Perceptions of Progress in the Equitable Treatment of Women Leaders in the Sport Industry

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Much of the focus of research done on women working in the sport industry has documented the underrepresentation of women in the sport workforce (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lapchick, 2019; Lavoi, 2019; Staurowsky, 2016). Although the sport industry has been open to some women serving in executive leadership roles, barriers to women’s advancement in sport careers have been well documented and explored through various theoretical frameworks, including homologous reproduction (Buzuvis, 2015); the glass ceiling (Hancock, Darvin, & Walker, 2018); the glass cliff (Lough & Guerin, 2019); the leadership labyrinth (Harvey, Voelker, Cope, & Dieffenbach, 2018); systemic gender discrimination (Sabo, Veliz, & Staurowsky, 2016; Women in Sport, 2018); and others. Building on that work, the purpose of this project was to assess the experience of U.S. women sport leaders who work in women’s sports (N=2363), the degree to which identified barriers hold women back, and their perceptions of the progress made during the past 10 years (2009 - 2019) in addressing those barriers. Part of a larger survey on the overall status of girls and women in sport conducted collaboratively with the Women’s Sports Foundation, this presentation reports findings from the section on women in the sport workplace organized around questions pertaining to gender discrimination in the workplace (3 items); hiring and evaluation practices (18 items); opportunities for professional development (16 items); and workplace culture (18 items). The U.S. women sport leaders who responded to the survey came from various sectors of the industry (youth sport – 14.52%; high school – 13.37%; college – 49.11%; elite amateur/Olympics – 6.29%; professional – 7.87%; city leagues/recreation leagues – 5.23%; and other – 3.6%). In terms of racial composition, the majority of respondents were White (83%) with 7.34% identifying as Black or African-American; 1.89% as mixed race, 1.56% as Asian, .66% as American Indian; .37% as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Just over four percent identified as Hispanic or Latina. The average age of the respondents was 46 years and their average time of service in their current position was 10 years. When asked about how gender affected their success within the work environment, 63% indicated that they had been discriminated against in the workplace; 43% reported that their gender prevented them from being promoted; 23% had lost the opportunity at one time to get a job in sport because of their gender; and nearly 47% reported that they were evaluated differently compared to their male peers because of their gender. While some progress has been made according to respondents in creating more welcoming and inclusive sport workplaces, there continues to be much more work to be done in addressing an array of climate issues and in the areas of transphobia (24%); racism (19%); and ageism (29%), the climate was perceived by women sport leaders as worse or much worse than it was 10 years ago. In this presentation, we will elaborate further on our findings and offer policy recommendations to facilitate more equitable work environments for women in the sport industry.