

Final Thoughts on Women in Sport Coaching: Fighting the War

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This collection of articles about and for women in sport coaching provides more evidence of the occupational landscape and experiences of women. As with countless empirical articles before, the eight articles in this special issue of *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* (WSPAJ) further uncover and reveal that structural-level systemic bias is *deeply* embedded within the culture of sport—the data tell the story. With more data, the story plotline becomes sharply focused and illuminates the many obstacles women coaches face and how challenging it is to change the gendered system. As Pat Griffin (2015) argued, a war on women coaches exists and currently continues to rage. The war is exacerbated by

“misogyny, sexism, and homophobia. This trifecta of hostility towards women in athletics is made more threatening in an athletic climate in which financial resources are strained to the max and athletic administrators in schools large and small buy into the pipe dream of cultivating big time football (and men’s basketball) as the salvation of cash strapped athletic departments.” (Griffin, 2015)

To fight the war, data is warranted and must be systematically organized and leveraged to maximize change efforts.

In 2012, LaVoi and Dutove (2012) first outlined the Ecological Model of Barriers and Supports for Women Coaches, which was extended by LaVoi (2016) in *Women and Sports Coaching* to include intersectionality and power. The Ecological-Intersectional Model (EIM; LaVoi, 2016), derived from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, specifies that “human development and experience is influenced by a variety of proximally located *individual, interpersonal, organizational, and socio-cultural environmental systems*” (emphasis added; p. 19) across one’s lifespan and career trajectory. The purpose of the EIM was to systematically organize existing literature, stimulate dialogue, identify gaps in the literature to help researchers target inquiry, and guide decision-makers to improve the occupational experiences for women coaches. What is clear from the data is that far more barriers than supports exist for women coaches—particularly for women with systematically marginalized identities (e.g., race, sexuality, age, class, ability, parenthood, and ethnicity; LaVoi, 2016). Ironically, the individuals in the system with the least power (i.e., women) often get blamed for the lack of women head coaches, a visible position of power.

Women are often blamed and held responsible, particularly by male athletics directors (Kane & LaVoi, 2018), for the scarcity of

women in coaching due to their choices, failing to apply, lacking competencies or confidence, being less interested than men, focusing on family over career, or not taking job offers (LaVoi, 2016). Conversely, women athletics directors and senior woman administrators attributed the “good old boys” network and conscious and unconscious bias as the reasons for the scarcity of women coaches (Kane & LaVoi, 2018). Blaming women ensures that the androcentric systemic status quo of male dominance remains intact. Feminist sport scholars over the decades have argued that male control of, and deeply embedded gendered power within, sport is a primary factor for the absence, scarcity, and stagnation of women in leadership positions. Unfortunately, little has changed in the occupational sport landscape for women over time, despite a plethora of research, advocacy, and action. As Norman, Rankin-Wright, and Allison (2018) argued, the underrepresentation of women coaches must be reframed as “a symptom, or an outcome of a deeper issue, rather than the problem in itself” (p. 395). Fortunately, in the eight years since the EIM was proposed, researchers have used the model to focus efforts and further understanding that can potentially lead to social change, and the articles in this special issue are no exception.

Locating the WSPAJ Special Issue Papers within the EIM

Many contributions to the knowledge of barriers and supports in the EIM model for women coaches were evident in this special collection of papers. Cunningham et al. (2019) used a multilevel approach to highlight how occupational constraints limit individual women’s aspirations and intentions to remain in coaching compared to male counterparts, and provided compelling evidence to assist in railing against common “blame the women” narratives for the lack of women in coaching. Women’s professional choices are influenced by *occupational and socio-cultural factors*. Clarkson et al.’s (2019) piece reveals that gender is deeply embedded across the EIM model as a barrier to career development and progression for women coaches at all levels of competition from youth to elite. Clarkson’s findings complement and reinforce what Cunningham et al. argued—gendered systems influence women’s career trajectories and choices of women.

Two of the articles addressed career pathways into and through women’s NCAA Division-I basketball. In Wasend and LaVoi’s article (2019), the power of same- versus cross-sex role models, a possible *interpersonal-level support* in the EIM, was examined as an influence for female college athletes to enter into and stay in the coaching profession. The authors illuminated evidence for the power of same-sex role models for inspiration, aspiration, education, emulation, information, and access to a female network in helping early career women navigate and stay in coaching.

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Same-sex social support and role models matters. Larsen and Clayton (2019) used an intersectional lens of gender and race to examine career pathways of women's basketball head coaches, and found both play a significant role in influencing women's career trajectories. Larsen and Clayton's results add to the *individual level* in terms of intersectionality, and complemented and extended Cunningham et al. and Clarkson et al.'s findings that gender and racial bias permeates every level of the EIM and function as barriers to advancement and retention.

Multiple papers in this special issue outlined and evaluated programs targeted to develop women coaches. Allen and Reid (2019) and Culver et al. (2019) specified multifaceted programs, best practices, and lessons learned for developing women coaches in Scotland and Canada, respectively. Both papers add practical and applied knowledge of supports at the *individual and interpersonal levels* of the EIM model, that can be adapted to other contexts to help develop and retain women coaches and improve equitable representation of women leaders in sport. Krahn (2019) evaluated the effectiveness of Canadian sport policies, an *organizational structural level* variable in the EIM, that have potential to inform mentorship and sponsorship programs that help advance careers of high performance women coaches. Unfortunately, based on Krahn's analysis, policies fell short of intended outcomes of developing and supporting women coaches due to lack of practical strategies and the inclusion of specific language around mentorship and sponsorship. Research and data inclusive of the voices and experiences of women must inform policy development.

Banwell, Kerr, and Stirling's (2019) paper explicated the role of mentorship and sponsorship, which reside at the *interpersonal level* of the EIM, and the need to learn from non-sport domains. Sponsors (a majority of whom are men) have greater power in the system at the *organizational level* of the model, and, therefore, may be more effective in advancing the careers of women. Based on the data, Banwell argues women coaches need both male and female mentors over the entire career trajectory, and that mentorship must be supported at the *organizational level*. These data highlight both mentorship and sponsorship is necessary in helping women coaches overcome and navigate a highly gendered and discriminatory system.

Taken together, the papers in the special issue highlight the utility of locating where empirical efforts map into and through the EIM model, and in doing so revealed how different levels are intertwined and influence each other bi-directionally. Women coaches do not exist in a vacuum—their experiences are influenced by the people, organizational culture, and policies of those in power and the societies in which they live. To hold women responsible for the scarcity of women coaches is not only abundantly simplistic, but myopic.

Gaps Remain in the Literature

None of the papers in this special issue explicitly or directly examined *socio-cultural level* barriers or supports, collectively. However, the papers do reveal a highly gendered system which privileges men and functions to keep a male-dominated system in place. Despite being a global leader in civil rights for girls and women in sport due to Title IX, it appears that the United States lags behind other countries in terms of mentorship, programming, development, and organizational policies. The work being done in Canada and Western Europe will guide knowledge in how to develop women coaches and create an organizational climate where women of all identities feel safe, valued, and supported. Researchers must move away from barrier work and focus on what factors support women coaches and help them not only survive, but thrive.

In order to understand supports for women coaches, more light needs to be shed on individuals in power and decision-makers who are doing it “right”—such as gender allies. Allies are defined as members of dominant social groups who are critical members in the pursuit of meaningful change, and gender allies are a fruitful group that warrants examination (Heffeman, 2018). LaVoi and Wasend (2018) recently interviewed college athletics directors who employ and have hired a majority of women head coaches for their women's teams. They found this group of male and female allies to have an explicit, unapologetic belief that competent women existed, to have diligently and systematically recruited women, to have felt women should be coached by women, and to have intentionally created an organizational climate where women felt cared about, valued and supported. Additional research is needed on how to identify existing gender allies and on what processes are effective to develop more gender allies that in turn may change the occupational sport landscape. More ideas for a call to action and future research follow.

As Fink (2016) stated, “Sexism in sport is not tidy, it is a downright messy matter. The ideals of meritocracy and fair play embedded in sport make it difficult for people to believe that it provides advantages for some groups over others . . .” (p. 4). However, the papers in this special issue clearly confirm that the state of affairs for women coaches is not fair and not improving, and, in fact, “women are losing ground” (Banwell, Kerr, & Stirling, 2019, p. 128). Despite the fact that many formal barriers have been removed through policies and legislation, the scholars in this issue have illuminated that implicit and entrenched bias remains (Clarkson, Cox, & Thelwell, 2019; Fink, 2016). While it might appear that by simply increasing the numbers of women who enter coaching, and remain in coaching, we would arrive at a solution, an “adding women and stir” approach is not the answer and on its own is insufficient (Madsen & McGarry, 2016), as we know that “it doesn't matter how successful you are, at some point people will still say something pretty down about you” (Allen & Reed, 2019, p. 104). The job of a coach itself is stressful and challenging enough. For women coaches, additional challenges include low organizational support in the form of a lack of encouragement and validation, and less pay for similar, or even more, work. It begs the question, “Do I really have to deal with this on top of the pressures of the job?” (Clarkson, Cox, & Thelwell, 2019, p. 78). Fink pointed to examples, like those women coaches face, of how sexism remains relatively “uncontested in sport” (Fink, 2016, p. 1). And, Shaw and Frisby (2006) stated that we have to critique such practices at the structural level that reflect socio-cultural, embedded beliefs—many of which are entirely implicit—that allow us to think we are treating all coaches equitably when we are not.

The bottom line is that women coaches' career mobility has been limited by embedded gender bias in organizational practices, and this bias has been used to scrutinize women coaches more than their male peers (Burton & LaVoi, 2016; Clarkson, Cox, & Thelwell, 2019). Krahn (2019) tells us that the lack of consistency between research, programming, and policy has contributed to a situation where the low numbers of women in sport coaching has been positioned as a women's issue rather than a systemic issue. The only way to contest that situation is through connecting research, programming, and policy, and doing so explicitly.

Future Research and Call to Action: Everyone Can do Something!

Moving forward, researchers first need to address the intersectional identities of women coaches (Banwell, Kerr, & Stirling, 2019;