

The Challenges and Improvements in Female Athletes' Leadership in Competitive Sports Environments

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Abstract. The development of female athletes' leadership capabilities remains constrained by gender stereotypes and unequal decision-making opportunities, which prevent their outstanding on-field performance and strategic acumen from fully translating into leadership roles within sports. This paper examines the challenges and root causes hindering female leadership in competitive sports. It explores how social role pressures, identity negotiation within symbolic interactionism, and organizational institutional barriers collectively inhibit the development of female leadership and proposes pathways for improvement. Employing a literature review methodology that integrates social role theory and symbolic interactionism, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the micro-interaction mechanisms that affect female athletes in competitive sports. Drawing on real-world case studies and existing research data, the study elucidates the impact of gender stereotypes on female leadership. The findings indicate that gender stereotypes, symbolic discrimination in micro-interactions, and structural barriers within organizational systems are the primary obstacles to female leadership development. To address these issues, systematic interventions across multiple levels are essential, including the reconstruction of media narratives, organizational cultural transformation, and individual empowerment. Through dismantling stereotypical perceptions, establishing inclusive environments, and enhancing female athletes' identity negotiation capabilities, these measures can advance gender equality and leadership diversity in competitive sports.

Keywords: Female Leadership, Competitive Sports, Gender Stereotypes, Symbolic Interactionism, Organizational Change

1. Introduction

Feng Xixi & Zhang Xiaoyue [1] note that an increasing number of women demonstrate exceptional strengths and leadership capabilities across various fields. They achieve this through unique perspectives and innovative thinking, becoming a key driving force for social progress. However, societal perceptions of female leadership remain confined by traditional stereotypes. This issue is particularly evident in sports. As discussed in “Female Sports Coaches’ Leadership Behavior and Situational Dynamics in Sports and Recreation Studies” [2], female coaches face “interwoven situational dilemmas.” Although the focus here is on coaches, they share common experiences with female athletes. Both groups encounter gender stereotypes and biases from society and sports

organizations. Their professional competence is frequently questioned, and they are often expected to assume more administrative or caring tasks that align with traditional gender roles. Psychologically, many female coaches must expend additional energy in negotiating their identities, balancing between being an "authoritative coach" and a "socially expected woman," all while enduring the pressure to constantly prove their worth. Furthermore, as

Cao Bingchan [3] points out, media narratives often overemphasize their "female" identity while downplaying their roles as 'coaches' and 'leaders.' Such framing tends to attribute their achievements to personal talent or emotional factors rather than to their professional leadership skills and strategic acumen, resulting in a systemic obscuring of their leadership qualities.

Despite increased female participation in sports in recent years, female leaders in male-dominated sports like rugby and soccer still face significant gender bias and role conflicts. Analyzing this phenomenon from sociological and personal perspectives, this paper primarily addresses three questions:

What challenges do female leaders encounter in competitive sports? What factors contribute to these challenges? How can this issue be addressed?

While existing research provides a foundation for understanding female leadership in sports, notable gaps persist. Most studies adopt an organizational behavior perspective, examining female coaches' leadership styles or analyzing the glass ceiling effect from a macro-sociological viewpoint. However, these studies often overlook the specific analysis of female leadership in masculine-dominated sports (such as rugby and football) and lack in-depth examination of micro-interaction processes within teams. To address these gaps, this study integrates social construction theory with symbolic interactionism, employing a literature review methodology. It offers new perspectives on understanding the micro-interaction mechanisms of female leadership in competitive sports, providing theoretical foundations and practical pathways for challenging gender stereotypes.

2. Leadership dilemmas under gender pressure

2.1. Dilemmas under gender pressure

The difficulties female athletes encounter in pursuing leadership roles stem not from insufficient capability, but from multifaceted structural pressures. Gender role theory indicates that "excellent leaders" are typically endowed with traditionally masculine traits such as trustworthiness, decisiveness, and authority, while women are expected to exhibit gentle and compliant characteristics. When female athletes demonstrate decisiveness or assertiveness on the field, they defy societal gender expectations, facing pressure and even being labeled as "unfeminine." This manifests as their professional judgments and tactical directives requiring greater validation to gain acceptance (Carlos Gomez-Gonzalez's research indicates that when gender information is concealed, evaluations of male and female athletes show no significant difference; once gender is disclosed, male evaluations are significantly higher than female ones). Take football as an example: female quarterbacks must not only accurately assess the field situation when issuing tactical commands but also navigate skeptical glances from teammates and pressure to provide additional explanations. In contrast, male athletes of equivalent skill levels typically gain immediate team trust without undergoing repeated demonstrations of competence.

2.2. Identity negotiation in symbolic interactionism

From the micro-level perspective of symbolic interactionism, the negative symbols inadvertently conveyed by coaches and players in daily interactions continuously shape female athletes' self-perception and behavioral choices [4]. In rugby, when a female quarterback issues tactical commands, male teammates' dismissive expressions or their refusal to listen constitute symbolic challenges to her authority. If her instructions are repeatedly ignored, it leads to self-doubt and diminished confidence; conversely, if she earns recognition through resolute performance, it reinforces her leadership identity and shapes a decisive, non-traditional character.

2.3. Case analysis

In co-ed teams, female athletes often face structural disadvantages due to gender stereotypes and perceived innate differences, making it difficult to secure captaincy even with greater effort. This discrimination manifests specifically in tactical execution: Male quarterbacks, when making passing decisions, prefer to throw to male teammates with relatively lower technical proficiency rather than to female teammates; female players only gain passing opportunities when their completion rates significantly surpass those of most male teammates. Today, this situation extends beyond men. Even when women possess sufficient authority to delegate possession, they often choose to hand it over to male teammates. This has become a societal phenomenon, with both women and men holding gender stereotypes about their respective sexes.

3. Factors contributing to the dilemma

3.1. Social dimension

Traditional societies often associate masculinity with leadership, decisiveness, and reliability, while femininity is linked to traits like gentleness, compliance, and consideration. Female athletes who display authority or assertiveness are often perceived as defying gender norms, leading to their leadership behaviors being scrutinized more harshly. Media coverage frequently focuses on female athletes' appearance and personal relationships. According to research by the International Tennis Federation, references to family in female athlete coverage exceeded male coverage by 30%, while mentions of age were twice as frequent. Conversely, male coverage featured “battle” terminology and physical strength references at rates 70% higher than female coverage, respectively. Additionally, mentions of “Greatest of All Time (G.O.A.T)” and “making history” in male content were 50% and 40% higher than in female content, respectively. This phenomenon is further confirmed by Lin, J., He, T., & Fan, L., who found that media representations often emphasize traditional feminine traits rather than professional achievements [5].

3.2. Personal dimensions

Female athletes also bear the weight of societal and familial expectations, such as being good mothers and caregivers. Yet the high-intensity training and frequent competitions of elite sports clash with traditional gender roles that prioritize women's domestic responsibilities [6]. They must demonstrate fierce performance and physical prowess on the field. Even though this is a normal part of an athlete's life, women are often criticized for it, further intensifying the pressure on female athletes. Today, even as more female athletes learn to handle this pressure, stereotypes prevent women from gaining recognition on the field, and their accomplishments are frequently belittled or

dismissed. After prolonged exposure to negative interactions, some female athletes may internalize external biases, develop self-doubt, and diminish their willingness to pursue leadership roles (Cooley noted that persistent negative evaluations lead to negative self-perception).

3.3. Organizational institutional level

Male and female athletes receive unequal decision-making opportunities. In most sports organizations, senior positions are predominantly held by men. Women lack promotion pathways and mentorship support, remaining marginalized in coach hiring, tactical decision-making, and resource allocation. Systemic biases—unconscious gender preferences in selection mechanisms (e.g., prioritizing males with equivalent abilities) and the pervasive “brotherhood” culture within organizational structures—collectively form a “glass ceiling” that impedes women’s advancement. For instance, in Finnish sports organizations, men hold 67% of board seats and 86% of chair positions [7]. International Olympic Committee data reveals that at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, while female athletes comprised 48% of all participants, female coaches accounted for only 13% of all certified coaches.

4. Measures to improve the status of female athletes

Addressing this issue is a long-term process. While the status of female athletes has become increasingly equitable with the times, there remains significant room for progress and improvement.

4.1. Media and public perception

Media should shift away from stereotypical narratives and encourage in-depth, technical coverage: Focus on female athletes' strategic decision-making, tactical acumen, and leadership on the field—not their appearance or personal lives (Cao Bingchan proposed mainstream sports media should amplify female athletes' voices and emphasize their athletic identities) [3]. Through documentaries, feature stories, and other formats, consciously promote female athletes, coaches, and administrators who excel in various sports—especially traditionally male-dominated disciplines—to provide diverse role models for younger generations and challenge public stereotypes.

4.2. Organizational culture: reshaping inclusive environments

Implement Unconscious Bias Training: Provide regular training for coaches and athletes to heighten awareness of gender stereotypes and teach how to convey signals of equality and respect through micro-interactions (e.g., feedback delivery, eye contact). (Research by Bursell M. in Swedish society indicates unconscious bias training significantly enhances participants' recognition of bias [8])
Establish Mentorship & Sponsorship Programs: Match promising female athletes with experienced mentors, mirroring support for male athletes. For example, Nigeria's WISCAR WIN Mentorship Program offers 6-12 months of rigorous training to advance women's leadership development.
Redesign Leadership Evaluation Systems: Recognize and reward diverse leadership styles by incorporating competencies like “collaboration,” “empathy,” and “communication” into leadership assessments, moving beyond traditional models that solely prioritize ‘assertiveness’ and “authority.”[9] Additionally, authoritative bodies should establish gender equality rules, such as the Beijing Winter Olympics Organizing Committee’s stipulation that female staff must constitute at least 40% of the total staff and female volunteers at least 50% of all volunteers.

4.3. Individual empowerment: strengthening self-identity and leadership initiative

Beyond external environmental and institutional support, female athletes' psychological development and capacity building are equally crucial. Specialized psychological and leadership training programs should be developed for female athletes. Training content should cover self-affirmation, public speaking, decisive decision-making, and conflict management, helping them maintain clear judgment and effectively communicate instructions even when facing skepticism. Secondly, establish structured mentor and peer support networks [10]. Matching young female athletes with experienced mentors not only provides technical guidance and career planning but also focuses on helping them construct their “leader identity.” Drawing inspiration from successful initiatives like Nigeria’s WISCAR WIN, design 6–12 month leadership development programs incorporating regular meetings, field observations, and reflective workshops. This enables participants to practice leadership behaviors within real sports organizations while receiving ongoing feedback. Finally, educate female athletes to recognize and reject internalized biases while strengthening self-worth affirmation. External challenges often stem from structural biases rather than individual inadequacies; these obstacles should be viewed as natural components of leadership development.

5. Conclusion

This study used a dual perspective of social role theory and symbolic interactionism to systematically analyze the multidimensional dilemmas faced by female leadership in competitive sports and their underlying causes. Findings reveal that the challenges female athletes encounter in pursuing leadership roles stem not from inadequate competence but from the combined effects of social role pressures, symbolic discrimination in micro-interactions, and structural barriers within organizational systems. Under traditional gender role expectations, female athletes who demonstrate decisiveness or authority are often labeled as “unfeminine,” thereby requiring repeated validation of their professional judgments to gain recognition. Within team interactions, negative symbolic cues persistently erode female athletes' leadership confidence, while organizational “glass ceilings” further restrict their promotion opportunities and developmental space. To address these challenges, this study proposes systematic interventions across three levels: media narrative reconstruction, organizational cultural transformation, and individual empowerment. Media should focus on female athletes' professional competence and strategic wisdom. Organizations must implement bias-free training, establish mentorship programs, and redesign leadership evaluation systems. At the individual level, psychological fortitude and leadership training are needed to enhance self-identity and leadership agency, thereby advancing gender equality and leadership diversity in competitive sports.

However, this study has certain limitations. It focuses on male-dominated sports like rugby and soccer, with relatively limited exploration of women's leadership in other sports. Future research could expand its scope to encompass more athletic disciplines. Additionally, the study gives insufficient attention to gender role differences across cultural contexts. Future comparative research considering the cultural backgrounds of different countries or regions could propose more targeted improvement strategies.

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