports, ensuring that the regulations are equally applied to every competitor (24). This sport is not simply a competition among drivers; it is a large institutional system involving engineers, strategists, mechanics, management, commercial staff, and regulatory authorities. These roles shape the technical and organizational decisions that determine how sport operates.

Beyond the role of the drivers, women work in a wide range of positions throughout Formula One, spanning technical, sporting, commercial, communications, legal, and other functions. However, representation across these functions does not necessarily translate into equal access to seniority, compensation, advancement, or organizational decision-making authority. Despite formal access to the sport, women remain underrepresented in technical and leadership roles, where gendered norms may shape perceptions of authority and expertise. Gender Pay Reports show a 28% female and 72% male split across its total employee workforce in recent years, indicating that motorsport is still a male-dominated field (19).

While Gender Pay Reports demonstrate 28% female employment, this 2025 study of 16 women working in engineering, mechanical, and manufacturing roles in Formula One highlights that women remain severely underrepresented in operational positions, facing a 0% representation rate for team principals (18). Alongside

this underrepresentation, women are represented across supportive, public-facing, technical, and leadership functions at different rates (2). Research on women in motorsport suggests that some of the public-facing roles women tend to fill are associated with social, communicative, and supportive traits. These positions constitute essential components of a Formula One organization, but the issue arises when assumptions are made about women only being qualified for these roles. Even women in the motorsport community believe that “female roles demand sexualized, stereotypical ‘feminine’/gendered behavior and performances” (25).

Publicly available data on occupational gender distribution within individual Formula One teams remain limited. Where team-level information is available, it provides evidence of gender disparities in workforce composition and pay, but does not permit a comprehensive comparison of promotion rates or decision-making authority across all occupational categories. Instead, the available workforce and pay data are used descriptively, alongside documented examples of women’s representation in senior and decision-making positions. For instance, the Mercedes-AMG PETRONAS F1 Team Gender Pay Reports from 2025 report that their Top Pay Quartile, including executive directors, senior trackside heads, and team leadership, is roughly 85% male, indicating that women remain substantially underrepresented in the highest-paid quartile and senior leadership positions (26). This distribution demonstrates that representation in the overall workforce does not necessarily correspond to equal representation in the highest-paid positions. Even when women hold engineering and strategic positions, broader qualitative research on gender and workplace authority suggests that women in engineering and strategic positions may encounter heightened scrutiny of their competence and authority compared to their male counterparts (27). As Pflugfelder argues, women’s contributions can be positioned as supplementary to established forms of male authority (2).

Despite this, some of the most noticeable progress in recent years has been in technical roles, where women have begun to break historic barriers. For example, Laura Mueller became the first full-time female race engineer in Formula 1 history when she was appointed to work with driver Esteban Ocon at the Haas F1 Team for the 2025 season, a role that places her at the heart of real-time decision-making during race weekends (28). Mueller’s appointment received significant attention as a milestone for women in Formula One. Her appointment

also provides a documented example of the limited representation of women in senior technical positions, although a single appointment cannot establish the broader mechanisms underlying this disparity (28). The significance attributed to such appointments may also reflect the continued rarity of women in these positions.

If institutional structures limit women’s authority behind the scenes, media narratives shape how their presence is interpreted in front of the camera. In Formula One’s public imagery, women have frequently been framed less as agents within the sport and more as aesthetic complements to it.

## **GENDERED MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS**

### **Historical Representation**

Media narratives have often constructed men as the heroic actors. Formula One markets itself as a spectacle of speed, danger, and heroism. Meanwhile women are held as decorative accessories in the same story. As Damion Sturm points out, men are “heroic risk takers,” glamorized by their adoring fans and Hollywood potential (29). Conversely, women’s glamour resides in their “decorative capacity to adorn the cars and symbolically become trophies for these macho racers” (29). The most effective way to display these attributes is through Formula One’s Grid Girls. Since the sphere of racing is “perceived as a male world,” members seek an exaggerated display of femininity to reinforce their own masculinity (30). These Grid Girls are essentially models who accompany the cars and the drivers throughout race weekends, wearing provocative outfits and posing for pictures. Men are positioned as the macho racers, part of the machine of motorsport, while women are positioned as adornments to that same machine. This literal, visual separation can shape cultural assumptions about what a driver is expected to look like. Repeated representations can influence assumptions about who ‘belongs’ in certain roles long before formal exclusion happens. If the car is culturally coded as male, and women are framed as decorative contrasts to that masculinity, then women become symbols of difference rather than participants (30). Meritocratic assumptions can be undermined when women are represented through gender and appearance rather than through the expertise that the sport claims to reward.

The objectification isn’t just sexist imagery; it can also shape perceptions of who counts as an athlete. By marking women as adornment, this representation

detaches them from the core of the sport. It creates a distinction between those “who ‘do’ sport (the men) and those who ‘observe’ sport (women),” leaving women as objects rather than agents of their own careers (9). That distinction signals whose presence defines the sport and whose presence serves primarily a decorative function. Repeated representations of women as decorative rather than competitive participants can shape assumptions about who belongs in the sport and what expertise looks like. Such representations can reinforce assumptions about which roles are associated with expertise and which are associated with spectacle. This creates a cultural environment in which women’s credibility may be shaped before their performance is evaluated.

### **Institutional Change**

At the beginning of the 2018 Formula One season, Grid Girls were banned (31). The decision was presented as part of Formula One’s effort to modernize its presentation and move away from practices viewed as problematic within contemporary attitudes toward women. The timing of the decision, during the broader rise of the #MeToo movement also placed the change within a wider cultural debate over sexualization and sexism in public institutions (30). Regardless of the motivation behind the decision, the removal of Grid Girls marked a visible shift in Formula One’s public presentation of women.

### **Contemporary Representations**

Although the removal of Grid Girls showed change in Formula One’s public presentation, research suggests that gendered media representation has evolved rather than disappeared. Earlier promotional strategies relied on overt sexualization through promotional models and glamorous imagery (30, 29). More recent coverage places greater emphasis on women entering Formula One as drivers, engineers, and executives, reflecting the sport’s broader public commitment to diversity and inclusion (9). Yet this increased visibility can itself remain gendered. Recent analyses of Formula One media coverage argue that women continue to receive disproportionate attention for their novelty, appearance, and symbolic importance relative to their professional contributions (30, 32). Thus, contemporary representation may differ from the overt objectification associated with Grid Girls while still marking women as exceptional participants whose gender remains unusually visible. The shift is therefore not simply from sexism to equality, but from explicit sexualization toward subtler forms of gendered attention.

### **Contemporary Empirical Findings**

These patterns are reflected in contemporary research on women’s experiences within motorsport, as demonstrated through a study conducted by Louise Smyth, Dr. Nigel Morgan, and Dr Whitney Vernes Smith. According to this study, approximately 85% of women in motorsport believe that “objectification is a serious issue in motorsports,” while 70.5% have experienced it and 54.5% have experienced verbal harassment (25). The persistence of these experiences suggests that removing a visible practice such as Grid Girls does not necessarily eliminate the broader cultural attitudes associated with the objectification of women. Continued emphasis on appearance and femininity may also contribute to assumptions about women’s competence, although the specific effects of such representation on perceptions of professional ability require further empirical study.

### **Illustrative Incident**

A contemporary example of gendered treatment occurred when Sky Sports commentators Matteo Bobbi and Davide Valsecchi made sexual remarks about a woman in the paddock, with Bobbi referring to her as an “upgrade package” and inviting Valsecchi to look behind him (33). This incident illustrates how gendered treatment can persist alongside broader institutional changes in the sport’s public presentation.

## **INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES AND THEIR LIMITATIONS**

### **Current Institutional Response**

In response to persistent gender disparities in motorsport, Formula One and the FIA have introduced initiatives designed to increase women’s participation, including W Series and F1 Academy. These programs are intended to provide women with opportunities to demonstrate their driving ability and develop through more structured pathways within the sport. Research on women-only racing argues that such opportunities can provide observable performance evidence and challenge assumptions about women’s competitive ability (9). F1 Academy has subsequently established progression opportunities into higher formula categories. The inaugural champion, Marta García, received a fully funded seat in the Formula Regional European Championship by Alpine (FRECA), while the series now awards FIA Super Licence points to top finishers, linking performance within the series more directly to the established development ladder (34). The FIA has

also established the Women in Motorsport Commission with the stated goal of creating a “sports culture which facilitates and values the full participation of women in all aspects of motor sport” (35). Together, these measures indicate institutional recognition of gender representation as an issue within motorsport.

### Limitations Of Responses

However, the existence of women-specific initiatives does not by itself establish that they have eliminated the broader disparities identified in this paper. Separate championships may also create a tension between providing additional opportunities and maintaining a clear connection to the established competitive hierarchy. Müller’s concept of gender incommensurability is relevant here, as institutional separation can contribute to the perception that women’s participation belongs to a distinct competitive category (4). Similarly, research on women in motorsport has raised questions about whether participation in women-only series translates into equivalent recognition within the wider motorsport community (9). The relevant issue is therefore not simply whether women are provided opportunities to compete, but whether success within those opportunities is associated with comparable recognition and advancement

within the broader motorsport hierarchy.

The available evidence suggests that progression from women-only series into established feeder categories has not always been straightforward. For example, three-time W Series champion Jamie Chadwick did not secure a seat in FIA Formula 3 or Formula 2, demonstrating that success in a women-only series did not automatically result in advancement through the mainstream ladder (6). Additionally, the number of Super Licence points available through F1 Academy remains below the maximum available through Formula 2, indicating that the series occupies a different position within the established hierarchy of single-seater competition (36).

These examples do not establish that women-only initiatives cause continued underrepresentation elsewhere in motorsport. Rather, they demonstrate that increased access and visibility within a dedicated series do not necessarily translate automatically into equivalent advancement within established elite categories. The initiatives therefore represent meaningful efforts to expand participation and create development opportunities while leaving unresolved questions about whether those opportunities produce comparable progression, recognition, and access to the highest levels of the sport.

**Table 2.** *Comparative synthesis of proposed mechanisms of gender inequality in Formula One.*

| Mechanism of Inequality            | Stage at Which It Occurs               | Supporting Evidence                                                                                                                                                 | Counterargument                                                                                               | Representative Sources | Evidentiary Limitation                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Unequal access to motorsport       | Karting/ entry into competitive racing | Female participation decreases substantially between casual and competitive karting; access to equipment, tracks, coaching, and competition creates early barriers. | Karting is formally open to both boys and girls, and financial barriers affect aspiring male drivers as well. | 9, 11, 15              | Participation disparities demonstrate unequal representation but do not establish that gender is the sole cause of individual exclusion. |
| Financial and sponsorship barriers | Karting → F4 → F3 → F2                 | Junior motorsport requires substantial financial investment; sponsorship and digital visibility influence opportunities and career advancement.                     | Funding is a major barrier throughout motorsport and is not exclusively experienced by women.                 | 9, 14                  | Difficult to separate the effects of gender from socioeconomic status, family resources, and individual performance.                     |

*Continued Table 2. Comparative synthesis of proposed mechanisms of gender inequality in Formula One.*

| <b>Mechanism of Inequality</b>          | <b>Stage at Which It Occurs</b>              | <b>Supporting Evidence</b>                                                                                                                                                              | <b>Counterargument</b>                                                                                                | <b>Representative Sources</b> | <b>Evidentiary Limitation</b>                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gendered evaluation of ability          | Junior formulas/ driver selection            | Research suggests women can face different standards of competence and greater scrutiny, while female drivers may be perceived as riskier investments.                                  | Driver selection necessarily involves judgments about performance, potential, and team fit.                           | 9, 22, 21                     | Much of the evidence concerns gendered evaluation generally rather than documented F1 driver-selection decisions.                           |
| Male-dominated networks and credibility | Development pipelines/ recruitment           | Mentorship, sponsorship, informal recommendations, and established networks influence advancement; historically male-dominated networks may reproduce existing patterns of access.      | Professional networks and trust are normal parts of motorsport and do not necessarily indicate intentional exclusion. | 4, 15, 9                      | Informal networks are difficult to measure, making their direct effect on individual career outcomes difficult to establish.                |
| Gendered workplace roles                | F1 teams/ technical and leadership positions | Women remain underrepresented in technical and leadership roles and are disproportionately represented in supporting or public-facing positions.                                        | Women are present across a wide range of F1 occupations, and representation has improved in some technical positions. | 29, 18, 2, 19, 26             | Workforce statistics demonstrate representation gaps but cannot alone establish why particular individuals were placed in particular roles. |
| Questioning of female authority         | Technical/ operational roles                 | Research suggests traits such as assertiveness, confidence, and decisiveness can be interpreted differently depending on gender, potentially affecting perceptions of female authority. | High-pressure technical roles require accountability and evaluation for all employees.                                | 27                            | Evidence is stronger for gendered workplace evaluation generally than for specific F1 teams or individuals.                                 |
| Gendered media representation           | Public representation/ throughout careers    | Historical research documents sexualization and decorative portrayals, while contemporary research suggests women continue to receive gendered attention.                               | F1's public representation of women has changed substantially, particularly following the removal of Grid Girls.      | 30, 29, 15, 32                | Media studies establish patterns of representation more clearly than their direct causal effect on participation or career outcomes.        |

*Continued Table 2. Comparative synthesis of proposed mechanisms of gender inequality in Formula One.*

| Mechanism of Inequality                | Stage at Which It Occurs                | Supporting Evidence                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Counterargument                                                                                           | Representative Sources | Evidentiary Limitation                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Exceptionalism and “othering”          | Elite competition/ media representation | Female drivers and professionals may be framed as unusual or exceptional rather than as routine participants, emphasizing novelty or gender alongside professional achievement.                                             | Increased visibility can also normalize women’s participation and provide positive representation.        | 2, 32                  | Evidence demonstrates representational patterns more clearly than their direct effect on hiring, promotion, or driver selection. |
| Separation through women-only programs | Development/ W Series and F1 Academy    | Women-only programs expand access and visibility but have historically had less established status and weaker pathways into the mainstream ladder; Jamie Chadwick illustrates limits of translation into higher categories. | F1 Academy has created clearer progression opportunities, including FRECA seats and Super Licence points. | 9, 4, 6, 36            | These programs are relatively new, so their long-term effects on advancement into Formula One remain uncertain.                  |

## CONCLUSION

At its core, Formula One operates under formally gender-neutral sporting regulations. However, the persistent gender imbalance documented throughout this paper cannot be explained by the rules alone. The evidence examined suggests disparities in access, sponsorship, evaluation, professional networks, and representation in technical and organizational positions.

Female drivers face a further tension between formal participation under gender-neutral rules and continued gendered treatment in media and professional contexts. Research suggests that although overt forms of sexualization have declined, women in motorsport continue to receive attention related to their novelty, appearance, or symbolic status. The available evidence is consistent with the interpretation that formal neutrality does not necessarily eliminate gendered experiences within the sport, although the specific mechanisms connecting representation, evaluation, and advancement require further empirical investigation.

Formula One and the FIA have increasingly acknowledged gender representation through initiatives such as W Series and F1 Academy. These programs have expanded opportunities and created more explicit pathways for women within single-seater racing. At the

same time, the evidence examined here indicates that increased participation and visibility do not automatically establish equality in advancement, recognition, or organizational authority. Further progress therefore depends not only on expanding access to competition, but also on examining how opportunities, evaluation, sponsorship, progression, and decision-making authority are distributed throughout the wider motorsport system.

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