



Executive Summary: Elite Women Coaches in Global Football

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Background

Women coaches form a minority globally in almost all sports and football is no exception. This situation applies to women coaching women as well as women coaching men. Moreover, this minority position tends to increase in higher levels of competition, where unequal representation of women in coaching is found to be worst (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). The importance of having women role models and representation in crucial positions in sports organisations is unmistakable: self-perceptions, valuing of abilities and potential, coach well-being, organisational performance and success, career aspirations and challenging stereotypes depend on it. Same-sex role models provide and inspire insights and advice as to how to navigate the various challenges a woman will encounter when pursuing a career in sports where she tends to be in the minority. More tangibly and urgently, women coaches themselves experience poorer mental and physical health effects as well as negative career implications as a consequence of their minority status. Alienation, feeling highly visible and scrutinised, a pressure to over-perform to gain credibility and conform to organizational norms, as well as consistent gender discrimination in the form of wage inequalities, limited opportunities and even sexual harassment, all are routine, common issues experienced by women coaches. In short, women football coaches exist in a system where they lack power, often do not feel supported or valued, and leads them to experience many negative occupational, social and psychological outcomes. The women who have navigated this system to the highest level of coaching are resilient, highly competent exemplars from which much can be learned.

Purpose

- To obtain insight into the strategies women coaches use to navigate gender issues in coaching top level football and to illuminate the experiences of women coaches within the broader cultural and organisational context of football in order to understand what works to increase the number of women coaches.
- To stimulate dialogue and further understanding about the experiences of women coaches within the occupational landscape of football and how these experiences may connect to other sports.
- To create a possible agenda for change for the governance of football that improves the experiences of women coaches and thus ultimately, their players.

Method

The research team were approached by a gatekeeper working at the highest level of world football with the purpose of collating and sharing the stories of a sample of high-performance women coaches as to their experiences, challenges, and successes within their role in professional football. All participants had prior or current experience of either working in a national head coach role or as a head coach in the highest tiers of club football. Fourteen coaches, representing nine different nations, consented to being part of the research. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with each participant. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results

- Many of the women had a sponsor or mentor that gave them their first job or connection to coaching which acted as the first step on the ladder and provided the bridge between playing and coaching.
- The women interviewed demonstrated a clear sense of self-confidence, resilience, and self-awareness as to what their strengths and philosophies were as coaches. They were very reflective and articulate of their experiences. The coaches had a clear understanding of their direction and how they wanted to lead. It was just the supportive structures that needed to be in place around them.
- The participants are motivated, engaged, ethical, committed, intrinsically motivated professionals who have a clear sense of duty towards their athletes and to their players' pedagogical development. All the coaches felt that their profession was a 'calling'.
- Women coaches experience a burden of representation and surveillance (Puwar, 1994): because of their minority status which amplifies their scrutiny, they are seen to be representative of 'all' women coaches and their behaviours and approaches are then associated with all women. Any failures for example, are then considered and justified to be representative for women coaches. Many more male coaches are just considered at an individual level and any poor coaching practices or records are just because they are who they are, rather than because they are a 'white man' for example. As a result of being in the minority, many women coaches report working in isolation without the support of networks around them.
- Women coaches are often considered in 'developmental' terms or 'given a chance' or 'outside of the norm' or a 'risk'. However, male coaches are viewed with more trust and as a 'safe pair of hands'. This is because they have dominated coaching for so long that they have become synonymous with what it means to be a coach. We need to redefine what we consider make for effective coaches or coaching so that we create new norms.
- Many of the women who do get 'the chance' to coach at the highest levels are often well-known former players. Often the process by which they are developed and appointed is as ad-hoc, fast-tracked, and opaque as many of the appointments of male coaches. Thus, there are many excellent women coaches who are outside of the 'system' and have thus become invisible or unrecognised.
- Many women coaches, at the senior levels of the coaching pathway, have "the responsibility, but none of the autonomy". They are often placed in public and prominent roles, and have the responsibility of creating teams that achieve more and play better than if they were coached by a man (due to the burden of representation and surveillance). But they often do this in isolation with little organisational support or sponsorship. Yet, the weight of expectation and responsibility is high, but FA, European, and international governing body support is poor, and they are subject to oppressive powers above them (e.g. football association boards).
- Women's football, and women coaches, are invisible within coaching curriculums. There is little discussion of football beyond the men's game within the content of qualifications, and little consideration of how different coaches operate across the game (e.g. women coaches). Thus, coaches working in the women's game do not the opportunity to engage in relevant, specific course content. Women coaches also feel as outsiders or invisible on courses because they are not formally recognised within the learning content.
- Female players often respond differently to female coaches. This warrants further research and investigation as to why, but possible reasons may be that the norm is to be coached by a man and this reduces the feeling of unfamiliarity and uncertainty around what a coach means.

Recommendations

To develop and progress more women as football coaches within their respective FAs with the support of European and international governing bodies, the following actions are recommended for football:

- **Locate your women coaches.** First steps for FAs- find out who and where are your women coaches within your football system. Map them out at every point of the pathway. Know who you have in the system in order to build the pipeline and manage your talent.
- **Address the cultural symbols within your clubs and organisations.** Who are in your posters, your marketing materials, your learning resources, who are put forward as ambassadors? Increase the visibility of women to normalise having a diversity of coaches.
- **Develop formal support and networks around women coaches.** These need to be sustained, personalised, directly related to their work, meaningful, and connected to those individuals and opportunities that can make a difference to their CVs. Mentoring is important for emotional support, Continued Professional Development, and in many cases, for career advancement. Sponsorship is equally important - having the support of an influential decision maker within an FA that is a political voice of support for a woman, and who is directly tasked with their development and progression.
- **Expose both male and female players to being coached by a woman.** Many of the coaches reported tensions when working with players, even female players, around their ability to coach. This may be because being coached by a man is 'normal' and high-performance players in particular, do not want any uncertainty in training or performance. They need to develop trust with their coaches which may be more difficult for female coaches if they are viewed with suspicion and as 'unusual'. Make women coaches the 'norm' by increasing their visibility, promoting their worth, and increasing contact opportunities.
- **Manage talent.** As part of a talent management programme and framework, identify potential coaches amongst players that may be approaching mid-to end of their careers. Make it known to them about coaching as a possibility and provide development, experience, and licensing opportunities. Shut the trapdoor between playing and coaching that many women fall through after their athletic careers. Connect the dots between playing and coaching.