Understanding Occupational Well-being and Women Sports Coaches

Background

Women make up only about 28% of all coaches, and very few women reach senior levels. Recent figures from sports coach UK show that only 9% of senior coaches are women and that there is a significant decline in the total number of women coaching after the age of 25. Little is known about why the career pathways are so gendered, why there appears to be a glass ceiling to prevent progression to the most senior roles, and how different women’s career transitions connect with their life transitions to affect their professional development. There is also little knowledge of how such experiences of being in the minority affect the occupational health and well-being of women coaches. Our research set out to investigate this area.

Methods

The research comprised three stages:

Stage 1: An online questionnaire measured 218 women coaches’ psychological health, psychological well-being and physical health.

Stage 2: From stage 1, a sample of 16 women head coaches were interviewed on their experiences of life and career transitions, professional identity, organisational practices and relationships, and occupational well-being.

Stage 3: This data was the evidence base for a workshop provided to a sample of women coaches on personal well-being, managing relationships, and influencing change.

Key Findings

• Many women coaches reported low levels of physical activity, which will negatively impact on their sense of psychological health and well-being and physical health.
• Many women coaches have an unsatisfactory work-life balance. They found it challenging to maintain personal commitments and relationships outside coaching.
• Working conditions were poorer for older women coaches.
• Many women did not feel trusted by their organisation to be competent and effective coaches.
• The processes to appoint and promote coaches are often opaque and can exclude women coaches who are often outside informal, elite networks.
• Female coaches have few opportunities to network and meet regularly with other women in similar roles. With women under-represented in coaching, it can often be isolating and lonely.
• Many report low job security and perception of fewer job resources. High job demands can lead to them working beyond their job requirements, burnout and high turnover of coaches.
• The influence of work relationships is vital in retaining or losing women coaches.
• Coaches’ sense of commitment to their governing body of sport will impact on their engagement while at work.
• The coaches in the research represent an engaged, motivated and valuable part of the UK coaching workforce. The intrinsic value of the role of coach is key in retaining women coaches.
• Difference among women coaches remains low. When gender was considered alongside other social categories, it is evident that most coaches are white and non-disabled.
Recommendations

As a result of the research, we recommend the following strategies to recruit and retain women coaches:

1. Invite women to be coach educators, tutors, formal mentors, and speakers at events and conferences. We need to do more to raise the profile of women coaches, and this will make more women visible in clubs, organisations and governing bodies of sport.

2. Fix the system, not the women. We need to direct significant attention and work towards addressing the organisational processes and systems that deal with the appointment and advancement of coaches. We should aim to ensure greater transparency and reach for new opportunities.

3. Make the occupational health and well-being of coaches a strategic priority for governing bodies of sport and sporting organisations as a matter of urgency. Psychologically ‘well’ coaches mean psychologically ‘well’ athletes and participants. We need to include more in coach education that focuses purely on the health and well-being of coaches.

4. Implement codes of practice and ‘value’ statements for organisation members and coaches, to ensure positive relationships and opportunities for coaches to connect within governing bodies of sport as well as across sports. This will help to change the culture and values of these organisations – so all individuals are nurtured – and establish expectations for staff and the organisation. Many governing bodies of sport also need to integrate formal and informal networks with other regular opportunities for coaches to meet each other.

5. Target, attract, recruit and retain a diversity of coaches to increase the representation of different women within coaching; for example, more black and minority ethnic, disabled and older coaches. The sample of coaches in this study mostly self-defined as white British. However, before we can make this change, we need greater knowledge and understanding of the issues that may facilitate or constrain different groups of women within the profession. We can begin by profiling the coaching workforce with comparative data within sports that considers other social categories, such as ethnicity, alongside gender.

6. Let the coach be a coach. The role can often include tasks outside the remit of what a coach should be responsible for, which puts a burden on the individual and contributes to unfair expectations of the workforce.

7. Work to understand well-being and coaches as a whole. We need more knowledge, not just of the occupational well-being of women coaches, but also men in order not to make women a special case. This study highlighted a significant number of concerns related to the well-being of coaches, and some of these relate to the role of the coach per se. These will impact on male coaches too.

Further Resources/References


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