The Sport Glass Ceiling: Myth or Reality

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ABSTRACT

The study of gender and sport is consistently evolving. Researchers have increasingly focussed on women's experience of sport and the factors that impinge on their involvement. However, little has been written on women's involvement in sport management and leadership. The focus of this study was to examine women and management in the context of sport. Specifically, the study has investigated the rational behind why there are so few women in senior level management roles in Australian sporting organisations.

The findings demonstrate that the overtly masculine nature of management and sport serves to restrict women's involvement in management and decision making. Females are employed by sporting organisations. However, they are restricted to positions which offer little scope for advancement. External constraints impacted most significantly on women's ability to progress upwards through organisational hierarchies. Male organisational cultures, masculine merit structures, myths and stereotypical assumptions were all found to negatively impact on the career strivings of female sport managers.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The under representation of women in sport management is not under question, it has already been quantified (McKay 1990; Cashmore 2000; Magnay 2000), but explanations concerning the reasons why and the constraints to female career advancement are to be further investigated. The aim of the paper is to present findings that relate to questions posed as part of a broader research program. Answering the assertion: Why are there so few female senior level managers in Australian sporting organisations?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Business and management have traditionally been regarded as a masculine preserve (Carli & Eagly 2001). In Australia, despite more than a decade of equal opportunity and affirmative action legislation, women aspiring to senior level management positions continue to face considerable constraints (Smith 2000, Fischlmayr 2002). Women are disadvantaged and obstructed in their career path as organisational hierarchies and executive level positions are 'thought to require an achievement orientated aggressiveness and an emotional toughness that is distinctively male in character' (Heilman 2001:258) and contradictory to stereotypical based norms regarding what women are like and how they should behave. Although, women's social position has altered significantly over time feminine values and traditional ethics of care continue to restrict female involvement in traditionally masculine spheres (Carli 2001; Loutfi 2001) 'The gender stereotype of women as nurturing and caring has contributed to a popular perception that women are less effective than men in leadership roles' (Kawakami, White & Langer, 2000: 50). Gender stereotyping is therefore one of the primary reasons why fewer women are hired in executive level managerial positions (Heilman 2001).

This lack of equal representation has been attributed to the existence of a 'glass ceiling'. Ceiling based discrimination is not generally overt; rather it is defined as an invisible barrier

that keeps women from attaining senior level management positions (Newman 1994; Atwater & Van Fleet 1997).

The invisibility of the constraint is problematic with restrictive organisational cultures and individual gender assumptions contributing to the existence of a glass ceiling (Ryan & Haslam 2005). This is particularly evident in organisations predominated by men. When a corporation has many more men than women (or vice versa) in influential positions the culture tends to adopt attributes that favour the dominant gender (Bradford & Jackson 2001, Pedersen & Whisenant 2005). As a consequence, men (particularly those in female orientated professions) are likely conveyed into management positions by a 'glass escalator' (Ryan & Haslam 2005: 81).

Gender segregation in the labour market, sex discrimination and the under-representation of women in managerial roles is problematic not only in generic business environments but also in sporting organisations. Despite increases in the number of female players, coaches, umpires, administrators and managers, men continue to control the power structure of Australian sport (Skinner, Macdonald & Gowthorp 2002). In 2002 77% of presidential, 75% of executive director and 97% of high-performance management roles were held by men (Magnay 2000 in Skinner, Macdonald & Gowthorp 2001). Under representation and control of this nature is closely related to the strongly masculine culture of sport, with

Messner and Sabo (1990) asserting an inherent connection between sport and manliness, to the extent that sport and sporting organisations are male defined and male controlled. As a consequence of this masculine ethos, it can be argued that women aspiring to senior level management positions encounter additional obstacles to success. Not only are women constrained by the masculinity of business environments but so too by the historically gendered nature of sport.

Women seeking managerial positions threaten masculine hegemony and the erosion of male advantage (Hall 1996). In a world where there are fewer and fewer tasks left which men and women cannot perform equally well, sport has become one of the most significant areas where gender differences continue to be perpetuated and reinforced (Kirk et al 1996).

Despite an increased consciousness regarding the benefits of gender and workplace diversity, little has been documented on why so few females rise to senior level management positions in Australian sport (McKay 1992; Hargreaves 1994; Talbot 2000). Extensive literature relates to sport participation but fails to address issues and constraints surrounding women's involvement in sport management and decision making in Australian sport.

While a number of pertinent studies have been conducted in the United States, these are not necessarily representative of

female sport managers in Australia (Lapchick & Mathews 1998).

In the past decade the proportion of managerial positions held by women in Australian sporting organisations has increased. Yet the number of females in executive level positions remains relatively low, to the extent that disparity of gender in sport rated at least fifteen years behind other areas of organisational life' (Skinner, Macdonald & Gowthorp 2002:3).

The research utilises a study by McKay (1990) as a framework to providing an investigation into the rationale behind why there are so few women involved in the management of Australian sport. Given the identified gap in Australian sport management studies, it also aims to provide an improved theoretical and practical understanding of sport, gender and management.

METHODOLOGY

The data is drawn from fourteen semi structured in depth interviews. The length of time to conduct interviews varied according to the participant's response to the questions and deviation that may have occurred. The research sample was selected on the basis of the following criteria:

1. The women were currently employed or have been employed in a senior level management position.

2. The women were currently working for or had worked for, an organisation whose primary or predominant product or service was sport or sport related.

3. The women could be employed in either a paid or unpaid position (women working voluntarily or on boards were also deemed appropriate).

4. The selected women were derived from varying age group and marital/dependant status.

Homogenous sampling was utilised for this study, largely because it allowed the selection of like cases (senior level female sport managers). This was of importance as the research attempts to present their experience in Australian sport organisations.

Respondents were generated through a variety of methods. Initially a list of high profile female sport managers was developed. These individuals were targeted directly via phone and email. Once data collection commenced word of mouth was the most fruitful way to gather participants. From these initial contacts the snow ball technique was employed to obtain the final sample of women. To aid the selection process each interview respondent was asked to suggest a female colleague who might be willing to participate in the research study.

Participants were gathered from government departments, not for profit organisations and private sector organisations. Allowing a cross section of the sport industry to targeted.

Participant Employment by Industry Sector

	Government	Not for Profit	Corporate/Private Organisations
Federal	XX		XXX
State	XXX	XX	X
Local	XX	X	

Respondents illustrated diverse demographic characteristics. Similarities and differences in age, income, marital status and number of dependants were reported.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents identified internal and external factors as constraining their career development. Notably, all respondents identified external factors as having the greatest negative impact on their sport management career. For the purpose of this research paper external constraints have been reported and discussed.

External Constraints

External Constraint 1: Sport and Sporting Organisations as a Masculine Preserve

It is widely accepted among feminist scholars that sport and its associated institutions are fundamentally sexist, 'male dominated and masculine in orientation' (Messner, 1992:17). Thus, women seeking to pursue a career in professional sport management are faced with multiple constraints to achievement.

The overtly masculine nature of sport impacts on women's sporting involvement. Provision is frequently based on stereotyped notions of femininity (Deem 1986), with women's participation allowable only on specific terms (Green et al 1990). Participation is perceived as incompatible with the female gender role. 'A female can't be both an ideal woman and an ideal athlete (Martin & Martin, 1995: 287).

Often anyone who is good is marginalised either by their sexuality, she's good at sport so therefore she must be a lesbian. It's not a real sport, so girls playing rugby is not really, really rugby. Girls playing tennis, they can't play five sets (Rose)

Not only is male hegemony present on the sports playing field but so too in organisational settings (Billing & Alvesson 2000; Hearn in Aaltio & Mills 2002).

'When I walk into a meeting people look at me because they were expecting a man. I just think "you idiots" Australia has not come very far if we still have those hang ups' (Rebecca)

Organisational prejudices continue to dog female involvement particularly at the senior level and in non traditional settings (Bellamy & Ramsay 1994; Kawakami, White & Langer 2000). As a result, there is the proliferation of women in professions which align more closely with societal perceptions of appropriateness (Badgett & Folbre in Loutfi 2001; Leonard 2001; Halford, Savage & Witz 1997). As a consequence, women in sport organisations tend to perform administrative and operational functions (Moore,

Parkhouse & Konard 2000. There were also a significantly greater number of females engaged in casual and part time capacities. Resulting in direct and indirect remuneration and training disadvantages.

'The only area where you find women outnumbering men in sport is in part time casual type jobs: the receptionist, and the administrator. And in the volunteer sector not surprisingly, in secretary and treasury kind of jobs' (Belinda)

Ceiling based discrimination is further articulated.

'In that situation [male sport] women will run the canteen and take minutes of the meeting and not be heavily involved in decision making processes' (Lyn)

'Females tend to be used more on the operational side, which is much more hands on. This means to expand into leadership positions they [women] are restricted' (Christine).

Respondents found themselves in a double bind. The masculine nature of management and leadership, combined with the distribution of power and the gender hegemonies associated with sport organisations, was problematic (Talbot in Scraton & Flintoff 2002). Respondents were of the opinion that traditionally masculine sports further reinforced this hegemony *'I think being a male sport; people expect a male to be running the organisation' (Belinda)*

You just know within the [sport] organisation that you are working for that the most senior person is a male and the next level below is predominantly male, there might be one woman (Melissa).

This predominance saw respondents look for opportunities in more gender neutral or female sport organisations. '*Just the whole culture of the organisation suggested to me that it was not going to be a happy environment to be or a very conducive one to progressive opportunities, so I got out of that sport and started working for [organisation X]' (Alison)*

As a consequence, respondents commented on a sporting culture that is not welcoming and reported 'not fitting in' and 'not being accepted'. '*Women are regarded as inferior; they are regarded as not having a place in sport, because sport is so entrenched in the male culture and male values. Women have to fight for access to playing opportunities, let alone access to decision making opportunities' (Belinda)*

Respondents also indicated that this inferior position was a restrictive force. Women were expected to behave like men to succeed '*they [women who are successful] have been prepared to play the boys (Alison).* Women in sport are devalued if they act feminine and likewise when they seek to challenge restrictive gender roles (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt 2001).

There are two things that people [other sport managers] ask me. And that's whether I wear male after shave. And they ask if I wear pants or a skirt. I use to get quite offended, but now I just think that people are ignorant (Rebecca)

External Barrier 2: Gender Stereotyping and Otherness

Interviewees were of the opinion that female managers were viewed in a 'deficit model'. Men are seen to be significantly more capable than women. Whisenant, Pedersen and Obenour (2002) identify this as a way for men to affirm their power.

'They [men] are terrified a lot of the time. And I think they see the ability of women coming in, and they look at themselves and are as a result very, very threatened' (Danielle)

In addition, Cockburn and Clark (2002) refer to the notion of 'gender orders'. This ordering fosters the notion of women as the other *'where sort of outsiders in the whole [sport] domain really' (Alison)*. By excluding female involvement and limiting their managerial influence, men affirm sport as the generic preserve of men.

People often say 'what do you know; you have never played the game before, so how can you be a leader, how can you be a manager". It's a curious analogy, but someone said it to me not long ago, "Well blokes don't know how to have babies and never will have babies, but blokes are still predominately the gynaecologists' (Belinda)

Thus, female managers were subject to incompatible expectations. Gender stereotypes not only reinforced actual differences but also foster and further perpetuate norms about behaviour.

External Constraint 2: Recruitment and Recognition

The systematic exclusion of women in sport is referred to as the 'homosocial' reproduction of managers 'organisations tend to find attractive those candidates who resemble present

members in style, assumptions, values and beliefs' (Schein 1985 in Whisenant, Pedersen & Obenour 2002: 487).

'The reality is that people tend to select people who are like them and for a bloke that's mostly a bloke' (Alison)

As a consequence, respondents identified subconscious and overt discrimination in the hiring practices of Australian sport organisations. Respondents reported tendencies to recruit on the basis of personality rather than skill and merit:

'In the male world [of sport], do I like you? Yeah, in which case you're a good bloke. Whether I have the skills or not is irrelevant. If they like me then they will work with me' (Lyn)

External constraint 3: Masculine Merit Structures

Respondents also reflected on masculine merit structures. Interviewees reported a tendency for men to be promoted at a more rapid rate than equally performing women. 'Organisational consequences are that capable women are not regarded, selected or rewarded equally to men' (Fischlmayr 2002: 775). This tendency is reported by Jackson (2001) as women's need to work harder at proving themselves and establishing their credibility as managers because of preconceived notions ingrained within the corporate culture (Ramgutty-Wong 2000).

'It's definitely something as a female you have to work twice as hard at. My boss always says that to me, he says there are people in this organisation who are perhaps higher up than me that don't have the skills base or the drive or dedication that I have. Because they are male they will always have that

edge' (Rebecca) .This expectation creates a tendency to evaluate female conduct differently to males.

'I developed a business plan for our business but it ended up being the template for the entire organisation. At the time I was really proud of that, but I was also cranky. There are so many men in this organisation who get such high accolades for what they do, but they don't even have a business plan' (Rebecca)

The rational for women's muted advancement is articulated:
'In terms of progression or ability to progress through the organisation. They [men] all tend to know each other and protect one another' (Rose). Aligning with Coakley's (2001) assertion that women are underrepresented due to the strategic professional connections which men establish. Being a competent highly skilled female manager will provide no assurances of advancement to the same organisational levels as an equally performing male (Heilman 2002).

'It's the theory of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Fred Astaire was such a brilliant dancer but how about Ginger Rogers; she actually had to do it backwards and in high heels. So it's always more difficult for women to get to an equal position. If they had been a male, they would have been the Chief Executive Officer by now' (Rose)

External Constraint 4: Accountability and Sexual Persuasion

The research findings indicated that female managers were scrutinised more closely than their male counterparts Women's personal lives and sexuality were frequently invaded.

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'The thing that annoys me about the way women are treated in sport, is the fact that if you get to a certain level, then you have done it because you have slept with some particular bloke. Or they [men] kind of knock you down with accusations of being a lesbian or a butch' (Belinda)

Respondents also noted the need to dot their I's and cross their T's *'having an ability not to be compromised on your way through to senior management positions' (Rebecca)* was seen to be necessary and fundamentally important to women's success. Further, respondents highlighted the stereotypical gender assumptions that underpin organisational settings. To the extent that female mangers *'only have credibility in sport if you are a heterosexual women with a family (Alison)*

External constraint 5: Masculine Networks

Respondents identified formal and informal networks as constraining their career advancement. Masculine activities including going to the pub and playing golf, made women's involvement in these networks difficult (Logan & Huntly 2002). Also, the timing of functions precluded female involvement (Kirchmeger 1998; Leonard 2001). This was particularly evident for female mangers with dependant children. Women were seen to be at a disadvantage as business and social relationships are formed and reinforced at such events.

'There is a bit of a boy's club in terms of contacts and networking and it's a hard area to break into'. They [women]

don't play golf and they are often days where people do lots of businesses (Kelly)

Respondents further commented on norms related to communication and the negative influence that cliques and networks impose on women's ability to communicate with male co workers. This was also seen as detrimental to organisational success in general.

'There are certainly barriers. You are not going to walk into the men's bathroom and stand up to a urinal so you can be part of a discussion' (Danielle).

Constraints as Situational

The research findings demonstrated the situational nature of constraints. There is recognition that each individual's experience and way of understanding the world is vastly different and ever changing (Glesne 1999). Gender combined with one or other factors contributed to women's subordinate position (Black and Rothman 1998; Wearing 1998) *'it's been gender and something else'*. Respondents reported ethnicity, religion, age and dependants as additional constraints.

'I think there was preferential treatment in groupings. Sometimes because of age, particularly as a young woman it was difficult' (Alison)

'I have grown up in a society where women are good for a couple of things. I have all these intelligent aunties and cousins who have never done anything with their lives because they don't think its appropriate (Rebecca)

If I could go back to [organisation X] and work from 9.30-2.30 (outside school hours) I would jump at the chance. But

it's just not going to happen…. and that's why I had to make the decision not to do it [sport management].

Conclusion

In light of the masculine culture of sport and the gendered division of managerial occupations, women are both subconsciously and overtly constrained in their ability to become involved in sport management. Traditional attitudes of male supremacy and dominance create a situation where men are preferred to women as managers and senior administrators. The nature and current structure of Australian sport was seen to further constrain women's ability. Creating a situation where women are expected to work at a higher level than their male co-workers, in order to progress and to be noticed. The research findings conclude that despite having the same qualifications and experience women were generally not recommended for promotion. Further, the masculine construction of merit and skill limited female recognition and career striving.

The research findings demonstrate the diversity of women and their experiences. For this reason findings are not said to be representative of all female sport managers. Rather, the findings will assist in understanding the rationale behind why there are so few female managers, and provide a platform for the establishment of empowering strategies to enhance the number and profile of women in executive level positions in Australian sporting organisations.

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