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Female Leader's Experiences within Sport Organizations: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

Despite being historically underrepresented in sport leadership roles, female leadership in sport has increased in recent years. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews to further explore the gender biases and experiences of seven women in leadership positions within sport. Through the employment of reflexive thematic analysis, the four main themes emerging from these seven interviews were: 1) acknowledgement of position, 2) supporting female leaders, 3) developing female programs, and 4) obstacles and challenges. The acknowledgement of their position in sport and ways to support future female leaders involve more positive experiences, where obstacles and challenges, along with developing female programs, involve negative experiences. This study examines the seven women's experiences while also analyzing gender biases that are present.

Introduction

There has consistently been a bias against women in leadership positions throughout history in a variety of fields, despite having the ability to succeed in these positions on par with men [1-3]. Regardless of several examples showing that a woman may occupy the same job as a man at the same level of prestige, this bias still exists in the world of sport and exercise [1,3-5].

Numerous groups have challenged this precedent in the past ten years as a consequence of growing awareness of underrepresentation and the inclusion of equality goals [5-7]. For example, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) endorsed the Olympic Agenda 2020, which supported the objective of increasing the number of women in positions of leadership in its administration and contained a target of female athletes making up 50% of athletes competing in the Olympic Games [6]. Similarly, as of 2012, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reported a scarce 20% of leadership positions being filled by females [7]. Since then, the percentage of female representation in leadership has increased to 25% in coaching and athletic directors, and 30% in conference commissioner positions [8]. The National Basketball Association (NBA), is one of the few team sports organizations where the women's league (The Woman's National Basketball Association, WNBA) receives significant media attention and viewership [5].

Positions within the construct of sport such as coaching, sport psychology, athletic therapy, and other areas also see a lack of female leadership. Although female sport psychologists provide equal benefits to athletes, Roper reveals that male sport psychologists are more frequently chosen by athletes [4]. According to Walker and Bopp's study, examining the viewpoints of female coaches of all male teams, just 3% of male sports teams had a female coach, compared to approximately 60% of women's sports team [5]. Burton's dissertation goes into further detail regarding the absence of female leadership in sport by analyzing how gender is represented within athletic organizations [9].

For the purposes of this study, a female leader is defined as an individual who has the experiences of being a female that holds, or has held, a role in sport that individuals around them respect with high esteem. Due to gender role stereotypes, the perception of those around them in these positions are of less masculine characteristics, despite not all females displaying maternal characteristics in leadership roles [5].

Numerous theories and frameworks are used to address the gender bias that is experienced in sport leadership [1,2,10,11]. The most prevalent, The Feminist Theory, is a powerful model for furthering the education, advancement, comprehension, and reform required for more women to hold leadership positions in sport [12]. This theory aims to promote women's rights, include them in history, and empower women [12]. This paradigm allows for the comprehension of female viewpoints in male-dominated environments, a method of understanding that is rarely used.

Female leaders coaching male teams have reported the perception that networking was not an option for them, that they had to put in more effort to get the respect of their male co-workers and athletes, and that they were not accepted in leadership positions within men's basketball [5]. Comparable results were found in another study examining females who had indicated interest in selecting a profession in sport or who were studying sport for an exam [10].

While these findings seem quite discouraging, a study conducted by Fuller and colleagues focused on the leadership perspectives of female athletes on female teams. These results have a more positive undertone with athletes using their leadership for actionable change toward female underrepresentation, self-reflection making them capable of being leaders in the world, and leading by example on their teams [13]. These three studies, examining similar experiences of female leaders in different settings, cultivate two very different tones of being a female leader in a male environment versus female environment [5,10,13]. The dichotomy of these studies demonstrates the support and positivity that female leaders can have when placed in a supportive environment, despite the adverse tone of being a female leader on a male team.

Female underrepresentation in sport leadership has been attributed to a variety of factors, including gender discrimination, a blatant gender bias in favor of men, and the 'boys club' mentality that sport encourages [1,4,6]. However, until recently, research on this subject was primarily concerned with measuring the number of women in leadership roles, identifying personal and professional barriers that women experience, and developing methods to address this underrepresentation [6]. Limited research has focused on women's experiences and perceptions in this area [5,10].

This study was conducted to add depth and information to the discussion surrounding females in sport leadership, perspectives of their role, and how they are able to complete their role as a female in sport leadership. Upon completion, the results could enhance conversations surrounding female leadership in sport such as how to increase support, develop female programming, and encourage more females to take on leadership roles. The results of this study may contribute to future discussions about gender biases in sport leadership and strategies for reducing their impact on sport leaders.

The study had two objectives: 1) to identify any gender biases that prevent women from being treated equally to men in leadership positions in sport; and 2) to further explore the experiences of female leaders in sport and exercise. Since few gender prejudices were discussed during participant interviews, the study's second goal received high priority.

Methodology

Participants

The inclusion criteria for this study were that each participant identifies as a female and currently holds, or has held, a leadership position in sport and exercise. A total of twelve females were identified and contacted for this research study. However, due to factors outside of this research, only seven females were able to participate, following previous research [14-16]. Participants currently hold, or have recently held, a leadership position in sport across Canada (n=6) or the United States (n=1). Ages of the participants ranged from 22 to 71 years old, however these ages were not utilized for data analysis purposes as age was not pertinent for this study's analysis.

The participants represent a variety of leadership roles in sport because the type of leadership role each participant held was non-restrictive: 2 coaches (one of whom is an active collegiate athlete who coaches), 1 athletic director, 1 CEO of a sport organization, 1 referee (also referred to as an official in this text), 1 director of facilities of a university's athletic complex, and 1 athletic trainer.

Methods

TThe Staffordshire University Ethics Committee granted official ethical approval. Participants were then contacted via email and provided the essential documentation regarding the current study. These documents included an invitation to participate, an information sheet regarding the study, and an informed consent form. After reading the required materials, the participants were asked to sign and submit the informed consent form to the primary researcher. Before the informed permission was signed and in the principal researcher's possession, interviews could not be organized.

Once each participant returned their informed consent, a video interview was scheduled via Zoom. The structure of these interviews was semi-structured to broadly discuss the experiences of these leaders. An interview guide was developed by the primary researcher and was used to gain insights into each participants' experience as a female in a leadership role in sport. The questions used to gain these insights asked how each participant first got involved in sport and their career field ('What made you want to

pursue this position/area as a career?'), descriptions of any positive and stressful situations that each participant has experienced in their career ('Can you describe any stressful/positive situations you've experienced during your career as a female in sport leadership?'), any challenges or hurdles they might have run into ('What challenges did you face to reach the position you are in?'), and what they think should be done to help other female leaders in sport ('Based upon your experiences as a female leader in sport, what should be done to help other females in similar positions?'). The only individual who interviewed participants was the main researcher who identifies as a 23-year-old female.

The researcher guaranteed that each participant's comments remained anonymous by using pseudonyms (used in this literary work) and removing any additional characteristics that may be used to identify the individual after each interview. An audio recording device was utilized to properly capture the conversations with participants for transcription purposes. The audio-transcription application Ava was also used during each interview to aid in the transcription process. Interview times ranged from 45 minutes to one hour. Using a semi-structured interview style, the interviewer ensured conversations stayed in the topic areas of this research. Relevant and tangential conversations and questions were used to gain more insights into each participant's experience.

Data analysis

Only the primary researcher was privy to the identity and the entirety of all conversations with the seven participants. The primary researcher was the only individual who analyzed and parsed the data that was collected during these interviews. All information and sensitive material related to the interviews were securely kept on the researcher's personal laptop.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), developed by Braun and Clarke [17-19], was used as the qualitative analysis method for this research. Reflexivity allowed the data to be examined while acknowledging the thoughts and motives of the researcher during the analysis process [19].

The researcher initially reviewed the transcripts of each interview to get perspectives of the discussions with participants. All interviews were coded and given first themes during the second read. Due to the original themes being combined and merged in later readings of the interviews, second order themes emerged. The core research topics took precedence above any themes or codes that did not connect to them [17].

Where appropriate, themes were combined to produce higher order themes in the data. The theming process was subsequently visualized using a thematic map, as seen in Figure 1. The final themes were defined and, when necessary, given new names once the thematic map was organized into its highest order themes. Throughout all of the transcripts, this procedure was utilized to determine significance and make sure the relevance was consistent with the study question and prior literature.
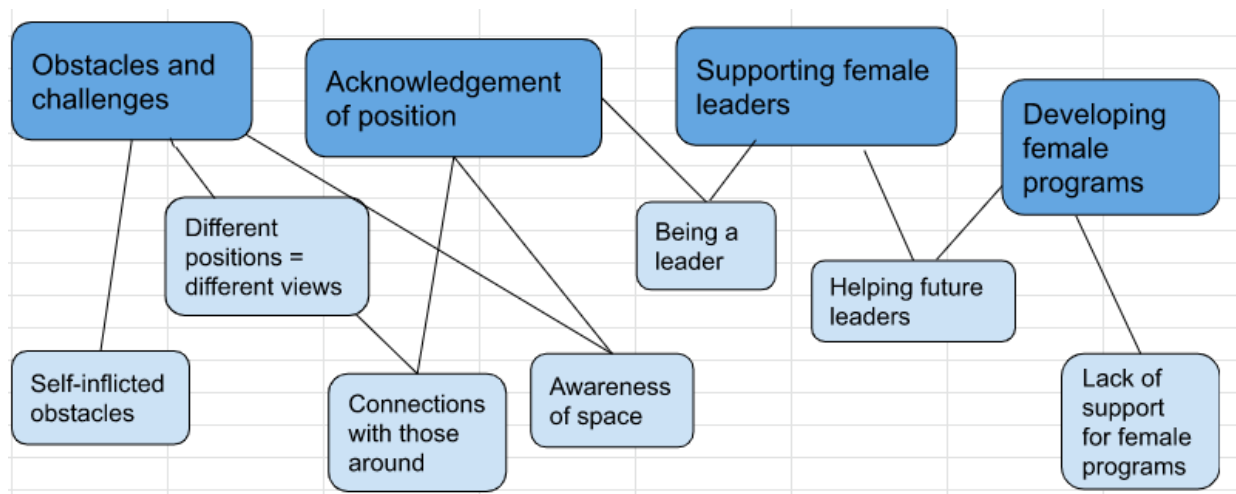

Figure 1: A thematic map of the connections between second order themes (light blue) to create four higher order themes (dark blue).

An inductive approach was utilized when formulating themes in this data analysis based upon previous literature [4,5,20]. Inductive analysis allows themes, patterns, and concepts to emerge rather than using collective data to prove or refute an existing theory [21]. Due to the current, limited research available on the specifics of female leadership within sport [22], an inductive approach was used to generate themes as they emerged in this data set, opposed to preconceived themes before research or data analysis began.

Trustworthiness and rigour

The academic community places tremendous emphasis on the trustworthiness and rigour of an analysis to guarantee a high-quality study [23-25]. The criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba were applied as a guide to assess the reliability and rigour of the current study [26]. Credibility examines whether respondents' opinions concur with the researcher's interpretation [24,26]. In order to thoroughly capture each participant's opinions on each theme during the analysis and write-up procedures, the researcher made sure that emerging codes and themes were repeated by at least two participants in order to capture the discussion of that theme.

To ensure the researcher covered all pertinent material and presented events accurately in the respondents' perspective, participants were also contacted when full elements of their discussion appeared in this literary work. The generalizability of the results is provided in place of external validity [26]. The current study made sure that the chosen theme could be applied to subsequent works by using descriptions of the second order themes that made up each higher order theme. Lastly, in-depth examination of techniques employed in this research study demonstrates the dependability of the current research [24,26].

To guarantee that no step was overlooked in the writing of this report, every stage of research was recorded from the start to the conclusion. Confirmability and audit trails are reached in the achieved credibility, transferability, dependability, and reflexivity of a study [24]. The logical arrangement of code and theming linkages shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 satisfies the requirement for confirmability.

Results

To learn more about their perspectives on being a woman in a predominantly male environment, seven female leaders in different facets of sport were questioned. Since there are several leadership positions in sport, those who are considered to be leaders-such as coaches, CEOs, and athletic directors-were interviewed. To add depth and breadth to the experiences shared by these women, interviews with less typical leadership positions such as referees and athletic trainers were also incorporated.

Following the RTA data analysis process, a total of four higher order themes were found. Combining second order themes from original themes led to the uncovering of these higher order themes. Table 1 presents the theming and grouping procedure used to identify the higher order themes. The seven female leaders' recurring themes were: 1) acknowledging one's position, 2) supporting female leaders, 3) challenges and obstacles, and 4) developing female programs. A graphic representation of the interactions between themes to produce higher order themes is shown in Figure 1.

Acknowledgement of Position

Data analysis from the participants revealed the most frequently addressed topic was acknowledging their position as women in sport. This acknowledgement takes on many forms such as the recognition of being a leader and helping future female leaders in sport, identifying the connections that these female leaders make with their colleagues and other individuals in their field, as well as each participant's awareness of the space they are in as stated by Tina (athletic director): *"...it'll be myself, my partner, and the three guys from the facilities permit. So, I'm the only female there, and I am aware of this"*.

A significant result was five of the seven participants referred to themselves as simply a leader, never as a female leader. Julia (CEO) recognized that she has *"never had to look at [herself] as a female leader and [her] career has not been dominated by that realization"*. Katrina (director of facilities at an athletic complex) describes this experience as being a leader of a university's athletic division: *"I always just saw myself as the leader who had to show up. And being a female in that position should never come into play because, in the end, it does not matter."*

The leadership philosophies of Julia and Katrina were described as being consistent with transformational leadership. Positive organizational results have been linked to transformational leadership, but gender has not been proven to affect the style of leadership employed [27,28]. Both women highlighted how they help the individuals they are leading in various ways. Julia asserts that she *"is not a dictator"* and that she prefers to think of herself as a coach rather than a leader. She can *"recognize where people are in the ranks and use their strengths to benefit the whole organization"* (Julia). Katrina is conscious that she leads in a *"very collaborative"* manner because *"the people working there are stakeholders too"*.

These leaders recognized that they were the only women in such a heavily male-dominated environment. Several scenarios were used to address this, with four participants mentioning how they felt like they needed to assert their position more among their male co-workers. As the head coach of two male assistant coaches, Brooke (coach and collegiate athlete) discussed how the male coaches frequently questioned her intentions and directions.

According to Tina: "*females have to establish their way and solidify their position more through actions to gain respect*".

Three participants spoke about needing to clearly define their roles as well as the experience of having their male co-workers give them a "*pat on the head*" (Julia) rather than truly acknowledging their authority. According to Gwen, the only female athletic trainer on an all-male team and staff: "*the way they responded to questions and their body language was like, you're putting on that alpha male aura right now*". A "*pat on the head*" or a "*way to go*" is how Julia characterizes how she often felt early in her career. Claire (coach), however, contends that men have a "*natural desire to help,*" which might be mistaken for sexism against their female colleagues, "*when they are trying to help a situation and play the hero.*"

All seven of the leaders acknowledged the strong relationships they cultivate with those around them in their leadership position. When Mikayla (referee) feels she needs support, friendly male officiating counterparts will go watch her referee and provide feedback. Both Claire and Katrina said that their interactions with their male co-workers have always "*been positive*" and that they "*have always felt respected by those around [them]*" The male athletes Gwen works with were quite accepting of her, and she "*definitely felt like part of the team*".

Claire, Julia, and Tina discussed varying experiences in forming relationships through sport, oftentimes more than their male colleagues. For Tina, she recognizes that female athletes seem to be most comfortable talking to her. Julia believes that her connections with colleagues "*might be due to [her] being more empathetic than the males [she] works around*". Claire believes she is most known for making connections in her area of work and with those around her. These connections were not discussed as networking, which has been found to be difficult for female leaders [5,10,29], but as professional relationships these females cultivate with colleagues.

In conclusion, each participant recognizes their status as a female leader in a range of fields. The assistance they can offer and that has been given to them on their path to the leadership roles they occupy is the main way these leaders appreciate the position they hold. Of course, this does not diminish the respect that these women have for their roles or the fact that they have to put in a significant amount of effort to maintain it.

Supporting female leaders

Figure 1 illustrates how the following higher order theme is related to the participants' acknowledgment of their role as leaders in a male-dominated environment. Mentorship and assisting upcoming female leaders were discovered to be very important topics to the participants. "*Don't think of it like you're a female coach*", Claire advises a former athlete who was having trouble

finding a coaching post. "*You are simply a coach, and you also happen to be a female*" (Claire). This acknowledgment of leadership without a gendered designation can assist and direct future women toward the self-assurance these participants have developed during their careers.

Five of the seven participants mentioned mentorship as a support, making it one of the most popular strategies for assisting future female leaders in achieving prestige in leadership positions. Some leaders, like Tina, believe "*having a mentor who is very supportive from the beginning of the relationship is important for empowerment and gaining confidence*". Other leaders, like Julia, believe in order to make a difference they must be a mentor to others: "*It's important for me to mentor young women*" … "*If I can influence or impact them in a way that encourages them to be more confident in whatever capacity they're moving in, I will have succeeded*". When asked what support she has had in her career, Gwen discussed the role of her mentor as: "*helping me find my voice and stand up for myself*".

Four individuals also talked about how leadership in sports gives them more confidence. Julia learned her leadership style in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Julia claimed that having to lead, and lead well, helped her to understand who she is. Claire talked about using her leadership skills to promote self-confidence in her athletes. When questioned about the support she's had in her field, Gwen explained how the organization she works for supports athletic therapists, both men and women, in realizing and embracing their potential.

When asked what might be done to support upcoming female leaders in sport, three participants noted how the presence of strong female role models may support future generations of leaders. Brooke and Mikayla explain how the presence of women who "*are elite in what they do*" (Brooke) encourages other women to believe they are also capable of pursuing the same degree of respect in leadership, supported by Stainback and Kwon [30]. In theory, future females will be able to look at these leaders and be encouraged to pursue similar goals as these strong women.

Future leaders should have support if female leadership in sport is to keep expanding. The leaders who took part in this study recognized the value of having a strong and encouraging mentor. This support, along with witnessing other strong women in leadership roles, will help future female leaders to excel in these positions.

Developing female programs

Organizations have not worked as hard to build female sports programs as they have male programs [31,32]. Growing female programming in sport was noted in these conversations as having the ability to help future female leaders in their growth and advancement. Negative experiences are connected to the reason

why creating female programs was produced as a higher-level theme. According to Mikayla's experience as a female referee, female programs are not always encouraged and developed to the same calibre as male initiatives.

Mikayla spoke about this lack of support for the female program after an incident at a sporting event, which also happened to be the first video review of a female official. When the largest organization (Organization X) questioned the call and enquired into Mikayla's decision, the organization she works for (Organization Y) refused to support or defend Mikayla:

"I was like, this never would have happened on the male side because you never would have made your official look bad. [Organization Y] says, 'no, we stand behind our officials and we will work with them', but where was the support when a female official was being questioned?" (Mikayla).

According to Mikayla, this lack of support impacted not just her personal desire for officiating, but many other female officials as well. "*That just shows how much not supporting one person can trickle down into the confidence of others*" (Mikayla).

Mikayla describes other instances in which female officials are not supported, such as when a male referee is selected to be the head official of a game over the female officials available. Then, for games where they are usually head refs, the female officials are assigned to assist the male official. There are several reasons why this dynamic is problematic. The first is that female officials are perceived to have less authority than male counterparts. Additionally, the male referee might not always be aware of how the female game is officiated differently from male games. For example, female hockey does not allow body checking, or the defensive move of using one's body to disrupt their opponent, where male hockey does. The idea that a woman must hold a position of power beneath a man is further reinforced by appointing a male referee over a female referee.

Overall, Mikayla feels that the female refereeing program, while operating under the same organizational guidelines as the male program, is not nearly as developed or supported. Unfortunately, this report follows similar results found in recent years with female refereeing programs ranking second to male programs [11,33,34]. Even if these experiences do not reflect the experiences of all female officials, it illustrates the lack of support that many females still face in sport.

Obstacles and Challenges

Other studies have recognized and investigated the difficulties faced by female sports leaders [10,29,35]. As shown in these earlier works, examining the challenges and obstacles that these women have encountered throughout their careers produced an intriguing topic. Instead of exterior obstacles, it was discovered

during these conversations that the respondents more often faced internal obstacles. While all seven participants discussed this topic during their respective interviews, three participants explicitly stated that the main challenges they encountered while in leadership roles in sport were internal obstacles. Julia recognizes the barriers she has faced in her career are "*self-inflicted*". She explains that "*self-esteem and self-confidence would have been big parts in any challenges I faced, and I placed those on myself*". Claire describes a similar experience:

"Challenges were internally for me, even when I was an athlete. I didn't really let go of worry or what if I'm not good enough, probably until my late 20s. It was [the] fifth time, I think, going to a national camp and I thought 'I'm tired of feeling heavy because I don't think I'm good enough'" (Claire).

These remarks demonstrate how external forces are not the only ones that hold females back from pursuing their full potential in certain areas. Gwen adds that she finally recognized these internal barriers and gained confidence in herself to succeed within leadership. While these strong female leaders have all had to overcome internal, more so it would seem than external, obstacles, Claire discussed how "*females need to have boxes checked and need to be more prepared, whereas a male pursues more opportunities with less preparation*".

It's important to emphasize Brooke's realizations during these conversations. As a recent collegiate athlete and current head coach, Brooke has seen the contrast that comes with being a strong female in sport in different roles.

During the course of the discussion, Brooke emphasized how she routinely took on leadership roles under male coaches. "*They tend to hold me at a higher status than female coaches have in the past, as an athlete. As [an] assistant coach or a head coach, it's completely opposite*" (Brooke). When a confident, powerful woman has two different leadership roles, it is interesting to see how the males around her act in each situation. Being a strong leader is advantageous for athletes, but is contested in coaching roles, highlighting the emerging double standard within female leadership roles. Brooke is expected to carry responsibilities as an athlete under male leadership because of her assured play and impressive performance. Whereas, instructions she issued to her players as a head coach were frequently contested by male assistant coaches.

Every part of life comes with difficulties and barriers, especially in a competitive atmosphere like sports. However, these participants brought up the internal struggles they impose on themselves in this environment, contrary to most accepted conceptions that these difficulties originate from men outwardly opposing women. It is common for men not to fully accept women in leadership positions in sports [1,4], as Brooke experienced,

but most individuals are more concerned with their own internal challenges.

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to delve further into the perspectives of female sports leaders and to identify any instances of gender bias. From the seven interviews conducted, four key themes were identified. These four topics cover acknowledging the role of women in sport leadership, recommending and providing support for aspiring female leaders, discussing the challenges and hurdles these women have encountered, and emphasizing the demand for more advanced programs for women.

Discussion of Results

Each participant's awareness of their place in the predominantly masculine world of sport emerged as the most often discussed theme during these conversations. This manifested itself in a number of ways, such as being conscious of the fact that they are the only female in a room, choosing their words carefully, exerting greater effort to express themselves, developing strong ties and connections, among others. All seven participants are leaders and mentors to others they work with, which was another topic of discussion regarding the acknowledgment of being a female in the area they were in. One of the study's most intriguing discoveries, though, was that not a single participant identified themselves as a female leader. All participants saw themselves as a leader, without the gendered qualification of being a female.

All of the subjects also shared traits of being highly powerful, self-assured, and independent women. These qualities were identified in each participant throughout interviews and data analysis. The question of whether these strong females are nurtured in their leadership roles or if these women have advanced in their professions because of their strong qualities is raised by the distinguished characteristics shared by these women. Previous research has shown conflicting results regarding whether a person develops leadership skills through time or is born with them [36,37]. Female leaders stand out in environments where men predominate because they see themselves as powerful individuals and leaders.

Being a leader in a space such as sport was also found to be connected to the second most discussed theme, supporting female leaders. However, in this context, being a leader was discussed in the context of being a mentor and the best leader they can be to help future leaders. Supported by Blom and colleagues, mentoring was the most often referenced way to help future females grow in leadership positions [38]. Some participants discussed mentoring as something they utilized in their journeys to leadership, while others discussed how important it is for them to mentor those around them. A few leaders simply recognized it as

a good development tool. However, the wide acknowledgement of mentoring and mentoring programs was the most offered solution to help future female leaders.

The secondary strategy to support future female leaders was to see other women in leadership roles. The need for future female leaders to thrive and feel supported is a result of mentorship and watching these women in powerful roles in sport [30]. According to Kram's mentoring theory, mentorship helps protégés grow in their careers while also fostering their professional development [39,40]. By being supported and encouraged to advance, women may succeed in leadership positions at any time. Both male and female mentors offer their own perspectives, counsel, and optimism to the roles they perform. Following the mentor role theory prior [40,41], the seven participants felt that mentoring was one of the most beneficial forms of assistance for their leadership based on their common experiences.

Acknowledging their position in sport and supporting future female leaders did not present any gender biases, however the concept of developing female programs did. Mikayla had a more distressing encounter. Her observations of the refereeing program she works under are filled with gender biases, such as the fact that women referees receive minimal support and that men are given better officiating positions than women when the two work together during games. The male and female officiating programs are built to carry out the same tasks, ensuring compliance with all game rules and regulations. However, Mikayla has discovered a startlingly stark difference between the male and female programs. It also highlights the need for a deeper comprehension of the factors that contribute to the underdevelopment and underfunding of female programs. This female refereeing program seems to provide less assistance to their referees and less opportunities for growth compared to the male program, despite completing the same job and having shared objectives.

Other areas of sport such as sport journalism, sport psychology, and sport management have also been affected by the gender prejudice that Mikayla continues to detect in the officiating program [4,31,42]. It has been demonstrated that the masculinity and sense of "maleness" associated with athletics contribute to gender bias and the lack of support for female initiatives [4,31]. Further examination of Mikayla's experiences in this study leads to the uncovering of the gender bias that is still ever-present in areas of sport today.

The distinction Brooke made between the assistance given by male coaches and male colleagues was another instance of gender bias that was examined. It was noted that Brooke was supported in her position as an athlete but not to the same degree as a coach, despite being a strong female role model in both the athlete and coaching roles. This experience and understanding of dynamic between males and a strong female in opposing

leadership roles has yet to be explored. A further recognition and understanding of these dynamics will help eliminate the gender bias that Brooke found in her experience of being a high-level athlete and a head coach. An explanation for the disparity in support of these circumstances is an athlete is expected to possess high physical prowess, regardless of gender [43], frequently resulting in leadership on a team. However, women in leadership roles, also seen as strong and competent women, are questioned in their positions [4].

The experiences of Mikayla and Brooke show that gender prejudice persists in sport, particularly in leadership. However, while examining the difficulties and barriers that participants had to overcome in sports, it became clear that the biggest barrier was their own self-doubt and mental barriers. As already mentioned, additional literature has discovered that women have internal difficulties that cause them to get in their own way [10]. The largest hurdles facing female leaders originate from within, yet these issues can be rectified and managed in order to decrease its impact.

The experiences described in this study by the seven participants further the discussion of what female leaders in sport leadership face. These participants' lived experiences show both positive and negative aspects of female leadership in sport. Having supportive, and not supportive, males nearby, lack of female development programs, being aware of their position in the realm of sport, and other aspects of their experiences all contribute to the true embodiment of female experiences in sport leadership.

Practical Applications

The objectives of the present study were achieved, and a number of useful applications may be concluded from this information. Simply stated, the lessons learned from the seven participants may be applied to develop better programs and initiatives aimed at assisting females who want to become leaders in their fields and endeavors. These encounters might help people better understand the challenges female leaders can have in a field where men predominate, like sport.

The creation of programs and the encouragement of female leaders in sport were two of the four themes that arose from the gathered data. Organizations and smaller entities can use these results to assist and promote the advancement of female leadership. Sports programs for female development are not given as much priority as male programs, according to the female leaders who were interviewed for this study. The seven study participants' accounts of their experiences, along with existing [29,31,42] and future studies on the subject, offer compelling justifications for designing programs specifically for women.

In addition to designing programs specific to one aspect of sport, as the refereeing programs Mikayla mentions, these development programs must emphasize the general development of female leaders in sport. These clinics, programs, and initiatives will not only support the growth of female sport leaders, but also the development of strong, self-assured women like those who were interviewed for this study.

These findings can also be used to raise awareness of the 'maleness' of sport. Numerous study participants talked about various facets of maleness in sports. These manifestations of maleness include receiving a metaphorical pat on the head (Julia), having male co-workers play the hero (Claire), or being the only woman in a room full of men (Gwen; Tina). Organizations and programs should be encouraged to expand the inclusion of women in all spaces as a result of education and increased awareness of the experiences of female leaders. Incorporating more females into programs and efforts can lessen the fear that females frequently experience when they enter male-dominated environments like sports. Initiatives to support and develop strong females in these male dominant spaces will also work to decrease intimidation and increase inclusivity.

More women need to be active in sport development and leadership roles in order to change female underrepresentation in these positions. Female presenters in training sessions, development programs, and similar events can help with this. A female speaker or presenter at such events will benefit both the women in the room by demonstrating a strong female leader as well as the men in the room by exhibiting male recognition of female leadership. Education on issues like female leadership cannot be limited to women. To transform the mindset and culture around sport, education must be accessible to men in the same way. If female speakers are allowed to lead a mixed audience, two goals will be accomplished. Providing an example of female leadership, the first goal shows the male attendees that women are capable of effective and efficient leadership. The second illustrates Albert Bandura's theory of vicarious self-efficacy [44].

Self-efficacy is the conviction in one's own skills to carry out a job with a desired result [44]. It has also been reported that vicarious experiences, or seeing others do a task successfully, also increases self-efficacy in the desired individual(s) [44]. Future leaders in the room will have increased self-efficacy in obtaining the same, or greater, leadership positions since they were able to observe female leaders in action.

The current research allows for further understanding and experiences of female leaders. The broad scope and versatility of this research allows it to be applied in a variety of ways to increase female leadership in sports. While initiatives may take time to influence future generation, the potential positive experiences and increase in future leaders will be impacted by appreciating women in leadership positions today.

Limitations

With the recognition that this study was able to provide context and first-hand experiences to being a female leader within sport, there are also identified limitations of this study. The first of these limitations is the number of participants who were able to be a part of the study. Lack of responses, and other factors, prevented some female leaders from participating in this study. Of the 12 leaders who were contacted, 7 agreed to participate in this study. According to other studies of similar aims [10,14-16], this number of participants is expected, however, more experiences and first-hand accounts would enhance the emergent themes found.

In line with the number of participants interviewed for this study, the ages of female leaders varied significantly. The youngest leader is 22 years old, while the most senior leader is 71 years old. This age difference between participants could have altered the experiences discussed during each interview. A trend that was found was the older participants discussed very few negative experiences, while the younger participants, who are in the beginning stages of their careers in sport, discussed more negative experiences. This might be due to the leaders who are solidified in their roles in sport not remembering or recognising negative experiences for what they were. Whereas, the women who are just starting their careers are currently facing those negative experiences, which makes them much more real and are brought to the forefront.

Gaining insights from the wide age range that were able to participate in this study was positive in learning about experiences throughout decades of female leadership. However, this also posed the problem of more senior leaders viewing their careers as a whole [45], while the younger leaders are focused on their career as its currently being built [46].

This study also had limitations related to its structure, in contrast to the limitations found in the data analysis. This limitation was found in the form of only one participant conducting interviews of each participant and analyzing the subsequent data. Including more individuals in the examination of collected data would allow the researchers to further discuss the themes that emerged. Using this method of data analysis would allow all researchers to see the data collected from a different perspective to make informed decisions on the selected themes.

Although this study was successful in providing additional information about the experiences of female leaders, it contained certain drawbacks. The current study's shortcomings should be taken into consideration in order to improve future research from an unbiased standpoint.

Future Research

Future research should aim to continue understanding the personal experiences of female leaders in male-dominated spaces such as sport. Some areas of future research might include investigating reasons why females have the experiences they do in sport leadership. The experiences of females in sport leadership may be further understood by exploring other factors, including personality characteristics, mentality, and other components of their lives, in addition to gender biases that are present.

This study concentrated on the gender biases and experiences of current female leaders. To account for different experiences, and to enable more inclusive study results, a range of leadership positions held by women were sought out. This objective was accomplished, and six distinct leadership positions were examined among the seven participants. To learn more about the experiences of a particular leadership job in sport, future studies may decide to concentrate on fewer leadership roles. While having several leadership roles in sport allowed for a diversity of experiences in different positions, choosing experiences from fewer positions will allow for a more thorough and insightful study of the experiences discussed.

Taking one component of these experiences mentioned by participants and exploring it further is another avenue of research that will further the conclusions of this study. For instance, learning more about the programs that ought to be developed to improve the prospects for female leadership or learning more about the knowledge that female leaders have of the space they occupy in sport. While reflecting the multiplicity of experiences these women had, the current study identified four key conversation areas. A more in-depth examination of one of the experiences described in this study will add to the increasing body of knowledge about female leadership in sport.

The internal challenges these individuals experience emerged as a theme that fascinated the study's principal researcher the most. Investigating whether other female leaders have the same internal challenges and how those challenges present themselves may help support future leaders in eliminating such obstacles. In order to further this area of research, it would be beneficial to examine the internal and external barriers that both males and females encounter while seeking leadership roles. Claire talked about her experiences seeing both men and women take risks: "*on the male side, there is more of an assumption that they're going to be okay. Whereas females are less risky and need to have more boxes checked*". Research might help to better understand why women need to be more prepared than males in a variety of other fields, not just sport leadership.

The participants in the current study have shown to be extremely talented, strong, and self-assured women. Examining the traits of female leaders is crucial to determine if they develop into leaders naturally, or as a result of the positions they play. Although it has been argued that personality can influence leadership [47-49], to current knowledge, no research has explicitly analyzed this

issue in relation to female leaders.

To grasp a subject matter more thoroughly, it is crucial to consider how future research will advance various fields of study. Finding out more about emerging topics like female leadership is essential to creating a better and more inclusive environment for future generations.

Concluding Thoughts

The present research examined female leaders' first-hand experiences in the predominately masculine world of sport and athletics using semi-structured interviews and RTA. The findings of this study are consistent with how women view themselves in this environment, with barriers they encounter, and with strategies for increasing female leadership and programming to address the underrepresentation of women in these sport leadership roles. Interacting with seven participants from a variety of sport leadership roles, made it possible to better understand the challenges, supports, and opportunities that women in sport leadership encounter. Practical implications of this research suggest strategies to increase female leadership in sport along with ways to raise awareness of female representation in sport. This study enriches the expanding body of literature that examines the experiences of female leaders in sport in addition to offering suggestions for enhancing female leadership in sport.

Acknowledgements

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