The Paradoxical Decline of Women in Coaching: Time for Radical Structural Change

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As we witness the growth in participation and success of girls and women in sport both in the U.S. and internationally, there continues to be a noted decline in the number of women holding coaching positions in sport. In the U.S., the percentage of female coaches has declined from 90% in the early 1970s, to 43% (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). These two empirical trends make up a paradox as more women are participating, yet less are coaching. Specifically, in the US intercollegiate system, the most lucrative and powerful division the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), women make up only 40.1% of all head coaches of women’s teams and a meager 2% of all head coaches of men’s teams (LaVoi, 2016). Fewer women are being hired for head coaching positions than male colleagues (LaVoi, 2014, 2015, 2016). As noted by LaVoi (2016), a decline in the number of women in head coaching positions is critical, as this is a leadership role that provides women a point of influence and power within the institution of sport.

This symposium will examine how leaders within sport organizations are influencing this decline and will provide a forum to discuss how scholars in sport management can work toward stopping the decline and increasing the number of women in coaching. The first part of the symposium will focus on a review of four current empirical research projects that have explored both individual and organizational factors that may help explain why we are witnessing the paradoxical decline of women in coaching. The second part of the symposium will be an interactive discussion of the role of sport management scholars in helping to address the issue.

The first research project replicated and extended Acosta and Carpenter’s (1988) study of intercollegiate athletic directors (ADs) attributions for underrepresentation of women coaches. They found significant gender differences whereby male ADs focused on the attributes of individual women (they are unqualified), while female ADs highlighted organizational factors (success of “old boys’” network). In this replication, a nationwide sample of college athletic administrators were surveyed to determine current-day perceptions for the underrepresentation of female head coaches. Significant gender differences emerged in that female administrators continued to rate institutional variables such as unconscious discrimination as key attribution factors, while male administrators attributed the absence to individual variables such as time constraints due to family obligations. An unexpected finding compared to 30 years ago was that female ADs, even more strongly than their male counterparts, believed that a major contributing factor was women’s failure to apply for jobs.

The second study encompasses practices, policies, philosophies, or norms that exist regarding what athletics administrators are doing (if anything) to recruit, hire and retain women head coaches. To track the progress or decline of women head coaches in collegiate athletics, LaVoi and colleagues started the Women in College Coaching Report Card in 2013. This report assigns a grade (A through F) to institutions, conferences, and sports based on the percentage of women in head coaching positions. To date, after 4 years of the report VERY few institutions received an above average grade of A or B. In fact, in every year of the report, there are more Fs, than As and Bs. This study aims to fill the gap in the knowledge regarding what separates institutions that are receiving As and Bs on the Report Card from those receiving less desirable grades. Results will be utilized to generate a best practices for athletics administrators in the hiring, recruiting and retaining women coaches.

The third study focuses on the pipeline of women coaches - current female student-athletes. The study aimed to measure the influence uncivil environments have on female student-athletes’ intentions to pursuing a coaching career. Researchers characterize uncivil conduct as discourteous, rude, condescending, or lack of regard for others.
Using the framework of implicit bias, the fourth study will examine whether athletic administrators may be differentially evaluating women seeking head coaching positions and what factors may be contributing to this difference. Women experience a bias in evaluation of their leadership behavior as a result of stereotypes regarding their behavior (i.e., warm, kind, nurturing) that is inconsistent with the expected behaviors demonstrated by successful leaders (i.e., confident, ambitious, competitive) that as a result may lead to backlash (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Rudman et al., 2012). Given that expectations of a head coach are consistent with being the leader of the team, women holding the head coaching position may experience bias in the evaluation of their coaching behaviors if these behaviors are not consistent with the stereotypes regarding women's behavior and the behaviors expected of a successful leader. These potential biased evaluations may be a result of the perceived incongruity between the role of head coach (leader) and the inconsistencies in stereotypes held for women and leaders. Participants in this study will be athletic administrators working in Division I universities who will evaluate male and female fictional head coaches describing their coaching styles using either agentic or communal leadership behaviors.

Whilst these studies have focused on the US, the situation is replicated across the world. It is time for a change. We propose a model that advocates for a paradigm shift in sport leadership challenging the ‘winning at all costs’ status quo to one which values sport ‘beyond winning’. If using the ‘winning at all cost’ model to demonstrate success in sport organizations is detrimental to sport in general, and to women in leadership, in particular, we should consider alternate models to measure success in sport (e.g., success beyond winning). Of course we acknowledge that sport is based on the concepts of competition, and to remove winning from sport is not realistic, desirable or necessary. Our contention is that over the last 40 years there has been an ongoing debate about whether our focus should be on structure or agency in endeavoring to increase women in sport leadership including coaching. Critical feminist theorists advocate for a focus on structure whereas more liberal feminists argue that agency is of primary importance. We suggest that at this point in time we cannot afford to only focus on one, but instead we need to be active in both areas to reduce the gap between them with an increase in agency and a decrease in structural issues. Institutional practices, gender bias and a lack of understanding about intersectionality are the three main areas we believe have not been fully addressed. Structural change takes time and is often slow, whereas programs to increase agency can be comparatively fast and effective. In the end individuals create the structures we are part of and we need more women, and supportive men, to be part of those structures to affect change. Facilitating this through coaching programs that develop women and girls self-confidence, self-awareness, resilience and networks as well as social capital, are not about ‘fixing the women’, but about enabling them to seek those positions of power and authority as Head Coaches within the sport sector. If sport organizations adopted the UN Sustainable Development Goals and shifted emphasis to success beyond winning i.e. the economic rationale, organizational practices would need to follow. The rationale for CSR has been well made in the business literature, suggesting that there is a need to move away from a purely economic model of business focused exclusively on profits to one that includes social, cultural and environmental sustainability – referred to as the quadruple bottom line (Werbach, 2009). In addition to the quadruple bottom line, Laszlo and Laszlo (2011) advocate for the quadruple top line, which focuses on the organization’s value add of their service and/or product to their sector, rather than only considering the return on investment (the bottom line) of the service and/or product. Driven by the strategic leadership of the organization, in most cases the board, structural change can be achieved to secure sustainable and ethical outcomes over the long term (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2011; Mostovicz et al., 2009). By adopting an integrated holistic approach which focuses on social, cultural, financial and environmental sustainability, fundamental changes in overall organizational structures are likely to occur. We posit that structural change could be achieved more expediently by sport organizations adopting a quadruple top and bottom line approach, with a particular focus on the UN Sustainable Development Goals of Gender Equality and Decent Work and Economic Growth.

The final phase of this presentation will include an interactive discussion with attendees. The focus of the interactive
part will focus on a discussion of the current aforementioned studies and current issues facing female coaches. Specifically, the interactive phase will be geared towards generating ideas expanding the discussion to include potential solutions.