



Examining the legacy of the 'old boys club' in high performance coaching

Kendra Tate & Robert C. Townsend

To cite this article: Kendra Tate & Robert C. Townsend (02 Sep 2024): Examining the legacy of the 'old boys club' in high performance coaching, Sport, Education and Society, DOI: [10.1080/13573322.2024.2397021](https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2024.2397021)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2024.2397021>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 02 Sep 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Examining the legacy of the ‘old boys club’ in high performance coaching

Kendra Tate  and Robert C. Townsend 

School of Sport and Human Movement, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Sport is a breeding ground for exclusionary gendered discourses and this trend is evident within the coaching cultures of numerous national sports organisations in New Zealand. Drawing on an organisational case study of a New Zealand national sports organisation (NSO) data were collected through thirteen semi-structured interviews and observations with coaches and staff in the NSO. Engaging in a critical feminist approach, this paper explores the various ways in which women’s exclusion from high-performance coaching roles was maintained, reflecting critically on the extent to which hegemonic masculinity was reproduced within the organisation’s coaching history and culture. Specifically, we illustrate the ‘felt’ dimensions of gender exclusion, highlighting how women’s absence from coaching is not through choice but is reflective of the gendered power dynamics of coaching. Together, the analysis demonstrates the institutionalisation of hegemonic masculinity and the mechanisms through which this is maintained, solidified and undermined. This study, while focusing on a particular NSO, offers insights that extend to male-dominated sporting systems across New Zealand, bringing to light the challenges encountered by women coaches within high-performance sport.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 January 2024
Accepted 20 August 2024

KEYWORDS

Gender; hegemonic masculinity; coaches; exclusion; discourses; allies

Introduction

There is a considerable body of scholarship that traces the historical reproduction of masculinities and gender in the context of sport (see Connell, 2008; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Theberge, 1990). Sport is routinely considered among the most masculine of social institutions (Connell, 1987; 2008) and for over 30 years research has shown how coaching is an occupation in which men’s power and privilege over women is naturalised (de Haan & Knoppers, 2020; Staurowsky, 1990; Theberge, 1993). Thus, sport coaching is a breeding ground for the reproduction of certain forms of masculinity; configurations of gendered practice (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836) that are solidified through divisions of labour, power relations, and organisational cultures of coaching (Adams, 2020). Embedded in the structure and culture of sport, *hegemonic* forms of masculinity (Connell, 2008) inform and promote gendered norms and discourses in which men are naturally afforded authority and social power, and women are positioned outside of those dominant norms of coaching and leadership. Sport coaching therefore reflects a contested gender order in which women are routinely subjected to masculine domination (e.g. Fasting et al., 2019;

CONTACT Kendra Tate  kendra.t@icloud.com  www.linkedin.com/in/kendra-tate  @robtownsendPhD

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Zehntner, McMahon and McGannon, 2023) while their presence in sport coaching challenges a hegemonically masculine institution (Norman, 2010).

Sport coaching naturalises and articulates an ideological terrain through which gender is understood and implicated (Norman, 2010). The impact of this ideology reduces the leadership opportunities afforded to women in high-performance sport (Graham & Blackett, 2022) and constructs men as 'naturally' suited to coaching (de Haan & Norman, 2020). Hegemonic masculinity further ensures that women lack authority, control and institutional power, and creates gendered institutional systems which prevent women from breaking through the 'glass ceiling' of their organisations into high-performance coaching roles. Women who do find themselves in coaching roles report experiencing sexism through misidentification as coaches or leaders, differential treatment in comparison to their male colleagues, tokenism, or additional treatment for being a female coach, isolation from the dominant coaching group, and discrimination in regard to their parental status (Siegele et al., 2020).

Therefore, the aim of this research is to understand the gendered mechanisms that limit opportunities for women to access coaching roles within high-performance sport. Importantly, while considerable attention has been paid to women's under-representation in coaching, few studies locate these problems within the masculine subculture of sport coaching (cf. Norman, 2010). Such critiques are crucial if we wish to address the institutionalisation of gender inequality and promote large-scale change.

Context

Hegemonic masculinity in New Zealand is observable through an entrenched 'old boys culture' in high-performance sport in which coaching is not positioned as a sustainable career for women. This culture creates alliances and exclusions in which women coaches are often not 'in the know' and are not approached about coaching opportunities or given the opportunity to apply for positions (Burton & Newton, 2021), thus limiting their exposure to 'hands-on' coaching experiences and development opportunities. As such, the high-performance coaching pathway in New Zealand is subject to a gender configuration in which only 19% of high-performance coaches are women (Shanks et al., 2021). This gendered division of labour has led to targeted efforts to improve gender equity through initiatives such as High Performance Sport New Zealand's (HPSNZ) Te Hāpaitanga¹ programme and the establishment of Healthy Women in Sport: A Performance Advantage (WHISPA²). Despite these targeted efforts, structural and systemic issues continue to inhibit the progression of women into high-performance coaching roles, and we know very little of women's experiences in specific high-performance coaching cultures (Brice et al., 2022; Leberman & Palmer, 2009). This dearth of women coaches has contributed to concerns about organisational high-performance sport cultures which can be described as toxic, chauvinistic, and damaging (see Heron, 2018). These gendered power relations are magnified in – but not unique to – National Sports Organisations, and point to a high-performance system in drastic need of culture change and in which gender inequity is self-evident (see Shanks et al., 2021). Understanding women's experiences of masculine institutions in context is crucial if we are to challenge the patterns of inequality that structure both access to, and mobility within, sports coaching roles for women.

Theory and methodology

There is a long history of critical feminist scholarship in sport (e.g. McGannon et al., 2023; Messner & Sabo, 1990) which has a central concern with the production of masculine ideology and male power,

¹Te Hāpaitanga is an 18-month coach development initiative enabling more women to pursue and maintain careers in high performance coaching in New Zealand.

²Established in 2017, WHISPA is a HPSNZ initiative designed to support the health, wellbeing and performance of female athletes through research, advocacy and education.

stereotypical constructions of femininity, and the resistance of women to oppressive sport practices (Birrell, 2000). Furthermore, critical feminist research attends to the distribution of power in institutional spaces in ways that exclude or reduce opportunities for women. Epistemologically, critical feminism acknowledges the gendered nature of knowledge production and its role in reinforcing the power relations between genders, enabling the examination of a social process (coaching) 'based in the material conditions of a privileged masculine culture' (Messner, 1990, p. 138). We extend this focus through a critical examination of institutional power, gendered assumptions, and hegemonic structures and their subsequent effect on women coaches (cf. Sawiuk et al., 2021) within a broadly male-dominated coaching environment.

As such, in engaging critical feminism it is helpful to think with and through the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony'. 'Hegemony' refers to the power dynamics by which men sustain a leading position in social life and encompasses shifting relations of domination between men and women (Connell, 2005). Developed by Connell (1987) and later refined (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), the concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful in thinking about power, gender and social hierarchies, and for the examination of patriarchal legacies in contemporary sporting cultures (e.g. Zehntner et al., 2023). Thus, from this perspective, gender is a way in which social practice is ordered, is deeply enmeshed in the history of sport institutions (Messner & Sabo, 1990; Shaw, 2006) and is reflected in coaching and leadership structures (Hoerber, 2007). Sport coaching, from a critical feminist perspective, therefore, is a gendered institution characterised by tension and struggle, but it reproduces a conservative and stabilising gender order which limits the progression of women (cf. Anderson, 2009). Importantly, while such a perspective lends itself to cultural reproduction, masculine hegemony is not fixed, but evolving and open to change, as it is predicated on a particular configuration of power relations as well as targeted forms of resistance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Entry, access and reflexivity

Practising feminist research requires a level of reflexive engagement to avoid claims of 'false value-neutrality' (Messner, 1990, p. 140). This research was commissioned by a major National Sports Organisation (NSO) amidst heightened levels of scrutiny on high-performance sporting cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand, in which the NSO sought to redress the levels of gender inequity in their institution (cf. Shanks et al., 2021). Like many NSOs in NZ, leadership, coaching and governance staff of this institution had historically been predominantly male, with few exceptions. Specifically, the research sought to understand barriers to progression for women coaches to promote opportunities and better support women into coaching roles within the talent and performance pathways. This leads to an obvious critique; as a researcher located within the dominant group (men), I³ (the second author) occupy a privileged standpoint in relation to the world of sport coaching from which I might distort or misrepresent the reality of a subordinated group. Here, my priority has been to encourage an analysis in which women's experiences of coaching are foregrounded, within the context of a feminist critique of male privilege (cf. Messner & Sabo, 1990), and to support the lead author in her research.

As a junior athlete, I (the first author) was an athlete licensed to this NSO for eight years. Although I was never a high-performance athlete, I was involved with the NSO as a junior development athlete. During the research my background as an athlete provided a level of familiarity with the language and the environment of the NSO and an understanding of the gendered nature of the sport. The NSO itself was open and accommodating; I was invited to spend time in the NSO, where I was able to observe training sessions, camps, and events up close and from the stands. I was given free rein to speak with any coaches and staff members within the organisation. In addition, I was added to a 'women only' coaching Facebook group, where I was invited to attend any of the webinars they provided and communicate privately with members of the group. Though it was never forgotten,

³In this section we weave first-person narrative (using "I") and third person commentary to illustrate the ways in which the research is intertwined with our subjectivity.

the fact that I was a researcher was not overly constraining and I felt that the research was important to everyone involved. At the time, there was no obvious resistance to my presence in the NSO. Thus, in attempting to represent the patterns of culture and practice within the NSO, both authors are attuned to gender issues within sport and how these can manifest within leadership structures.

Participants and sampling

A total of thirteen participants were interviewed for this study. Table 1 gives an overview of the demographics of the participants. Given the absence of women coaches at the high-performance tier of the NSO, this research sought to examine the mechanisms which inhibit the upward mobility of women into high-performance coaching roles. Therefore, nine of the participants were women coaches from all across the country and included a diverse range of educational backgrounds, roles and entries into the sport. As well as the women, three participants were male coaches identified within the NSO as 'gender allies', and one (female) was the coach development lead for the NSO. The participants were either recommended by the NSO or volunteered through a post on the 'women only' coaching Facebook group. The males were selected entirely by the NSO as 'allies', as the NSO coach developer felt that they were supportive of growing the presence of women coaches in the organisation. All interviews took place either face-to-face or online over a 3 month period. Ethics for this research was approved by the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Role in NSO	Background	Qualifications
Sarah	Female	Pākehā	Volunteer Coach	Volunteer NSO coach. Experience in high-performance coaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National female coach support programme
Ashleigh	Female	Pākehā	Volunteer Coach	Private and volunteer NSO coach. Ex High-performance squad as an athlete.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical education degree
Kelly	Female	Pākehā	Volunteer Coach	School and volunteer NSO coach in. Ex National level athlete.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sport coaching degree NSO coach accredited
Jenna	Female	Pākehā	Volunteer Coach	School and volunteer NSO coach. Ex national level athlete.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSO coach accredited
Hannah	Female	Pākehā	Volunteer Coach	Volunteer coach. Recreational athlete.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Code Level 1 coach accredited
Katie	Female	Pākehā	In the NSO's coach database	Skills instructor and coach developer. Recreational athlete.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSO coach accredited Code Level 5 coach accredited Skills Level 3 Sports coaching level 1
Lisa	Female	Pākehā	In the c's coach database	Schools' coach and para-athlete coach. Athletic experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NSO Coach accredited Sport coaching level 3
Susie	Female	Pākehā	In the NSO's coach database	Volunteer schools coach. Recreational athlete.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Code international coaching Level 2 Professional athletes' association accreditation
Nina	Female	Pākehā	In the NSO's coach database	Private coach. Ex high-performance athlete.	N/A
Jackie	Female	Pākehā	Employed NSO Coach Developer	Coaching experience in NSO. Experience in multiple roles in the NSO (paid).	N/A
Ben	Male	Pākehā	Employed Coach	High performance coach for thirteen years (paid). Various roles under the NSO and overseas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sport Coaching Degree HPSNZ Coach accelerator Code international Level 3 Diploma
John	Male	Pākehā	Employed Coach	Private coach and NSO hub head coach (paid).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Papers in PE and PT
Hamish	Male	Pākehā	Volunteer Coach	Private organisation paid coach and various paid and volunteer roles under the NSO.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International code Level 2 Diploma NSO coach accredited

Research design

Interviews were semi-structured, ranging between 40–60 minutes. Using relevant literature to understand the current landscape of high-performance sport and coaches experiences, a set of interview questions was constructed to open conversations about the coaches environments and why women were not progressing beyond junior-level coaching. As well as interviews, a series of observations were conducted of coaches ‘in action’ at a junior ‘worlds’ camp that took place at the NSO training base. This was the only opportunity throughout the duration of the study to see women working in a coaching setting with the other male coaches. Field notes from these observations were collected and coded to inform the data analysis. Throughout the camp, both trainings and a national series event that had been incorporated into the camp were observed. Time was spent listening to the coaches’ conversations with the athletes and with each other, as well as observing from the stands.

Analysis

In this study, the use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) enabled a clear focus on the relationship between power and culture in shaping the experiences of the participants. In this sense, reflexive thematic analysis enabled a level of deep familiarisation with the data through reading and transcription, after which the data was coded, and developed into an unrefined set of themes; patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These themes were continually refined through an iterative process, engaging with meaning at both a semantic level, recognising the experiential aspects of participants’ stories, as well as possible deeper, latent concepts informed by our theoretical lenses and a significant body of literature exploring the effects of hegemonic masculinity in sport.

Discussion

Institutionalising hegemonic masculinity: the ‘old boys club’

In Connell’s (2005) analysis of the production of masculinities, it was argued that to recognise gender as a social pattern ‘requires us to see it as a product of history, and also as a producer of history’ (p. 81). While the structures of gender relations are formed and transformed over time what was immediately apparent in this case study was the long history of socially dominant masculinities being institutionalised in the coaching and leadership of the organisation. This was commonly referred to, and recognisable as, an ‘old boys club’ (cf. Shaw, 2006):

That old boy’s network runs long and deep in (this sport). It’s pretty well integrated, and it has been that way for a long time. Yeah, ‘pretty well established’ is probably the better word. – Ashleigh

As Hoffman (2011) argued, an ‘old boys culture’ or ‘old boys club’ can be understood as an example of the reification and institutionalisation of male leadership and the presence of powerful, gendered alliances which shape institutional norms and culture. The ‘old boys club’ thus represents a historical power structure in which men are provided more immediate and straightforward access to institutional power, resources and opportunities:

I would kind of say it’s an old boys club being like, people that would do a mate a favour. You know? And I would say that’s gone. It’s not there anymore. It was here but I would say there is a definite, I guess, masculine approach to things. – Jackie

The quote above exemplifies the institutionalisation of masculine practices, alliances and power structures within the organisation, in which coaching is implicated as a vehicle for the reproduction of masculine norms and values. While some participants were keen to stress that the ‘old boys club’ had diminished over time, as Shaw (2006) argues, such ‘masculine’ values are solidified and naturalised as part of the day-to-day functioning of organisations, and in this case were manifest in

patterns of work, social interaction, cultural norms, and, specifically, in the hiring practices adopted by the NSO. For example:

There are a lot of jobs that get advertised that someone internally gets it or someone who is a mate of someone.
– John

Despite some progress being made nationally through the implementation of a 40% gender diversity target for boards and management (see Brice et al., 2022) in national sports organisations, the data is suggestive that there has been little change to the gatekeeping practices of coaching:

I think finally, female coaches are getting a look at. In the past, I would have just said everyone's just on their own, that they have got to make their own pathway. It's just this history of it (the sport) being like a boy's club and being male dominated. Every new coach that comes into the team is a male, and they're just not looking at female coaches. – Jenna

Something that I don't think works very well is in high-performance, we put a job advert out that says the person 'needs to have experience coaching at x number of world champs or Olympics'. So, it immediately discounts females because there's no females doing that or have done that. – Jackie

Furthermore, the dominant position of men within the organisation served to further obscure the recruitment of coaches in ways that excluded women or kept them 'out of the loop':

Honestly, I'm not really sure how they hire their coaches. – Kelly

The patterns of recruitment that secure coaching as predominantly male is therefore a significant area of social and political concern (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2008). Even when women can matriculate into coaching, they are likely to be placed into devalued roles:

So, for example, you know, there's a female who's somehow got the opportunity to be (coaching), and all of a sudden, they're relegated to just doing the numbers on the lap board. They're never given any other responsibilities. So, to me it's a form of discrimination. – Jackie

These gendered social practices lead to a familiar pattern in high-performance coaching cultures, whereby former (male) athletes are recycled into coaching roles, and creating the conditions where women's absence from those roles are accepted and depoliticised, even by those individuals considered 'gender allies' by the NSO:

To be honest, I think the old boys club is just another way to say people that used to (compete) that got into coaching, that were all friends as they were all (athletes), and for the reasons talked about before, those people affiliated themselves with coaching and you know, females didn't. So, I think to be honest that it's not really a term that is, it doesn't mean anything. It's a slang term for how those people came together. – Ben

One of the more concerning legacies of an organisational culture in which male athletes are fast-tracked into positions of power is the transmission of masculine, and often toxic or debilitating values associated with success in high-performance sport, as highlighted by several participants:

I think (the sport) attracts a certain type of person, especially males, it's the nature of the sport. And that's to be successful as (an athlete), you still have to be quite aggressive, because in the end the winner is the last man standing in a lot of events. – Susie

(This sport) has also got this history where they take these (athletes), they have not done some great things themselves in terms of drug taking, or bullying, and it was seen at that point as what you had to do to be a successful (athlete). And then we bring them into these coaching positions, and they're kind of idolised. And I'm like, these guys have horrible value systems, why are we idolising them? – Ashleigh

These data are suggestive of a dominant and essentialised form of masculinity, characterised by Connell (2005) as hegemonic, which comprises (arguably) negative attributes such as aggression,

toughness, immoral behaviour, alongside more valued (in sport) attributes such as competitiveness and individualism. These configurations of masculinity are positioned in opposition to, and therefore defining of, skills and knowledge associated with femininity (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2008). Such normative hegemonic discourses systematically reduce women's progression and visibility within the NSO through the maintenance of an overtly masculine culture:

The way that it's been for a while is that good (athletes) were taken into coaching roles. And they've all just been like, really strong, loud personalities, male personalities, that have gone into those roles. I don't think the environment is that well set up to have a female in there. I had this conversation with (Jackie) when I was up (at the NSO), and we were in the stands looking down at the pits and she asked, 'do you see yourself being there?' And I was like, 'honestly no'. There were probably like twenty dudes, coaches and support staff walking around, and maybe like one female physio. I was like, 'how do you step into that environment?' – Ashleigh

As Connell (2005) suggests, hegemonic masculinity at any point in time can be naturalised, as gender and the social practices it sustains are always relational:

I feel like all the other male coaches have known each other for years as well. They're all mates too, which makes it a bit harder. Because a lot of them are like, 'oh, back in the day when we were all (competing) together', and that kind of stuff. But yeah, it's kind of hard to relate to them a lot of the time. – Kelly

The analysis illustrates the historicity and institutionalisation of hegemonic masculinity and its subtle, networked operations of power in placing women outside of the 'norm' for coaching roles. A dominant form of masculinity – reinforced by masculine power and a gendered internal division of labour – positioned men as 'naturally suited' to high-performance coaching, reducing access to coaching opportunities for women and establishing an organisational culture that reflected masculine norms and sustained gendered alliances:

I'm sure that if someone who was qualified enough and good enough, and they applied for one of those jobs, they would definitely get an interview. And you know, whether or not the old boys club would take it or not, I don't know. – John

For those women who were able to make space in the organisation through targeted initiatives or development opportunities, the effects of navigating a historically male-dominated institution shaped their everyday experiences of coaching. These are explored in the next section.

Being the only one: tokenism and isolation

As argued above, one of the functions of hegemonic masculinity was to ensure that women are not perceived as the 'natural' occupants of such leadership roles, and as such have reduced access to social resources, influencing everyday interactions and relationships within the workplace. This pattern means that, as Norman and Rankin-Wright (2018) argue, when women coexist in coaching spaces, they can experience marked isolation:

It can definitely ... you get a sense where it just feels like it's all older men, which can feel really intimidating to even think of approaching and trying to start a conversation. – Hannah

Thus, within the NSO was a configuration of gender practice in which women experienced heightened precariousness and marginalisation associated with their status as 'the only one': There's not many females around and then you get a little bit marginalised. – Lisa Furthermore, the gendering of coaching shapes women's claims to knowledge and experience, further exacerbating the inequalities between men and women within the structure of the sport:

I: Do you feel like being the only female coach in that environment, that it's harder for you than other coaches?

Yeah, being the only female and being so green at it as well. Like all of the other coaches have coached for, oh god probably like ten years or more. And so, every time you show a little bit of vulnerability, they just pounce on it. So, it's not even a good place where you can ask questions and things like that because I feel like you're just

looked down on, rather than coming to someone as an equal and being like, hey, I've got this problem, have you encountered it before? – Ashleigh

Connell (1987, p. 109) notes that 'the main axis of the power structure of gender is the general connection of authority with masculinity', providing a gendered framework through which women are perceived and perceive themselves in coaching. Understandably, being left to navigate such a masculine space with little support can contribute to an undermining of women coaches' authority and confidence:

A lot of the parents definitely look at me like I'm just a young female, like, 'what would she know?' Whereas the way they treat Joe (a male colleague) is very different. They'll listen to anything he says, and the students as well, to be honest. And then as soon as I name a team for an event or something like that, the parents are so quick to be like, 'what would you know, my kid's the best, blah blah blah'. But Joe's never been questioned. – Kelly

I'm used to operating in para (sport) where I can run things, and I run the development camp. So, I'm confident and I do my own thing. So, I took that into (the junior worlds camp). And then I realised, oh, these male coaches actually think of me as way down the bottom of the pile, but I don't think of myself like that. You know what I mean? Like, they'd come to me and give me like, patronising advice. Like, 'oh I've got this wee gem for you. And you probably don't know, and you'll be really stoked that I'm here to tell you this wee gem'. It took me a few days to be like, oh shit, yeah, that's right. They all think of me as this pathetic young female that's got no idea how to coach. – Sarah

As such, the women were inserted into a set of cultural interactions in which they had to search for legitimacy and security. The following extract from Ashleigh is illustrative:

I'm the only female coach, and then you rock up to the (training area) and there's this really disjointed male thing going on where none of the other coaches really interact with each other. It's kind of like a bit of a war. And two nationals in a row I rocked up and one of the guys was like, 'oh your (athlete) is going so shit, I thought they were going to be a star but man they are going shit'. How do you even respond to that? I mean she went and had an incredible nationals, but to come up and say that to you before the (competition) had even started, it's like, this is so fucked. And after the race had finished, my (athlete) had broken a record and it was an amazing (win), and I looked over and there was this group of maybe six or seven guys from [the NSO] all in this huddle, obviously talking about it. And then I watched the other male coach go over and shake all their hands. And I was like, I don't know what to do. No one came over and said anything to me. – Ashleigh

Here, Ashleigh was inserted into a struggle for status defined by the derogatory language, exclusionary behaviours and belittling expectations of male coaches, rendering her relatively powerless and passive. Such symbolically violent moments do not act independently of broader structural conditions, and were ever present across the institution, influencing the coaches' feelings of acceptance and exacerbating the feelings of exclusion that high-performance coaching can sustain:

They don't take you as seriously, you know, blokes. And I don't know maybe it's because I'm not like a top sports-person or something like that. But I'm pretty intelligent and I'm well read, and I've been [participating in the sport] for a very long time. I've raced [in different areas of the sport], so I've got lots of life experience. So maybe it's a bit of that, but I do feel they still just, you don't get taken seriously. – Lisa

For others, this had very real effects in terms of the day-to-day tasks and operations of coaching, whereby women's authority can be devalued and masculine power continually asserted and reinforced through such interactions (cf. Staurowsky, 1990):

Even on camp, [the other female coach] and I would have gone through everything, and then a male coach will come over and say the exact same thing we've said to the [athletes]. But they've just got to do it, because, I don't know why ... this happens heaps, or like we will be having a meeting and a male coach will be like, 'oh I'm just going to sit in here', which is fine. But then, you know, we've gone through everything, and then they'll just stand up and say their piece, and it's like, 'we literally just said that'. – Ashleigh

Several participants highlighted how these feelings of being the 'only one' were not just limited to coaching and were reflected in the coach education and development opportunities afforded to

them. Tutored by men, and predominantly framed as a 'male space', the women had to navigate a coach education pathway in which the processes of interaction, observation, legitimisation and the examination of coaching knowledge were embedded with masculine privilege and power:

For the level five, I went on a course, it was male-oriented ... that was pretty much by myself with a male assessor. I think there was like one or two [females] at the [NSO] one, but yeah, mostly male. – Katie

When we're learning stuff it's cool. It's more in between, like the morning tea and lunch break, and everyone kind of goes off and chats and mingles. And that's when I feel really out of it, because I don't really mix too much with the men and they don't really interact with me that much either. During one of the [NSO] courses, I finally built up the courage to ask a question. And they literally replied with like, 'oh, why don't you just ask James? Wouldn't James know?' Like, did it to me in front of 30 coaches, and I'd finally built up the courage to ask a question. And he was like, oh, surely James would know, and I was like, 'I'm not asking James, I'm asking you – Kelly

Here, the data reflects a system of gender relations through which a more contemporary form of hegemonic masculinity – associated with knowledge, power and authority – was (re)asserted by undermining Kelly and her claims to legitimacy within coaching. Importantly, these interactions were not 'one off', but represented a sustained pattern of exclusion and surveillance, and implies that a male coach's words carry more weight, and that sport expertise is associated solely with masculinity (Staurowsky, 1990), thus creating an automatic devaluation of women's experience and achievement.

With the masculine power historically embedded within the organisation, one response from the NSO was to implement 'women only' coach development opportunities, as a means of reconfiguring the gender relations within coaching:

I think it can be hard, because [the courses] can be more male dominated and they might stand out more in the courses or things like that. But I think there's definitely been a focus and a change within the last year or so to try and incorporate and bring females into the courses. Especially at these women only ones, it's given everyone a chance to speak up and maybe talk about their perspectives and why they've sort of struggled as a female coach, or why they are not seeing as many female coaches out there, and especially at a high-performance level. – Jenna

Here, gender-segregated coach development was an intentional act of resistance, designed to challenge male hegemony within the institution and provide more opportunities for women coaches. These were perceived as helpful in shaping individual behaviour, confidence and a shared sense of purpose and belonging:

If I hadn't had the (women's group), I wouldn't have even put one step in the direction of being a coach. They're the reason I've started this journey, and they are all females. – Katie

However, the data highlights the complexity of challenging male hegemony and the undoing of institutional exclusion, where the very meaning and intentions behind gender-specific coach development strategies can work to conceal cultural inequalities by further positioning women coaches as 'outsiders within' the coaching culture, emphasising and reproducing difference and separatism (see Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2008):

They rang me up and said, 'hey, we need to develop more female coaches, so do you want to come and coach in the program?' And I was like, so you want me to come, not because you think I'm a good coach, not because I have any credibility, but literally because I've got a vagina and you've got like a box to tick to say that you've got female coaches? – Sarah

To minimise or render invisible their token status and claim an identity as a competent coach, women were forced to assimilate to a masculine culture, relying on male 'allies' to support their development, which further emphasises the gendered dynamics of power within the NSO. These are explored in the next section.

Allyship, 'enlightened' masculinity and gender essentialism

It is common to note the importance of male 'allyship' in promoting gender equity in sport coaching (e.g. Schewinbenz, 2021), and potentially challenging male hegemony. In this case, to address long-standing issues of gender disparity, the organisation adopted a range of informal practices to approach gender, one of which was identifying male 'allies' to support and mentor women into coaching roles, and to advocate for women. However, the concept of 'allyship' is politically loaded, whereby those in positions of power and dominance are positioned as critical members in dismantling the prevailing male hegemony:

I: Have you ever witnessed any instances where a female coach has been discriminated against, or talked down to?

I've been more conscious in looking out for it, and there's definitely language out there which can be belittling. Sometimes, someone will make a comment and you need to tell them that it's not appropriate, and nine times out of ten they didn't even realise what they were doing. It's kind of ingrained which is worrying. – Hamish

More critically, allyship emphasises that women's inclusion and progression within the coaching culture are largely reliant on male support:

We're not inclusive in that space, and especially in (this sport). And it's hard, you get some pretty good coaches coming through, and then they seem to drop out. And whether that's because they're not loved enough, or not looked after enough, or they've got other things that pull them away from the (sport). I've got a mother who's now coaching, and I go to the trainings, they run the trainings, but I'm just there as a sounding board. – John

While – on the face of it – the use of male 'allyship' to challenge masculine hegemony is progressive, this situation is further illustrative of the unequal power dynamics framing sport coaching and its disproportionate impact on women. Below, the discourses employed by male allies – on the surface – reflected a level of egalitarianism and gender-blindness, leaving the dominant masculine culture and its perpetuation unquestioned (cf. Hoerber, 2007):

At first glance, I think the opportunities are there for everybody, and I can't see where gender comes into it. But then you look at the balance of the people and I can see where that could become or feel threatening. It may be perceived, it may not be, I don't know. I think the opportunities are there, but I don't know whether the culture is there to enable women coaches to feel confident to step into the opportunities. – Hamish

The male allies therefore drew on a discourse of gender neutrality which downplays or depoliticises the masculinised practices that exclude women from coaching (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2008), instead locating the focus on women and their lack of confidence for their underrepresentation in coaching. Furthermore, these data reflect the thinking and actions of those who receive the benefits of patriarchy without 'enacting a strong version of masculine dominance' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832), thus showing a complicit masculinity couched in pragmatic or rationalistic discourse:

There's got to be females in it to see that they can do it. But I don't believe that it should be at the expense of quality or competency. Because that is the most detrimental thing you can do. And you know, there was talk about someone like [female coach] being able to jump into an elite development role before she had been to junior worlds. Well, I don't think that's the right way to go. We have to ensure that she's got the skills and the experience to before going into more pressure or more, you know, harder situations. – Ben

As Connell (1987) argued, hegemonic masculinity serves to justify the order of things within a given system, and the data is suggestive here of 'gender blindness' serving as an 'enlightened' justification for the continuation of men's privilege, while couched in liberal feminist rhetoric. In invoking these discourses, the male allies were able to reframe and neutralise the gendered construction of coaching, rendering (politically driven) change as either unjust or unnecessary (cf. Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2008):

I: What do you envision gender equity in the NSO to look like?

I don't like to put a number on this kind of thing and say there should be an equal number of male coaches and female coaches because I don't think that's the reality of the world. I do think the people who are best qualified for the role should be doing the role regardless of gender. – Hamish

I've had some magnificent conversations with people, and they say, you know the goal, we need to have six women and six men on our board, and I said, no, we don't, we need the twelve best people. And I said even if that's eleven women and one man, then they are the twelve best people. – John

Further reifying masculine hegemony is the conceptualization of gender as a system that categorizes and creates order based on perceived biological differences (Connell, 2005). In this case, particular beliefs that men are more knowledgeable about sport and naturally more suited to the 'technical', performance aspects of coaching than women (cf. Theberge, 1990) were evident:

With guys and coaching guys across time and individually, and you know earlier on, they're a lot more keen to understand the mechanics and the application and the how. And often a lot of those guys have then gone on to become coaches or be interested in coaching or coaching other [athletes] or start coaching juniors while they are still [competing] and things like that. And they seem to like thinking, technically, they seem to like thinking about how the body works, how does it adapt to stimulus? How can they do things differently? And that hasn't seemed to be a trait that the girls that I've coached have been interested in. So, when you think about the traditionality of coaching [in this code], then there aren't many females who want to go and apply that to other people. So, to me, that's probably the biggest barrier why there's not many females coaching [in this sport]. Other sports which lend themselves more to teamwork, collaboration, culture and pedagogy, seem to have more females because they are less technical and less about the mechanics of the body. – Ben

LaVoi and Baeth (2018) argue that it is arguably 'impossible to discuss or study "how women coach" without essentializing gender differences in a way that marginalizes and problematizes women coaches' (p. 153) and their knowledge:

I had a situation recently talking to various people in our system around the potential opportunity for [a female coach]. And you know, she's got every bloody qualification under the sun, probably more qualified than most of our HP coaches. And you know, what about her in a role? And some of the coaches that have fed-back, 'oh we're not sure if she has enough technical, tactical knowledge'. And they're not willing to give her a go in that space, because they weren't sure. I think the biggest barriers are males' perceptions of their abilities or knowledge. Versus a male, if it was a male, they would just give them a go. – Jackie

In this case, ideas about sex, gender, coaching, knowledge and expertise – and thus authority – collide, becoming taken-for-granted and 'natural' (Theberge, 1990), creating lasting conditions for the production of gendered ideology and for the – legitimate – marginalisation of women.

These discourses further paint coaching as a masculine endeavour, which can intersect with issues of class, age and wealth, placing further barriers to the progression of women in coaching:

The last job that (the NSO) offered me, they wanted me to do it in exchange for mentorship, I've got a fucking mortgage and three kids. Like really? How is that a sustainable career? Coaching's hard like that, unless you're 20 and you really don't give a shit because you're paying \$100 rent and you just eat rice, or your 45 and you're absolutely loaded. – Sarah

Taken together, the analysis illustrates an allyship framework that serves to mask and reproduce many of the same issues that inhibit womens' progression within the institution, further justifying the 'natural' exclusion of women. Such a position is problematic, as it locates the source of exclusion within women and leaving the dominant masculine culture unquestioned, the direct opposite of a true approach to allyship.

Conclusion

In this paper, we respond, in part, to the call of Norman and Rankin-Wright (2018) for a greater focus on configurations of practice and ideology that codify coaching as a 'masculine' endeavour, and thus position women as 'other' within organisational cultures. Specifically, we examined the legacy of a

historically embedded 'old boys club' and its dominant masculine culture which served to naturalise and justify womens' continued exclusion from coaching. Furthermore, the analysis highlights a series of exclusionary and damaging masculine practices that create structural disadvantages and barriers for women to access coaching roles and reduce opportunities for their progression.

In utilising feminist epistemologies and methodologies, we are better able to articulate and challenge the institutionalization of masculine privilege within sport coaching, locating the experiences of women within historically masculine frameworks of discourse and power and illuminating their effects. Of importance here is that while gender operates as a complex and relatively enduring structure within sport, it is not a static system, and it is important to recognise the agency of women in breaking through the 'glass ceiling' of coaching. But, despite improvements in the number of women in coaching as well as targeted initiatives to support the progression of women coaches in New Zealand, coaching remains a structure 'in which ideas about gender and gender differences are powerfully constituted and expressed' (Theberge, 1993). At the core of this paper is the contention that the structure of gender relations has remained largely consistent in that masculine hegemony is institutionalised, and the legacy of the 'old boys club' still has significant impacts on coaching cultures. As such, it is necessary to continue to critically examine the production and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity and its legacies, shining light on the gendered social relations that continue to exclude women from sports coaching, to further open possibilities for change.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Kendra Tate  <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-7296-6025>

Robert C. Townsend  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7343-5329>

References

- Adams, A. (2020). Humour, masculinities and youth sport coaching: 'Good morning, ladies!'. *Sport, Education and Society*, 25(4), 463–474.
- Anderson, E. D. (2009). The maintenance of masculinity among the stakeholders of sport. *Sport Management Review*, 12(1), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2008.09.003>
- Birrell, S. (2000). Feminist theories for sport. In J. Coakley & E. Dunning (Eds.), *Handbook of sports studies* (pp. 62–77). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Brice, J., Grainger, A., Beissel, A., & Postlethwaite, V. (2022). The world cup trilogy: An analysis of Aotearoa New Zealand's leverage strategies for the women's cricket, rugby, and football world cups. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 14(4), 621–639. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2022.2117839>
- Burton, L., & Newton, A. (2021). Organisation-level practices to support women in coaching. In L. Norman (Ed.), *Improving gender equity in sports coaching* (pp. 138–155). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Allen and Unwin.
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- Connell, R. W. (2008). Masculinity construction and sports in boys' education: A framework for thinking about the issue. *Sport, Education and Society*, 13(2), 131–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573320801957053>
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>
- de Haan, D., & Knoppers, A. (2020). Gendered discourses in coaching high-performance sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 55(6), 631–646. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690219829692>
- de Haan, D., & Norman, L. (2020). Mind the gap: The presence of capital and power in the female athlete–male -coach relationship within elite rowing. *Sports Coaching Review*, 9(1), 95–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2019.1567160>

- Fasting, K., Sand, S. T., & Rørvik Nordstrand, H. (2019). One of the few: The experiences of female elite-level coaches in Norwegian football. *Soccer & Society*, 20(3), 454–470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2017.1331163>
- Fielding-Lloyd, B., & Meân, L. J. (2008). Standards and separatism: The discursive construction of gender in English soccer coach education. *Sex Roles*, 58(1–2), 24–39. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9334-x>
- Graham, L. C., & Blackett, A. D. (2022). ‘Coach, or female coach? And does it matter?’: An autoethnography of playing the gendered game over a twenty-year elite swim coaching career. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 14(5), 811–826. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2021.1969998>
- Heron, M. (2018). Independent review of Cycling New Zealand high performance program. <https://hpsnz.org.nz/content/uploads/2018/10/CNZ-Review-Final.pdf>
- Hoeber, L. (2007). Exploring the gaps between meanings and practices of gender equity in a sport organization. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 14(3), 259–280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2007.00342.x>
- Hoffman, J. (2011). The old boys’ network. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 5(1), 9–28. <https://doi.org/10.1179/ssa.2011.5.1.9>
- LaVoi, N. M., & Baeth, A. (2018). Women and sports coaching. In L. Mansfield, J. Caudwell, B. Wheaton, & B. Watson (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of feminism and sport, leisure and physical education* (pp. 149–162). Palgrave MacMillan.
- Leberman, S., & Palmer, F. (2009). Motherhood, sport leadership, and domain theory: Experiences from New Zealand. *Journal of Sport Management*, 23(3), 305–334. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.23.3.305>
- McGannon, K. R., Kulkarni, S., Hladun, W., Bundon, A., & Pegoraro, A. (2023). Exposing a motherhood penalty in sport: A feminist narrative inquiry of media stories of Canadian athlete mothers’ journeys to the 2020 Tokyo Games. *Communication & Sport*, 21674795231187916, online first.
- Messner, M. A. (1990). Men studying masculinity: Some epistemological issues in sport sociology. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 7(1), 136–153. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.7.2.136>
- Messner, M. A., & Sabo, D. F. (1990). Toward a critical feminist reappraisal of sport, men, and the gender order. In M. A. Messner & D. F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sport, men and the gender order* (pp. 1–18). Human Kinetics.
- Norman, L. (2010). Bearing the burden of doubt. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 81(4), 506–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2010.10599712>
- Norman, L., & Rankin-Wright, A. (2018). Surviving rather than thriving: Understanding the experiences of women coaches using a theory of gendered social well-being. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 53(4), 424–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690216660283>
- Sawiuk, R., Lewis, C. J., & Taylor, W. G. (2021). “Long ball” and “balls deep”: a critical reading of female coach-learners’ experiences of the UEFA A licence. *Sports Coaching Review*, 10(1), 110–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2021.1874688>
- Schewinbenz, A. N. (2021). Navigating a minefield: Allyship in women’s coaching. *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*, 21(3), 1496–1539.
- Shanks, A., Leberman, S., Shaw, S., & Watson, G. (2021). Symbolic equality in Aotearoa New Zealand sports organisations. In D. Sturm & R. Kerr (Eds.), *Sport in Aotearoa New Zealand: Contested terrain* (pp. 81–94). Routledge.
- Shaw, S. (2006). Scratching the back of “Mr X”: Analyzing gendered social processes in sport organizations. *Journal of Sport Management*, 20(4), 510–534. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.20.4.510>
- Siegele, J. L., Hardin, R., Taylor, E. A., & Smith, A. B. (2020). “She is the best female coach”: Female swimming coaches’ experiences of sexism. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 13(1), 93–118. <https://doi.org/10.17161/jis.v13i1.11676>
- Staurowsky, E. J. (1990). Women coaching male athletes. In M. A. Messner & D. F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sport, men and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives* (pp. 119–131). Human Kinetics.
- Theberge, N. (1990). Gender, work, and power: The case of women in coaching. *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie*, 15(1), 59–75.
- Theberge, N. (1993). The construction of gender in sport: Women, coaching, and the naturalization of difference. *Social Problems*, 40(3), 301–313. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096881>
- Zehntner, C., McMahon, J., & McGannon, K. R. (2023). Gender order through social censure: An examination of social exclusion in sport coaching. *Sport, Education and Society*, 28(1), 105–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2021.1979506>