

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: LEARNING FROM WOMEN LEADERS IN
PROFESSIONAL SPORTS

by

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ABSTRACT

This capstone serves as a look into the world of professional sports from the perspective of its female front office employees. For decades, historical stereotypes and societal norms have influenced the way sports are viewed, resulting in a continued male-dominated atmosphere. Women have slowly been able to enter this field but are still not fully accepted or equally represented. Through interviews with 10 women from the NBA, NHL, NFL, MLS, WNBA and MLB, I sought to understand why this gender imbalance may exist, learn the experiences of women currently working in professional sports and most importantly generate suggestions for solutions to close this disparity. This capstone is a sound exploration into this topic and provides a wealth of resources for any organization seeking to gain more gender equality in their workplace.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The intent of my capstone is to explore the disparity between men and women in employment within professional sports front offices. This study will identify the gaps that exist, examine the potential causes and offer solutions as to how to close them, based on study research.

There is currently an imbalance when it comes to the number of men and women that hold these different positions, with women holding significantly less. This not only affects the futures of the women in this industry, but also results in organizations lacking diverse perspectives. There is potential that is untapped and unfulfilled when an organization does not reach gender equality.

Not only is this issue important due to its moral implications and the ethical standpoint of reaching gender equality, but there is a business impact as well. "...In a full-potential scenario in which women play an identical role in labor markets to that of men, as much as \$28 trillion, or 26%, could be added to global annual GDP in 2025" (Woetzel et al., 2015, para. 2). While the ethical reasoning of this issue should be enough for organizations to care, it has been studied and shown that having more women in the workplace can boost revenue and success for companies as well.

To provide an overview of this capstone, I will first explain why this topic is so important and relevant to the field. It is a current issue, and one that needs to be explored and progressed to enable change. In order to add a greater understanding, I will then give

a description of the literature I have examined on this topic. This topic has affected me personally and I have had my own first-hand experiences with gender inequality in sports. Given this, I will discuss the different assumptions I am making related to this topic. I will also discuss the methodology that I employed for my research, including research questions, sample characteristics and my role in the research. Finally, I will conclude with what data I have found and implications and reflections for the future of this topic.

Background

This topic is important and relevant to the field of sports. These inequalities affect the livelihood of women in this industry. It does not provide them the same opportunities in their workplace, limits their growth in their career and affects their income and quality of life. Females offer valuable, unique perspectives and different abilities to the sports world. Institutions and organizations are at a disadvantage and not maximizing their potential by continuing to have these disproportionate numbers when it comes to gender. Different genders bring different perspectives, which leads to innovation and positive changes for all employees and stakeholders. That is not possible if the current situation we are in remains stagnant. The presence of females in the sports arena needs to continue to progress so that we can achieve a better future and advance sports through diverse leadership.

I do have a personal connection to this topic, and I am passionate about the effects it may have on my future career in sports. As a student-athlete, coach and front office employee, these differences among males and females have been evident. I have

experienced behaviors in my professional life that remind me of inequalities that exist and how I am viewed because of my gender. I am sometimes sought after to fill a “diversity” role and provide my motherly and connective abilities. While those are traits that I appreciate about myself, it feels as though my skills to the actual job are overlooked. I have been in situations where I am skipped over when it comes my turn for a handshake and greeting. I have experienced different treatment in comparison to my male counterparts. For example, coworkers would ask my male counterpart how they thought the game was last night, excluding me from the conversation because they assume I do not have interest. I have been left out of playful banter and aggressive encouragement because perhaps I am not regarded as “one of the guys”. While I do not believe there was any ill intent from my colleagues, these types of actions and politics cause for females to fall by the wayside when it comes to being included and viewed as equals. These different experiences have made me feel as though my contributions or presence is not valued as much as my male colleagues. This in turn leads to discouragement in envisioning development and promotion opportunities.

In factors that extend beyond the office, I have had to worry about flexibility in hours and the lack of maternity leave in benefit packages, and what that would mean for my family and career down the road. These are just a number of reasons why this topic is so relevant and important for me to research and why I am passionate about finding potential ways to institute change.

Women in the sports industry are not the only group that face the different aspects of the disparities between men and women in the workplace and their consequences. This topic is applicable across many different industries and are experienced by a variety of

women. The sports industry is somewhat unique as it is a traditionally male-dominated field. While my capstone is focused on women in professional sports front offices, much of what I uncover and suggest can be applied to other industries as well.

Literature

The literature reviewed covers a variety of aspects of my topic. The literature includes the following themes: historical beliefs and stereotypes, underrepresentation of women in sports leadership, media coverage, barriers to women entering leadership positions, sexism in sport, support and encouragement for women in sports, solutions for gender equality in the workplace. There is a combination of content analysis, surveys, interviews and more. The literature reviewed also provides information from decades of research on my topic and related women's topics, so it serves to inform us of the trend of the issue over the years.

Knoppers and McDonald (2010) conducted a content analysis of the papers within a journal called *Sex Roles* written over 35 years, from 1975 to 2010, that explore organized sports and gender. We learn that a large consensus throughout this paper is that sports have historically been viewed as a place and activity for men. Knoppers and McDonald continuously highlight different findings from the papers that describe the "masculinity" and male dominance that was/is present within sports. It is clear throughout their content analysis that it was absurd for women to participate in masculine sports, even to the point that society may have believed there was something psychologically wrong with that female and would then lead to marginalization and ridicule. Their work shines a light on the stereotypes and societal norms that were present

and how they affected women's participation in sports. Knoppers and McDonald (2010) also tell us how these perceptions further cause inequality among genders. One summary of their findings reveals that "...sport governance, coaching education and sport management continue to be sustained by assumptions/ideologies that construct sport as a 'male domain'" (Knopper & McDonald, 2010, p. 314).

Through an extensive review of literature, Burton (2014) helps us understand why there are so few women in sports leadership positions. The author states that "...women are often situated as 'other' in the social institution of sport, and the presence of women in sport, as athlete, coach, manager or leader, is under constant scrutiny" (Burton, 2014, p. 156, as cited in Kane, 2005). She also states that gender plays a tremendous role in culture, image and processes adopted by an organization. This is important to consider when thinking about the leadership group. Additionally, Burton (2014) tells us that there is a large perception that men hold the attributes that are associated with being a successful leader, like aggression, assertiveness and independence. In turn, traditional female attributes, like tenderness, care and sensitivity, are not viewed as successful. She also makes the case that organizations adopt human resource policies to appear politically correct and do not always actually take action to make a difference in gender equality. Overall, Burton (2014) highlights how gender influences virtually every aspect of our workplace, and it is important to understand how the makeup of leadership and employees can affect that workplace as a whole.

Spoor and Hoye (2014) conducted a survey of men and women to examine patterns in how human resource management practices and top management support for gender equity, affect the psychological likelihood of turnover. This study supplies some

information when thinking of solutions for this issue in the workplace. Their findings show that support from top management is more valued by women than any human resources policy. Spoor and Hoye (2014) introduce social identity theory to demonstrate that high status groups (men in sports) tend to resist advances by lower status groups (women in sports) as a reaction to perceived status threat.

Ryan and Dickson (2018) draw focus to privilege that lies within groups of men and valued forms of masculinities. The authors use New Zealand's relationship with rugby to prove that sport is useful in understanding that the intersection of sport, gender and leadership provides an insight into what is normalized: men and the masculine subtext of leadership. The authors suggest that simply adding more women to leadership positions is not the answer. They believe that dismembering male privilege and preferred masculine styles is what will make a difference.

Media coverage is an important aspect of this topic to understand as it tells us how frequently and in what way women are portrayed in society. Hall and Oglesby (2016) provide a numerical understanding of this issue (as cited in Cooky et al., 2013) by saying "Females are 40% of the participants in sport but only have 4% of the coverage in the media" (p. 272). In printed media, Shor et al. (2015) provide an analysis of the factors that explain gender imbalances in coverage, and suggest that media coverage and women in public life are only enhancing the gender inequalities. They infer that if men are continuously seen in the media, they and their behaviors will be seen as superior and important. This continued underrepresentation of females allows women to remain inferior to men in the minds of the consumers. Shor et al. (2015) also state that reporters might not have full autonomy over what they write and the real power lies within the

leadership's hands. As a result, they note that if more women were in leadership positions, there could potentially be a wider variety of topics written about in newspapers. This gender imbalance is also seen in sports broadcasting. On one occasion in the 1970s, a female sportscaster was forced to sit outside of the press box during a blizzard to cover a NFL game, while the male reporters were allowed inside (Grubb & Billiot, 2010). We also learn that women were sometimes hired for a feminine touch and that they faced barriers of harassment, implied feelings of incompetence and more.

In a study conducted by Betzer-Tayer et al. (2017), we learn of the struggles of one woman fighting for gender equality within a sports organization in Israel. In her efforts to establish a volleyball league, she was met with barriers of entry to power and decision making, loneliness in her pursuit of her agenda and tough decisions she was forced to make herself being the only female. Throughout this process, this woman stated that she adopted some masculine traits (aggressiveness and independence) but then also wanted to display her other traits (like affection and interpersonal sensitivity) but felt like if she acted that way, she would be thought of as "other" and would result in a loss of influence (Betzer-Tayer et al., 2017). Importantly, she also noted how crucial it was to have a network of other women for support and to gain influence among men.

Pfister and Radtke (2006) provide insight to this issue through their study that included interviews with German sport leaders who decided to leave their position. The aim of their study was to detect processes of gender segregation and identify mechanisms that attribute to the marginalization of women in sport organizations (Pfister & Radtke, 2006). They tell us that "the dominance of men in leadership positions and the gender hierarchies in all areas of society, including sports organizations, is not only the product

of, but also the driving force behind the gender order, at least in Western industrialized societies” (Pfister & Radtke, 2006, p. 114). The authors highlight themes like culture in the workplace and respondent’s view on work to illustrate the male dominance in this space. They tell us that the way to lead is a “man’s way” and that females are left to adopt those behaviors, or not enter at all. Pfister and Radtke (2006) also found that men were more likely to make radical decisions, wanted more power and influence and did not question their competency on the job. The women’s responses were the opposite. However, perhaps the biggest takeaway from this study in relation to barriers women face is 14 of the 16 participants said that a woman’s underrepresentation in leadership was due to their family responsibilities and its effect on carrying out leadership tasks (Pfister & Radtke, 2006).

In McKinsey’s Women in the Workplace 2020 report, we learn that through data from 317 companies, a survey of over 40,000 people and more than 45 in-depth interviews, Coury et al. (2020) found that women are more likely to be laid off or furloughed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is stalling their professional growth as well as their financial stability. Working mothers are also facing added stresses because the normal support of daycare and schooling is suddenly not available, and their daily responsibilities have substantially grown. Unfortunately, “one in four women are contemplating what many would have considered unthinkable just six months ago: downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce completely” (Coury et al., 2020, para. 4).

Fink (2016) begins the conversation of sexism in sports by stating “...that is what is so interesting about sexism in sport. It is commonly overt yet simultaneously

unnoticed. It hides in plain sight. It is so entwined in the fabric of sport that most do not even discern it” (p. 2). She states that sexism is not regarded in the same light that any other discrimination is, and that the lack of sponsorship for women’s sports is indicative of the sexist beliefs that lie within sports. Fink (2016) also tells us (as cited in Morrow et al., 1994; Schneider et al., 1997; Fitzgerald et al., 1997) that sexism is also linked with lower work satisfaction and commitment, and women who experience it are likely to remove themselves temporarily or permanently from their work as well as experience greater stress, depression, and reduced health and well-being. This is critical to understand as it has an impact on the everyday operations of an organization.

Continuing on this topic, Hindman and Walker (2020) state that different forms of sexism, overt and subtle, are faced by women every day in the sports industry, and influence their comfortability on the job and stereotypes that surround women in sports. The authors utilized a combination of respondent journaling and interviews to collect their data. Many of the responses received included topics like: old boys and girls club, feeling ignored and invisible, questioning knowledge and capabilities, diminutive nicknames, spotlight on appearance and attire, sexualized interactions and contact, the “player” issue (others thinking women in sport may have chosen the job because they are interested in relations with a player), married women and (potential) motherhood. The authors illuminate how impactful these issues are for women as they describe different methods they are forced to adopt to survive their workplace.

Wagner (2020) tells a story about Jen Wolf, a life skills coordinator for MLB’s Cleveland Indians, who started a group text when she felt a need for support. This story highlights the significance of women supporting other women and how crucial it is for

women to have a shared network. This group chat grew to allow women working in professional baseball to understand that they have the ability and potential to make a career out of sports, among many other things. It becomes evident that women seek to have familiarity in their workplace and that they are inspired when they see people who look and sound like them in higher positions.

Graham et al. (2017) use data from 81 publicly traded firms with the average company having 7,000 employees, to examine correlations between human resources, the person certifying the company's EEO-1 report and women's representation in management. The authors suggest that it appears that diversity practices and structures are created to avoid discrimination cases, not to actually hold the organization accountable. They also suggest to look at other factors within a company, like the budget that is given to EEO or diversity officers to see what kind of progress they have actually made and how committed they are. This study again indicates that support from top leadership is more impactful than a human resources policy put in place.

This literature shines a light on how important this issue is in its field today. Overall, each piece of literature that I have examined links back to historical beliefs and stereotypes in one way or another. It will be crucial to reframe those ideas, and gain a substantial understanding of these women's experiences today to initiate change.

Assumptions

There are a few assumptions that I am making about this topic. These assumptions have actually led me to study this issue further to confirm or dispute what I currently think. Since this topic is about the gender disparity within professional sports front office

positions, where women are underrepresented, I believe this issue affects women more than it affects men. I am assuming that women's everyday work environment, advancement opportunities and career aspirations are negatively affected more than men's. With this assumption, one of my main focuses is learning the experiences of women in these positions. That, in turn, excludes men's experiences from my focus.

Another assumption I am making is that there is not one reason, or solution, for this issue. Through the literature I have read and my personal experiences, there is a combination of factors that lead to women being less attracted to jobs in sports, and less inclined to stay with that field for a lifelong career. These factors include biases, work environment and culture, attention to women's needs, role models and mentors, stereotypes, informal networking and more.

Lastly, I am assuming that my personal experiences as a woman in sports is shared among other women. As a coach and an employee within a front office, I have previously shared observations with other female coworkers and colleagues. I realize that these informal conversations are limited to a small group of women. However, based on the literature and these similar feelings amongst others and myself, I am assuming that this is a common occurrence among women in these positions.

Methods

As previously mentioned, the goal of my capstone is to explore the disparity between men and women in professional sports front offices. Mainly, I want to understand the experiences of women in these positions today and generate ideas for solutions in order to attract and retain more women in the sports industry.

I present a number of research questions in regard to my capstone topic. As I pose these research questions, I feel as though there are three different steps, or levels, that I explore in order to fulfill the goal of my capstone. Each comes from its own perspective within the topic. I will describe these as follows:

Research question #1: What are the reasons why a gender disparity exists within sports? This question is extremely important to understand from a current day standpoint. There is a mountain of literature that covers the history of gender and sports. Stereotypes and historical beliefs about women in sports are continuously highlighted. While that information lays a solid foundation to our understanding of this issue, and we can draw conclusions about how they affect us today, I believe it is important to gather reasons for its existence from women today. The potential reasons women think this exists today could lead to a new understanding.

Research question #2: How does the gender imbalance in sports affect women that currently hold these positions? Again, to describe these positions, I am referring to front office positions within professional sports teams. In this question, I want to uncover how the gender differences affect women in the workplace, and I want to gain that understanding from women who are currently experiencing it. I want to explore how it influences their daily work routines and behaviors. How does it affect the workplace culture and norms? Does it provide for a challenging work environment? How does it affect or influence their work each day? Additionally, I am interested in learning what impact the gender imbalance has on their career aspirations. Based on some of the literature, it can be difficult to envision a long, successful or possible career if there are no mentors or role models for them. Given the current underrepresentation of women in

leadership positions in sports, I am curious whether this has an effect on how these women picture their future or plan their career path.

Research question #3: What are ways in which organizations can attract more females to these positions, and create the desire to stay? If we as a society are going to attempt to close this gender gap in sports, it is imperative that we have solutions. One solution to this issue is to simply attract more women to these front office positions. Different job descriptions that are attractive to both men and women, a more inclusive culture that can be described during interviews, and benefits that are created with women in mind but will be advantageous to both genders, could be logical places to start. While those are ideas that I believe would help, I again want to understand what employees in these positions think.

Research question #4: Why do women take jobs in the sports industry, but not make them a lifelong career? I would be remiss not to acknowledge this aspect of women working in sports. To this point, I explore what changes women in these current positions believe would aid in retaining women in these jobs and reaching more gender equality. There are many reasons why women leave their jobs but creating ideas to foster the desire for women to stay in their roles is critical.

I chose a qualitative method for my research. I interviewed women that are current professionals within the front office of a professional sports team within the following leagues: NBA, MLB, MLS, NFL, NHL and WNBA. I believed it was important to conduct interviews as it allows for a greater depth of understanding these issues. There are nuances, stories and trends that you cannot always detect in a survey, for example. I wanted to hear the different experiences these women had, and be able to

ask follow up questions if necessary, as each interview was unique. Again, I believe there is an additional layer you can reach when conducting interviews that was very important to my research questions. Little literature that I reviewed emphasized interviews as its methodology, so it can serve as a new addition to the existing research.

I conducted 10 interviews with women that currently hold positions in the front offices of professional sports teams. I set on the sample size of 10, as it is what was manageable and realistic given my research timeline. I relied on my professional, social and student networks for referrals as well as choosing the women in my sample as that was the easiest and most reliable course during recruiting. While this route may not be random, it is realistic and feasible and ensures participation in my study given the direct or indirect personal connection. While there could be bias given the personal connections, this plan of recruiting served as a great way to include a diverse group of women in regard to years of experience and variety of positions held in their offices.

Conclusion

This capstone is particularly personal to me and influenced my desire in exploring this topic in greater depth. It is something that has affected me, and I have wanted to give back to sports, as sports have given me so much. I hope to allow sports to be a positive part of females' lives, as it can provide amazing experiences. Overall, I uncover women's opinions on the issue and reasons why the gap exists. I then understand how this issue affects their work life and their career aspirations. Finally, I provide practical solutions, supplied by the women in my study, for organizations to employ in order to move towards gender equality in sports.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature that I examine will include studies directed specifically towards sport organizations, as well as women in the workplace in general. The literature is divided into themes of: Historical Beliefs and Stereotypes, Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership, Media Coverage, Barriers to Women Entering Leadership, Sexism in Sport, Support and Encouragement for Women in Sports and Solutions for Gender Equality in the Workplace. This literature provides an overview of the issue, encompassing decades of research on the topic. It is vital to understand the history and how it can provide insights for the status of issue today. Additionally, the literature I reviewed provides a comprehensive report of the many things that women face in the workplace today, in the sports industry and beyond.

Historical Beliefs and Stereotypes

Knoppers and McDonald (2010) conducted a content analysis of the papers within *Sex Roles* written over 35 years, from 1975 to 2010, that explore organized sports and gender. *Sex Roles* is a social and behavioral science journal with a feminist focus that publishes research reports, original theoretical papers and conceptual review articles. It is clear that a large portion of the literature that was written on the topic of gender and sports from the 1970s to approximately 2000 was focused on women in sports, without comparable studies on men. The authors call this out in their review, and they focused

mainly on gender in relation to women because that was the emphasis of the majority of the articles within *Sex Roles*. There are many assumptions in the studies that were conducted in the different papers in *Sex Roles*. Knoppers & McDonald (2010) say:

The majority of the papers seemed to implicitly assume certain universal characteristics (American, White, heterosexual) of participants while explicitly assuming (and searching for) difference across gender and/or athletic status with an occasional use of socioeconomic status and/or race/ethnicity/nationality of participants as independent variables as well. (p. 312)

A large consensus throughout this paper is that sports have historically been viewed as a place and activity for men. Knoppers and McDonald continuously draw on different findings from the papers that describe the “masculinity” and male dominance that was/is present within sports. Referring to the 1970s, Knoppers and McDonald (2010) tell us how absurd it was for females to participate in sports, even to the point that it was believed there could be something psychologically incorrect with that person. Knoppers and McDonald (2010) refer to:

At that time, a popular notion in psychological research (Smiler, 2004) and the broader society (Cahn, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994) assumed that labels for behavior and for gender had to “match” as it was assumed that “so-called cross-sexed behaviors and preferences (e.g., athleticism among females) indicated emotional disturbance or sexual deviation.” (Hall 1996, p.18-19) (p.314)

Scholars of sport “...observed that women who transgress culturally prescribed ideals of femininity by engaging in masculine sports are subject to marginalization and homophobic ridicule” (Knoppers & McDonald, 2010, p. 317). The authors action of

highlighting these perceptions of gender in sports are important because they tell us how female athletes in particular were viewed, and how they were expected to fulfill a societal mold that they necessarily were not a part of creating. Understanding these notions from just 50 years ago can potentially assist in finding equality within sports today.

Moving the storyline to the employment within sports, Knoppers and McDonald (2010) tell us how these perceptions further cause inequality among genders. One summary of their findings reveals that "...sport governance, coaching education and sport management continue to be sustained by assumptions/ideologies that construct sport as a 'male domain'" (Knopper & McDonald, 2010, p. 314). These assumptions affect all parts of employment within sports for females. The authors conclude by saying further research needs to look at intersectional analysis, and to incorporate different race, class, sexuality, nationality and more when gathering information on this topic. They stress that this will provide a broader understanding of all women in sports, with which I agree.

Underrepresentation of women in sports leadership

Burton (2014) provides an extensive review of the scholarship that has contributed to the understanding of why there are so few women in sports leadership positions. She touches on a multitude of different reasons and areas of this field, and I will highlight them in the following themes: masculinity of sport, intercollegiate athletics and selection and decision-making processes.

Masculinity of Sport

Overall, the author says that sports are a masculine space and are used to validate masculinity among boys. The author states that "...women are often situated as 'other' in

the social institution of sport, and the presence of women in sport, as athlete, coach, manager or leader, is under constant scrutiny” (Burton, 2014, p. 156, as cited in Kane, 2005). The author explains that gender plays a massive role in the culture, image, and processes of organizations, and that she views sports as a gendered institution that operates under a male norm (Burton, 2014). In this light, it is easy to see how difficult it can be for women to enter these spaces. In one examination in the UK, the author says (as cited in Shaw, 2006) “the social processes adopted by the organization, including humor, informal networking, and use of dress codes sustained masculine work practices” (p. 158). I can particularly relate to this finding as I recall asking supervisors on numerous occasions “What is the female equivalent of your dress code?” This culture also affects the way women operate as Burton states (as cited in Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008) that when women were token members of boards of directors in sport organizations they tried to “avoid engaging in what they perceived to be negative stereotypical behavior associated with women and adapted to the dominant behavior styles of the men” (p. 161).

Intercollegiate Athletics

The next theme the topic is centered around is intercollegiate athletics. As an overview, Burton (2014) says:

At the intercollegiate level in the U.S., men hold the most powerful leadership position, that of athletic director of Division I Bowl Championship Series (BCS) universities, hold a greater percentage of head coaching positions of women’s sports, and are nearly the exclusive coaches of men’s sports (Acosta & Carpenter,

2012). Women hold fewer than 25% of senior leadership positions across all U.S. professional sports leagues (Lapchick, 2012). (p. 156)

Reviewing the literature, it is evident that gender is heavily imbalanced among leadership in intercollegiate athletics, whether that be in board positions, administration or head coaching positions. This is also true for professional sports settings. Burton (2014) notes that women in head coaching positions face a larger burden than men when it comes to family and work balance. The demands and office hours cause stress, and without proper support from their administration, women have a more negative experience. These women actually reported staying in their positions when they felt they had more support about these obligations. Further:

Importantly, Dixon and colleagues (2008) found that when examining the availability and usage of family supportive work benefits in intercollegiate athletic departments that the departments were not offering nor were they encouraging the right types of family support benefits for their employees. In addition, intercollegiate athletic administrators noted only modest support for work-life supportive cultures in their athletic departments (Dixon et al., 2008). (p. 159-160)

Although this theme highlights intercollegiate athletics, we can see how sports across different settings favors men over women. These reports are gathered from a collegiate space, but it is easy to apply them to the professional sports office space as well.

Selection and Decision-Making Processes

The last theme I want to highlight from this work is the selection and decision-making process for some of these jobs, and the perceptions that lie within them. Burton (2014) tells us that there is a large perception that men hold the attributes that are associated with being a successful leader, like aggression, assertiveness and independence. Traditional attributes that women hold, like tenderness, care and sensitivity, are not viewed as success factors. These perceptions and the thought that both genders cannot hold all of these attributes need to be changed in order to gain gender equality. In a study of male leaders and affirmative action policies, men stated they thought females should be included on the board, but yet did not take action to advance policies that would enable that to happen. They also created and kept their own boundaries for their gender's success in selecting women for jobs with certain criteria - no young children, well-educated, previous high-level jobs, flexible personal schedules, and behaved properly, as defined by the male leaders (Burton, 2014). This selection criteria will continue so long as the majority of decision makers are men. Perhaps with more women in these hiring positions, the process and criteria would be different.

Two of the largest takeaways from this research is that since sport is viewed as a hegemonic masculine space, the culture that exists within that space is also skewed towards hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, Burton (2014) states that some organizations adopt gender equality practices and processes to secure funding, to look politically correct, to keep up with the trends, but do not actually accept norms that will allow change in gender equality (Burton, 2014). This indicates that there needs to be another level of accountability when policies are put in place, whether that be an outside

observing group or even surveys to their employees to gauge how these policies are working.

Further, a study conducted by Adriaanse (2015) looks at gender relations in organizations, focusing on Kanter's model of gender ratios and critical mass. An audit of the gender ratio on 1,600 boards of National Sport Organizations was conducted in 45 countries and the data were collected through the Sydney Scoreboard, an interactive website that tracks women's presence on sport boards internationally (Adriaanse, 2015). This ultimately showed that women are underrepresented in leadership positions – specifically board of directors, board chairs and executive directors. Adriaanse (2015) brings to light that:

Several recent studies into the relationship between gender diversity in the boardroom and firm performance (Joecks et al., 2013; Torchia et al., 2011; Konrad et al., 2008) indicate the importance of a 'critical mass' of women. Women need to occupy a minimum of 30% of board positions or three positions to enhance firm performance. If the critical mass is not reached, gender diversity can nullify or negatively affect firm performance. This clearly establishes the business case for gender diversity on boards. The ethical case is beyond dispute. (p. 150)

While the critical mass is written in a context of a board, it is easy to apply this ratio to a leadership group within any professional sports organization. The same 30% goal can be set for organizations that are looking to enhance their performance through moving towards gender equality. Also, the workplace environment is again stated as a reason for the underrepresentation of women. The expected behaviors of managerial

positions and culture favor men over women. Adriaanse tells us (as cited Shaw & Slack, 2002) how gender relations are created in sport organizations. It is argued that language, practices and policy within the context of the sport organization construct gender relations that favor masculinities over femininities. Additionally, managerial positions are described or perceived with masculine tendencies – rationality and efficiency (Adriaanse, 2015). If this is the criteria that managers and leaders are evaluated and chosen upon, then they are excluding women's traits that can potentially help organizations.

The author indicates that ultimately each region in the audit was below the “critical mass” (Adriaanse, 2015). It is important to note the differences that can come from individual cultures. For example, the Cook Islands have more representation because they operate under a matriarchal society, making it more common and accepted for women to be in those leadership positions. Making a good argument for the increase of women's representation, Adriaanse (2015) says:

Central to the argument for fostering women's representation in governance is the fact that women represent stakeholders who should be included (ethical principle) and that their inclusion increases the pool of talent available for selection into leadership positions (business principle) (Branson 2007; Erhardt et al. 2003; Huse and Solberg 2006; Nielsen and Huse 2010; Singh and Vinnicombe 2004; van der Walt and Ingley 2003). (p. 149)

Looking forward to solutions for this issue, Spoor and Hoye (2014) conducted a survey of men and women to examine patterns in how human resource management practices and top management support for gender equity, affect the psychological likelihood of turnover. They measure this via organizational commitment and intention to

stay. The authors found that perceived organization support is all about perceptions. If employees believe they are being supported, they will have more positive intentions to stay at that organization. “In a survey of American sport organizations, they found that philosophical support rather than the presence of substantive HR practices predicted female representation in upper management. However, their measure of philosophical support reflected both protection of reputation and genuine concern for women” (Spoor & Hoye, 2014, p. 410). The authors emphasize that it is critical to not just have human resources policies in place, but for managers to exhibit their support and desire for gender equity. We see this present today with the hiring of Kim Ng as the General Manager of the Miami Marlins. Her relationship with Yankee’s superstar and Marlins part owner Derek Jeter, and his power at the top, had influence on her attaining the historic role. Spoor and Hoye (2014) also bring up social identity theory to demonstrate that high status groups (men in sports) tend to resist advances by lower status groups (women in sports) as a reaction to perceived status threat. This can serve as a point of understanding why it is so difficult for women to truly break into leadership positions in sport organizations. These authors present their sample description well. However, it is important to note that less than half of the respondents were males, participants were paid for this study and they were from organizations that do not usually have paid employees. All of those factors can certainly make a difference in responses because they could be skewed more towards a female’s perspective and the experience of paid and unpaid employees can differ significantly.

Ryan and Dickson (2018) provide a different outlook on the subject of the underrepresentation of women in sports, as they draw focus to privilege that lies within

groups of men and valued forms of masculinities. They examined New Zealand's relationship with Rugby Union to show leadership scholars that sport is useful in understanding that the intersection of sport, gender and leadership provides an insight into what is normalized: men and the masculine subtext of leadership. Ryan and Dickson (2018) say that research in this area shows that women are not the issue, and the solution is not as easy as adding women to leadership positions, but that rhetoric is more impactful than practice. Although the authors did not elaborate on the type of rhetoric that needs to occur, I believe it is implied that the authors think examining and dissecting male privilege and preferred masculinity is needed more than placing women in leadership positions. Ryan and Dickson (2018) conclude by suggesting that future research shifts the focus away from women and starts asking questions about men, masculinity and male privilege. Suggestions for questions were not specified, but this could be an interesting topic to explore in future interviews, perhaps with men in sports rather than women. Also, although this study was limited to New Zealand and rugby, it is demonstrative of how popular sports in a country can have influence on its society, its leadership and its preferences in that space. This study left with me a profound quote that I believe encompasses just that. "To summarize, sport, and heavily masculinized male team sports in particular, confer privilege to forms of normative masculinities and by association, position men as 'natural' leaders" (Ryan & Dickson, 2018, p. 340).

Media Coverage

Another theme in the literature of this topic is women's coverage in sports in the media. This is an important aspect because this is how frequently and in what ways

women are displayed on paper, television or other forms of media. Hall and Oglesby (2016) provide a numerical understanding of this issue (as cited in Cooky et al., 2013) by saying “Females are 40% of the participants in sport but only have 4% of the coverage in the media” (p. 272).

Women’s Representation in Printed Media

In printed media, Shor et al. (2015) provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors that explain gender imbalances in coverage and suggest that media coverage and women in public life are only enhancing the gender inequalities. If men are widely seen and mentioned in the media, that implies that they and their behaviors are important and superior, which leaves women and their behaviors inferior. The cycle continues, and thus hinders women’s progress. The authors state that their findings are consistent with previous studies, in which women are underrepresented in newspapers and female names make up just ¼ of all mentions (Shor et al., 2015). This continued lack of female representation allows women to remain inferior to men in the minds of the consumers. The authors suggest a cause for this disparity is that newspaper reporters have deadlines to meet, and limited time to seek out new content. They also point out that reporters use the modes in which they have easiest access. For example, if a reporter has gained access to a courtroom or the White House, their stories will likely follow that small group of individuals, as that is what easiest for them (Shor et al., 2015). Perhaps newspapers and other printed mediums can commit to diversifying where they collect their news stories from, in order to gain a better balance in reporting on men and women. If consumers are only reading about a small group of people, they can begin to believe they are most

important. Shor et al. (2015) describe how this inequality is a reflection of everyday society by saying:

That is, one of the main reasons why certain groups of people (including women and minority groups) remain substantially under-covered in the media is that they are underrepresented in key real-world power positions in politics, business, and professional sports—the subjects on which the news tends to focus. The latest Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) report (Gallagher 2010) reveals that nearly half of the stories in print media are devoted to either politics and government or the economy. The topics of science and health, in comparison, constitute only 10 percent of all stories. Hence, the persistent social realities of acute gender inequalities at the top in politics, the business world, and sports translate into highly imbalanced gender coverage patterns. (p. 964)

Senior leadership also contributes to this imbalance. Shor et al. (2015) found that reporters might not have full autonomy over what they write. The real power lies within the leadership's hands. As a result, they note that if more women were in these leadership positions, there could potentially be a wider variety of topics written about in newspapers. This is important to highlight as other literature has too suggested that those in decision-making positions hold power. An equal representation of gender in leadership groups is critical to achieve in order for their product to reflect its consumers, and society as a whole. If the same type of people continues to make top decisions, then we can only expect to see the same results.

The authors explain the limitations of their study clearly. It is important to note that while they examined the number of times female names were mentioned, they did

not explore how they were mentioned. They emphasize that how they are portrayed definitely matters. This study did not indicate in what stories or contexts these women were being discussed. Secondly, this study is strictly looking at newspapers, which excludes websites, television and social media. The authors did briefly look at the corresponding websites of these newspapers and found that the imbalance does not change in the paperless form. Shor et al. (2015) conclude by telling us that women still do not make up more than one fifth of newspaper mentions and suggest that as long as the glass ceiling is in place, gender imbalances in the media will exist.

Women in Sports Broadcasting

Grubb and Billiot (2010) conducted interviews with female sportscasters to understand their experience in a “male domain”. To provide a context of the imbalance in this realm, “according to a survey involving ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, Fox Sports Net, the new Fox Regional Sports Report, Turner, CNN/SI, USA Network, and HBO, 335 male and 81 female sportscasters are employed by the networks” (Grubb & Billiot, 2010, p. 91). The authors present their study, divided into sections including the culture of sports broadcast and women’s emergence, treatment of female sportscasters, and then introduce the present study, which they call “maintaining the hegemony”. The stories included in their paper highlight the different treatment and barriers that women have faced in this profession. On one occasion in the 1970s, a female sportscaster was forced to sit outside of the press box during a blizzard to cover a NFL game, while the male reporters were allowed inside (Grubb & Billiot, 2010). Additionally, there was a trend of hiring female sportscasters not for their knowledge of sports, but to provide a “feminine touch to the male-dominated airwaves”, which led to these women being positioned as sex symbols

(Grubb & Billiot, 2010, p. 88). As the authors move into the responses they received from their sample, it is clear that women are still facing these types of barriers. Some examples of these barriers are sexual harassment, feeling that they have to constantly prove themselves more than their male counterparts, filling less-threatening roles, and conducting business is viewed as them being flirtatious (Grubb & Billiot, 2010). Some of the women interviewed suggest that having more women in hiring and decision-making decisions will allow for more women to enter these jobs equally. Grubb and Billiot (2010) conclude by stating that a culture change in sports is needed, as well as a societal change that will see males and females as equals.

This literature shines a light on how important this issue is in its field today. Overall, the literature that I examined links back to historical beliefs and stereotypes in one way or another. It will be crucial to reframe those ideas and gain a substantial understanding of these women's experiences today to initiate change.

Barriers to women entering leadership positions

Gable and Reed (1987) talk about the emergence of women into professional selling and highlight a number of themes around the topic. While this article is in regard to professional selling, we can easily relate this to professional sports, where selling is a major part of front offices.

The authors touch on different reasons why women may not enter the field. They consist of extensive travel and family ties, trouble finding mentors and building a network of other women and tokenism (Gable & Reed, 1987). In regards of tokenism, Gable and Reed (1987) report that:

One saleswoman reflected that when she first came to the company: “it was like working in a fishbowl” (Kanter and Stein 1979). As with all changes, reducing tokenism is a difficult undertaking, but once the numbers wing towards a more realistic balance, pressures that result from tokenism will diminish significantly. (p. 35)

This is yet another barrier that women have to face if they are one of the only women in their office but can definitely be overcome if gender equality is reached. Additionally, the authors call upon the stereotyping of a sales role. Gable and Reed (1987) report that selling was always viewed as a man’s job, so for a woman to do it they had to behave like a man, or face resistance in other’s acceptance and comfortability with it. Further, it is stated that men are reluctant to give women feedback on the job, while they are comfortable with tearing a male counterpart apart on his performance (Gable & Reed, 1987). If women are not receiving the same amount of feedback that men are, and thus not allowing them to work on their craft, they can be at a disadvantage when it comes time for promotions. This unequal treatment can lead to stunting a woman’s professional development.

One interesting part of this article is that one study conducted with Columbia Business School MBA graduates and another by Catalyst, reports that women did not abandon their careers due to motherhood. This is contrasting to other literature that cites parenthood as a reason why women question whether they can handle both their career and being a mother.

This article is limited in that it was written in 1987, 23 years ago. However, it is clear that many of the reasons why it was hard for women to enter the field in 1987, are

still present today. This indicates that more work needs to be done in breaking down stereotypes surrounding jobs, and understanding women's needs in the workplace in order to attract and retain top talent. It also is not specific to professional sports, but as mentioned previously, selling is a large part of professional sports front offices.

In a study conducted by Betzer-Tayer et al. (2017) in Israel, the authors used interviews with four males and an auto-ethnographical account of one author to analyze actual experiences of these people when establishing a Volleyball Academy for Young Talented Girls (VAYTG). The participants tell their accounts of the process of establishing this academy, with the participating author being the only female on the board at the time, and the largest supporter of the academy's introduction. After analysis, Betzer-Tayer et al. (2017) generated six themes from their study that speak to the barriers women face. They are gender balance, political wisdom, fear of otherness, code of behavior, assertiveness and making concessions. The author's narrative in this study was especially insightful. She explains that in the beginning stages of implementing her idea, she had to figure out the stakeholder's intentions and the power dynamic within the board. She wanted to know who was for, against or undecided on the agenda she ultimately wanted to push and saw value in understanding where the power lies in decision making so she could know who to approach (Betzer-Tayer et al., 2017). This is interesting to note as it could serve as a strategy for women to use when looking to push a certain agenda. Similar to other literature, the participating author found herself in a struggle between adopting new character traits and displaying ones true to her. She states that she adopted some masculine traits (aggressiveness and independence) but then also wanted to display her other traits (like affection and interpersonal sensitivity) but felt like

if she acted that way, she would be thought of as “other” and would result in a loss of influence (Betzer-Tayer et al., 2017). An enormous barrier the participating author faced towards the end of the implementation process was having to shut down all other women’s national team activities. She was told that if she did not halt all activities for the following two years, the academy would not be developed. This was a massive decision that she had to make alone, as she was seen as the leader of the project since she was the only female (Betzer-Tayer et al., 2017). It is unfortunate that when a female is searching for equality between girls’ and boys’ sports, she is faced with a lone all-or-nothing deal that causes her to put other athletes at a disadvantage. An important implication for women today, we also find out from Betzer-Tayer et al. (2017) that the author found it crucial to have a network of women that supported her, to not only help her feel not alone but to gain influence among the men. This reinforces how important female role models and mentors are. A large takeaway from this study is a quote from Betzer-Tayer et al. (2017):

In many cases, some men perceived women as threatening outsiders and tried to keep them away from the nerve center of the decision-making process. She found that if she wanted to deconstruct the context of hegemonic masculinity within the IVA (board), she must preserve the beliefs and values preventing her from assimilating into the existing hegemonic discourse on the IVA. (p. 20)

This study reached a greater depth in understanding one woman’s barriers, as they used interviews to uncover real experiences from participants during a large project. Betzer-Tayer et al. (2017) conclude with offering that the path towards change and gender equity should be started at a young age, and “can occur through education and

socialization that deconstruct existing contextual socio-historical structures, beliefs and values about feminine and masculine discourses...” (p. 232-23).

The trend in this study points to, again, the long-believed ways that men and women are expected to behave. Women can display their more “masculine” traits to assimilate or gain influence, but is that ultimately adapting to the workplace, or not showing who they truly are? If there is a constant adaptation to these past sought-after traits in leadership, the future of decision-making will lack diversity, perspective and critical thinking.

Pfister and Radtke (2006) shed an interesting perspective on this issue as they conducted a study that involved interviews with German former sport leaders that decided to leave their positions. An important note in this study is that Germany’s sport system is based on clubs and federations, and its sport organizations are led by unpaid volunteers. The subjects of this study were all unpaid volunteers, so the authors offer that leaving their sports career could be easier than those in paid positions, since they have no monetary consequence. This was an important study as the authors claim that there was no research on those who left their career, and prior studies only focused on those still in their positions.

The aim of their study was to detect processes of gender segregation and identify mechanisms that attribute to the marginalization of women in sport organizations (Pfister & Radtke, 2006). They tell us that “the dominance of men in leadership positions and the gender hierarchies in all areas of society, including sports organizations, is not only the product of, but also the driving force behind the gender order, at least in Western industrialized societies” (Pfister & Radtke, 2006, p. 114). On that note, there are a few

themes that emerged from their results that point to the male dominance over females in this space.

Culture in the Workplace

The first theme is the culture around the workplace. Pfister and Radtke (2006) write that the way to manage is viewed as the “man’s way”, which creates a cycle of men at the top and women having to act like a man to reach those same positions. Since the top is controlled by men and their behaviors, women are either forced to adopt those same traits or not enter the space at all. Further, it is expected that you are able to give a large amount of time to the job, which can be a gateway for men, but a barrier to women based on stereotypical family duties (Pfister & Radtke, 2006).

Respondent’s Outlook on Work

Another interesting theme is how the respondents viewed their work. A majority of the men reported wanting to make more radical decisions, and wanted these positions to secure influence and power, where the women felt that they wanted to help people or a situation (Pfister & Radtke, 2006). Even more interestingly, the authors found that the women, but not one man, questioned their competency to do their job. When it came to conflict and power struggles, the women disliked playing a political game and took things more personally and emotionally, where the men saw this just as part of the job (Pfister & Radtke, 2006). These findings need to be considered, as it is a clear example of women being indirectly discriminated against based on societal norms.

Overall, 60% of the participants said they never or rarely faced barriers; the women that did said that it was mostly due to not accepting them because of their sex, power struggles and the incompatibility of voluntary office and their professional work,

and the men stated it was mostly because of infighting and politicking (Pfister & Radtke, 2006, p. 122). Perhaps the biggest takeaway from this study in relation to barriers women face is 14 of the 16 participants said that a woman's underrepresentation in leadership was due to their family responsibilities and its effect on carrying out leadership tasks (Pfister & Radtke, 2006). This is a notion to consider when creating solutions for women staying in the workplace, as it shines a light on a huge barrier for women that does not proportionately affect men. There is a culture in place, and if there is no change or support for change, then women will continuously drop out, or never enter, and change will never be made.

In 2020, women are facing some of the most unique challenges that workplaces have ever seen. In McKinsey's Women in the Workplace 2020 report, we learn that women, especially women of color, are being disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis. For this study, the group drew data from 317 companies, a survey of over 40,000 people and more than 45 in-depth interviews. Coury et al. (2020) report that women are more likely to be laid off or furloughed during the pandemic, and this is stalling their professional growth as well as their financial stability. Additionally, the normal pressures that working mothers face, like working during the day then returning home to childcare and household duties, have exacerbated. With schools and day cares closing due to health concerns, the support that made their work life balance possible is suddenly gone (Coury et al., 2020). The authors tell us that workplaces need to act now, before years of advancement for women is diminished. They found that "one in four women are contemplating what many would have considered unthinkable just six months

ago: downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce completely” (Coury et al., 2020, para. 4).

While this study is not specific to professional sports front offices, it is reflective of women in the workplace at large. It is easy to apply the different struggles that any working mother faces to any industry, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be interesting to learn how the rest of this crisis unfolds, as this data was collected from June to August of 2020. We can hope that this trend changes as we move forward, but the obstacles women are facing are imperative to understand, as the workforce could lose influential leaders if support is not supplied.

Stories surrounding the hiring of Kim Ng, now Miami Marlins General Manager, have highlighted some of the barriers she faced on her way to becoming the first ever female GM of a major men’s professional league. Buckner (2020) tells us that Ng, along with many of her friends and close colleagues, always knew she could and would become a GM, but did not think it would take this long. Through five unsuccessful GM interviews, Kim Ng still built a reputation as one of the most qualified candidates, overcoming racism and sexism along the way (Bucker, 2020). The article recalls times where male executives asked Ng to get them a coffee, asked her boss at the time what she was doing there and someone mocking her Chinese heritage during a social gathering of colleagues (Buckner, 2020). These types of interactions are unique to women, and minorities, and can certainly deter them from pursuing their career in sports. However, she persisted on. One supporter stated, “We all just knew that’s what she was driven to, to go to the top in the baseball department,” said Grace Guerrero Zwit, the senior director of minor league operations for the White Sox. “I thought it would happen sooner rather

than this late” (Buckner, 2020, para. 9). It is echoed by other people that they were unsure the day would ever come for Ng, not because of her abilities, but because of the “glacial pace” in which male-dominated sports leagues allow change (Buckner, 2020). The slow progress that was being made for women in sports was noticed not only by Ng but by her colleagues and others that knew her, and that is important to note. This issue is so large that women are not the only ones noticing it, and it will take both genders to care enough to move this issue forward.

The story concludes with a great quote by her former boss and a continuing sponsor, who said:

I knew the challenges that she had throughout her career: the harassment, the stigma, the glass ceiling. It’s all gone now. She is the general manager of the Miami Marlins, and she just happens to be a woman and she just happens to be Asian American. And that’s a great day for our game. (para. 21)

Sexism in Sport

Fink (2016) draws attention to sexism in sport, and states that it is not being challenged by leaders in the space. She gives examples of how this is present and makes suggestions based on Shaw and Frisby (2016) in order to institute change.

The author begins by stating “...that is what is so interesting about sexism in sport. It is commonly overt yet simultaneously unnoticed. It hides in plain sight. It is so entwined in the fabric of sport that most do not even discern it” (Fink, 2016, p. 2). She argues that discrimination against women in sport is not taken as seriously as any other discrimination that you could substitute for sexism. Additionally, she believes that the

lack of sponsorship for women's sports is reflective of the sexist beliefs in sports. The author recalled a recent survey commissioned by the Women in Football (soccer) group that included 661 females working in soccer as coaches, officials, and administrators.

Fink (2016) explained these results in saying:

More than two-thirds of the women reported they experienced sexism in the job; of those, more than one-third had witnessed women being told they could not do their job because of their gender. More than half worried that their appearance was judged before their ability to do their job. (p. 4)

Fink (2016) tells us (as cited in Morrow et al., 1994; Schneider et al., 1997; Fitzgerald et al., 1997) that sexism is also linked with lower work satisfaction and commitment, and women who experience it are likely to remove themselves temporarily or permanently from their work as well as experience greater stress, depression, and reduced health and well-being. This obviously affects the workplace in that it disrupts operations and can cause tension between employees. Further, Fink says (as cited by McDonagh & Pappano, 2008) that:

Spots are so entwined with all aspects of our culture that allowing such attitudes and behaviors to prevail does not merely impact our lives within sport, but also perpetuates "stereotypical gender roles that limit women's social, economic, and political opportunities" beyond sport as well. (p. 4)

Fink (2016) suggested that small changes in the workplace can make a difference, like flexible hours for employees, that can allow females the flexibility they need. She concludes by stating that large-scale changes are not needed, but small gestures can move the issue in the right direction. This study provides important feedback from women in

sports and shines a light on the tremendous negative affects there are to sexism's presence in the workplace. It is an issue that should be acted upon, if not for its ethical standpoint, but because it can be a detriment to business as well.

Continuing on this topic, Hindman and Walker (2020) state that different forms of sexism, overt and subtle, are faced by women every day in the sports industry, and influence their comfortability on the job and stereotypes that surround women in sports. The authors conducted a study that consisted of 11 female business managers within minor league hockey. They interviewed them to start, then had the participants journal for two weeks and document any perceived sexism or difference of treatment due to their gender and finished with another round of interviews. Hindman and Walker (2020) reported two themes that emerged from their journals and interviews: diminishment of intellectual contributions and capabilities and objectification of physical appearance. Many of the responses received included such topics as old boys and girls club, feeling ignored and invisible, questioning knowledge and capabilities, diminutive nicknames, spotlight on appearance and attire, sexualized interactions and contact, the "player" issue (others thinking women in sport may have chosen the job because they are interested in relations with a player), married women and (potential) motherhood. One story highlighted the unfair opportunities men receive over women, when a mother was not considered for a promotion that an equally qualified man received. This participant said her boss told her, "Well you're a mom, you have a home, we wouldn't think of relocating you" (Hindman & Walker, 2020, p. 71). This is indicative of the thought process that decision makers may have when considering employees for promotions. Although superiors may believe they are being considerate, mothers and their families may be okay

with relocating for a promotion. These assumptions can be removed by having conversations with women in their offices.

Hindman and Walker (2020) also described survival tactics that these women experience by saying:

In response to these repercussions, women act and think in ways that allow them to cope with the sexism that they face in order to succeed (or at least stay) in the sport workplace. These survival strategies including minimizing and normalizing sexism, blaming women, selectively choosing when and how to speak up, actively managing how they are perceived, and reframing their experiences to focus on their agency at work. (p. 72)

We can see how complicated these issues can become for women in sports, as they actually adopt tactics to *survive* their workplace. Although they are limited to women in minor league hockey, these stories are imperative to hear and understand as they tell us what women in the industry experience. I believe the use of interviews plays a large role in uncovering these stories, and that is why I chose to conduct interviews for my research as well. Hindman and Walker (2020) suggest that future research includes women's professional sports and college athletics, as well as diversity among race and sexual orientation.

The biggest takeaway from this study may be that the culture that exists within the sports industry is the contributor to these acts of sexism. However, despite these recounts, women also reported enjoying their jobs. This can leave employees with conflicting feelings because its organizational culture is so complex.

Support and Encouragement for Women in Sports

It is important for women in sports to have a support system, and to feel encouraged to continue their path in the industry. Wagner (2020) tells a story about Jen Wolf, a life skills coordinator for MLB's Cleveland Indians, started something special by creating a group text. When Wolf felt a lack of support, she started a group text of women in professional baseball, which now consists of 49 members. This text chain serves as a place to celebrate, brainstorm, support, discuss experiences in a male-dominated field, talk about player management and development and ways to improve diversity in the sport (Wagner, 2020). The article describes how important it is to these women to have mentors, support and others that are similar to them in the same sport and industry. One reflection asserts, "Being able to mentor other women that are coming into the game is huge", Wolf said. "I didn't have that. I had mentors, but not really female mentors" (Wagner, 2020, para. 8). Many of the women in the group reported that they were not aware that there were so many women within the sport (Wagner, 2020). Another member of the group stated, "It's so amazing to be able to see someone who maybe speaks like you, who might have a little accent like you and who you see yourself in" (Wagner, 2020, para. 25).

This story is a great insight into what can help women feel more comfortable in professional sports, and that something as simple as a group chat can inspire others. It is clear that women seek out support and having others that look, sound or are similar to them in the sport gives them hope that they can have a lasting career.

Solutions for Gender Equality in the Workplace

Graham et al. (2017) use data from 81 publicly traded firms with the average company having 7,000 employees, to examine correlations between human resources, the person certifying the company's EEO-1 report and women's representation in management. Their study found that a Human Resources presence on the Top Management Team (TMT) plays purely a symbolic position in Equal Employment Opportunities, where the EEO-1 certifier hierarchical rank impacts quite substantively (Graham et al., 2017). The EEO-1 certifier is the person responsible for signing the company's required, confidential federal EEO-1 report. The authors suggest that it appears that diversity practices and structures are created to avoid discrimination cases, not to actually hold the organization accountable. We have also seen this expressed in other literature.

Graham et al. (2017) suggest that the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) look closer at the data that is filed by companies to see who can be potential offenders of the current policies in place. They also suggest to look at other factors within a company, like the budget that is given to EEO or diversity officers to see what kind of progress they have actually made and how committed they are. The authors conclude by emphasizing that the person who signs the EEO-1 form has more power and is more influential to increased women management representation than having an HR professional on a TMT (Graham et al., 2017).

This study is interesting to think about in regards to its implications in getting more women into leadership positions. It is clear that having policies and human resource presence is not enough, and that the power lies in the person who has the ability to see where the company lies in terms of Equal Employment Opportunities. Although the study

is not on women in professional sports, the conclusions drawn are specific to how to get more women into leadership positions. This is an important strategic consideration for organizations and the EEOC to understand when thinking about how to advance women's leadership.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A qualitative study seemed fit to use for my topic because it was important to understand a deeper layer of the experiences of women in sports. I was eager to listen to their stories and responses and wanted the ability to ask follow up questions if necessary. A survey simply would not provide that flexibility or more descriptive story I was interested in hearing. Additionally, I wanted the participants to feel as though they could express their own personal thoughts in confidentiality, so a forum like a focus group would not allow that to be fulfilled.

Study Design

This qualitative study used 10 female participants as interview subjects to collect data. The reason for using 10 participants is to that I could recruit two women from each major professional sports league. Those leagues are the MLB, NBA, MLS, NHL and NFL. As described next, the study ended up consisting of one NBA and one WNBA participant. Each woman, at the time of this study, currently worked for a professional sports team. There were two participants each from the following leagues: MLB, NHL, NFL, MLS, and one from the NBA and one from the WNBA. The decision to draw from these leagues was made from the acknowledgement that they are generally the most popular professional sports leagues in the United States, thus likely attracting the most and best talent. The years of experience in specifically the sports industry of the

participants ranged from four to about twelve years, and the teams they represented spanned from the West Coast to the East Coast. Four to twelve years of experience was chosen because I wanted to speak with women who had a number of years in the industry and could speak to the different topics in a seasoned and confident way. I did not want to use professionals who had just joined the industry, in caution that they would not have enough experience to speak to or would not have enough time in the industry to develop a real opinion. I would have accepted participants that were in the industry longer than twelve years, but the referrals I received happened to lie within that year span. There was also a range of positions that these participants held. They consisted of marketing, premium ticket services, group sales, business operations, branding and strategy, corporate partnerships and ticket sales and premium membership. As shown, there was a wide variety of front office positions included as part of my sample. When recruiting, there was not an emphasis on these particular departments, but an emphasis on the desire to select participants from a variety of departments to gain a widespread understanding. Data regarding age, race, sexuality etc. was not collected because my goal was to create a conversational space during my interviews, and those identifying questions did not fit into that theme. The choice to interview only women was based upon wanting to learn about and hear the first-hand experiences of those potentially affected by this issue. I believed it was important to first understand the woman's point of view of those who are currently in the field, experiencing this issue in real time. Interviewing male participants would certainly provide another perspective and potential insights to the topic; however, this expanded respondent group was not realistic for this study given my timeline and my focus on women's experiences. Secondly, it would also be interesting to interview

subjects who previously worked in the sports industry but decided to leave. Again, given my goals of this study and timeline, this was not a realistic item for me to complete.

These are both potential opportunities for future research.

Study Participants

I recruited these participants in a few different approaches. I began with women in the sports industry that I currently had in my network. Although I knew there could potentially be bias in choosing a participant I have a personal relationship with, this method was easily accessible and reliable. From there, I asked a woman in my network for a referral of another woman within her same league. Additionally, I used a connection within the Penn Organizational Dynamics community to elicit referrals. Lastly, I reached out to men within my network to ask for referrals of women in different professional sports leagues to participate. These methods are a mixture of using connections within my own network, and the snowball method, as one of the participants of the study referred another participant. The snowball method is a recruiting method used when you ask a participant to refer someone who then becomes a participant as well. Again, there is acknowledgement of potential bias in my sample since none of the participants were reached from a cold, or blind, email. However, using my network to gain referrals from across the sports industry proved to bring in a diverse group in regards to years of experience, variety of leagues and positions held. It also ensured me of participation, as the women in my sample all stemmed from a direct or indirect personal connection. It was also expressed during the recruiting stage that I was seeking a diverse group of female participants.

Interview Study Questions

There were eight official questions asked in each of the interviews. The list of the questions is below.

1. Can you tell me about your career path and what attracted you to your current position?
2. What gateways did you experience as you pursued your career? Who and/or what helped you progress to where you are?
3. Did you experience any barriers as you pursued your career? If so, can you tell me about them?
4. Can you share some stories that stick out to you, that might help me understand your experiences in pursuing your career?
5. As you may know, much has been written about gender equality in sports leadership roles. Based on your career and experience, how would you describe this issue?
6. Imagine it is five years from now. Where do you see yourself? What needs to happen to make your vision come true?
7. If you were 'Queen of the Forest' and had all the power, how might you address the underrepresentation of women in sports leadership? What practical changes would you suggest to gain more parity?
8. If a young woman was networking with you to pursue a leadership position in sports, what recommendations would you have for her?

The questions were designed to help me better understand their experiences in pursuing their careers in sports and gaining insight to what the future might look like for women in that space. The different questions touched upon their career path, gateways and barriers they may have experienced, stories that represent their journey, their view on the issue of gender equality in sports leadership roles and suggestions for solutions for the future. The mode of interviews allowed us to follow the flow of conversation and opened up new and different topics within my study. The interview questions were taken through a number of edits and a pilot run to eliminate any bias or influence to the best of my ability. The interview guide began with basic points that I wanted to discuss and evolved to incorporate more context and visualization to serve as a better way to have a conversation about my topic. The interview guide was always focused on the goal of my study, to understand the experiences of these women currently in the field and to generate possible solutions to progress this issue. The interview questions themselves were generated from a number of different sources. They were influenced from my personal experience working in the sports industry and the different goals I had in completing this research. They were also influenced by the literature I read and similar studies. The questions were all created with the intent to learn how the women in the sports industry currently view the issue, their personal experience and insights for the future of my topic.

Interview Software

I conducted each interview using Zoom, a video conferencing platform, in order to have a virtual face-to-face conversation with each of the participants. Had the COVID-19 pandemic not been present, in-person interviews would have likely been sought out

when possible. However, using Zoom as my interview platform allowed for me to include participants from all over the country. Had the interviews been in-person, it would not have been realistic for me to interview participants outside the Philadelphia area. The limitations in using Zoom versus an in-person interview was that I was not always able to fully read body language, and that can cause for an inability to fully understand the participant's responses. Each Zoom invitation was specific to the participant and was sent via email only to them. There was also a passcode required to enter as a layer of security. Additionally, I used Otter.ai, a software that records and transcribes the interview, to aid in my analysis. Both of these platforms helped me keep an audio and text record of the interviews conducted.

Data Analysis

The data that I collected was analyzed and grouped into themes. As I examined the different transcripts from each participant, I highlighted the themes that stood out in their responses. From there, general themes amongst all participants were grouped together to develop my outcomes. Specifically, I used the method of truths, trends and unique ideas to organize my data. Truths are defined as 60-100% of the participants reported the statement. Themes are defined as 30-50% of the participants reported the statement. Unique ideas are defined as statements that 10-20% of the participants reported. Maintaining confidentiality, any direct quotes from a participant are free from use of their name or organization. After identifying the themes that arose from my research, I considered and applied how they relate to the field now, and potentially in the future.

In the following chapter, the truths, trends and unique ideas will be listed in their own sections. Following each section in truths, trends and unique ideas, I included my own reflections listed under “Researcher’s Reflections.” Additionally, I provided separate sections for barriers, suggestions for solutions and recommendations for young women. The responses I received from these topics were powerful and I believed needed to be highlighted individually because of their importance.

CHAPTER 4

DATA INTERPRETATION

Introduction

With the methodology presented in the previous chapter, this chapter serves as an informative interpretation of the data I collected. The data collected was the responses from each participant to each of the eight interview questions, grouped into different sections. Again, this included their career path, gateways and barriers experienced, important stories and insights and suggestions for the future of women working in sports. Some interviews included follow up questions based on the participant's response, which sometimes led to different topics being discussed. The data is displayed in the themes of truths, trends and unique ideas. My own reflections on these responses are listed under "Researcher's Reflections." For this study, truths are defined as 60-100% of the participants reported the statement. Trends are defined as 30-50% of the participants reported the statement. Unique ideas are defined as statements that 10-20% of the participants reported. Following truths, trends and unique ideas, you will see barriers, suggestions for solutions and recommendations for young women. The last three components were included in this analysis in their own sections because I believe their content needs to be individually highlighted due to its importance. They help illustrate the stories these women shared as well as insightful considerations for the future.

Previous studies on this topic indicated that future research should be sure to include a diverse group of participants from different ages, sexualities and races. This is important in order to capture the entire landscape of this issue. While this was a focus in

the recruiting stage of my study, the specific demographic information of each participant was not collected.

I believe it is important to begin the analysis of the data with the following sentiment from the majority of the participants. 70% of the participants explicitly stated that they believe the issue of women working in sports is progressing. All of these participants expressed that they continuously see more women in sports and that the growth is visible. They expressed that they see it moving in the right direction and the changes seen are incredible. One participant stated that she has seen "...more change in the last two years than I saw in 10 years in the industry." This provides hope that the momentum is picking up surrounding this topic and the slower moving progression we have previously seen is no longer the case. It is also important to note that the other 30% of participants did not explicitly state that they thought the issue was regressing or moving in a negative direction. They simply just did not state their opinion like the rest. Overall, understanding that these women currently in the industry believe there is a positive future and actual change happening is certainly uplifting and encouraging.

Truths

For this study, a truth is defined as 60-100% of the participants reported the statement.

Mentors

A truth that was probably most profound throughout the interviews is the importance of mentors and good leadership. Every participant spoke about this in one way or another. All study respondents stated they did not arrive to this point in their

career by doing everything themselves. The power of the connections and relationships they all hold had an impact on their path and success. To illustrate their importance, one participant described a mentor of hers like “I strive to be like her and I want to have other females look at me the way I look at her...”

What is also significant to note is that these participants had both male and female mentors to help them. However, there did seem to be a difference in how these mentors helped them. For example, it was apparent that the male mentors mentioned were perhaps more influential in opening opportunities to the participants. Some of the participants described these male mentors and colleagues inviting them into important meetings, showing them different job responsibilities and allowing them to gain experience beyond their job description. This allowed the participants to see what it is like to be in a leadership position and understand what operations are like at a higher level. This is useful in professional development as those skills and insights gained better prepare them for a promotion. One participant said the men in her journey “took her under their wing” and that she “was an equal from day one”. From my experience, an act like that aids in a woman feeling comfortable in a male dominated field. Additionally, multiple participants talked about how the male leaders and mentors set expectations. They always knew what goal they were striving toward, and how that was going to help them advance in their career. That goal setting came with the assistance of these male mentors. One participant mentioned a very structured plan to her professional growth that both a male and female leader helped her define. They would collectively set a plan for the participant and would have quarterly meetings to track her progress.

When the participants spoke about their female mentors, it was clear that they mostly took on a different role. The participants described these females as more of a role model. The women in these roles were someone that the participants could look up to and potentially follow their example. There were many instances where a participant mentioned that they saw a female in their office in a higher position than them, and that made it seem possible that they could achieve the same thing. These female mentors and leaders were so influential because they exemplified the work ethic it took to arrive to their career status, as well as showing them that being a woman working in sports was possible.

When asked if the participants vocalized their desire for a mentor and guidance, there were a mix of responses. Some of the participants stated they made it clear that they wanted to advance in their career, while others simply did not know why they received the certain attention. In both cases, it shows that it is important to communicate what your personal goals are, and to demonstrate a work ethic and attitude that can get you noticed and receive that mentorship without even asking.

Researcher's Reflections

It is important to note the differences between male and female mentors and leaders listed are an interpretation, and not a universal truth. It is also not to say that the female mentors mentioned did not aid at all in opening opportunities for the participants. However, it is an interesting observation as it allows us to understand the office dynamics that these participants experienced. It is possible that this difference appears because men have more access to power in the workplace than women do, so their role as mentors operates differently.

Intentional Leadership

Similar to the responses received regarding mentors, 60% of the participants spoke about the power of intentional leaders, and how they can make a difference. One major takeaway was that having proactive, caring leaders leads to empowerment and better relationships. The participants felt that when their leaders care about including women in the workplace and ensuring they are being treated properly, it allows them to feel comfortable and like they matter. In another sense, one participant said she is able to have casual conversations with bosses and executives in her office, and that is a part of their culture that she values. It was stated from multiple participants that just knowing their leaders value women in the workplace is huge. Additionally, one participant stressed how important it is to work for the right leader and to find the office culture that you will succeed in. She stated this starts in the interview process, with understanding what it could be like to work in that environment and leaning on others to inform you of that workplace.

Researcher's Reflections

All of these things prove how crucial it is for leaders to communicate that they care about the women in their workplace. This can be speaking with them about their needs on the job and asking how they can feel more included and valued at work. It is clear how much it matters to these women that their leaders portray that they care about their experiences at work. This falls directly in line with the study conducted by Spoor and Hoye (2014) that found feeling psychological support for gender equity in their

workplace influenced women to stay with their organization, more than any human resource practice could.

Additionally, in an article that highlights the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers progressive culture in placing women in leadership roles, we learn that the league office consists of nearly 40% women (Hayes, 2019). Oris Stuart, the league's chief diversity and inclusion officer, says "the hiring of women by our teams and the league is part of our long-term and holistic commitment to attracting and retaining the world's best talent" (Hayes, 2019, para. 16). The intent of the NBA is clear and is likely one of the reasons why they are able to attract and have women in top leadership positions.

Biases and Societal Norms

The topics of biases and societal norms arose frequently throughout the interviews. They were both mentioned in the context of why some of the participants believed that there are not enough women in sports leadership positions. These two terms seemed to be interchangeable during our conversations and were lumped together when discussing the issue.

The participants that specifically mentioned biases as a reason for the unequal number of men and women in similar positions stated that they believed they were unconscious. The participants expressed that they did not believe any male colleagues they have encountered purposely caused any obstacles for women, but perhaps their viewpoints and beliefs are unconsciously skewed. One possible reason given by a participant for these biases was that the men could have grown up in a household where only their father worked, and their mother stayed home. In this instance, that experience

could leave a bias in the mind of the male since that is what they know and have not challenged that. The participants thought that challenging the men's ways of thinking and gaining more self-awareness of their biases can be conducted in trainings and would be a helpful first step in overcoming them.

Bias was also spoken about in regard to the types of positions men and women hold in sports offices. One participant mentioned that although it is different in every office, she has definitely noticed correlations between certain positions and genders. For instance, she described noticing that the women take on more of the friendly roles and the men take on more of the aggressive roles. She said, "...the girls did the service, and the guys did sales, and the girls had the more customer service vibe, and then the guys were sales, premium..." This particular point was touched on by a few other participants as well. They noted that women are usually thought of in more nurturing, caring roles like community relations and other service-oriented positions and are not typically seen in sales positions. These assumptions fall in line with the historically held beliefs that women's prominent traits are caring, nurturing and friendly, while men hold traits like aggression, logic and rationality. Burton (2014) tells us that there is a large perception that men hold attributes that are associated with being a successful leader, like aggression, assertiveness and independence and traditional female attributes like tenderness, care and sensitivity, are not viewed as what is successful.

Similarly, a few participants mentioned societal norms playing a part in the issue. As previously mentioned in the literature, there are historical societal norms that display the men in the household working and the women staying in the home. Over time, this led to more men in leadership positions and more women in lower ranking positions in

the workforce. One participant thought that "...because of how we've suppressed women and minorities, there's not as many women and minorities ready for those larger leadership roles..." She followed up to say that it starts at the bottom and hiring women into entry level positions and developing them can help more women reach leadership roles. Another participant reflected that she did not recognize how little women were presidents of sports organizations until she finally worked under one, which made her ask herself how she never noticed this before. She stated, "...it's kind of embarrassing that I don't think that way, that I don't think like wow there isn't anybody else and it's almost one of those things that you're not recognizing the issue and I think that that's the hardest part about it is that no one really talks about the fact that there aren't women, we just accept it."

Researcher's Reflections

With these stereotypes and assumptions still holding true today, they remain a challenge for women to advance in leadership roles. If there are still present today, it remains difficult for people to imagine women as leaders. Accepting these roles that have derived from societal norms, or perhaps not even thinking of it as an issue, is certainly a reason why the issue itself exists. It will be important to challenge the way we all view workplaces and leadership positions in order to make any change.

Trends

For the purpose of this study, trends are defined as 30-50% of the participants reported the statement.

Future Career Outlook

The responses I received to the question of where the participants see themselves in five years and what needs to happen for them to get there were interesting. When describing where they see themselves, there was a variety of answers but also agreements among the different participants. No participant had a defined step-by-step plan laid out.

Many of the participants expressed that they hoped they would be in a certain position in five years. When describing what needed to happen for them to get there, 40% of the participants said they needed to develop their craft in order to advance. They said they needed to learn more parts of the business and improve their skills at their current position before they thought they could reach the next level in their career.

Researcher's Reflections

I found this interesting because many of the participants also called upon studies that have shown that women will not apply for a job if they do not meet all or most of the criteria, but men will. To this point, they suggested that women should be more confident in their abilities and be encouraged to apply for those jobs. This was interesting to me because although they wanted women to go after higher positions, they were hard on themselves in the fact that they felt they needed to improve before promoting. While it is important to develop skills needed for higher positions, this observation presented itself as almost a contradiction. Furthermore, they were chosen for these interviews because they stood out to me or those who referred them as a leader in their respective league.

Participant's Views on Advancement

Additionally, 30% of the participants stated that their view of climbing the ladder has changed. They reported that it is important for them to be happy and comfortable in

their role and organization, and a title change may not be what they seek out the most anymore. They want to be in the right environment and would not need a title change or move if they are still growing and learning. When describing her professional outlook, one participant said, “I don’t necessarily think it’s a bad thing to still be in the same role, but obviously I hope that I’m able to progress and take that growth.”

Researcher’s Reflections

The last sentiment among the respondents tells us what some women value in their career. They want to feel like they are a part of a good culture, and that growth and developing their skills is important to them. This understanding is useful for managers, supervisors and the like, so that they can understand what women are seeking, and can hopefully utilize that information to help them grow and stay at their organization.

Seeing Women in Leadership Positions

Seeing women in higher-ranking leadership positions in their office helps other women in their career. This was reported by 30% of the participants. They serve as a role model, aspiration and proof that advancing to a higher role is possible. A few participants stated that they are unsure how to reach a certain level or if it is even possible when they do not physically see people that look like them in those roles. It is also challenging to find motivation to get there. Another participant noted that she was unsure what her next career step may be or what her life could look like working in sports and growing a family. To this point, she also said that seeing a woman in an executive role within her organization helped her to see that could be a possibility for her. She believed that this would also help other younger women as well and allow them to see that women can fill

those roles in a male dominated field. Another participant mentioned that seeing a woman running her league really blew her away. It made her reflect and say, "...I was pretty happy just kind of doing what I'm doing but maybe I can do even more."

Researcher's Reflections

These stories stress the importance of having women in top leadership roles so that other women below them can see that it is achievable. This is especially important in a male dominated field like professional sports. It is clear that this has truly opened up a world of possibilities for the participants that they had not even thought of previously. Having a role model and seeing that a person just like yourself can be a leader and have a career in your field is invaluable.

This rings even truer after the Miami Marlins hiring of Kim Ng, the first ever female General Manager of the major male professional sports leagues in North America. Coverage of her hiring includes a number of people stating how profound this is, and how it has opened doors for many young girls and boys. One source stated, "Kim's appointment makes history in all of professional sports," Commissioner Rob Manfred said in a statement, "and sets a significant example for the millions of women and girls who love baseball and softball" (Kepner, 2020, para. 9).

Unique Ideas

For this study, unique ideas are defined as 10-20% of the participants stated the response during their interview. These are unique ideas specific to this study, not to the topic as a whole.

Burnout

On the topic of burnout, 20% of the participants mentioned it during their interview. They expressed that it is possible they become burnt out from the work in the sports industry and have moved on from it within the next five years. Specifically, one participant stated that the salary you receive in sports is not enough to live comfortably on, and that she does not know that she can continue to stay as she gets older and starts a family. Similarly, another participant said that the pace of her work moves so quickly, and priorities are always shifting that she may find herself wanting to leave the field. Additionally, she mentioned that she wants to start a family, and thought she "...might say she doesn't want to do the job because the women that I know in the industry find it difficult sometimes to handle both especially when children come into play."

Researcher's Reflections

This topic is something that I personally have heard from a variety of people during my time studying sport management and working in the field. This is important to understand because these women have trouble envisioning a future in the field due to those reasons, and it could be true among other women as well. It seems that the one participant does not see a path where she can advance and earn more income, and the other is unsure whether she could balance family and work based on experiences from women she knows. Employers and recruiters should consider these when formulating a work environment and policies, as well as making it part of the conversation during the interview process.

Revenue Generating Positions

This unique point was brought up in 20% of the interviews. Both of these participants noted that it is crucial to understand and be in a revenue generating position to climb the ladder and be a leader. One participant reflected that "...you never see women CEOs or CBOs and it's just because women aren't necessarily in that random revenue generating position..." She continued to point out that there are not many executive leaders that were previously in Human Resources or Community Relations. She used this information as motivation, to stay in her current role in order to advance to a high-ranking position. Another participant stated that "...you can't be in a leadership position and not understand where the revenue comes from..." She noted you need to understand ticket sales, merchandise, and other revenue streams that your organization has.

Researcher's Reflections

These make sense because an organization needs revenue to survive and continue to function. However, if males are traditionally seen in sales and revenue generating roles and women are not, how can the system be reworked to include women in these high executive roles? Sales positions can be introduced differently, and job descriptions can be altered to attract more females. Additionally, giving women, and others, in different departments than sales the chance to learn all sides of the business can provide more opportunities to advance to leadership roles. As we have heard from some of these participants, managers and supervisors understanding the goals their employees have and helping them to develop makes a large difference in their feelings towards the organization.

Negatively Influential Women

In multiple interviews, the topic of poor leaders arose, specifically when asked about barriers experienced or stories that capture their journey. It was clear that these people had an influence on the participants, as it was important enough to bring up. However, these experiences almost served as a lesson and helped the participants realize what they want in their future leaders, and how they want to be as a leader. The stories of the female leaders were in the context of pay and workplace behaviors. One of the participants recalled that a particular woman approached meetings and conversations with a combative manner, and continuously brought up the idea of the men in the room versus her. Additionally, she would speak about different female-related things in order to make the men as uncomfortable as possible. As the participant told this story, she reflected that it probably would have been easier for her had that woman not been so aggressive in her behaviors. This actually served as a great lesson for how the participant wanted to lead as she said, “I want to be aggressive in sort of carving out space and making a place for them and for their voice, but I also want to make sure that as I do that, I’m doing it in a way that opens up doors versus closes them behind me.” Similarly, another participant stated that she has seen negative behaviors amongst women in the workplace. She mentioned a “mean mentality” and that although she has seen progress, there was definitely a cutthroat atmosphere between women previously.

Researcher’s Reflections

These stories are certainly interesting to note because they are the opposite of what women generally want in the workplace. My assumption is that women want more women in leadership positions. The behaviors described in the stories are actually

obstacles for other women to overcome, and do not help women advance in sports. It seems as though these negatively influential women wanted others to suffer behind them and have to take the hard road they experienced to get to their career point.

Barriers

Each participant was asked if they had faced any barriers in pursuing their career and to share about them if they did. I believe it is important to touch on each of the barriers mentioned as it reflects what women across the sports industry face today and is critical for organizations to understand in order to grow women's leadership. These responses tell us directly what is currently occurring in the workplace, and most importantly provides insights into what action can be taken to eliminate them.

It is important to note that some of the participants spoke about barriers that were individual to them, like a personality trait or a certain aspect of their job. These participants did not speak about barriers that were exclusive to women in sports like those that are listed below. There were certainly women in this study that felt that they had a very fortunate career and did not come across many barriers at all.

Parenthood

The topic of parenthood arose in 40% of the interviews, but in different contexts. Two participants spoke of this in the context of being unsure as to whether they can juggle being a mother and working in sports, as they observed it is difficult from their experiences. Another participant emphasized the barrier that becoming a mother has presented her while working in sports. She felt that she had to look inwardly at herself

and “dig deep” to feel comfortable with what she valued. She understood that she would have to feel comfortable asking for days off from work or to leave early during her pregnancy and beyond. It was challenging working in a department with a majority of men, and especially when you are expected to work long hours in sports. Another participant illuminated a unique barrier faced involving parenthood. She noted that women who choose to not have children also face a barrier with men in their office. She suggested that men attempt to bridge a gap by having conversations about their children. That is sometimes a common ground between men and women and can serve as a starting point in their relationship. When women do not have children, this participant suggested it is just another obstacle in the way for them. This participant also mentioned that “...the moms I know in sports carry more of the load at home, while working their sports jobs than the dads I know in sports. And I think that disproportionate weight makes it really difficult for women...”

Researcher’s Reflections

Issues surrounding becoming a mother are faced among women in other industries as well, but the sports industry presents a unique challenge as it is historically male dominated. This is to be noted because men may not be as inclined to understand or think about these female issues, since it is not something they personally experience. This then presents a conflict because the demand is to work long hours, but as a mother-to-be, you need to be more absent from work than usual. Additionally, an imbalance of responsibilities between a mother and a father working in sports not only affects those mothers but serves as an example to aspiring mothers that it may be challenging for them as well. This could result in a difficult decision for women in sports, whether to stay in

the field and experience it themselves or leave the industry and become a mother elsewhere.

Gender Differences

Differences between genders was a topic discussed when asked about barriers for women in sports. One participant described that the previous leadership at her organization presented a “madman type perspective” in the office culture. She did not believe that they intentionally thought less of her because she was a woman, but they did create a different atmosphere and it took her a while to truly feel part of the leadership team. She stated that there were small behaviors that made her feel like an “other” and made it obvious that she was the only woman in the room. Some examples she provided were insisting on holding the door for her and not the men who walked through it and getting her a bottle of water during a lunch meeting without asking her and dropping it off at her seat. Again, she felt that these actions stemmed from good intentions, but drew attention to the fact that she was the only woman and ultimately made it harder for her to feel part of the team. She did see changes when leadership turned over, as her new leaders were more intentional about making her feel a part of the team. They would make sure her voice was heard and acted on the feedback she gave them about the small behaviors that were polite, but made her feel left out.

She also noted that she thinks advancement is largely driven by your network, and that it tends to be harder for women to break into the social network of men. She gave the example of men and women breaking off into their own separate groups at conventions, during meetings and especially during the social events.

Another participant mentioned that she has periodically noticed that there are egos in the room and that her own insecurities have gotten in the way. She sees this as somewhat of a personal barrier as she is still trying to find her voice and become more confident. She later elaborated that she sometimes identifies the male ego in the room and becomes frustrated. Other times she questions herself and wonders if she is being too sensitive as one of the only women in the room. She asks herself if she is being the “typical woman” that thinks a male egotistical issue is present when it is not actually there. Further, she described this bringing her down in the dumps because she notices it going on and thinks to herself that it has occurred for a very long time.

Researcher’s Reflections

These examples provide a look into what some women experience on a day-to-day basis. We can see that small gestures and attitudes affect how women feel in their work environment and stay with them enough that is easy for them to recall in my interviews. In regard to breaking into men’s social networks, this will be important for women to do as we have traditionally seen men in leadership and decision-making roles. In addition, it is troubling to hear a participant use the term “typical woman” as it shows what stereotypes have been created regarding women’s emotions in the workplace. These are real experiences faced by women currently in the industry and should be taken seriously by organizations in order to not lose out on them and their talent.

Lack of Women in Leadership

Similar to previous sections that brought up seeing women in leadership positions, this topic was also seen as a barrier for some participants. 40% of the participants spoke

about the difference women in leadership positions can make. Some of these participants expressed that it is hard for them to envision themselves in a leadership role when they do not see other women ahead of them. Their career paths may be hard to plan out because they are unsure what is possible for them. It was also reported that it is tough to stay motivated when it seems like it may not be a possibility.

Researcher's Reflections

In data provided in a previous section, it was reported that having female executives within their office was encouraging and provided an example to follow for some of these women. It is disheartening to think that women in the sports industry would be discouraged in pursuing their passion and career because their path forward is blurry. It is imperative that organizations understand these feelings from women that are currently working in the sports industry. They have not given up in pursuing their career, but they will need support in their development and career planning as they continue.

Cheerleading for Self

One participant recalled her first big barrier as a specific incident regarding a job promotion. The organization that she was a part of was expanding. When her boss told her that another woman was joining the team to be their manager, she expressed that she would have loved to interview for the job, and she was shocked that she never knew information about the position. This participant recalled the surprised expression on her boss' face, and it became clear to her that he was equally surprised that she would have been interested in that. This event turned into an immediate lesson learned that she needed to be a better cheerleader for herself. She reflected that she had normally did her

work, would not complain and stayed off the radar, and she thinks other women also do this because of the double standard that exists. That double standard is women need to work harder than men to be recognized.

Researcher's Reflections

This story serves as another obstacle that women have to overcome in the workplace and it is also a powerful lesson. This participant felt that she needed to work hard and not cause any attention to herself that, could have resulted in her not being considered for this promotion. However, an important takeaway is that women need to be advocates for themselves and speak up about what they want and what they believe they are capable of doing.

Unequal Pay

A discussion around unequal pay between men and women arose on two different occasions. One participant notes that compensation inequality has been her biggest barrier. Due to the nature of her job at the time, she saw that the employees below her were compensated higher than she was. She noted that the males were definitely paid more. Another participant said she noticed the pay gap as a huge issue within this topic at the moment. She stated it is unacceptable for a man and woman to perform the same job and appear at the same level, and not earn the same income. In her case, she believes that it "...all boils down to just the finances of it and the respect that's owed..." She added that women being underpaid is frequently happening on top of them trying to have a family at home, too.

Researcher's Reflections

In both of these responses, the participants were clearly frustrated, and it is obvious that they sense a lack of respect given to women when their compensation is less than men's compensation. This barrier seems like one that should not have to be discussed, given its moral and ethical components. This is also not only occurring in the sports industry. A 2016 survey shows that women are paid 79 cents on the dollar compared to their male colleagues, and it is worse for women of color (Wingfield, 2016). If this trend continues, I believe we could expect hostility and resentment from women towards men in the workplace, and cause for operational dysfunction.

Stereotypical Role Filling

One participant recalled a barrier she faced during an interview process. She was told that the other candidate's personality was more in line with the role that they were both aiming for. The participant reflected that the person who had filled that role prior to its opening and the person who ended up getting the position, were similar and that women in general traditionally fill the role. She continued on to say that she acted very differently than the women who are usually in the role, and she faced this barrier because she is "...not the typical woman or the stereotypical person in this role".

Additionally, she mentioned that she has had discussions with other people about women taking on "non-promotable" roles in the workplace. She noted that women are the ones who tend to bring in snacks and treats to celebrate coworker's birthdays and other events, and said, "no one's getting promoted or applauded for being the one that sends out the birthday email every month or brings in the treats for someone's birthday or celebration or their baby shower or whatever." She concluded by saying it is a hard

balance to be the woman that you are, and not fall into the stereotypical roles in the office.

Researcher's Reflections

These issues present a difficult dilemma for women. When they can notice there is a stereotype around a certain position and they do not meet that stereotype, do they compromise part of who they are or remain true to themselves? If women enjoy baking and planning celebrations, do they hold off on being the lead person in order to not fill that stereotype or do they choose to not participate in something they enjoy? There are traditional stereotypes for both men and women, and the goal is for them to demonstrate their authentic selves, take the risk to do so and feel psychologically and professionally safe in the process.

Suggestions for Solutions

One major component of this capstone study was to discover suggestions from women currently working in sports for solutions to close the gap between men and women in these positions. While it is important to raise awareness about the experiences women face, it is equally, if not more, important to offer possible solutions to gain more parity in workplaces within the sports industry. Below are the brilliant, insightful and thoughtful suggestions from the women interviewed.

Introduce Possibilities Earlier

In regard to this topic, 40% of the participants emphasized the importance of introducing a career in the sports industry earlier to young women. This was described in

a number of ways. To start, two participants mentioned that it would be helpful to have women leading a career in sports to talk to groups of girls. One participant stated that she speaks to Girl Scout groups, where she is in front of hundreds of young girls telling them about her job. The other participant suggested that sports organizations should be involved in their community and stated that a female executive speaking about her career to female high school teams is more impactful than holding a large event at a university. Another participant recalled sitting in her collegiate classrooms with mostly male classmates and said that leads to more internship and job opportunities for men in sports.

These ideas point to the importance of young girls seeing people like themselves in a career they could possibly be interested in on a more intimate level. It is clear how important it is to start early, and that women understand the possibilities that are available for them in the sports industry.

Intentional Job Postings and Candidate Pools

This was another topic that was frequently discussed when the participants were asked what actions could be taken to gain more parity. Job postings and candidate pools are a starting point for where men and women enter the industry, so it is important to understand positive changes that can make a difference.

One participant spoke about how important it is to create intentional job postings in order to attract the right people. She recalled recently seeing a job posting that called for an “all-star salesman”. She questioned who that organization thought was going to apply for the job given that the title was tailored more towards a man than a woman.

Being conscious about the title and description of job postings can make a difference in gaining a larger and different candidate pool.

Additionally, multiple participants called on the importance of having a diverse candidate pool. It was suggested that organizations should be building their pipeline of diverse candidates before they even have a job available to hire for. Another participant suggested that organizations can expand the schools they recruit from, and specifically suggested partnering with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and women-only colleges in order to be more intentional about the people they are seeking out.

Continuing Education

One participant mentioned that continuing education within the workplace can help more people get noticed to fill a larger role. She described there are a lot of trainers at the representative level, that train and teach them the job. However, there are not as many trainers for employees at the manager or even vice president level. She thinks that continued education within your workplace can help more people get recognized for promotions. Another participant also noted that there needs to be more mentoring and programs to ensure that women are developed and ready to take the next step in their career when it becomes available. On that note, a third participant observed that “a lot of organizations that I talked to don’t invest much in sort of people manager training or thinking about how you develop people because there’s this perception that people are just going to churn through.” She elaborated that teams in the sports industry think employees will be there for a few years and move on to a different team.

As we can see, 30% of the participants find it important to continue education and development on the job. This could not only make employees feel that their growth matters but will open opportunities for more people to advance. Instead of accepting the “norm” that employees turnover quickly, the focus could shift to developing them early and possibly retaining their talent.

Internship Programs for Those Underrepresented

One participant brought up that many sports teams have partnerships and relationships with local colleges and universities, and actually have an internship program for those students. She offered that organizations could be more intentional and create programs specifically for female students, and also those students who are underrepresented in those positions.

Networking Opportunities

This suggestion was brought up a few times throughout my interviews. It is clear that growing a network is crucial to a person’s success, and it was highlighted previously when this group of women spoke about the influence of mentors and other relationships.

One participant stated she wants to create an ally ship across the league she is a part of, meaning a group whose purpose is to connect a network of women that support and help one another. There are conventions and conferences that the league provides, but many times they are expensive and only senior executives are able to attend. She said she wished she had something like an ally ship available when she was younger, and that

she wants to create something that “helps build confidence in being your authentic self in the workplace and being okay with that.”

Another participant said there are tons of networking events, probably enough that you could attend a session once a week. While it is great that they are available, she questioned who is actually aware of them. Again, a similar trend emerged from the last participant’s suggestion in that executives that are already in the industry usually attend, but women who are still in college do not know about them. Opportunities to hear from women in the sports industry and begin to build connections would be helpful in giving women the confidence and start they need to enter the industry.

In the same vein, this participant also mentioned that she believes women supporting other women is crucial. She suggested that women view one another as teammates, and not adversaries, and realize that they all want the same goal: more women in sports. She believes “...it just comes down to reaching a hand out to each other, reaching a hand out to an entry level saleswoman who’s just getting started and actually showing her the way.” She continued to say it can be hard to ask for help when you first start out, so being mindful and proactive in helping other women in your office is huge. Another participant echoed this sentiment by saying that often times women rely on other women to give them perspective. She added “...the more women we have in leadership roles to kind of be that guidance and leader for other women, the more women we’ll have in sports.”

Increased Women’s Professional Sports

One participant thought that more women's professional sports teams could help increase the number of women in leadership positions. With this growth, she suggested more women would be interested in working those jobs. Since women like to see other women succeed and champion women's sports, this could draw more women to the sports industry. From there, the skills gained with a women's professional sports team can then apply to any other team. It would be interesting for future research to examine the leadership demographic in current women's professional leagues, like the WNBA, and how that may influence women's growth in overall leadership.

Breaking down Stereotypes

As previously noted, a number of the participants thought that the disparity between men and women in sports industry positions was partly due to societal norms and stereotypes. They also had great insights into ways to overcome these.

One participant noted that she still thinks "...males put females in positions because they feel like they need to, and then they're like "Oh wow. They're better than I thought". Another participant encouraged leaders to see women in practice. She recalled a time when her supervisor attended a meeting with her, and she could tell that he was surprised by the positive way she interacted with the client. She urged leaders to give people a chance to rise to the occasion, even those they do not expect to fill that role. She further reflected that there were multiple times that she ended up running a program or completing a task that was not originally meant for her, and it showed others that she is capable of doing so. She said "...even though she comes at it from a different perspective or from a different way, she's more than capable of handling this." This is such an

important statement that can be applied to women in leadership as a whole. Although women have not been traditionally seen in leadership roles, they are capable of succeeding even if it looks differently than when a man does it.

Trainings and Self-Awareness

Different trainings and self-awareness were brought up specifically by 30% of the participants. They provided great ideas, some of which came from experiences they have had within their workplace. One participant stated that it starts with something very simple: getting someone to pause and be self-aware. Creating a space where people can stop and consider what may be unconscious to them, becoming aware of it and taking steps towards changing any negative behaviors can make a huge difference.

Another participant recalled a microaggressions training her organization conducted. After the session, one of the leaders approached her and asked if she believed that women get interrupted more often than men. When she replied yes, her male colleague was surprised and felt almost guilty. He said he wanted to be more careful about doing that, and she said he and other leaders “demonstrate really good intent and then they back it up with sort of openness, humility and adjustments.” Another participant had a similar experience, as her organization holds trainings aimed at unconscious bias and diversity in the workplace. One of the topics during a training was centered around male executives making eye contact with other male executives in a meeting, but not the woman in the room. She said her boss was flabbergasted to learn this. She then described a time after the training where they were in a meeting with another executive within their league, and the man would not make eye contact with her,

despite her boss' efforts to divert the conversation to her. She remembered that she could tell her boss was anxious about the situation, and repeatedly tried to include her.

It was clear that these participants appreciated the small changes their superiors took, and that even the thought behind their actions meant a lot to them. One participant described her leaders adjusting their behaviors and said, "...just declaring that and asking me if it was working was huge because it let me know that they cared about my experience on the team and wanted me to feel valued and that's 90% of the battle in my opinion." It is also important to note that they saw the benefits of these trainings in real time, and that they bring awareness to things that others may have never considered.

Recommendations for Young Women

At the conclusion of each interview, I asked for recommendations the participants would give to a young woman that is looking to start a career in sports. The responses I received were hopeful, thoughtful and encouraging. The quotes are included below. I decided to include the quotes because of the power they hold in their simplicity.

- Do not get discouraged with a "no", be confident
- Go for it. Don't let anyone tell you you're not qualified for the job
- Look outside the major professional sports leagues, expand your experience
- Understand how revenue is generated
- Take the opportunity that is out there, don't wait for it to come
- The equality and pay are not fully there, but you have to have that passion and drive and know your "why"

- Take an assertive breath. It can come off the wrong way, but it's the only way you're going to get what you want
- You're going to feel like you're undervalued but you're not, it's just the realm of the industry
- Reach out to people to network before a job is even open
- Be open to internships and inside sales classes
- Hit the ground running when you're there and don't be intimidated if you are the only girl on a sales team. Be proud of that
- Speak up
- When you're in meetings, participate and be visible. Always be a helping hand, regardless of the department. Be a good communicator, a good coworker
- Find a male counterpart to help leverage your success, and surround yourself with a network of women
- Rely on our generalized strength and building relationships
- Get to know as many people as you can before you enter the industry
- Be brave in your approach as you head into sports. Although you may be the only woman in the room, that does not make your opinion or thoughts any less valuable. Find a way to vocalize those in a way that works for who you are
- Kick the work's butt
- Make sure you're adding value in every meeting. Be present, be active, make sure people realize you're there and you're part of it.
- Have confidence to have a perspective in every conversation
- Don't just feel lucky to get the position you have. Ask and look for more

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

As this capstone project was being conducted, the United States saw a number of breakthroughs for women in sports and society. Among many major stories, Kamala Harris became the first female U.S. Vice President elect, Kim Ng was hired as the first female General Manager for a major male professional sports league and Sarah Fuller kicked off for Vanderbilt at halftime as she became the first women to play in a Power 5 football game. We visibly see more women on the sidelines, in coaching gear and with a microphone. We listen to more women on sports radio and pre- and post-game shows. We read more articles of organizations adopting diversity and inclusion committees and moving women up the organizational ladder. It is undeniable that changes are happening, and it has been amazing and to witness.

This capstone provided a plethora of information surrounding the topic of women in professional sports front offices. It focused on areas where there has been little research and contributed the thoughts of those women within the sports industry which have not been heard. I was able to gather reasons as to potentially why a gender imbalance exists, experiences of women in the sports industry today and ideas for ways to progress the matter. The interviews served as a look into the career experiences that women in the industry currently see today. The literature shows that these issues, barriers, experiences and more are not specific to females within the sports industry; these are present in many other industries as well. The suggestions for solutions to gaining more gender equality in sports were one of the most valuable takeaways from this project, and

again can be applied to other industries. This capstone project was informative, insightful, powerful, meaningful and impactful not only to me, but to organizations that are seeking a better workplace.

Implications

As previously mentioned, many of the findings from this study can be applied when talking about women in other professional settings. The literature reviewed provided studies of women in the workplace that were easily applied to the sports industry, and I believe my findings are also easily applied to women in other professional settings. The stories, observations and feelings collected from my interviews can be useful in informing organizations of what their female employees potentially experience. Possibly more important, the suggestions for solutions can be considered and used by any organization that is looking to reach greater gender parity in their office and leadership teams.

In particular, this study has links to the coaching profession within sports, both at the collegiate and professional level. Some of the literature that I reviewed included intercollegiate or professional coaching, which aligned with many of the things expressed by women in general. As a personal reflection, I can definitely see the shared experiences between women in the front offices of sports and women on the coaching side of sports.

Future Suggestions

This study included 10 women from six different professional sports leagues. In the future, it would be useful to incorporate more women in a study in order to gather a

larger consensus. It would also be interesting to include men in the professional sports industry in a study to understand their view of the issue. While the focus is on women in professional sports, men could add another perspective to the topic that perhaps has not been considered yet. As we learned from this study, it is important to include both men and women in the efforts of reaching gender equality in the industry.

Researcher's Reflections

Completing this capstone project has been an impactful experience. It has allowed me to understand that I, myself, can be a vehicle for change. A relatively simple study was able to uncover more useful information than was originally expected. It also exemplifies the power of a conversation. A conversation is what I sought out to have with each of my interview candidates, and they produced a profound final project. This proves what can happen when women, and others, are given a space to express themselves and have someone willing to listen. Lastly, it allows all of us reading this project to reflect and now that we know better, we can act better.

This also allowed me to realize even further that awareness of an issue can be a simple first step in overcoming it. If coworkers, managers and executives are willing to create opportunities for others to bring attention to issues, they can begin to take small actions to create a better workplace for everyone. Through the literature and my interviews, it is evident that many times these issues are unconscious or unintentional and building self-awareness and showing care can immediately make a difference.

I believe this capstone project contains information useful specifically for the sports industry and can be used to start to understand experiences in other industries as

well. There is a takeaway useful for almost anyone who is seeking to better their workplace. I hope this capstone project can serve as an accelerator for change in the sports industry, and beyond.

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