The Role of Women as Coaches and Sports Managers: A Study on Challenges and Opportunities - A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This literature review aims to examine the current status, challenges, and opportunities for women in coaching and sports management positions, synthesizing existing research to identify barriers and potential strategies for advancement.

Methods: A systematic review of literature published between 2012 and 2025 was conducted using electronic databases including ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and PubMed. Articles were selected based on relevance to women in coaching and sports management roles, with particular focus on barriers, supports, and advancement strategies. LaVoi and Dutove's ecological model was used as a primary framework for analysis.

Results: Despite increased participation of women in sports and sports education programs, women remain significantly underrepresented in coaching and leadership positions across all levels of sport. Women held only 65 of 382 athletic director, commissioner, or other top leadership roles at Division 1 NCAA institutions in 2023. The research identifies multilevel barriers that include organizational factors (inconsistent hiring practices, hypermasculine sport culture), interpersonal factors (lack of mentoring, limited networking opportunities), and individual factors (work-life balance challenges, confidence issues). Successful advancement strategies include mentorship, sponsorship, networking, and building diverse career portfolios.

Conclusion: Women in coaching and sports management face persistent barriers embedded in gendered institutional practices. Interventions at multiple ecological levels are required to achieve equity, with organizational change being particularly critical. Formal mentoring programs, intentional networking opportunities, and challenging gendered organizational cultures can create pathways for women's advancement in sports leadership.

Keywords: sports managers, role of women as coaches, challenges and opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Sport has historically been a male-dominated domain, with masculine norms and values deeply embedded in its organizational structures and cultures. This historical dominance has created an environment where women's contributions and leadership have often been marginalized or overlooked. As noted in the literature, "Sport has in the past been seen as a male dominated environment (Maheu, 1963; Ogilvie & McCormack, 2020). Justifiably and increasingly challenged, the drive to increase the number of competitive opportunities for women are now paralleled by calls to increase the number of women involved in the leadership and management of sport at all levels (Darvin et al., 2021)". Despite significant increases in women's participation as athletes across all levels of sport in recent decades, this progress has not translated into a corresponding rise in women's representation in coaching and leadership positions. This disparity suggests that systemic barriers continue to impede women's advancement in sports leadership. The underrepresentation of women not only affects individual career trajectories but also impacts the overall diversity and inclusivity of sports organizations. Studies suggest that increased female representation in leadership roles can foster more equitable and supportive environments for all athletes (Evans & Pfister, 2020; Ogilvie & McCormack, 2020).

The persistent underrepresentation of women in sports leadership roles presents a significant challenge to the integrity and equity of sports organizations globally. As research indicates, "Despite increased participation opportunities for girls and women in sport, they are underrepresented in leadership positions at all levels of sport" (Evans & Pfister, 2020; White & Kay, 2006). This disparity reflects broader societal gender inequalities and warrants critical examination to understand the underlying factors contributing to this imbalance(Burton, 2014). Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that tackles both overt and subtle forms of discrimination and bias. It is essential to explore the

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cultural, social, and organizational dynamics that perpetuate gender inequality in sports leadership. Further investigation into mentorship programs, leadership training, and policy reforms can help to create pathways for women to assume leadership positions and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive sports environment (Cosentino et al., 2021; Tingle et al., 2014). These efforts are essential not only for promoting fairness but also for enhancing the quality and diversity of leadership within sports organizations.

Current literature on women in sports leadership consistently identifies a pattern of underrepresentation across all levels and types of sports, from community to elite levels, and from collegiate to professional contexts. Research has documented that "The number of women serving as coaches in community sport remains low compared to men" (Cosentino et al., 2021; Siegele et al., 2019). This underrepresentation persists despite increases in women's participation in sports and in sports management education programs.

Studies have employed various theoretical frameworks to analyze this phenomenon, with LaVoi and Dutove's ecological model being particularly influential in organizing research on barriers and supports for women coaches. This model is "guided by (Harvey et al., 2017; Lehman et al., 2017) Ecological Systems Theory" and contains four levels that explore factors affecting women's experiences in coaching from the individual level to broader sociocultural contexts. This multilevel approach has enabled researchers to examine the complex interplay of factors contributing to women's underrepresentation in sports leadership (Norman, 2010).

While existing literature has made valuable contributions to understanding women's experiences in sports leadership, several research gaps remain. As noted by researchers, there have been "repeated calls to explore how the dynamics of gender inform coaching practices" (LaVoi et al., 2019). Many studies focus on identifying barriers rather than developing and testing interventions to overcome them. Additionally, there is limited research examining the intersection of gender with other dimensions of identity such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic status (Liu et al., 2023; Sherman et al., 2023).

Furthermore, most research has concentrated on coaches at the collegiate or elite levels, with fewer studies examining women's experiences in community sports or in non-Western contexts. Some studies have noted that "women's progress through coaching is more comparable to a 'bottle neck' analogy whereby as women advance, most are excluded from positions of power through flawed pathways and few chances to coach", but more research is needed to understand the specific mechanisms of this phenomenon across different sporting contexts (Eime et al., 2021; Fletcher et al., 2020; Reade et al., 2009).

The persistent underrepresentation of women in sports leadership positions not only represents an equity issue but may also impact the quality and diversity of sports experiences for athletes. Research suggests that "With more women in leadership positions, there is more opportunity to subvert and disrupt this gender order, through the (re)organization of common sense and the development of channels of communication for voices that are already there but not being heard". Understanding the barriers and supports for women in sports leadership is essential for developing effective interventions to promote gender equity.

Additionally, as sports organizations increasingly recognize the importance of diversity and inclusion, there is growing interest in strategies to recruit, retain, and advance women in leadership positions. Recent research has found that women who have achieved senior leadership positions in professional sports suggest strategies including "finding, and later becoming role models, mentors, and sponsors; creating access to networks and opportunities; strategically self-promoting; and purposefully building a varied career portfolio". Examining these strategies in greater depth can provide practical guidance for individuals and organizations seeking to promote gender equity in sports leadership.

This literature review aims to: 1) Analyze the current status of women in coaching and sports management positions across different levels and contexts of sport. 2) Identify and examine the multilevel barriers and supports that influence women's entry, retention, and advancement in sports leadership roles. 3) Synthesize evidence on effective strategies and interventions for increasing women's representation in sports leadership. 4) Develop recommendations for future research, policy, and practice to promote gender equity in sports leadership.

METHODS

Literature Review

The literature reviewed for this study was identified through a systematic search of electronic databases including ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and PubMed. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as "women coaches," "female sports managers," "gender equity in sports leadership," "barriers for women in sports," "ecological model sports leadership," and "mentoring women in sports."

Criteria for Studies Chosen for Examination

Studies were selected according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigor and relevance to the research objectives. Eligible studies were required to be published in peer-reviewed journals or

issued as reports by reputable organizations between 2012 and 2025, focus explicitly on women in coaching or sports management/leadership roles, and address barriers, enabling factors, or advancement strategies related to women's leadership in sport. In addition, only studies published in the English language were considered. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on women athletes without examining coaching or leadership dimensions, were published prior to 2012—except for seminal works that established foundational theoretical frameworks—or did not constitute empirical research or comprehensive review articles.

A comprehensive search of electronic databases was conducted to identify relevant literature. The primary databases included ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, PubMed, and Google Scholar, all of which were systematically searched between March and April 2025. To enhance coverage, additional sources were consulted, including reports from major sports governing bodies such as the International Olympic Committee and the National Collegiate Athletic Association, as well as publications from organizations dedicated to gender equity in sport, including the Women's Sports Foundation. Reference lists of all included articles were also examined to identify further relevant studies that may not have been captured through database searching.

For the ScienceDirect database, a structured search protocol was implemented. The initial search combined keywords related to gender ("women" OR "female"), professional roles ("coach*," "sport* manager*," OR "sport* leader*"), and thematic focus ("barrier*," "challenge*," "support*," OR "opportunity*"). Filters were applied to restrict results to publications from 2012 to 2025 and to article types limited to original research and review papers. The search was subsequently refined using additional terms such as "ecological model," "mentorship," and "organizational culture" to capture theoretically informed and contextually rich studies. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, followed by full-text assessment of potentially eligible articles. Comparable search strategies were employed across the other databases, with minor adaptations to keywords and filters to optimize retrieval and ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature.

Study Organization

Following the initial database search, all retrieved studies were systematically evaluated for quality and relevance using clearly defined assessment criteria. Methodological rigor was a primary consideration, with particular attention given to the appropriateness of the research design, the adequacy of sample selection procedures, and the robustness of data analysis methods. In addition, studies were assessed for the presence of a clearly articulated theoretical framework that provided a coherent conceptual basis for the investigation. Consideration was also given to the extent to which each study contributed to a deeper understanding of women's experiences in coaching and sports leadership roles, as well as its applicability to contemporary sporting and organizational contexts.

Data Extraction Methodology:

A standardized data extraction form was developed to ensure consistency and accuracy in capturing relevant information from each included study. Extracted data encompassed study characteristics, including authorship, year of publication, country or region of focus, and research design. Participant-related information, such as sample size, demographic characteristics, and level of sport, was also recorded. Additional data elements included the theoretical framework underpinning each study, key findings related to barriers and supports for women in sports leadership, and recommendations for professional practice or future research. To enhance reliability, data extraction was conducted independently by two researchers, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus.

Variables for Data Sought:

The review sought to extract data on a set of key variables central to understanding women's leadership in sport. These variables included demographic characteristics of women in coaching and sports management positions, as well as representation rates across different leadership roles. Particular attention was paid to barriers operating at individual, interpersonal, organizational, and sociocultural levels, alongside supports and enabling factors that facilitate women's advancement. The review also examined the effectiveness of interventions or strategies aimed at increasing women's representation in leadership positions, as well as career trajectories and lived experiences of women who have successfully attained leadership roles within the sports sector.

Methods of Analysis

Content analysis was employed to systematically identify recurring themes, patterns, and discrepancies across the included literature. The analytical process was guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and its adaptation for women coaches proposed by LaVoi and Dutove, with particular attention to the principle that the system levels are interdependent, such that each level both influences and is influenced by the others. This theoretical framework enabled a structured examination of barriers and supports operating at multiple levels, including the individual level (personal characteristics, skills, and experiences), the interpersonal level (relationships with mentors, peers, and athletes), the organizational level (institutional policies, practices, and cultural norms), and the sociocultural level (broader societal values, stereotypes, and expectations). In addition, a comparative analytical approach was applied to explore similarities and differences across diverse sporting contexts, competitive levels, and geographical regions. Temporal

trends were also examined to capture changes over time, allowing the identification of evolving patterns, persistent challenges, and emerging issues related to women's participation and advancement in sports leadership.

RESULTS
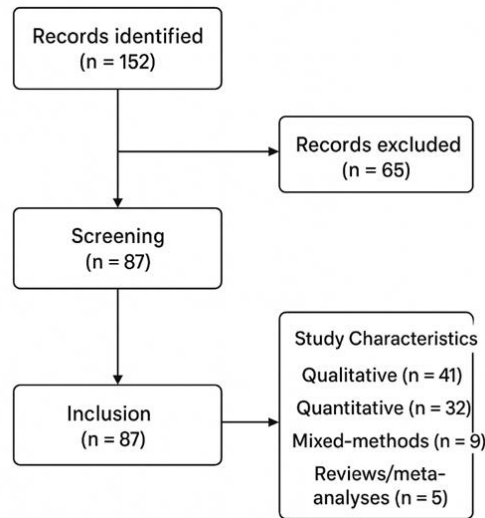
Quantity and Characteristics of Analyzed Studies

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram Infographic

The systematic search yielded 152 potentially relevant studies, of which 87 met the predefined inclusion criteria and were subsequently included in the final analysis. The body of evidence reflected a wide range of methodological approaches. Qualitative studies constituted the largest proportion (n = 41) and primarily employed interviews and focus group discussions with women coaches and sports managers to explore lived experiences and perceived challenges. Quantitative studies (n = 32) predominantly utilized survey methods and statistical analyses to examine representation rates and factors influencing women's advancement in sports leadership. In addition, nine studies adopted mixed-methods designs, while five publications comprised literature reviews and meta-analyses. The included studies encompassed diverse sporting contexts, including collegiate athletics, community-based sports, professional sport environments, and international sporting organizations. Geographically, the majority of research was conducted in North America, Europe, and Australia, with comparatively limited representation from other regions, highlighting an imbalance in the global distribution of empirical evidence on women's leadership in sport.

Current Status of Women in Sports Leadership

The analysis revealed persistent underrepresentation of women in coaching and sports management positions across all levels of sport, though with some variations by context and region (Bloom, 2012; Cosentino et al., 2021). In the United States, "Women held only 65 of 382 athletic director, commissioner, or other top leadership roles at Division 1 NCAA institutions last year," a figure that has remained relatively stable over the past five years (O'Connor, 2019; Wallick, 2018). This underrepresentation extends to coaching positions, even in women's sports.

At the professional level, while improvements have occurred in some areas, progress remains slow: "While still vastly underrepresented, females in coaching or operational roles in the NFL has grown 141% since 2020, with 223 women in such positions this past season" (Cosentino et al., 2021; Eime et al., 2021). Yet in women's professional sports, gender disparities persist, with "only 33% of GMs [in the WNBA] are female"(Associated, 2023; Cohen, 2024).

The disparity is particularly pronounced in higher-level positions. Research shows that "Women remain minimally represented in senior leadership roles in sport, despite increased female participation in both sport, sport management education programs, and in entry levels positions in the industry" (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; White & Kay, 2006). This pattern suggests a "leaky pipeline" where women enter the field but face barriers to advancement to top leadership positions.

Multilevel Barriers for Women in Sports Leadership

Individual-Level Barriers:

At the individual level, several barriers were consistently identified across studies: 1) Work-life balance challenges: "Carer responsibilities" were highlighted as a significant barrier "not faced by men coaching within community

sport, and for which women coaches, and their clubs that appoint them, are not well prepared to manage"(Kubayi et al., 2016; Norman, 2012). 2) Confidence and self-perception issues: Some studies found that women may be less likely to apply for positions unless they feel fully qualified, whereas men may apply with fewer qualifications(Asnaashari et al., 2023). 3) Limited coaching experience: Some women reported having fewer opportunities to develop coaching skills and experience, particularly in certain sports traditionally dominated by men.

Interpersonal-Level Barriers:

At the interpersonal level, several recurring barriers were identified across the reviewed studies. A prominent challenge was the lack of mentoring and networking opportunities for women in coaching and sports leadership. Prior research consistently emphasizes that relationship building is critical for career advancement within the sports industry; however, women frequently reported limited access to influential networks and mentors who could support their professional progression. Gender bias from athletes, parents, and colleagues also emerged as a significant interpersonal barrier. Female coaches described persistent skepticism regarding their competence, often rooted in deeply entrenched gender norms. As illustrated by one football coach, the predominance of men in sporting environments fosters attitudes in which male perspectives are assumed to be superior, creating an additional burden for women seeking legitimacy and respect. Furthermore, many women reported experiences of isolation and a lack of peer support, particularly when they were the only female coach or leader within their organization, which contributed to feelings of marginalization and professional loneliness.

Organizational-Level Barriers:

Organizational factors were also identified as substantial impediments to women's advancement in sports leadership. Inequitable hiring and promotion practices were frequently cited, with studies highlighting inconsistent recruitment processes and the persistence of hypermasculine cultures, particularly within school and competitive sport settings. Such environments often privilege traditionally masculine norms and leadership styles, thereby disadvantaging women candidates. The absence of family-friendly policies constituted another major organizational barrier. Many sports organizations maintain rigid schedules, extensive travel demands, and long working hours that are difficult to reconcile with family responsibilities, which disproportionately affect women. Additionally, limited opportunities for career advancement were evident, as women coaches often encountered minimal or inappropriate coaching assignments, along with insufficient incentives, recognition, and access to professional development or educational support necessary to facilitate long-term career growth.

Sociocultural-Level Barriers

At the sociocultural level, broader structural and normative barriers were found to shape women's experiences in sports leadership. Gender stereotypes regarding leadership and coaching abilities remain deeply embedded, with men frequently perceived as more competent and authoritative. This perception is reinforced by a male-dominated sporting culture that women must continually navigate and contest. Several studies conceptualized sport as a fundamentally gendered institution, operating within hegemonic masculine norms that influence organizational processes, decision-making, and power relations, thereby creating systemic obstacles to women's advancement. In addition, limited media representation and visibility of women's sport and women leaders further exacerbate these challenges. Insufficient media coverage reduces the availability of role models, constrains public recognition of women's expertise, and perpetuates the marginalization of women in sports leadership roles.

Supports and Advancement Strategies

Effective Mentoring and Sponsorship:

Mentoring and sponsorship emerged as critical mechanisms supporting women's progression in sports leadership. Studies involving women who had attained senior leadership positions reported that mentoring contributed to improved career advancement opportunities and success, enhanced institutional loyalty, and more effective time management and productivity behaviors. Formal mentoring programs designed specifically for women coaches were found to be particularly beneficial, especially when they integrated both technical skill development and explicit career advancement components. Sponsorship, whereby influential leaders actively advocate for women and connect them to high-visibility opportunities, was also identified as a powerful catalyst for advancement.

Networking and Relationship Building:

Networking and relationship building were consistently highlighted as essential strategies for securing and sustaining leadership positions in sport. The literature emphasizes that developing professional relationships is critical for advancement within the sports industry, particularly in environments where informal networks play a significant role in hiring and promotion decisions. Women who successfully progressed to senior roles often drew on a combination of formal networks, such as professional associations, and informal networks built through personal and professional interactions.

Organizational Initiatives and Policies:

At the organizational level, several supportive practices were identified. These included the implementation of formal policies aimed at increasing diversity in hiring and promotion processes, the adoption of family-friendly policies such as flexible work schedules and childcare support, and the provision of professional development opportunities tailored specifically to women. A visible and sustained commitment from organizational leadership to gender equity goals was also found to be crucial. The literature further underscored the importance of male allies in advancing women's leadership, noting that support from influential men—such as athletic directors, general managers, or prominent male athletes—can enhance visibility, legitimize women's expertise, and facilitate access to leadership opportunities.

Career Development Strategies:

At the individual level, several career development strategies were associated with women's advancement in sports leadership. Successful women leaders frequently reported the importance of strategic self-promotion and the deliberate construction of a diverse career portfolio. Seeking varied experiences across multiple domains of sports management, pursuing continuing education and professional credentials, and developing leadership skills in contexts beyond traditional sport environments were also identified as effective approaches for building credibility and leadership capacity.

Intersectionality and Diverse Experiences:

The literature further indicated that women's experiences in sports leadership are shaped by intersectional identities and are not uniform across all groups. Research focusing on women from culturally diverse backgrounds highlighted heightened levels of oppression and discrimination arising from the intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, and cultural identity, as well as the presence of distinct barriers and facilitators. Despite these insights, intersectionality remains an underdeveloped area of inquiry within sports leadership research. There is a clear need for further studies examining how factors such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and socioeconomic status interact with gender to influence women's pathways, experiences, and outcomes in sports leadership roles.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this literature review offer several key insights. First, the persistent underrepresentation of women in sports leadership despite increased participation of women in sports suggests that systemic barriers remain entrenched in sports organizations and cultures. As one study noted, "Despite the quality of scholarship put forward and the practical implications discussed by scholars in the field, women continue to face challenges and obstacles when seeking leadership positions in sport organizations (Hambrick, 2007; Martín & Herrero, 2019). Second, the ecological framework employed by many researchers highlights the complex interplay of factors at multiple levels that influence women's experiences in sports leadership. Understanding that "the levels are interdependent such that one level influences, and is influenced by, the other levels" emphasizes the need for multifaceted approaches to addressing gender inequity in sports leadership (Evans & Pfister, 2020; Hartzell & Dixon, 2018). Third, while barriers are well-documented, research on effective interventions and their outcomes remains limited. More attention is needed to developing, implementing, and evaluating strategies to increase women's representation in sports leadership.

This review builds on and extends previous research on women in sports leadership. Earlier studies tended to focus primarily on identifying barriers, while more recent research has increasingly examined supports and advancement strategies. As noted in one study, "While Gosai, et al., found a number of enablers existed for women coaches 'at mainly the organisational level (e.g. financial support, access to opportunities', interpersonal level (e.g. mentoring to support), and the individual level (e.g. importance of familiarity)," many barriers persist (Aghazadeh et al., 2024; Gosai et al., 2023). The application of the ecological model has helped organize and synthesize diverse findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing women's experiences in sports leadership. This model has proven valuable for "organizing the accumulated research" on barriers and supports for women in coaching and sports management(Hartzell & Dixon, 2018; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

The findings have several important implications for sports organizations, policymakers, and individual women aspiring to leadership roles in sports. For sports organizations, the results suggest that addressing structural barriers is essential for achieving gender equity in leadership. As research has found, "organizational factors of inconsistent hiring practices and hypermasculine sport culture act as barriers for women coaches" and "influence interpersonal factors such as the role of mentors, support from athletic directors" and other aspects of women's experiences (LaVoi et al., 2019; Siegele et al., 2019). Organizations must examine and reform their policies, practices, and cultures to create more inclusive environments (Obeta, 2024). For policymakers and governing bodies, the findings highlight the need for systemic approaches to promoting gender equity in sports leadership. Initiatives such as the creation of a "Women in Sport Leadership Association" that can "stage professional development programs, create networking and mentorship opportunities for other women, disseminate helpful and inspiring research literature, and serve as an advocacy voice" may be valuable (García-Silva et al., 2025; Women In Sports Group, Inc., 2025; Women Leaders in Sports, 2025). For

individual women, the research suggests the importance of seeking mentorship, building networks, and developing diverse skills and experiences. Women who have succeeded in sports leadership recommend "finding, and later becoming role models, mentors, and sponsors; creating access to networks and opportunities; strategically self-promoting; and purposefully building a varied career portfolio (Abdul-Rahim et al., 2025; Aghazadeh et al., 2024; Ratani et al., 2025).

Several limitations of the current literature must be acknowledged. First, most research has been conducted in Western contexts, particularly North America, Europe, and Australia, limiting understanding of women's experiences in other regions. Second, many studies rely on small samples and qualitative methods, which provide valuable insights but may limit generalizability. Additionally, much of the research focuses on specific levels of sport (particularly collegiate athletics in the U.S.) or specific sports, with less attention to community sports or professional leagues. As noted in one study, our understanding of [women coaches'] experiences is limited compared to what we know of the experiences of women coaching in professional or elite levels of sport. Finally, most studies examine current conditions rather than testing interventions or tracking changes over time, limiting understanding of effective strategies for increasing women's representation in sports leadership.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has examined the status, barriers, and supports for women in coaching and sports management positions. The findings reveal persistent underrepresentation of women in sports leadership roles across all levels and contexts of sport, despite increased participation of women as athletes and in sports education programs. The ecological model provides a valuable framework for understanding the multilevel factors that influence women's experiences in sports leadership. The interdependence of these levels, "such that one level influences, and is influenced by, the other levels", highlights the need for comprehensive approaches to addressing gender inequity in sports leadership. The research has significant implications for practice. "Visible institutional support, particularly from senior management, is vital to ensure support for any success of a mentoring program" and other initiatives to promote women's advancement. Organizations must examine and reform their policies, practices, and cultures to create more inclusive environments. Formal mentoring and networking programs, commitment from leadership, and challenging gendered norms and stereotypes are essential components of effective approaches.Future research should focus on developing and evaluating interventions to increase women's representation in sports leadership, examining women's experiences in diverse contexts and sports, and exploring the intersection of gender with other dimensions of identity. Longitudinal studies tracking changes over time would also contribute valuable insights.

In conclusion, while significant challenges remain for women in coaching and sports management positions, the growing body of research provides a foundation for understanding and addressing these challenges. By implementing evidence-based strategies at multiple levels, sports organizations can work toward greater gender equity in leadership, benefiting not only individual women but the sports industry as a whole.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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