



Experiences of Pregnancy in Elite Female Athletes on the World Class Programme



Loughborough
University

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FOREWORD

The findings of this report highlight the experiences of pregnancy in female athletes on the World Class Programme (WCP). Specifically, it documents the factors that contribute to decision making around pregnancy for athletes on WCP and the challenges and concerns athletes have faced throughout their pregnancy and post-partum.

The report highlights some of the existing issues with the current support mechanisms offered to pregnant athletes on WCP and the implications of this on athlete well-being, organisational support, and gender equity. Importantly, the report presents a number of recommendations and potential interventions for NGBs to consider in order to improve support provision, and directions for future research to continue to develop knowledge and understanding on this issue.

The findings of the report are based on a qualitative interview study with ten female Olympic and Paralympic athletes on or recently retired from WCP and aimed to shine a light on the lived experiences and insights from athletes on the programme. The research was conducted by Loughborough University in collaboration with UK Sport and was designed to provide empirical insights to support the improvement and development of evidence-based policy, guidelines, and provision around pregnancy by National Governing Bodies (NGBs) working with female athletes on WCP.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank UK Sport for their support with the research project and the development of this report. It has been – and continues to be – a collaborative process and the research would not have been possible without their investment, feedback, and commitment to addressing the current dearth of knowledge on this issue. We would also like to thank colleagues at the British Athletes Commission and the English Institute of Sport supporting the study and facilitating participant recruitment.



KEY FINDINGS

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Experiences of Pregnancy in Elite Female Athletes on the World Class Programme

- Participants: 10 female Olympic and Paralympic athletes
- Participated in semi-structured interviews between January-May 2021



COMMUNICATION

*"I was nervous to have
the conversation
[about being pregnant]."*



KNOWLEDGE

*"I think if we had that guidance, and it was
out there, and all members of staff felt
comfortable then I would feel a lot more
relaxed about everything I was doing."*



PLANNING

*"I think one of the big
considerations would be:
when would this be happening?
How long would I be out for?"*



SUPPORT

*"I think if I was to make a return, I would
need the support structure of the physio
team, team psych, and the coaches and
the squad and all of that, in order to
facilitate me getting back."*



GUIDANCE

*"It is so vague to say 'we will review at
3-months post-partum'. There is no: how
do you train; what is allowed and what isn't
allowed; how you keep fit during pregnancy."*



WELL-BEING

*"After I had had our baby,
I felt an obscene amount
of pressure."*

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on a research project conducted by academics [authors] in the School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences at Loughborough University. The research project was developed in collaboration with UK Sport. The study was also supported by colleagues at the British Athletes Commission and the English Institute of Sport.

Research questions

The research was designed to document female Olympic and Paralympic athletes' experiences of pregnancy whilst on, or recently retired from, WCP. Three main research questions structured the focus of the research. These were:

- What factors contribute to decision making around pregnancy whilst on a WCP for athletes?
- What challenges and concerns do athletes face throughout their pregnancy and postpartum?
- What were athletes' experiences of support from NGBs during pregnancy and post-partum, and how could this be improved?

Research design and method

The research employed a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection. Athletes were recruited via advertising the study on social media, via the BAC and EIS, and via emails detailing the study which were sent to current WCP athletes and those who had recently retired (within the last 3 years). 13 athletes expressed an interest in the study, of which interviews were conducted with 10 athletes between January to May 2021. The athletes included in the sample were from Olympic (n=5) and Paralympic (n=5) sports and had either experienced pregnancy (n=4) or were considering pregnancy (n=6) whilst on WCP.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before undergoing a form of qualitative thematic analysis. Data analysis procedures were followed throughout the process to enhance the empirical adequacy and descriptive validity¹. The full dataset for this project has been securely archived within Loughborough University's Data Repository². Interviews lasted on average 60 mins.

Ethics

The research was granted full ethical approval from Loughborough University Research Ethics Committee (2020-2065-2347). Athletes who took part in the research project have been granted full anonymity. All references to sport, event, Paralympic classification and / or any other identifying information have been removed.

Research strengths and limitations

The data from this research is drawn from a representative sample of elite female athletes on WCP. The sample size remains significant relative to the approximate number of female athletes to have experienced pregnancy whilst on WCP and is considered appropriate for the qualitative methods employed. It is important to note that the findings in this report reflect the current policy context at the time this research was conducted. It is the largest known study to date and includes a diverse sample of elite female athletes (including both Olympic and Paralympic athletes).

The findings of the study are presented below under three primary themes:

- Factors that contribute to decision-making around pregnancy whilst on a WCP
- The challenges athletes face during pregnancy and post-partum
- Recommendations for supporting athletes during pregnancy and post-partum.

¹ Wiltshire, G., & Ronkainen, N. (2021). A realist approach to thematic analysis: making sense of qualitative data through experiential, inferential and dispositional themes, *Journal of Critical Realism*, DOI: 10.1080/14767430.2021.1894909

² DOI: 10.17028/rd.lboro.14672901

FINDINGS

Factors that contribute to decision making around pregnancy whilst on WCP

The findings of the study demonstrate that many female athletes have a preconceived notion of the choices they face if they were to become pregnant on WCP that impact on their decision around pregnancy. A significant proportion of the athletes in the study described how, in their view, the most likely outcome was that their pregnancy would result in retirement.

“I thought that wanting a baby would probably be the end of my career or could be a potential reason for ending my career if you wanted to start a family because it seemed impossible to do both”.

“At the moment there’s definitely a feeling, at least in [sport], that pretty much if you want to have kids then retirement comes hand-in-hand with it”.

“My oldest teammate is 30, the rest are all mid-twenties or younger and would probably stop in the next few years if they wanted a family... a couple of people in the past have stopped for that reason – for having a family”.

This expectation appears to be in part due to a general lack of athlete, coach and manager awareness and understanding around the existing pregnancy policy and guidance in place to support female athletes, and / or a feeling that the current guidance fails to provide sufficient support and advice for athletes during pregnancy and postpartum. Furthermore, athletes describe knowing of very few, if any, existing role models of female elite athletes who have successfully made a return to the WCP following having a baby.

“I was about three and a half months pregnant, and I spoke to my federation and told them that I was going to have to come off the funding and then he said ‘oh actually, I think there might be a policy. Let me talk to them’ and then he spoke to them and found out. I do not think he even knew that there was a policy, so it was just through communication really. Like I said, I didn’t even know it existed”.

“UK Sport have this policy that I didn’t even know about”.

“We’ve got this pregnancy policy coming out and looking at it, it doesn’t seem feasible... It was just the different conditions on it, it just didn’t seem very realistic”.

“I have been sent over the pregnancy policy in the current agreement, but I was speaking to my manager today before this and she said ‘it’s not really good enough what’s in it so far’; there isn’t much in there. There isn’t much guidance and hopefully the changes that are going to come are going to make it better”.

“I don’t know what it is like for any athlete to come back [after pregnancy] to the programme... There is not really a clear process of how to actually get back into the programme”.

The importance of planning a pregnancy around Olympic and Paralympic cycles was another significant factor in the athletes’ decision-making process. Planning their pregnancy in the first two years of the Olympic and Paralympic cycle contributed to the athletes’ confidence that returning to sport could be an option. This was especially the case in younger athletes who were aware that peak sporting performance and Olympic and Paralympic success would occur at an age that coincided with peak fertility and fewer pregnancy-related risks and complications.

“Time in the Olympic cycle [and] whether there were other female athletes that I knew who had had children and had managed to make a comeback... I think that would matter to me or influence my decision or how confident I felt that returning to sport would be an option”.

“If I were to go for 2026 you would probably be looking at trying to have your kid early summer 2023 so you have two full years before having the Olympics. Yeah, you would have to definitely factor it in. If you had it less than two years out you probably are pushing it with the pressures that are on you at that point to make Worlds, make the Games. Whereas in the first two years there is a bit more breathing room”.



“At the moment there’s definitely a feeling, at least in [sport], that pretty much if you want to have kids then retirement comes hand-in-hand with it.”

“I think one of the big considerations would be: when would this be happening? How long would I be out for?”

“I think it would be very difficult for you to have a child in the third year of the [Paralympic and Olympic] cycle, and you definitely wouldn’t be in contention, I think, in the final year of the cycle”.

Specific family planning of this kind requires dialogue with coaches and support staff during the initial stages of any decision making around pregnancy. However, expressing a desire to have a baby was perceived by athletes to be directly in conflict with their performance remit and more broadly their inclusion on the WCP making such conversations extremely challenging. Although the findings demonstrate the critical importance of family planning to athletes, there appears to exist a culture of silence around the topic of pregnancy that subsequently limits the ability athletes have to discuss their options and plan accordingly.

“Pregnancy is just not a topic of conversation in the squad”.

“It’s not something that’s spoken about a huge amount”.

“I think it’s not really discussed. It’s not made to be an option”.

“They were paying me to train and paying me to be an athlete. I didn’t feel like I could have had those conversations”.

“It’s almost felt in the past like a taboo to have a baby and be in the sport”.

The findings indicate that athletes are not entirely comfortable initiating a conversation about family planning with staff members and especially with coaching staff who are predominantly male. Some athletes reported feeling like they would be chastised for deciding to start a family, and coaching staff would be disappointed if they fell pregnant. Certainly, the lack

of female representatives within an athlete’s immediate support structure is a key factor that contributes to the marginalisation of pregnancy as a topic of conversation within the WCP environment.

“I would be nervous to ask staff members... I would certainly be nervous to speak to a coach before I had actually come to that decision”.

“I feel like at the moment if you had to sit the coaches down and explain that you were pregnant it would almost feel like a teen pregnancy, like ‘well, that was irresponsible’ or ‘how did that happen? Have you not been taking proper precautions?’”

“One of the challenges as well [with family planning], is we have an all-male coaching team and support staff... basically our head coach, our assistant coach, our weights coach, our physio are all men”.

“There are no females in terms of our leadership team; it is a very male dominant hierarchy. There are not really any females up there you would go to first to have the conversation... I would prefer to speak with a female about it first, but it is a very male-dominant leadership team that we have got”.

The findings indicate that, although athletes felt the need to be transparent with coaches in the decision making around pregnancy, they felt uncomfortable to address this in part for fear of being viewed as not committed to the programme and the subsequent consequences this might incur with respect to their position within the programme and future investment.

“I wouldn’t say to the coaches that I was thinking of having a baby because chances are it wouldn’t happen whilst I was on the programme [due to fertility issues]. So, then you would just feel like you were waving a big red flag being like ‘I’m not fully committed’. So then, if you were trying for a family whilst being an athlete, you’d have to only tell them

once you were already pregnant and then that would leave me feeling like I had almost done something behind their backs”.

“It comes down more to the professional relationships or the coaches’ general feeling about that person... if I was coming up against a very young athlete – the coach thinking ‘well, she is going to have a baby in a year or so, so it wouldn’t be a smart decision to invest in her now; we should invest in the younger athlete’. So, I would be nervous about that”.

“I was nervous to have the conversation [about being pregnant]”.

These factors subsequently contributed to athletes feeling unsure as to who they would seek family planning advice from within their immediate support team and National Governing Body (NGB). When asked who, where or how they would seek, or had sought, family planning advice, some athletes pointed to the British Athlete Commission (BAC) and / or family planning services, whilst others suggested their Performance Lifestyle Advisor (PLA) would be the first point of contact.

“I think if it was right now, I would have to almost outsource it (advice about pregnancy) because there isn’t anyone I could ask”.

“I think I would end up going to talk to the BAC to get some advice from them as to maybe how to start the conversation”.

“Our performance lifestyle advisor is brilliant, and she would definitely do everything she can... I’d probably go to her”.



The challenges athletes face during pregnancy and post-partum

The findings demonstrate that athletes face a number of challenges and concerns throughout their pregnancy, which have specific implications for female athlete well-being and the integrity of the organisational support structures. One of the key challenges highlighted in the interviews was the sense of a lack of knowledge and guidance within NGBs on how to support athletes in training throughout the early stages of their pregnancy.

“I think one thing was staff felt a little uncomfortable about working with someone who is pregnant and not knowing what’s okay to do”.

“I don’t think anyone is too sure on what they are doing. So, I might have to lead that and say, ‘can we just map something out?’”

“I think if we had that guidance, and it was out there, and all members of staff felt comfortable then I would feel a lot more relaxed about everything I was doing, and I would feel a lot more relaxed about them saying ‘this is the plan’. Whereas it is kind of like ‘we don’t know’ at the minute and we are just rolling with it. So, one hundred percent way more needs to be done; there needs to be more research, more information and better guidance because there just isn’t any at all”.

“I think as things stand, they (support staff) are just curious, and they just want to know more about how to support... I think it is just going to be a case of working together on this one”.

This perceived knowledge deficit extended to post-partum support where athletes experienced limited planning and guidance by staff on their phased return to sport. Athletes described having to take the lead on returning to activity and in having to proactively seek out support from appropriately trained professionals to guide their recovery due to limited guidance and support received via the NGB.

“It is so vague to say ‘we will review at 3-months post-partum’. There is no: how do you train; what is allowed and what isn’t allowed; how you keep fit during pregnancy”.

“Because there have been other people, like sports psych or team doctors, who maybe haven’t been that helpful – or team directors – who were just like ‘oh, congratulations!’, and you’re like ‘yeah, great’. Can we talk about how I might get back to [sport]?”.

“I didn’t get any support from [named governing body] on that [antenatal advice]”.

“I organised my return to the gym. My return to the gym was pushed by me. I went and got a women’s health physiotherapy session which I paid for myself”.

“I’m still chasing them a lot for information about my return to sport”.

The three month post-partum review as outlined in the current policy was a key concern for a number of athletes. The findings indicated the need for greater clarity on the review process (e.g., such as what would be expected of them in their phased return to training and how a potentially longer return to sport would impact on funding) and many expressed concerns that 3 months was not a sufficient length of time to recover from childbirth – especially for athletes who may experience more complicated births, other pregnancy related complications, Para athletes with specific impairment related concerns, and / or postnatal depression. Indeed, a number of athletes described how the 3 month review contributed to pressure and post-partum anxiety.

“Post-partum... there needs to be some clarity... you don’t know what birth you are going to have. If you have a caesarean your recovery is going to take a lot longer... how much can you get done in 3-months? That’s not a lot of time!”

“After I had had our baby, I felt an obscene amount of pressure”.

“I think I did recover well but I think we need to recalibrate how long women need to come back mentally and physically and emotionally from them having children”.

“I actually had probably about 4-months’ worth of counselling with a therapist who just helped me with anxiety, confidence, self-esteem – stuff like that because I was really struggling”.



“I think I did recover well but I think we need to recalibrate how long women need to come back mentally and physically and emotionally from them having children.”

The findings further indicated that communication with support staff was a particular challenge throughout their pregnancy and post-partum and, for some athletes, this compounded a feeling of isolation often experienced by women in the early post-partum phase. The lack of communication and support throughout their pregnancy and post-partum journey from their respective sports meant that athletes felt undervalued and forgotten members of the WCP.

“I think our team and our governing body, in particular, I can’t speak for other governing bodies... but I think what they did was they outsourced the communication to the lifestyle support and then that was it. I didn’t hear anything. I still don’t! I’m very isolated”.

“The pregnancy was quite lonely as well because there was nobody really apart from a really lovely, performance lifestyle advisor. She was great... There was no S&C coach to tell me everything would be okay, no physiotherapist to be like ‘let me help you with your aches and pains’... There’s nobody in the governing body who is checking on me weekly and being like ‘hey, you doing okay?’”.

“It [lack of communication] just makes you feel undervalued... I come to some conspiracy where I’m like, ‘this is because this... this is because I’m an older athlete... this is because I have a child’. I make up all these things but this is just poor communication”.

Logistical challenges were also raised, for example in relation to childcare and specifically feeding following their return to training. There is a sense amongst a number of athletes that the WCP fosters an organisational environment that is not sufficiently flexible to accommodate or assist athletes with their childcare and feeding responsibilities.

“We’re in the building for 5 days a week for about 4-5 hours a day, and how accessible it is to bring your kid with you ... Would that be a supportive environment? Could you bring your children to training with you?”

“And then with the feeding as well it’s just simple things like I have to think about”.

One athlete pointed to the normalisation of ‘athlete mothers’ in the Elite Sport programmes of other nations, and the difference in the support mechanisms and provisions when compared with the UK WCP. This includes, for instance, accommodating a partner or family member to travel with the athlete during competitions and training camps to assist with childcare responsibilities.

“In [named country], that is the norm that your family travels with you... It is just seeing them [other countries] and what they do. The kid comes along with them, it seems so natural and the whole team gets behind it and it never seems to be an issue. But I don’t know how I would feel about it and how the programme would feel about it.”

“There are definitely examples in other countries... there isn’t much evidence of our team doing it successfully but in like, the [named Country] for example, they bring their kids to tournaments... But in our programme it seems like ‘oh no, you can’t do that!’ ... it is just not something we can do because there isn’t provision at all”.



There is, however, a sense that any meaningful and long-term changes made to improving the flexibility and support provisions for athletes with children will require more significant shifts in the wider organisational and leadership culture and approach of the WCP.

“I think it could be more flexible, but I don’t think the programme wants to be more flexible. We have just brought in a new ‘what it takes to win’ model and the number of hours you have to do to be the best in the world. They are very stuck in their ways about this is how it is, so it doesn’t feel like there is much wiggle room”.

“Depends on your performance director, your CEO, and all the people who are meant to be leaders within the system creating that open culture... I do think when you have women in positions of leadership then policy can change in favour of women a lot easier because they see us as a strength, not ‘you’re going to have a baby; go away’”.

Supporting athletes during pregnancy and post-partum

Based on the experiences and personal insights from athletes who took part in the study, this study has identified several recommendations in order to ensure that athletes feel better supported by UK Sport in both the decision-making process around pregnancy and throughout the duration of pregnancy and post-partum.

i. Improved communication and transparency

As highlighted on page 7, pregnancy, family planning and fertility related issues are rarely discussed between athletes and NGB's. The findings indicate that athletes would benefit from improved and more collaborative and open forms of communication on the issue and greater transparency around their family planning options whilst on WCP.

"[I would like] for it to be a commonly discussed topic and making it seem possible. Either speaking to female athletes about it who are at that point and age I am at, and saying 'this is an option; these are the things we could offer to do; do you think about things that could help other female athletes?' and making more of a conversation about the possibility of having it rather than it happening to somebody and being all panic stations... actually ask us 'what is your opinion on it? Is it something you have thought about it? What different scenarios? Could it be feasible?'"

"Regular communication would probably be pretty important".

"[I] think it could be quite nice to have some reassurance as a group about what the policies are and what our options are...it would be quite handy to have something like that [group talk] so we could all just know what the process is what that looks like and just have clarity that it will be the same for everybody for transparency, really. Then we all know what to expect and we all expect a fair deal".

"I think it would be really nice to see a bit more openness and transparency of what your options are. So, if you are in that scenario that you do want to get pregnant then what are the options and for it to be a bit more obvious".

"We don't have any communication about it. That was easy. What would I want to see? I guess more... I think they should maybe go through the pregnancy stuff; talk through it and make it open".

ii. Robust support structures

The findings demonstrate that athletes who have been pregnant whilst on WCP currently experience inadequate levels of support from NGB's in the development of a tailored action plan with regard to training practices both during pregnancy and in their return to sport postpartum. Athletes felt left to their own devices and largely ignored and undervalued by their NGBs whilst pregnant which was detrimental to their mental health and wellbeing. Athletes were particularly vocal about a need for more robust support structures and knowledge within individual NGB's to better support pregnant athletes throughout the duration of their pregnancy and the post-partum period. This included the integration of support mechanisms to assist athletes with their childcare responsibilities in cases where they would have to travel and spend significant periods of time away with their team.

"I think if I was to make a return, I would need the support structure of the physio team, team psych, and the coaches and the squad and all of that, in order to facilitate me getting back".

"Having a good understanding with the doctor, physiologist and coach about generally what is to be expected and at what point I could reasonably start training again and at what point I could be looking at being back at full fitness again".

"I do think that I'd be more interested in the specifics of what is available in my sport... I think I am at the point now where what I would want to know would be the facts of the support that would definitely be available to me".

"The option of having support if you were to go away and compete for the weekend whether you could bring an external party to help support you with your games... I think in terms of bringing someone along to support [with childcare during competitions], it would almost need to come from the programme".



"I think it would be really nice to see a bit more openness and transparency of what your options are."

iii. Independent advice

Given the difficulty athletes face in discussing family planning with coaching and support staff (including the male-dominated hierarchy and perceived negative judgements about pregnancy) and the perception from athletes of a lack of knowledge on this topic within the NGB support structures, many of the athletes within the study saw value in seeking guidance from an independent body or individual that could provide confidential advice on pregnancy and fertility related issues and / or advocate for reasonable adjustments to be made on a specific case by case basis.

"I think it would be great to have somewhere you could go. It doesn't need to be a dedicated person but someone who... even your PL could put you in touch with or somewhere you could go to talk these things through and be like 'I'm thinking about this. What does that look like? What do I need to be thinking about? What do I need to be considering? What are the questions I need to be asking of my NGB? What's okay and what's not okay?'"

"Say you had a problem with a coach that wasn't very respectful of the fact that you're a feeding mother and they weren't able to accommodate them coming on a camp, then there's somebody there to advocate and say 'hey, this can happen, but these are the things you need to do to make it happen'. Just an advocate with some power and influence that are able to influence governing bodies... an advocate and it definitely needs to have claws and teeth from the EIS in that kind of way".

Although many athletes claimed that Performance Lifestyle Advisors (PLAs) would be one of the first points of contact for pregnancy advice, and for athletes who experienced pregnancy PLAs had been invaluable in signposting athletes to advice services, there was some suggestion that pregnancy and fertility related issues fell outside of the PLAs knowledge remit and therefore a specific pregnancy related support advisor within the WCP structure would be welcome.

"[The performance] Lifestyle advisor was great – she was able to signpost me to a physiologist and to a good women's health physio [but] If UK Sport were able to invest in like a women's health lifestyle support where they're able to support women who are pregnant or have just had children".

"They might be able to support conversations, but they [PLA] can't make massive change I don't think".

iv. Gender equity

Although the current pregnancy policy and guidelines go some way toward improving the distribution and provision of benefits for female athletes, there was a general consensus amongst the athletes in the study that more needed to be done. A number of athletes suggested that they would welcome a revision to the current pregnancy policy and guidelines, and that revisions could be loosely modelled on the maternity support being offered in other occupational contexts. As athletes do not hold the status of employee, UKS may benefit from modelling their pregnancy support on examples set by other nations.

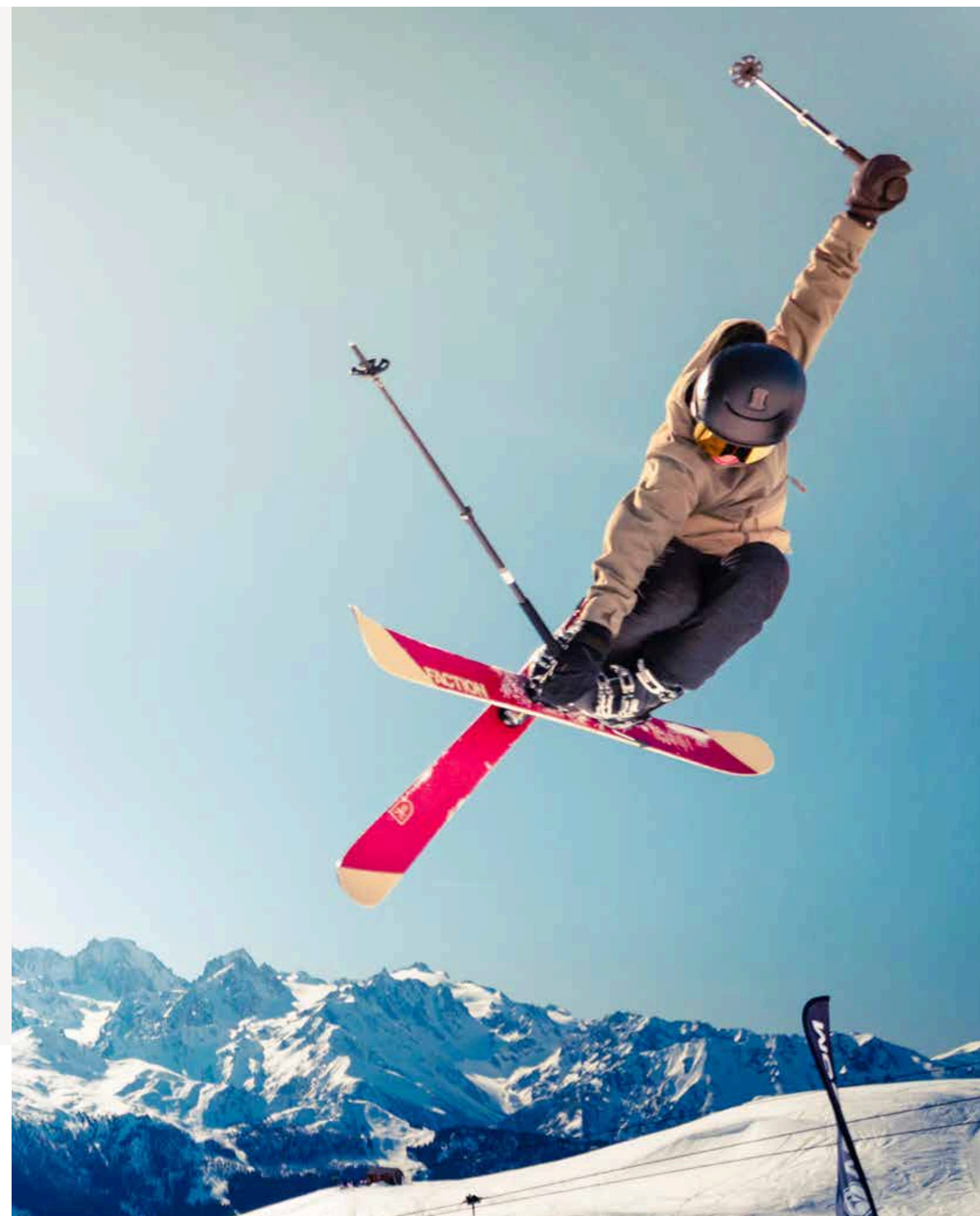
"There [needs to be] an understanding – just like there is in the 'normal' workplace – that women may take maternity leave and may have children and that's going to be accepted and their rights protected through that time. I guess whatever protocols or agreements put in place to create more of that kind of environment would be amazing".

"I think, ultimately, you should be treated like any woman in any workplace".

CONCLUSION

The findings in this report, drawn from a qualitative interview study with 10 current female athlete and Para athletes on WCP, have highlighted the factors that contribute to athlete decision making around pregnancy, the challenges and concerns faced throughout pregnancy and postpartum, and the way athletes feel they can be better supported during pregnancy and post-partum by NGBs.

- The findings indicated that discussions between athletes and support staff on the topic of pregnancy within NGB's are scarce and this subsequently contributes to factors such as a lack of transparency around the current pregnancy policy, a sense of nervousness amongst athletes to broach the subject, and athlete's wider awareness and understanding of family planning options whilst on WCP. Communication is therefore a key factor in an athlete's decision-making process, and this requires improving in order to enable athletes to make informed decisions around pregnancy.
- For athletes who have experienced pregnancy whilst on WCP there exist a number of key challenges. Firstly, the current knowledge and expertise of support staff within NGBs in the management of pregnant athletes is perceived as limited and thus impacts on the confidence athletes have in their successful return to training post-partum. The findings indicated that athletes feel that the current pregnancy guidelines are inadequate and fail to provide clarity and expertise on the management of pregnant athletes and return to training. Specifically, the three month post-partum review and the lack of clarity on what was expected by each NGB was a concern and compounded post-partum related anxiety issues in some athletes. Secondly, athletes were concerned about the lack of support and provisions available by NGB's for athletes who returned to training and had childcare and feeding responsibilities. The majority of athletes were of the view that more could be done to improve the support structures and mechanisms for mother athletes. Broadly, pregnancy and the post-partum seemed to be a risky period in relation to female elite athlete mental health and wellbeing due to feelings of isolation, loneliness and fears around their return to sport. Clearer and more comprehensive engagement between sports and pregnant / post-partum athletes may serve to alleviate some of these issues. Ensuring the availability of mental health support for these athletes may therefore be particularly important.
- In summary, there is a pressing need to improve the current pregnancy guidelines and support offered to athletes by NGB's alongside the development of specific knowledge and open communication with regards to how pregnancy can, and should, be managed within the elite female athlete population. The findings of this report demonstrate that more needs to be done. Making improvements to the current support offered will have a positive impact on female athlete health and well-being and the wider knowledge base and dialogue that feeds into female athlete health and well-being interventions, and on gender equity with regard to the meaningful provision and distribution of benefits and opportunities for female athletes.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This report makes an important case for the development of policy, interventions, and knowledge in the area of pregnancy and family planning in female athletes on WCP.

Although improved communication and dialogue between athletes and support staff around the current pregnancy policy and guidelines would benefit athlete knowledge awareness of their options in the short term, looking forward further research and intervention is certainly needed to develop a more robust policy.

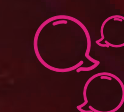
Recommendations for future research and intervention include:



The development of an independent pregnancy advisory group: To provide confidential medical expertise and advice on pregnancy related issues and feed into the development of pregnancy policy and guidelines.



A series of focus groups with female athletes across Olympic and Paralympic sports to assist in the collaborative development and revision of the current pregnancy guidelines. Knowledge from the focus groups would feed into the development of tailored and specific guidelines for NGB's.



Discussions with staff and practitioners to identify gaps in knowledge in support provision to direct future research and guidance accordingly. This will ensure that future support provision (e.g., specifically around training during pregnancy and postpartum) is appropriately tailored for female elite athletes.



Feedback from male athletes and partners about their experiences of parenthood whilst on a WCP. It is acknowledged that this research only focuses on the experiences of female athletes and that the perspectives of male athletes and partners may offer further insights into the needs for wider family support provision.

