Gender Equity in Sport-Science Academia: We Still Have a Long Way to Go!

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Despite significant societal progress toward gender equity, challenges persist for women pursuing careers in sport-science academia. Notably, female academics remain underrepresented in leadership positions. According to the latest report from the German Federal Statistical Office, 47% of all sport-science postgraduates and around 42% of sport-science PhD students are women, but only 23% of sport-science professors in Germany are female. Despite the increasing number of women entering the field, they still face barriers in progressing to senior roles.

This disparity in leadership positions also influences editorial boards of and publications in sport-science journals. Martinez-Rosales et al recently reported that only 24.8% of the nearly 5000 first authors of recent papers published in the five most cited sport-science journals were women. The percentage of female first authors has increased by around 0.5% per year over this period, but the percentage of female senior authors has not changed in 20 years. The low number of women in leadership positions is problematic for several reasons, including narrower or biased viewpoints in decision making and limited sensitivity toward female-specific issues, all crucial for the progress of science.

Institutional efforts toward gender equity need to be acknowledged and include empowerment programs and strategic appointments of women to positions of authority at universities and scientific journals. However, although it is an effective and sometimes necessary step to accelerate change, the mere appointment of women to professorships is not enough. A promotion strategy needs to be accompanied by cultural awareness and enabling conditions for academics of all genders, backgrounds, and career stages. We highlight some of these in the following paragraphs.

Decisions are often made in informal contexts. Without adequate mentorship, networking resources and access, women may find themselves at a disadvantage when seeking guidance, opportunities, and recognition for their contributions. Early-stage female researchers in particular may need different (or more) support to advance their academic careers. According to the American Psychological Association, mentorship plays a pivotal role in women's career development. In fact, having a mentor of either gender has been shown to increase a woman's chances of career success by up to 83%. Such support may be particularly important since women, on average, are typically more self-aware and self-critical than men. For example, women are less likely to apply for jobs unless they meet nearly all qualifications, whereas men will apply if they meet around 60% of the requirements.

Furthermore, work–life balance remains a major concern for many women in sport science and might be one of the reasons why female scientists may not stay in academia after pursuing a PhD. As an example, using gender-neutral job titles such as “professor” or “scientist” or being aware of who we use as references and norms in academia can help mitigate the career penalties associated with parenthood and enable parents to fully participate in academic life.

While acknowledging gender differences on a group level, the ultimate aim is equal opportunities for all, based on individual competence and interest. Inclusive language is a powerful way to promote gender equity. Gender-inclusive language refers to terminology that treats both women and men equally and avoids reinforcing gender stereotypes. As language reflects and creates culture, its use can help raise awareness of unconscious bias. For example, using gender-neutral job titles such as “professor” or “researcher” can help mitigate the career penalties associated with parenthood and enable parents to fully participate in academic life.

Altogether, initiatives to promote gender equity, such as mentorship programs, leadership training, and advocacy for equitable hiring and promotion practices, are essential steps in creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in the field. Furthermore, fostering a culture of respect and recognition for women’s contribution to sport science is paramount. By challenging gender bias and stereotypes, advocating for equal pay and opportunities, and supporting work–life balance, the sport-science field can continue to make strides toward gender equity.
community can empower women to thrive and excel in their careers, thereby improving the quality of teaching, scientific publications, and innovation in sport practice.

For journals such as the *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance* (*IJSPP*), diverse research on physiology and performance in sport, relevant to all athletes and coaches, is essential. While this editorial focuses on gender, the highlighted issues must be addressed to make sport science more inclusive of all ethnicities, sexual orientations, and disabilities.

To capture these perspectives, a correspondingly larger diversity among researchers than exists today is required. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from both individuals and institutions in the sport-science community. In this context, we encourage *IJSPP* to work systematically toward equal representation of women and men on the Editorial Board and as Associate Editors. Hopefully, we will also see the first female Editor in the near future.

### References

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