Organizational-Level Factors That Influence Women Coaches’ Experiences

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The purpose of this study was to identify the supports and barriers women coaches experience at the organizational level and to determine how those factors influence interpersonal- and individual-level factors within their coaching context. Nine women who coach high school basketball were interviewed at two time points and asked to reflect on organizational-level factors relative to their coaching position and how those factors have shaped their coaching experience over time. Based on the results of the interviews, two organizational-level factors were identified as barriers for participants: navigating inconsistent hiring practices and hypermasculine culture within school sport. The participants described organizational-level factors as influencing their experiences at both interpersonal (e.g., support from mentors, barriers related to the athletic directors) and individual (e.g., age, experience, sexual orientation) levels. The findings provide empirical support for specific organizational factors that contribute to interpersonal- and individual-level coach experiences. The power structures embedded in these associations are defined and discussed.

Keywords: barriers, power, hiring practices, human resource management, organizational behavior

Since the advent of Title IX, there has been an increase in opportunities for girls and women to participate in sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Despite this increase in opportunities for participation, women have historically been underrepresented in the coaching ranks, even in coaching women’s sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; LaVoi, 2016). There has been a steady decline in women coaching women’s sport, which is often attributed to Title IX providing equity in compensation for coaching, regardless of the gender of the athletes (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; LaVoi, 2016). According to Cunningham (2022), “scholarship shows a focus on how, why, and under what conditions women lack access to key coaching roles” (p. 12). Access, particularly at the hiring level, is critical to understanding what may be preventing women opportunities to attain coaching positions as well as persist when given these positions. Indeed, simply being hired for a position (i.e., increasing diversity) does not elucidate the complete story of the barriers and supports women encounter in the field of coaching (i.e., the existence of equity and feelings of inclusion). The idea that if you add more women to your organization and expect them to persevere in the coaching ranks without assessing the dysfunctional systems and processes within the organization—the so-called “add women and stir” approach (LaVoi et al., 2019; Madsen & McGarry, 2016)—has proven to be a flawed strategy.

Thus, beyond simply providing access through hiring more women, understanding associations between barriers or supports is critical in the retention of women coaches. With this interactive process in mind, LaVoi and Dutove (2012) developed an ecological systems model for women in sport coaching. Their model identified 14 factors categorized as organizational-level barriers, supports, or both (e.g., tokenism, recruiting, training, and low pay). The model highlights that organizational-level factors will interact with barriers and supports at other levels to influence the overall experiences of women coaches. For example, organization barriers may interact with interpersonal (e.g., support from mentors, barriers from athletic directors) and individual (e.g., age, experience, sexual orientation barriers). Exploring the stories of women who have lived experiences with coaching can assist in recognizing organizational factors that lead to their success or failure in the profession.

Ultimately, the identification of organizational factors that serve as barriers and supports for women in coaching may provide a stronger understanding of how to increase gender equity and inclusion in the field. Additionally, LaVoi et al. (2019) identified a “need to continue to focus on gendered power at the organizational and socio-cultural level” (p. 138), while LaVoi (2016) called for leaders to change organizational-level practices to improve the experiences of women coaches. Understanding these associations will give insight into the power dynamics that must be addressed to move toward equitable coaching experiences. Theoretically, scholars emphasize the prevalence of multilevel models to address barriers women face when coaching in sport (e.g., Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2019; Cunningham et al., 2019; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). However, the relationship between organizational factors and factors at other levels (e.g., interpersonal, individual, and those that are multilevel) within these models has been left relatively unexplored (Cunningham et al., 2019). Explaining the factors related to this nested model of experiences for women in coaching has the potential to contribute to a greater understanding of contexts that are equitable and inclusive; not just diverse or equal. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify the supports and barriers women coaches experience at the organizational level and to determine how those factors influence interpersonal- and individual-level factors within their coaching context. Specifically, the
researchers were most interested in addressing the following research questions (RQs):

**RQ1:** What are the supports and barriers women coaches experience at the organizational level?

**RQ2:** How were those factors connected with interpersonal- and individual-level factors within their coaching context?

For context, the researchers interviewed 10 women who coached high school (United States) girls’ basketball in 2009–2010 with the goal of understanding their lived experiences, particularly to barriers and constraints. During 2009–2010, the coaches focused specifically on interpersonal- and individual-level factors that influenced their coaching experiences (Strode & Parker, 2010). As a follow-up to the original study, the same women were recruited in 2021 to reflect upon their coaching experiences from the last decade, specific to organizational-level factors, such as “policies, job descriptions, professional practices, use of space, and opportunities (or lack thereof),” that were identified by LaVoi and Dutove (2012, p. 20). Nine of the 10 original participants agreed to participate in the 10-year follow-up study. Given that the participants were reflecting on 10 years, and the complexity of societal issues has shifted over the last decade (e.g., technology, Black Lives Matter, discussion around sexual orientation), the present study did not focus on or probe the sociocultural level of the ecological systems model (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

### Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

**Ecological Systems Model**

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory (EST) has been used extensively to help study human development and behavior within a specific context (Neal & Neal, 2013). The theory advances multiple levels which influence an individual’s development and behaviors, all of which are “nested” around an individual. An essential aspect of EST is that the levels are interdependent such that one level influences, and is influenced by, the other levels (Neal & Neal, 2013). LaVoi and Dutove (2012) applied EST to the existing women’s coaching literature and posited the ecological systems model for women coaches.

The systems model for women coaches includes four levels and moves from factors most proximal to the coach to factors most distal. Level 1, the **individual level**, incorporates the supports and barriers most closely associated with the individual coach, including marital status, sexuality, personality, and skills/knowledge/experience. Level 2, the **interpersonal level**, includes social-relational influences, such as networks, mentors, and family support. Level 3, the **organizational level**, comprises organizational policies, practices, and opportunities which impact coaches. Level 4, the **sociocultural level**, involves broader cultural systems which have an indirect impact such as homophobia and gender norms.

However, it is critical to note that existent supports and barriers at any level are not independent of one another. In fact, the utility of the model is represented in its ability to recognize the interconnectedness and intersections between levels of support and barriers for women coaches. Given the extant literature examining women coaches’ experiences, it is important to specifically investigate barriers and supports at the organizational level to address how each factor is interconnected (Cunningham et al., 2019; Knoppers et al., 2022).

### Organizational-Level Barriers and Supports

This study was particularly interested in how organizational-level factors influence interpersonal and individual factors. Previous literature focusing on the organizational level of sport organizations has found the barriers which exist throughout sport organizations’ structures, policies, and practices have become so commonplace, or normalized, that they are often overlooked or go unrecognized (Burton & Newton, 2022; Cunningham et al., 2019; Fink, 2008).

Organizational culture has been often noted as a barrier for women coaches (Burton, 2015; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). It is common for sport organizations to marginalize women and privilege men through sexism and discrimination (Cunningham, 2008; Cunningham et al., 2019). Hypermasculinity and traditional masculine traits are valued within sport organizations, and gender inequalities are accepted as standard practice (Hoeber, 2007; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). The default for sport is men, rendering women invisible within organizational policies and practices (Knoppers et al., 2022). These organizational factors define the context that women coach within and therefore provide the foundation for how women coaches are hired, oriented, and evaluated within their experiences as a coach.

Researchers have indicated there are also differences in how men and women coaches are evaluated by their organizations (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). Specifically, women coaches feel as if they must perform at a higher level than their colleagues who are men and are constantly having to prove they are competent coaches (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). They are not taken seriously by their peers and frequently have their abilities doubted or dismissed (Norman, 2010a, 2010b). Further, women coaches are aware of how they can be punished for aggressive or masculine behaviors which are otherwise valued and celebrated in men coaches (Knoppers et al., 2022).

The overall consequence of these organizational cultures is unsurprising. Women coaches report being subjected to sexism and bullying from their colleagues—men and women included (Knoppers et al., 2022; Norman, 2010b; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). They experience fewer opportunities for continued career growth as they are often relegated to lower levels and/or less visible roles (LaVoi, 2009), and women coaches are not provided the same access as men coaches to professional development opportunities (Norman et al., 2018). These practices and environments have been shown to negatively impact women coaches and their desire to remain in the coaching profession (e.g., Fink, 2015; Kane & LaVoi, 2018). In fact, women coaches often feel the only way to survive within such a gendered/sexist culture is to assimilate into the masculine culture—to “play the game” and accept and participate in sexist behaviors (Knoppers et al., 2022; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018).

Women coaches have noted that if they spoke out about the culture and treatment, they would be forced to leave the organization (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018).

While research on barriers at the organizational level significantly outnumber those on support (Taylor & Wells, 2017), having a supportive and inclusive organizational culture has been found to be beneficial to women coaches. For instance, workplace flexibility, supportive administrators, and inclusive workplace policies and practices are important to women coaches (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Inglis et al., 1996). Additionally, the organizational makeup,
such as having women in senior-level positions to serve as mentors and role models, also creates a more supportive culture (Taylor & Wells, 2017). Given that organizational factors can function as barriers and supports, it is increasingly relevant to understand how these factors influence other levels with an EST framework top of mind.

**Connected Levels of Barriers and Supports**

The complexity of the factors at the organizational level—systems which have been created by and embedded within organizations—impact factors at the interpersonal and individual levels (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Indeed, Cunningham et al. (2019) noted that the influence of organizational factors is likely indirect on the overall rating of experience by coaches, underscoring the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of the levels. However, while organizational-level barriers and supports for women coaches have been well established, there has been very little research to date specifically examining how the levels are related.

The present study addressed this gap in the literature by examining how factors at the organizational level influence interpersonal- and individual-level factors within the interconnected framework. Previously, Harvey et al. (2018) outlined the interconnected nature of interpersonal (e.g., views and relationships of family members) and individual (e.g., feelings of inadequacy) factors in their exploration of women’s experiences across their careers. Moreover, assumptions of gender at the organizational level, such as “dominant masculine leadership ideologies” and “gendered logic and beliefs that men are naturally better sport leaders and coaches” (Schull & Kihl, 2019, p. 1), have been implicitly outlined as influencing interpersonal- and individual-level differences in expectations and treatment, distrust among employees, and women coaches not feeling valued within their organizations (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). Likewise, organizational-level mentors and networks can provide support to women coaches at the interpersonal level (Banwell et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the presence of and participation in a strong and deliberate mentoring program for women coaches has also been shown to strengthen ties to the sport organization and favorably change the way in which the organization views women coaches—though the findings stop short of indicating an increase in supports due to these more positive feelings (Banwell et al., 2020).

In sum, the literature examining connected levels within the ecological model is scarce yet important in leading to a more complete understanding of women’s coaching experiences. As noted by LaVoi (2016), structures of power are integrated through the entire ecological model. To break down these power structures, we must understand the organizational-level factors that maintain power for historically dominant populations (e.g., White men) in sport settings. This study sought to expand on the multilevel model by developing empirical support for specific organizational-level factors (barriers or supports) that contribute to the interpersonal- and individual-level factors in the experiences of women coaches as they reflected on a 10-year coaching period.

**Method**

To serve the purpose of this study, a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm was adopted (Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivism acknowledges that multiple, interpretable, and equally credible realities exist for participants (Schwandt, 1994). Further, constructivism emphasizes that reality is a co-configuration that is formed in the mind of the participant, rather than as a single entity, and is brought to the surface by the reflection of the participant and researcher (Ponterotto, 2005). To ensure adherence to enhanced dialog within the paradigm, the research team engaged in multiple interviews (two total). The first interview in 2021 was established as a reflection on the phenomenon (e.g., gendered experiences in scholastic coaching) from participants’ first discussions with the lead author 10 years ago (2009–2010) to the present day (2021), and the second interview in 2021 allowed the researcher to dig into the hidden meaning and understanding that was brought to the surface by probing concepts from the first interview. This two-pronged reflection, first on a 10-year experience with coaching and second on responses from the first to second interview, allowed the participants the opportunity to elaborate on complex organizational factors influencing their experiences as coaches.

**Participants**

In line with the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, participants were recruited and engaged in multiple time points of collection. First, women basketball coaches in and around a large, metropolitan Midwestern city in the United States engaged in discussions with the lead author in 2009 and 2010. At the time, there were 110 varsity high school girls’ basketball programs in the district (a term used by the state high school athletic association to break down the geography of the member schools), and only 23 programs were led by women. In 2009–2010, the lead author recruited 10 women to discuss individual-level factors that defined their coaching experiences. In 2021, all 10 women were contacted again via e-mail to seek participation in a follow-up to their 2009–2010 discussions. This was a purposeful sample of participants who could actively reflect on their perceptions and experiences with coaching over a 10-year period. Nine of the 10 women agreed to participate in a series of two virtual recorded interviews on Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

**Materials and Procedures**

To serve the constructivist–interpretivist methodology and the purpose of this study, in 2021 a two-interview process was adopted. In particular, the interview guides were semistructured and occurred on two separate occasions approximately 2 weeks apart. The first interview took place over Microsoft Teams or Zoom (due to COVID-19 distancing protocols) for each participant and involved the participant’s recollections and memories of the 2009–2010 interview, their career path to date (all but one had stepped back from coaching), as well as their reflections on their experiences within their career path and departure from coaching. Following the first interview, a second interview was scheduled 2 weeks after the first. The second interview intended to build rapport and ask participants to reflect on the organizational barriers that they had acknowledged in Interview 1 and dig deeper into the meaning of those barriers. This allowed for the hermeneutical approach within the methodology to come to the forefront as a reflexive dialogue was the key focus of Interview 2 (Ponterotto, 2005). To serve the purpose of the study and structure the complexity of barriers and facilitators within participant experiences, probes generated from participant discussions in 2009–2010 were embedded in the questions within the first 2021 interviews.
Data Analysis

Interviews were virtually recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each participant was given a pseudonym that was then conveyed to and approved by the participants. Following transcription, two researchers independently coded that data using an open coding system. Specifically, the team followed Taylor et al. (2016) who outlined that beginning with open coding is essential to start the idea generation process. Further, in subscribing to the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, beginning with open coding allowed the researcher/participant dialog to guide the structure of analysis (Ponterotto, 2005). The three researchers independently read through the transcripts several times and began an organizing and labeling process that grouped batches of data into key concepts to pursue (Taylor et al., 2016). Within the open coding process, each participant’s experiences were coded independently to gain a rich understanding of their reality in context. Further, one researcher had viewed the participant video recordings before analysis and was able to make connections to the emotional reactions and tone of participants when assigning and labeling codes. This process contributed to a rich understanding of the realities each participant experienced while coaching and was an essential feature within the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. Next, with the frame of organizational barriers from the literature in mind, the data were then analyzed across participants to develop an understanding of the consistencies associated with the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon. Throughout the analysis process, reflexive journaling occurred where the researchers documented the connection to social constructs that came to mind as participant codes were connected. Finally, the overarching themes developed with the comparison across participant codes were then analyzed to produce subthemes that connected to, explained, or further defined the overarching themes.

To enhance trustworthiness and credibility, the researchers engaged in the above rigorous analysis process, as well as member checking with participants. In particular, the findings were shared with each participant to allow participants to provide feedback on whether the overarching themes represented their experiences. Moreover, the research team engaged in reflexive processes where they acknowledged their positionality within the research process. All three authors have coached at one point in time, two of the three authors identify as women. All three authors identify as White and recognize that their experiences and those of the participants centralize Whiteness in this context.

Findings

To serve the purpose of the study, the analysis of data was focused on providing structure to the complex stories that were described in participants’ experiences with coaching their school team. Through active reflections, participants shared their coaching experiences and revealed a deeper understanding of the factors that influenced their decisions when coaching in the high school basketball context. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the themes and underlay of subthemes that support and define the themes. The interaction between the themes is important to emphasize and Figure 1 displays the organizational factors that influence interpersonal and individual factors discussed by participants. For example, at the organizational level, inconsistent hiring practices led to varied administrative support (interpersonal level), and barriers were heightened in cases where the athletes’ parental influence was

![Figure 1](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
negative and strong (interpersonal level). The findings are presented below indicating the organizational barriers uncovered from the data, along with their influence on interpersonal- and individual-level factors. Quotations are provided to support each theme.

**Organizational Barrier: Navigating Inconsistent Hiring Practices**

Overall, there was a large variation in the organizational hiring practices outlined by participants. Participants noted the variation occurring within their school, as well as across schools in their context. In some cases, participants went through rigorous hiring practices where there were multiple steps to gaining their position on the coaching staff. For example, Lisa stated,

...it was very intensive, extremely intensive, and, you know, I think the first interview was with the past AD [athletic director], the AD, the principal, and someone else. And then there was another interview with some boosters, or some boosters were involved. And then the final interview in the second interview, they had me on the whiteboard. Right. So, they had me draw and stuff on the whiteboard.

Moreover, Katie had a similar experience where she emphasized the role of multiple individuals within the hiring process. She recalled,

There was a group, yeah. So, it was the athletic director, two parents, one was the booster president and one was another booster position. There were two players who were going to be seniors and I believe another coach. And then maybe like another person. I think the assistant principal or something like that.

These participants articulated that their hiring committees for their coaching positions were large and had a variety of stakeholders. Each participant listed these committees in a matter-of-fact manner. There was no questioning why boosters would be involved in the hiring process. This was common practice for these participants. This emphasized that the organizational practice of who is exclusively involved in hiring practices remains ultimately unquestioned; even though, it was noted as extremely problematic and inconsistent for these participants.

Interestingly, Pat discussed a time when she was able to see how coaches who were men were hired in comparison to coaches who were women. She discussed the role of stereotypes in who was brought in for the positions and the discrepancy in the rigor of the process. As she stated,

Yeah, that’s something that’s driven me crazy that I could talk about a lot and being on the interview committee, for new coaches within [area] schools, not basketball while I was on basketball for men’s, but how they hired men’s coaches or boys, sports coaches versus girls, sports coaches, and what those interview committees look like from one for the other are night and day.

For Pat, the composition of the committees was inconsistent (less formalized for girls’ teams, with varied transparency in the hiring process) and often reflected the bias that athletic directors or boosters had for the coach, the sport, and the gender of the sport (boys’ team vs. girls’ team). This provides a connection between inconsistent hiring practices at the organizational level and negative beliefs about sport and gender at the interpersonal level.

During the second interview with participants, the structure of the hiring process was discussed by many participants in detail. When probed, it was clear that participants had quite different experiences (ranging from some structure/formalization to no structure or formalization at all) with how they were hired into their coaching positions. Specifically, in contrast to the structure outlined above, some participants stated there was word-of-mouth selection that lacked any formal process. As Beth put it,

we had talked throughout college and stuff and was like, hey, like, I want to get into coaching and, do you maybe have a position at the middle school or something? And then he had said, well, actually, I have the varsity assistant position. And so, I took that and worked with him for a few years.

Beth had a good relationship with an individual of influence and was simply offered the position without an interview. Tara had a similar experience where she had a mentor who helped place her into a position. To explain the hiring process, Tara stated, “It is easier to hire the known rather than to try and reach out for a lot of them. I do think that that can be a factor in hiring. This is important.” Both Beth and Tara emphasized that knowing the right people was important in their recruitment into their coaching positions. This privilege was well received by the participants who derived benefits from their social connections but also contributed to a system where nepotism and social identity drive decision making and access. Here, inconsistent hiring processes at the organizational level were connected with support from leaders at the interpersonal level; however, this experience was only relevant for participants who had positive experiences with sport and gender at the individual level.

Formal hiring processes may take up more time but create equity in a process where it is not a “who knows who” in gaining access to head coaching positions. When Joan described her interactions with hiring for her assistant coach, the informal and inconsistent hiring process then impacted her own hiring processes,

Steve pointed him to me and said he’d be a good fit. So, he actually kind of interviewed me when we got together. And I told him how I felt and what I see for this group of girls. And I think he knew some of them from church because he goes to church out here.

The lack of process is then perpetuated because the informal process is a learned behavior where decisions based on social connections have become the norm. Moreover, Joan articulated the connections at church that helped foster connections in coaching. Those who were outside of the church social circle, in this case, may not receive the same privileged opportunities in these positions. These experiences are then seen as a support for those in the social circle but exclude anyone outside the social circle, therefore causing inequity.

**Interpersonal Support: The Role of Mentors**

Participants who discussed inconsistent hiring practices also discussed the presence of mentors. Many participants discussed the role mentors had in gaining access to coaching positions in their field. Mentors and mentorship were not inherently negative factors in participants’ experiences; however, of the mentors that participants discussed, over 30 were men, and many were outlined as being gatekeepers to their coaching positions or fueled their passion for coaching careers. In comparison, 19 total women
mentors were discussed and only one of these individuals was discussed as influencing the hiring and recruitment process.

Participants outlined positive experiences where a system of allyship was created. For example, their mentors who were men were seen as gatekeepers to access positions, athletic directors were then potential allies in a positive hiring and orientation experience, and finally, women were seen as allies in that they could discuss their experiences. At the interpersonal level, the availability of effective mentors was influenced by the network created by inconsistent (informal) hiring practices. For example, informal and unstructured hiring practices caused support for some coaches that led to effective mentors who continued to provide support beyond the hiring process. However, for those who had inconsistent hiring that included limited support (barrier), this organizational-level factor had a further influence on the available mentors within participants’ networks. That is, a participant who experienced limited support within inconsistent hiring practices had fewer mentor relationships during their coaching experience. This is important to note because some individuals benefit from this support and others do not have this support in place.

Overall, the system of allyship had to be self-created and required knowing “the right people.” Even after being hired, connecting with the “right people” has its importance, as Dawn stated,

“I think it’s good to have that kind of football coach in your corner, because football runs a lot of things and a lot of decisions are based on them. So maybe he comes to some of our games and supports our kids. So, I really appreciate that.”

Similar to the variation in hiring processes and informal processes outlined above, mentorships created a system of allyship for these participants; however, they also outlined the power of allies who are men at the interpersonal level in either making or breaking their experience as a women coach.

**Interpersonal Barrier and Support: The Influence of Athletic Directors**

Relatedly, an interpersonal factor influenced by inconsistent hiring practices was related to athletic directors being described as having a substantial influence on hiring processes and the experiences of each participant. In all cases, the athletic director was described as a potential advocate for participants after a positive hiring experience, as Joan indicated,

“I report to the athletic director and I had fabulous athletic directors, you know, Steve was my athletic director. And then Stanley and James all very supportive, very knowledgeable of the game. Knowledgeable of the kids and the parents. Knowledgeable of the situations I was going into. He probably knew more than I did at the time. If I had parents’ meetings with them, which were few, they supported me and backed me up and tried to work through things and did a good job.”

This support system was very meaningful to Joan and helped create a culture where she felt supported. However, the athletic director was also a barrier in other participants’ descriptions. In particular, Beth discussed a number of issues she had with her athletic director following a flawed hiring process. Specifically, she stated,

... the athletic director, I had my second year. I knew I didn’t have respect from him. I mean, I think even one time he called me like honey or sweetheart or something, and I had to say, no, please don’t call me that. The way he talked down to me ... . And I just I kind of felt like even sometimes when we were in meetings, I just felt like I didn’t have that support. And I even felt the same thing with the principal. I felt like I didn’t have that support from him. And so, then when you don’t have your administrators behind you or support you, then it’s even going to be hard for other people to also support you.

Beth had several stories in both interviews that outlined the negative impact her athletic director had on her experience. She discussed sexist comments (similar to “honey or sweetheart” above) and recognized a toxic culture that spread to her interactions with others at the school.

Participant experiences became more complex in situations where there were no formal hiring processes at the organizational level, and the athletic director had substantial influence over hiring and recruiting decisions. These situations left the hiring of coaches in the hands of one person, which led to problematic situations where gender bias existed in interactions with that individual. As described by Beth in her first interview and articulated to a large degree in her second interview,

... I had a couple different situations where I felt I was being degraded as a female coach by my athletic director. And I went to Sharon [long time female coach] as a mentor. And I said, you know, is, “is this something that I’ve done [to be treated this way]? Is this something that is because I’m young, and I’m female, and like, he doesn’t trust that I’m, you know, able to handle the situation appropriately.” And, she said, Beth, everything you’re saying, I’ve dealt with too. And I’m a veteran coach. I’m the most veteran coach at this school, right now. And, and she said, it’s because we’re female.

Beth had questioned her abilities because of how her athletic director treated her. The imbalance of power started with the interview process and was a large part of her overall experience. The participants emphasized that their athletic director had the power to make their experience wonderful or terrible.

**Interpersonal Barrier: The Influence of Parents**

Moreover, there was the varied influence of parents in the hiring processes outlined by participants. In these cases, participants also detailed experiences where student-athlete parents played an active role in their overall experience as coaches. Specifically, parents were described as having an active role at the organizational level in the recruitment and hiring process alongside finance allocation through booster clubs. From a financial standpoint, this involvement makes sense as parents are boosters in these contexts and therefore feel they have a right to contribute to decision making. However, as Audrey outlined,

... that’s where having more of the issues or altercations with parents came into play. And then when they’re on a booster group and they’re spending their time fundraising and trying to get things for the girls, then you get questioned about their playing time. So, it’s you’re right in the fact that they feel like they have more skin in the game just because they’re in that booster organization and helping make decisions.

Further, Lisa reflected on a similar influence of parents in her coaching experience,

I think that because parents are putting money in it. It’s almost like in a youth situation, it’s almost like they’re paying to play
for their kid to play, and so they look at it more of a club culture than a high school culture that you and I would be familiar with maybe. And I think that those lines are really blurred there. And I mean something that I discussed with the AD at length in my last two years there. I didn’t believe that the booster system worked because whenever someone invests money into something, they think it gives them power. And I think those parents thought they had some sort of power to make changes. Right. And even coaching changes.

Several participants recognized that parents had too much say in who was selected as coach. If athletes’ parents had biased preferences for coaches who were men, participants discussed this as limiting opportunities for women. Moreover, participants highlighted that this situation may have been more prominent earlier in their careers when they were younger and inexperienced. Kay noted this experience in particular as she recognized that her age played a role in missing out on opportunities earlier in her career,

I mean, there is like only a handful of women, like all men. And then to even be a young woman, there are times where I felt like I kind of like that. I liked being this like minority, like a young female coach showing up to like an all male table. But then again, you sometimes do feel like you have to prove yourself. You always feel like you have to prove yourself the moment you step out on the floor, like I said, and people are kind of like they had comments about that. I look like I was like one of the players or something. I think I even had that. I had organized maybe like a summer league or something. And I was having a really hard time with turn out like enough girls coming and things.

Ironically, when specifically probed further, Kay did not attribute the bias that she felt to her gender, only her age. This may emphasize the embedded sociocultural norms that become entrenched and therefore are not questioned (or even recognized in this case) during decision making that influences the hiring and evaluation processes for these coaches. These sociocultural factors should be explored in more depth in future research.

Organizational Barrier: Hypermasculine Culture Within School Sport

Participants experienced negative issues related to the culture of sport in-game and postgame behavior at their schools (i.e., coaching from the stands, getting into verbal arguments, or setting unrealistic expectations of players’ playing abilities and playing time). These experiences typically occurred with parents or athletics directors and were discussed as having an impact on motivation, mental health, and stress during their coaching careers. Moreover, participants discussed these interactions within the school/organizational context as a necessary evil in sport; something that is embedded in the competitive culture of the old boys’ network of the school sport culture. When probed in her second interview about the culture of the sport around her sexist athletic director, Katie outlined,

The community takes their sports pretty seriously. So, you have to definitely gain that respect from parents, from other coaches. So, I’m not so sure it’s the wins because you coach the players that you have. So, I think it’s more about gaining the respect from all the different stakeholders and outside people to fit in, as you say, as far as culturally.

Katie had become resigned to the fact that this was how sport was and how coaching in her sport was for her, as a woman.

Interpersonal Support: Prioritizing Development and Well-Being

One balancing subtheme that provided a motivator to continue to coach was student care and well-being. Working within the hypermasculine culture of their school sport, participants discussed student care focused on student-athlete well-being and moral development that allowed the participants the opportunity to create life lessons for their athletes. Most coaches believed program success not only dealt with winning percentages but was structured on building good habits and good morals for each athlete. As Pat expressed,

I think there is a coachable moment in everything that you do. And I tried to help the kids see to not be afraid of losing. And when you win act like you’ve been there before, and a lot of confidence in leading them through those situations of how do you help somebody that’s really struggling with those moments? And how do you know, its coaching is all about teaching. And I, as much as I would have loved to coach somebody who would have played DI ball, let alone anything more than that. I knew for most of these kids, this was about learning life lessons. You know, playing sports is about working with a group of people with a common goal and having fun while you’re doing it.

Given the hypermasculine sport culture within the organization, in some cases, parents would disapprove of life lessons coaches were trying to implement when certain athletes disobeyed their rules. This would increase parent–student–coach tension and impact the experience outlined by participants as further indicated by Pat,

I was trying to teach her a lesson. And, you know, he threw his hands up, he stood up in the crowd, this isn’t coaching and he storms out of the gym. And it’s like the moment you’re trying to teach a kid something and they see a parent react that way like this gonna be tough.

When faced with barriers defined by a hypermasculine sport culture in the school, coaches who were teachers put forward a more developmental approach to interpersonal relations with athletes through the connection of sports and life. The impact on the participants was further influenced by the support (or lack of support) from the athletic director regarding the developmental approach at the organizational level. As Beth explained,

... when you don’t really have that support from the administration, I think that then you when you’re a head coach, you’re dealing with parents, you’re dealing with like, you’re dealing with, you know, different things than when you’re on. Like admin team doesn’t support you. It doesn’t it doesn’t set up for success. I kind of felt like I was set up to fail and didn’t get support. So, it was just kind of frustrating.

The frustration that Beth felt was also outlined by Kay when discussing the laissez-faire nature of her athletic director in explicitly offering support in challenging situations. These concerns were highlighted in different contexts where participants discussed different experiences with the attitude toward women in coaching roles at their schools.
Interpersonal Barriers: Varied Beliefs About Sport and Gender

The influence of hypermasculine sport culture was amplified in contexts where participants experienced divergent interpersonal relations related to sport and gender. Specifically, the values, beliefs, and attitudes shared by the school and team differed by age group and financial status within the context that participants were coaching. Some participants noted they experienced more barriers associated with negative perceptions of women coaching within “country club culture” settings than in lower socioeconomic class settings. This was shown in Audrey’s comparison of parental barriers,

... here in our school parents play a huge role. You know, I’ve been to some games and parents, just are they, no, I’m not saying all of them, but you know, that they just have different views, unrealistic views of their student athlete. And so, you know, it, they, they think one thing and the coach thinks to another, and then they get into it, and you know, so that was one thing, I never had to, you know, battle at another school because like I said, there was minimal parents in the stands. So, it was the girls, it was coaching, you know, it was teaching them things. And it was great. I didn’t have to deal with that. But in another location, there’s a lot of parents that it just doesn’t seem to make it fun for a lot of coaches these days.

Attitudes and behaviors differed among students especially when parents were more involved in their athletics, as they felt a more club culture, “pay to play” society that participants said resulted in being treated as lesser because they were women. Older coaches noted that team culture was influenced by the athletes’ generation, comparing young athletes’ level of effort for sport participation and genuine sport interest to their own experiences growing up or earlier years of coaching. Coaches also discussed their perception of women’s personalities and how those can create coaching barriers or reasons why coaching girls requires a shift in coaching styles as some participants stated that girls need more communication, and more explanation for decision making as they are perceived to overthink criticism they may receive. Pat indicated, “Coaching boys and girls is, is really different. I think they respond to things really differently. And I’ve definitely had girls that can be coached more traditionally.” Lisa also supported this statement,

In my experience, I think that men coaches might find it harder to be tough on the girl, or maybe tough enough, and I know you can speak to that more than probably what I can, but Um, even you know, Clark is more apt to give them that second try, he’s more apt to give them that third try. I think we finally nip that in the bud by the end of this season, right? Where it’s like, Okay, this is the goal, if you don’t meet the goal, it’s the baseline [sprint drill] type of thing.

Given the experience of gender bias that these women coaches discussed, the above quotations demonstrate that these sexist biases within sport at their school filtered into the coaches’ perceptions of their players. Pat seemed to live these biases, whereas Lisa’s description appears to challenge the biases, therefore influencing how each engaged in interpersonal-level relations.

A notable trend among experiences revealed that coaches’ main interpersonal-level mentors and inspirations for coaching philosophies within their sport came from figures who were men. Women coaches felt that young athletes, officials, and other coaches showed more respect toward figures who are men than women, hence creating a repetitive cycle of perception for male/man dominance in coaching. Reflecting on past upbringing, most felt they responded better to coaches who were men, including being coached by their fathers, and do not take offense when current athletes continue to respond better to men coaches. For example, as Beth reflected,

I’ve acknowledged when it’s been brought up to me before, like the coaches, but I have the best relationship with where men, you know, so even myself being an athlete, I responded well to my male coaches. And those are the people that I like were my mentors later in life. And I had good relationships with. I don’t I had several female coaches, whether it was like volleyball or, you know, track, or even myself, like I responded well to the male coaches, and so then how do you not how do you not self-reflect on that?

Moreover, Katie outlined in her second interview that upon reflection, there was certainly gender bias at play,

I’ll just be honest, it was definitely gender biased, so for all the male, for every single one of the male athletic directors, it was always about the good ol’ boys club. And for every female, it was always about empowering women and giving girls and women opportunities that they hadn’t had in the past. If you want to know a theme that’s it right there.

This may be an ongoing barrier to women in coaching positions, as they strive to find ways to build relationships with stakeholders. Old school perceptions were common among coaches, with one participant admitting she knowingly stereotyped another woman coach based on her outfit that day as Beth indicated,

I would hate to say this, but I will admit it and I will admit when I’m wrong, I remember coaching against her. And even in my own head, coming up a little bit with like a stereotype of like I didn’t I was just kind of like. She doesn’t really look like maybe it was kind of how she was dressed or something, and I was like, she doesn’t really look like a coach are, like, not really knowing, like if she, you know, would know her stuff or be a good coach. And then I coached for her and like, I thought she was great. I think, like, she I, I enjoyed coaching for her and I kind of heard her background too.

This experience highlights the stereotype bias that these participants hold of other women in the coaching field.

This dominance of male/man-centered perceptions was also seen in the statements of two participants who briefly discussed their sexuality within the context of their coaching experience. In particular, Joan noted that coaches got a lot of “flack” from parents in her coaching context and felt that her sexuality did not have a place within the coach/sport setting. Joan did not explicitly state this lack of acceptance as her reason for leaving coaching but was visibly uncomfortable when she addressed this topic. She discussed leaning on mentors who were men as her support system and outlined that she leaned on the old boys’ network to maintain support as a coach. This reliance on a system of allyship that was rooted in hypermasculinity may have been linked to Joan’s reluctance to be open about her sexuality while engaged in her coaching career.

Individual Barrier: Conflicting Priorities

Moreover, the hypermasculine culture perpetuated by school policies that emphasized masculine ideals (e.g., sport prioritized over...
anything else) played an active role in participants’ decisions to quit coaching. Participants discussed this factor as an additional barrier when pursuing individual-level family-oriented priorities (i.e., spending time with their children, spouse, or aging parents) in the coaching context. Participants discussed how hours of practice and games would conflict with their personal commitments, leaving them with less time to show physical presence for their families. Many participants outlined that the potential for a balance is not possible. As Linda reflected,

You’re somebody is going to lose out at the end of the day, even if it was a perfect . . . I don’t know that there is the perfect world for family balance. And being a varsity coach in 2021, I feel like to be a varsity coach, which is kind of like where my where everything kind of came to an end was the basketball program. I mean, whatever program you’re coaching has to be a top priority. But is it fair to your family that they’re not the top priority? I mean, for me to be a successful varsity coach, that program has to be one or two on your priority list. And when you have a family, I don’t know that that’s fair to your family.

Moreover, Pat had a similar sentiment when she stated,

. . . there’s a work life balance that, you know, as I get older, I just keep saying, like, I love what I do, and I could spend so much time doing it. But I will, and I do love my family more. And so, keeping that in balance and check. You know, when I die, I don’t want to be known as the greatest coach ever. I want to be known as the greatest mom and the greatest wife ever. Could I do both? Really? Well, I think at a certain point, I could. But right now, my kids are developing in the way that they are finding their own passions and things that they like to do. I don’t want to miss that.

Further, contributing to a perceived need to prioritize sport, participants discussed driving times from teaching at other schools and coaching in opposing towns as a time constraint. Opportunities for coaching and teaching at the same school co-existed as a barrier for women. When most men head coaches were offered teaching positions as part of their hiring package, showing gender differences in hiring opportunities. Additionally, program and athlete development were also coded under time constraints with unrealistic expectations of quick program success and turnaround while dealing with staff turnover rates. Lived experiences revealed the hypermasculine culture of the school sport context put family priorities and the time commitment of the coaching role at odds, which was a barrier that many participants felt could not be balanced.

Overall, the findings indicate that organizational factors of inconsistent hiring practices and hypermasculine sport culture act as barriers for women coaches within the school setting. Moreover, these organizational factors influence interpersonal factors such as the role of mentors, support from athletic directors, influence of parents, prioritizing athlete well-being, and beliefs about sport and gender. These organizational factors also influence individual-level conflict of priorities felt by participants. In the next section, the findings will be discussed in relation to their contribution to the literature.

Discussion

This study contributes to the understanding of organizational-level factors in women’s coaching experiences and empirically assesses factors within the ecological systems model of women coaches (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Specifically, organizational barriers discussed by our study participants influenced interpersonal and individual factors, which contributes to our theoretical understanding of power structures embedded at the organizational level (LaVoi, 2016) in two ways. First, two main themes related to RQ one emerged from our analysis: (a) participants experienced and observed inconsistent hiring practices and (b) there is a hypermasculine culture within the organizational-level interscholastic sport context. These factors are situated at the organizational level, create power imbalances that favor men or women, and impact the interpersonal and individual experiences of the coaches in this study. Additionally, these themes support the narratives which have grown from previous sport coaching literature (see Burton, 2015; Cunningham et al., 2019; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Knoppers, 1987; LaVoi, & Dutove, 2012). As an example, Knoppers et al. (2022) outlined the role of sovereign power in the recruitment and hiring process of women coaches. They emphasized the response and role of women at the individual level who are attempting to enfold into coaching roles in international football. The current study builds from this work by clearly defining the organizational practice that creates this organizational-level barrier.

Moreover, our findings indicate women coaches attempt to navigate inconsistent hiring practices (organizational barrier) through relations at the interpersonal and individual levels. Most notably, inconsistent hiring practices across schools created power imbalances where some coaches were reliant on mentors and athletic directors to ensure that equal opportunities were experienced. This removed power from women coaches and left power in the hands of others (often men). In other cases, the hiring practices were inconsistent within the school/organization, and women coaches identified a lack of support from others (e.g., mentors and athletic directors) which further perpetuated barriers. These findings provide clear examples and empirical support for the power structures that must be disrupted in the movement toward equity in coaching (Burton & LaVoi, 2016; LaVoi, 2016).

To build on the influence of inconsistent hiring practices and further reflect on RQ1, the findings build on previous literature that outlines structures which create inequity in hiring coaches (Darvin, 2020; Hindham & Walker, 2020). For instance, as noted in this study, organizational hiring practices influenced interpersonal relationships with mentors and athletic directors. Participants outlined how having a mentor who was well connected, or knowing the athletic director, was often a way coaches were hired or appointed. Additionally, participants outlined that organizations often included parents and boosters on the hiring committees for coach searches. Taylor and Wells (2017) found building good relationships with key constituents, such as athletic directors and boosters, was vital to women’s career advancement and opportunity. This is an organizational practice of including parents and boosters in the hiring process, where our participants stated these stakeholders have very little understanding of the role of a coach. The biased views of parents remained a barrier, unless participants in our study were able to navigate and leverage additional forms of power (Knoppers et al., 2022) or create positive interpersonal relations with mentors and athletics directors.

To further understand RQ1, it is well documented that sport organization cultures create spaces that marginalize women and privilege men (Cunningham, 2008, 2019) and include sexism and discrimination that impact women coaches (e.g., Fink, 2015; Kane
Participants stated discrimination from parents often resulted in parents or boosters wanting favors or more control over day-to-day coaching decisions (i.e., more playing time for their kids). This prioritization within the schools and hypermasculine ideals of the winning-at-all-costs mentality embedded in interpersonal relationships with parents created a further power imbalance that often heightened the barrier of inconsistent hiring practices for these participants. In some cases, parents had ultimate control over the participants’ destiny as coaches. This control started within hiring and followed through for many participants labeling negative interpersonal experiences with parents and eventually exiting their careers as coaches.

The hypermasculine culture of sport influenced how sport and gender are viewed, the struggle for work–life balance (interpersonal and individual levels), and the challenge of prioritizing athlete development and well-being (interpersonal level). Participants recalled school, community, and parent beliefs on gender as well as the purpose/role of interscholastic sport were important determinants in how coaches were treated and viewed. This builds on previous work (Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Knoppers et al., 2022) and underscores that while women may be hired into coaching positions by men, if the surrounding organizational culture includes stakeholders with traditional views and beliefs about women and gender roles, negative interactions and experiences are likely to occur. For our participants, these interpersonal-level relationships with stakeholders were shaped by the initial presence of inconsistent hiring practices. Given that inconsistent hiring practices and hypermasculine school sport culture are embedded at the same level of the ecosystem, these two organizational barriers lead to structures that shape interpersonal experiences.

More specifically, coaches reflected on how athletes, officials, and other coaches showed more respect for coaches who were men and they believed players interacted with men and women coaches differently. Participants also commented on how the coaching expectations and demands were such that coaching had to be their priority over their family and the difficulty this created for those with children. Further, the coaches discussed how some parents took high school basketball too seriously or had an inflated sense of their child’s talent and disagreed with a coach’s efforts to prioritize player development and larger life lessons. Echoing the findings of Hindham and Walker (2020), others noted instances of sexism and recognized efforts to assimilate into the masculine culture in order to fit in. This hypermasculine culture within which these coaches worked and struggled was created by the interaction of interpersonal- and individual-level factors.

In sum, a hypermasculine school sport culture was defined by athlete parent’s behavior and the behavior of athletic administrators who favored men and dominant male characteristics within sport. Similar to LaVoi et al. (2019), biased school organizational practices and culture were experienced as these women coaches discussed being scrutinized more than their men coach peers, which served as a barrier. However, our findings extend this research by identifying that in response to this biased school sport culture some women coaches experience a prioritization of well-being and development at the interpersonal level, which acts as a support against these dominant school culture norms. Moreover, Schull and Kihl (2019) emphasized that gendered leadership expectations create contexts where “... women are expected to display agentic masculine traits because they are leaders while also being expected to display more collaborative and communal feminine traits because they are women” (p. 3). Interestingly, some participants leaned into the communal component of student care as a positive way to develop players within a hypermasculine school sport context; however, others adopted biased assumptions about how female athletes prefer to be treated to justify their prioritization of well-being. Within an embedded ecosystem, the impact of these variations should be explored in the future.

In 10 years, nine of 10 women in our study (including the one nonparticipant in the follow-up) left the coaching profession. All reflected on organizational practices and cultures which influenced their ability to remain a coach. While understanding what factors drive women from the coaching profession is complex, the value of EST is a greater recognition of the multiple levels of influence and the interplay of these influences across levels (Glanz et al., 2015). A coach is nested within these multiple levels, and the impact at one level will subsequently impact the coach at the other levels (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Using the ecological systems model as a framework, this study highlighted how organizational-level factors influence the interpersonal- and individual-level factors discussed in women’s coaching experiences.

**Implications and Limitations**

Sport administrators working to enact cultural change at the organizational level cannot simply look at the organizational-level barriers in isolation. Rather, sport administrators must recognize how the organizational level influences other levels in the system. For instance, the organizational structure and system will influence an employee’s individual beliefs about women’s abilities or place in sport. Put another way, individual sexism exists because organizational sexism exists and is given permission to interact with other levels.

Experts on EST suggest that the most effective means of changing behaviors are multilevel interventions (Glanz et al., 2015). In other words, to address the declining numbers of women coaches in sport, sport managers must work to change behaviors at all levels. Likewise, to change the culture of a sport organization, managers must work to change organizational-level factors that define organizational culture. Given the influence of levels in the ecosystem, for managers to enact change and create equitable contexts that give women the opportunity to thrive as coaches, we must focus attention on the organizational-level factors (barriers and supports) that can be managed.

It is pertinent to draw specific attention to the importance our participants placed on their relationship with their athletic director. The impact of this relationship, good or bad, was felt across all levels (e.g., at the organizational level with inconsistent hiring and at the interpersonal level with the role of mentors). Similar to the findings of Taylor and Wells (2017) who discussed the importance of women in the role of sport administrators having a good relationship with men who are athletic directors, the value of a supportive athletic director was clear, and future research should more fully probe this finding. Moreover, it is clear that parents and boosters have imbalanced control of hiring processes. Hiring processes must be explicitly addressed in terms of consistent conditions and criteria for recruitment and selection. The role of parents in this process should be revisited in terms of purpose and position.

It is evident that significant improvements within the hiring, onboarding, and evaluation process should be made. Job descriptions and interview processes should be consistent across all sports, regardless of the gender of the team. Hiring for a girls’ sport should not be treated as a second-class process, but rather the same rigor must be employed as for the hiring of a boys’ sport. Administrative support must also be consistent, including how resources are doled
out, as well as how coaches are evaluated. School districts should explore requiring implicit bias training to assist in improving the relationship between athletic directors who are men, parents, and women coaches. Finally, mental health needs to be considered, as coaching a high school team as a part-time employee holds some of the same pressures as college and professional coaches who do it as a full-time vocation. While this research led to a variety of strategies to improve the nature of high school coaching, future research can address the impact of these strategies on all levels. In particular, there should be a focus on the sociocultural level and how factors at this level (e.g., gender role assumptions, marginalization, homophobia; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012) are connected to relationships identified here.

There are several limitations of this study which should be noted. As a qualitative study, the authors acknowledge their role in the collection and analysis. The experiences of the researchers inherently shaped the interaction between the researcher and those researched. Each member of the research team provided a statement of positionality where biases or perspectives were consistently acknowledged and addressed during the analysis process. Additionally, nine participants completed both interviews, where follow-up with the 10th participant to determine reasons for attrition from the study was not possible. Moreover, participants were women who identified as White women. Through recruitment and study design, it is important to reflect on barriers that may surface because of interpersonal and individual factors not captured in this study. Indeed, this emphasizes the need to further explore the relationship between levels within the ecosystem of coaching experiences among diverse populations of women coaches.

References


