Gender Equality in Soccer: Negative Attitudes Facing Female Head Coaches

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Management - Leadership (Professional Sport)  Friday, June 8, 2018
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  11:15 AM
Abstract 2018-187  Room: Acadia A

Review of Relevant Literature. As described by Burton (2015), there is a distinct “absence of research on women’s aspirations for leadership positions within sport organizations” (p. 163). The extant literature on women in soccer (e.g., Caudwell, 1999; Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, 1999; Williams, 2017) has largely examined women’s experiences playing soccer, with comparatively less attention paid to women in non-playing roles, such as managers and head coaches. There is evidence to suggest that a greater number of women are leaving the coaching profession than men, such that on average women only maintain a coaching career for a period of five years (Cunningham & Sagas, 2003). Outside of the sport of soccer, a plethora of research literature exists that has sought to investigate underrepresentation of female coaches across sports, such as examining structural practices and workplace relationships within the coaching profession through a sociological lens (e.g., Norman, 2010a; 2010b; 2016a; 2016b). Evidence from U.S. elite female head coaches suggests a lack of support systems, mentoring, and networking as key influences on low rates of female coaches (Blom, Abrell, Wilson, Lape, Halbrook, & Judge, 2011). The power of male coaches and lack of opportunity for female coaches, despite having similar levels of qualification, has also been suggested as reason for the disproportionate ratio (Reade, Rodger, & Norman, 2009). Whilst this theme of research has been fruitful at adding to our global understanding of underrepresentation of female head coaches across sports, there has yet to be a direct sport-specific gender examination of the elite coaching workforce, such as within the male-dominated sport of soccer. The aim of this study is to address this gap in the literature by qualitatively examining the experiences of female soccer coaches in order to understand the extent to which gender affects their work experiences.

Methodology. A transcendental phenomenological methodology (Husserl, 1983) was employed to provide a rich description of the coaches’ experiences (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Through purposive snowball sampling, female soccer coaches were approached by the researcher based on personal associations and invited to participate in the research. The sample (n=12) consisted of professional female elite (n=7) and development (n=5) coaches; specifically, elite girls’ Regional Talent Centre (Tier 1) coaches (n=4), a boys’ professional academy coach (n=1), an Academy Technical Director (n=1), a Women’s Super League (WSL) head coach (n=1), ‘feeder’ youth development coaches (n=4), and an amateur women’s soccer club head coach (n=1). All participants took part in one-to-one interviews with the researcher, guided by a semi-structured interview guide divided into three sections: a) female coaches’ work experiences in soccer, b) experiences as a female coach in a male-dominated sport, and c) career progression opportunities for female soccer coaches. Audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. The data was entered into QSR International’s NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software and thematically analyzed following procedures by Braun and Clarke (2009).

Results. The participants reported experiencing negative attitudes based on their gender from players, parents, male colleagues, organizations, and employers. The barriers female coaches faced were categorized into the following themes: (a) organizational conflict (e.g., sexist jokes, lack of respect from colleagues, rejected for promotion); (b) unable to express themselves (e.g., judged, under pressure, worried about appearance, damaged confidence); and (c) actively having to change preconceived ideas of women and soccer (e.g., are emotional, are not knowledgeable, are not good at playing).

Discussion. This study provides insight into the perceived negative attitudes from a broad spectrum of stakeholders in soccer, that have consequences on female coaches’ ability to perform, their well-being, and their career opportunities. Accordingly, it offers preliminary information for regional associations and national governing bodies, who need to offer greater support for female coaches within the male-dominated soccer profession. This study provides an introductory overview of the work experiences of female soccer coaches and offers the necessary foundation for future research.