

An Exploratory Analysis of Constraints and Barriers with reference to Women Leadership in Sports

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Abstract

Women's leadership reached a historic milestone in the economic and financial arenas but they have not reached the top leadership positions in sport. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and FIFA widely regarded as the most prestigious sport organisations, have never been led by a woman. Latest research, based on the Sydney Scoreboard Global Index for Women in Sport Leadership, shows that women chaired only 7% (5 of 70) of international sport federations in 2016. This is the same as in 2012, so no positive change has been achieved in the past four years. Women occupied 19% (12 of 64) of chief executive positions in 2016, up from 8% in 2012. So, men hold a staggering 93% of chair or president roles and 81% of chief executive positions. This means the key leadership positions in global sport governance and management remain largely elusive for women.

Leadership is the area of sport where women are particularly underrepresented, if not totally absent. Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, the number of women playing sports has significantly increased; however, the percentage of women in coaching positions has strikingly declined. Women continue to be largely marginalised from the decision making and leadership sphere of sport, including at the grassroots level. Barriers to women's leadership in sport can be defined as: any construct, norm or practice within the structural or cultural domains of sport serving to bar passage to, restrict, limit the ability of women to lead, guide or have influence. These barriers can be further categorised as: a) structural barriers b) cultural practices and c) capacity gaps.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within all sports is caused by societal perceptions of sports and gender, homologous reproduction theory, and networking and access discrimination; the underrepresentation of black women especially can be explained through social cognitive career theory. This underrepresentation hinders the future athletic success of women and further enforces power hierarchies among men and women. A primary reason that women are underrepresented in sports leadership is the societal perception of sports as a masculine space. Sports work as a societal institution to "actively construct boys and men to exhibit, value, and reproduce traditional notions of masculinity," and reproduce certain forms of masculinity as acceptable. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to bring into account the barriers and constraints faced by the women regarding their leadership in sports.

Keywords: leadership, sports, women, underrepresentation etc.

"Women are historically underrepresented in sports and tech but diverse businesses are flat out more successful," says Hudl CEO David Graff

Introduction

In recent years there has been a big shift in the visibility of women's sport, as women's sport has received more exposure and media coverage than ever before. While the profile of and demand for women's sport has risen, gender inequalities still prevail in terms of investment, sponsorship, media coverage and pay (Farrer & Co, 2019), but also more broadly in society, in terms of participation in grass roots sport. Research shows that although the gender gap is slowly narrowing, women and girls are still significantly less likely than their male counterparts to

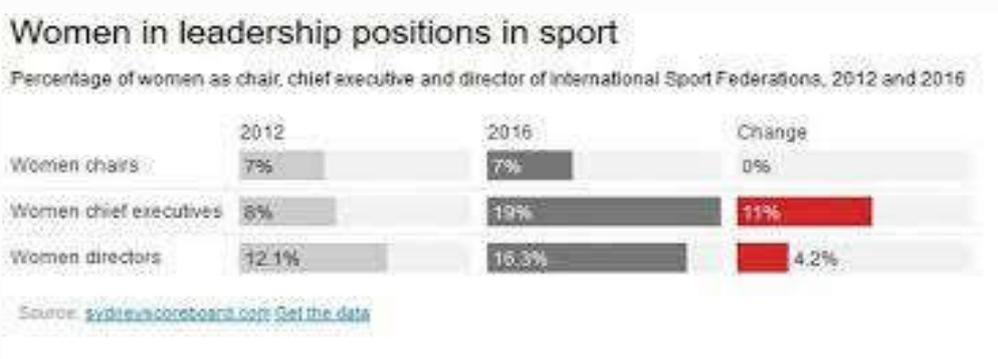
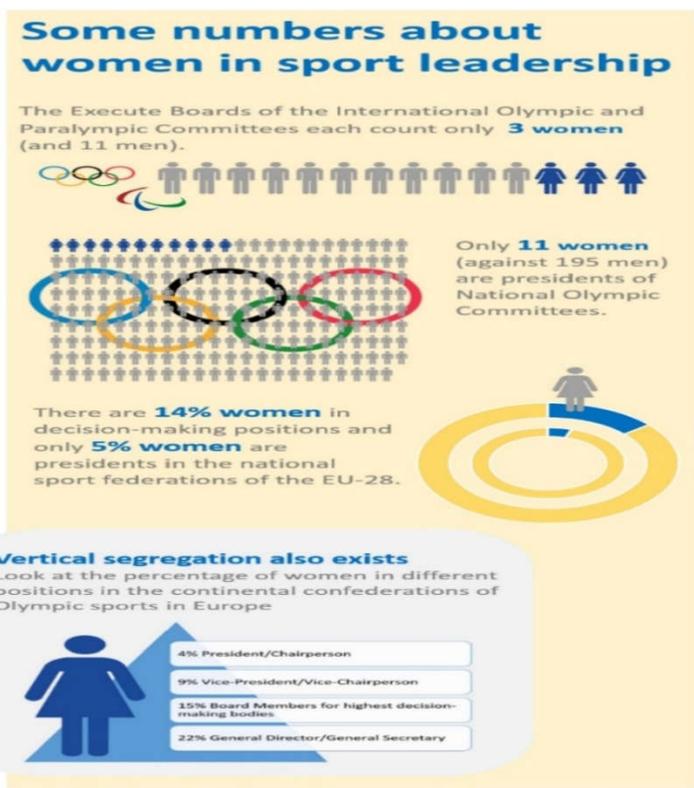
be physically active and play sport (Sport England, 2019a ; 2020). Women also occupy much less of the sporting workforce in roles such as coaching (UK Coaching, 2018), managing, performance and development directors, and other senior leadership positions (Women in Sport, 2017).

Women make up 51% of the population, so it is incomprehensible to exclude women in the decision-making process that will impact on them. More women leaders will not only improve organisations' governance and performance, it can have a ripple effect with more women opting to work in sport. There is a strong body of evidence to support that gender diversity leads to better organisational outcomes, as well as equity for both women and men in the workforce. Despite this, leadership positions have typically been dominated by men and progress away from this has been varied across different sports, both globally and domestically (Women on Boards, 2016). "Because sports is so male-dominated, the leadership that we get (whether it's guidance on how to lead or actually being led) is from men. But women approach things differently and have diverse thoughts to offer that can help men and women find success in sports," shares Dr. Welter. "I always say that the brilliance of a diamond is revealed when you consider each individual facet. That's when it's really brought to life. It's the collection of those individual facets or perspectives that allow the diamond to sparkle. It's the same with leadership, we all sparkle and achieve excellence when we acknowledge the importance and value of every perspective."

Leadership and decision making are the biggest challenges facing sport in its progress towards gender equality. In addition, leadership is the area of sport where women are particularly underrepresented, if not totally absent. There has been progress in terms of women's equal participation in sport, progress is certainly not matched in terms of leadership and influence in decision making. If we take Germany as one example, according to the German Olympic Sports Confederation, more than 10 million girls and women are members of sports clubs nationally, which corresponds to approximately 40% of the membership base. In competitive sports, 45% of German Olympic athletes are female. However, only 13% of national coaches and 16% of leadership positions in German sports organisations are occupied by women. High level and prestige positions such as members of presidential boards in particular are dominated by men. Similar and worse patterns are found in many other European countries. In fact, even though these numbers are far from desirable, Germany's statistics are on the higher end of the equality spectrum.

Women continue to be largely marginalised from the decision making and leadership sphere of sport, including at the grassroots level. Structural barriers through discriminatory norms, values, and institutional practices in how sport is "done" still limit women's options and opportunities. Cultural practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes provide further challenges. Capacity gaps that result as a legacy of this discrimination and under investment also mean that women are sometimes less likely than men to have the education, networks or resources needed to become effective leaders. Women in Sport has collected data annually on women in leadership roles for the last seven years for organisations. The results in this report show:

- ❖ The percentage of women on the boards of the NGBs (National Governing Bodies) of Sport in England and Wales. remains static, with an average of 30% of board positions being held by women.
- ❖ A fall in the percentage of women in Senior Leadership roles.
- ❖ Much lower numbers of women in Performance Director roles.
- ❖ Women make up a third of Non-Executive Director roles.



Only 41% of women’s college teams are actually coached by women.

Women make up only 28% of youth sports coaches.

Across professional sports women continue to be underrepresented in front offices.

These staggering statistics suggest that we might need to be more intentional about creating women leaders in sports.

Focusing on the UK, the national charity Women in Sport has raised considerable awareness of the lack of gender diversity in sport leadership through annual audits of publicly funded sports bodies, from 2009–2016. The 2017 report *Beyond 30% Female Leadership in Sport* showed that while organisations had gradually become more gender diverse, progress had stalled with women’s representation at board level averaging around 30%. Furthermore, the number of women in senior leadership roles below board level had declined. It argued that organisations were paying little attention to creating a sustainable pipeline of female leadership talent.



In response to the lack of diversity in the sport sector, in 2016 the government introduced the UK Sports Governance Code, overseen by the UK's two funding bodies: Sport England (grassroots) and UK Sport (elite). The code requires sports bodies in receipt of government funding to meet a target of at least 30% men and 30% women on their boards by 2017 or risk losing funding. In addition to gender parity, the code also requires organisations to show a 'strong and public commitment' to diversity more generally, with inclusion of members from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds and those with disabilities.

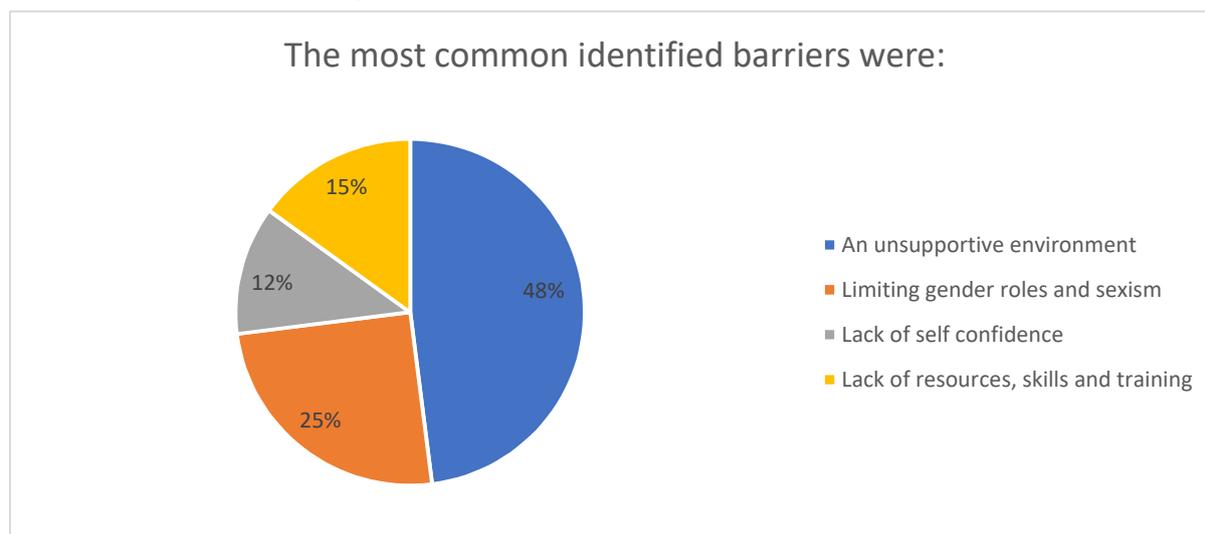
Despite the gradually increasing rates of women's participation in sport, there is still a strikingly gender unbalanced representation in decision-making positions in sports organisations. Recent statistics show that there are very few women in leadership positions in the Olympic and Paralympic Committees, in European and national sport governing bodies, and in national sport federations. This underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in sport can be explained by prevailing masculinised sport settings, stereotypical gender roles, but also by genderblind or biased institutional norms and procedures. Many executive members are elected by their peers, who often tend to elect new leaders that feature similar characteristics as themselves. In order to ensure a more balanced representation of women and men in leadership positions in sport, several institutions are issuing policy recommendations, establishing targets, or implementing initiatives. Since 2015, the Council of Europe is inviting the governments of the Member States to develop policies and programmes to achieve a gender-balanced representation in public authorities and public bodies related to sport. The Member States are also encouraged to integrate a gender perspective in all areas of decision making. A similar recommendation was made by the Council of the European Union in 2014. The European Commission's Proposal for Strategic Actions in Gender Equality in Sport (2014-2020) recommends to achieve the following targets by 2020:

- A minimum of 40% of women and men in executive boards and committees of national sport governing bodies and 30% in international sports organisations located in Europe.
- A minimum of 40% of women and men in the management of professional sport administrations and governmental bodies. The Olympic and Paralympic International Committees are engaged in raising the number of women in leadership positions. Both international committees established targets (20% and 30%, respectively) to increase the number of decision-making positions for women (particularly in executive bodies) in the Olympic and Paralympic Movements. Both international committees are undertaking complementary initiatives to support the achievement of these targets.

Hegemonic Masculinity in Sports

To understand the gender gap in college athletics, we must first understand the interconnected nature of sport, power, and gender in our society. Sport has, from its origins, operated as a means to ascribe power to men, by creating the highly visible, symbolic linking of power with masculinity in a way that makes that association appear natural and legitimate (e.g., Messner, 1988; Willis, 1982). As a result, the ways in which women are denied access to sports and its associations with power are largely unquestioned and unseen. In fact, the hegemonic nature of this phenomenon means that men and women alike perpetuate the association of masculinity and power through sports. Women are excluded from opportunities within sports, whether through lawful or unlawful means, or their interest suppressed by external social forces that make their actions appear to be internal and agentic, or their opportunities to engage in the sporting enterprise are constructed on different terms so as to pose no threat to the gender order. Evidence of hegemonic masculinity in sports can help explain the imperviousness of college athletic departments to leadership of women (Whisenant, Pedersen, & Obenour, 2002), as it offers a framework to explain the barriers to entry, job constraints, and the construction of women's athletic interest and motivation that all contribute to the gender imbalance of leadership in college athletics.

Barriers to women's leadership



Barriers to women's leadership in sport can be defined as: any construct, norm or practice within the structural or cultural domains of sport serving to bar passage to or restrict or limit the ability of women to lead, guide or have influence. These barriers can be further categorised as: a) Structural barriers: discriminatory norms, values, and institutional practices b) Cultural practices: attitudes and gender stereotypes c) Capacity gaps: education, networks/contacts, resources.

The most common identified barriers were:

1. **An unsupportive environment (structural barrier):** Many women cited a lack of support from peers and more senior members of their organisation in terms of adequate time and financial resources with which to do their job, as well as inadequate prioritisation of their activities in scheduling or organisational planning. This category included lack of recognition and standard hiring practices.
2. **Limiting gender roles and sexism (cultural practices):** This included the stereotypical sexism in relation to talk time in meetings as well as domination techniques and gaslighting that can take place in board meetings and other leadership contexts. In addition, requests like making tea and taking on more administrative functions

directed at the women present were common. This category included gender based violent, overt sexism as well as stereotyped gender roles.

3. Lack of self-confidence (capacity gap): For example, several women doubted their capacity specifically to take on a leadership role, for example because of lack of previous experience. In many cases it was also clear that norms and ideals regarding what leadership is and involves were also influential. This category included self-assessed lack of experience and lack of confidence in leading.

4. Lack of resources, skills and training (capacity gap): Some women described how they lacked many of the networks and contacts that would potentially make their role easier. Part of this was a lack of support specifically from women peers, most commonly due to lack of a network of women or specific means of connecting and having opportunities for exchange and building relationships and support. Another aspect of this was the lack of prioritisation of training for women taking on new leadership roles by the superiors or organisation. This category included lack of access to training, supportive services, insufficient time to carry out the required duties as well as inadequate professional networking opportunities.

Gender Differences in Sport Leadership

As of July of 2018, only 3.3% of women held Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions in the companies on the Toronto Stock Exchange (“Women in the Workforce,” 2018). In addition, only 30% of these companies had a woman as an executive officer (“Women in the Workforce,” 2018). Various researchers have confirmed that there are a minimal number of women in leadership positions in business (Dean, 2016; Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Baumgarten, 2007; Hartmann-Tews & Pfister, 2005; Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Sanchez & Frey, 2019). The data for sport organizations reveal a similar trend. For example, men significantly outnumber women in various types of positions in sport, such as athletic trainers (Mazerolle, Burton, & Cotrufo, 2015), sport physicians (Stern, Gately, & Barrett, 2013), sport coaches or head coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Kane & LaVoi, 2018; Reade, Rodgers, & Norman, 2009; Walker & Bopp, 2010), female sport academics (Whakley & Krane, 2012), and executive roles within organized sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton et al., 2011; Forsyth et al., 2019; Kane & LaVoi, 2018; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Although numbers of women on executive boards are increasing, inequalities with respect to representation still exist (Seierstad, Warner-Söderholm, Torchia, & Huse, 2017; Torchia, Calabro, Gabaldon, & Kanadli, 2018). These inequalities are concerning because increasingly more young women are graduating from undergraduate programs (Statistics Canada, 2017). In 2006, 32.8% of women aged 25 to 34 held a bachelor’s degree or higher, while 24.8% of men did (Statistics Canada, 2017); by 2016, this rose to 40.7 % of women, and 29.1% of men (Statistics Canada, 2017). Furthermore, the same source reports that 50.6% of women held a doctorate degree from the ages 25 to 34 (49.5% business, management, and public administration, 73.6% from education, and 62.4% from health-related fields). It is clear that more women are graduating than men, but there is not a direct transfer to the gender breakdown within the senior leadership ranks in a number of sectors. Unfortunately, this pattern is also played out in the sports industry where women are disproportionately underrepresented at senior leadership levels, despite the increase of women enrolling in sport management programs (Simmons, 2011). In fact, there is a “glacially slow progress toward the advancement of women into sport leadership” (Burton & Leberman, 2017, p. 16). In Canada, as of 2018, women only held 2% of positions on boards in sport organizations (Facts and Stats). To be specific, in Major League Sport in Canada (i.e., Major League Soccer, Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League, The National Basketball Association, and the Canadian Football League) there are 98 Vice-President and President positions available. Fourteen of

these positions are occupied by women (15%). More women are being prepared in educational institutions, but something happens along a career path that perpetuates this imbalance. Researchers (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, 2015; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Hancock et al., 2018; Kamphoff, 2010; Lovett & Lowry, 1994; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Shaw, 2006; P. Smith et al., 2012) have highlighted, institutional and social barriers like the glass ceiling, glass cliff, glass wall, homologous reproduction, role congruity theory, “old boys network”, sexual harassment, discrimination, access and treatment discrimination, and stereotypes continue to contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in organizations including those from the sport domain. Some studies suggest that the realities of working in a male-dominated industry, the lack of mentors, role models, and sponsors, might contribute to a decrease in self-confidence. Women often underestimate their contributions and abilities, they often think that they lack the skills and ability to position and promote themselves relative to their male counterparts and leave middle management roles early due to a perceived lack of support, recognition, and respect (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Aman et al., 2018).

Review of Literature

The literature review is presented below in four sections, which are: (a) Agentic and Communal Traits; (b) Barriers to Leadership; (c) Theoretical Framework; and (d) Mentorship and Networking for the Future.

Agentic and Communal Traits

Weese (2018) described successful leadership using the 5 C Leadership Model. His model suggests that leadership encompasses five key components, namely: (a) credibility; (b) compelling vision; (c) charismatic communicator; (d) contagious enthusiasm, and; (e) culture builder (Weese, 2018). Wood and Eagly (2012) explained this concept using agentic (i.e., aggressive, dominant, self-confident) and communal (i.e., gentle, nurturing, passive, helpful, affectionate) characteristics. The presence of stereotypes of the ideal traits that women should display as leaders contributes to role incongruity that may be present between both gender and leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Rosette & Toast, 2010). Role congruity theory was adapted from the social role theory, which examines the expectations men and women occupy about their roles in society (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Weiner and Burton (2016) provided an example of social role theory in leadership, where traits that are considered “leadership” traits are agentic and women tend to display more communal traits. The attributes and behaviours of leaders and the attributes and behaviours for each gender are prescribed by social mores and is a role incongruence that women face in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Based on stereotypes, women feel that they need to act a certain way in leadership positions and if they do not act this way they will be criticized or presented with various barriers to overcome (Shaw & Hoerber, 2003; Zheng et al., 2018). Women have dual standards when it comes to leadership positions, being stereotyped to have to display both agentic and communal traits cause evident role incongruity (Zheng et al., 2018; Rosette & Toast, 2010).

Barriers to Leadership

Women in leadership roles within such contexts can provide young women with role models and serve as visible evidence of social justice (Sperandio & Kagoda, 2008). In similar context, the identity theory and identity control process were used by Sartore and Cunningham (2007) to investigate the effect that self-concept, stereotypes, and gender-role meanings have on women in upper leadership positions in sport. There are various barriers that are thought to contribute to the glass ceiling phenomenon (Hancock et al., 2018; P. Smith et al., 2012). These include barriers that reward and value men’s activities (Knoppers, 1992) and barriers that contribute to making workplace

environments hostile, antagonistic, and discriminatory (Cunningham, 2008). Moreover, sport being male-dominated creates male-dominated leadership in sport (Burton, 2015) and as a result, this creates a power dynamic within the workplace that tends to favour men (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). These barriers are named and described in terms of structural (i.e., organization specific) and individual (i.e., to the individual) barriers to leadership below. Homologous reproduction “is a tendency for those hiring...to give employment to those who are the most similar to them, as a means of reducing organizational uncertainty” (Forsyth et al., 2019, p. 82). This is a structural barrier to women advancing in leadership that refers to a concept often described by researchers as the “old boys club” (Forsyth et al., 2019; Shaw, 2006). Various phenomena express negative advancement opportunities that present women with a glass wall, ceiling, cliff (Burton & Leberman, 2017). The glass wall refers to the opportunities that women are provided with, in that there is a lack of access to working in sport (Burton & Leberman, 2017). The glass ceiling refers to the lack of support that women receive to advance, in other words there is an inability to progress in the organization (Burton & Leberman, 2017). The final glass phenomenon is the glass cliff, characterized by a lack of support or consistency for women, resulting in higher risk and ultimately prompting failure when women are promoted to positions (Burton & Leberman, 2017). Women are still facing the biological timeclock as a barrier. The responsibility of child rearing contributes to the leadership labyrinth. The second component of barriers to advance are the barriers that women put on themselves. These are individual barriers otherwise known as self-limiting behaviours (Kay & Shipman, 2014). Women tend to undermine their confidence in themselves compared to males (Kay & Shipman, 2014). This lack of confidence ultimately leads women to apply for positions they qualify for and deserve, and consequently leave positions in senior leadership and coaching (Burton, 2015). Both emotional and cognitive processes are present when working in a male-dominated industry, and thus there is an identity comparison (the women feeling as if they have to conform to the stereotypical masculine traits exhibited in leadership) and women feel they need to engage in these stereotypes in order to “fit into” this male dominated area (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). This can be attributed to the lack of respect and recognition that women receive in careers like coaching (Burton, 2015; Norman 2010b). Overall, there are both structural and individual barriers that contribute to leadership advancement for women who choose to advance in the sport industry.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based on the rich glass ceiling research literature base. The glass ceiling is a metaphor that is commonly used in research when referring to the barriers and obstacles that women commonly face when they are seeking promotions in the top levels of organizations (Burke & Vinnicombe, 2005; International Labour Office, 2004; McLeod, 2008; P. Smith et al., 2012). This approach was originally mentioned in 1986 by the Wall Street Journal and states that there is a lack of access to move up the organizational hierarchy to achieve leadership positions for women (Weyer, 2007). Women receive a lack of support when seeking to advance and this creates a lack of progression for women in the organization (Burton & Leberman, 2017). The glass ceiling metaphor was investigated by P. Smith et al. (2012) where the researchers developed a measure – the Career Pathways Survey (CPS) – to determine how women in management positions perceived the glass ceiling barriers that women face when advancing. Namely four factor models of attitude were evaluated: denial, acceptance, resilience, and resignation. Overall, denial refers to beliefs that the glass ceiling no longer exists. Acceptance about the glass ceiling in the survey demonstrates why women are happy and satisfied to stay in the position that they are in. Resilience are statements that describe how women overcome challenges and describe that woman will continue

to move forward in their journey despite the glass ceiling. Resignation refers to women deciding to give up or fail to strive to achieve promotions due to various obstacles such as social and organizational (P. Smith et al., 2012).

Mentorship and Networking for the Future

In the 21st century, increasingly, women are pursuing university degrees in higher proportions to men, but they still are not achieving top levels of leadership (Johnson, 2016). This non-diverse community created in organizations hinders institutional progress and success (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). Mentorship from men is important for these women but more importantly they need mentorship from other women (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). A consistent theme that women have expressed in qualitative studies within the literature is that there is a small number of women employed in sport, which makes networking opportunities challenging (Walker & Bopp, 2010). As a result, there are also fewer mentors for other women in sport (Kilty, 2006), and thus, women-specific support groups would be helpful to create mentorship and network opportunities and increase both the confidence of women and their employment rates (Burton et al., 2012; M'mbaha & Chepyator-Thomson, 2018). The minimal number of networking and mentorship opportunities accessible to women could be attributed to the minimal number of women employed in sport (Forsyth et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2015).

Conclusions

Gender inequity in sport organisation boards, particularly in decision-making positions, remains a significant issue. There is consensus in the literature that, globally, women continue to be under-represented in leadership positions. Patriarchal selection practices and organisational cultures reinforce this inequity, despite evidence that men in leadership roles recognise the problem. While gender equity policies exist, actions to pursue gender equity are more limited. Patriarchal language, gendered stereotypes and person-profiling still persist, resulting in specific emotional and practical challenges for women in sports leadership positions. The reflective panel recognised an over-representation of studies from a liberal 'Western' tradition that conceptualises gender inequity in a specific socio-cultural and political way. Structural barriers through discriminatory norms, values, and institutional practices in how sport is "done" still limit women's options and opportunities. Cultural practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes provide further challenges. Capacity gaps that result as a legacy of this discrimination and under investment also mean that women are sometimes less likely than men to have the education, networks or resources needed to become effective leaders. In order to achieve equity many policies and recommendations are required at grass root level.

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