Women's careers in leadership positions and mechanisms of exclusion in sport organizations

Suvi Heikkinen

Gender Equality in Sports Leadership
International Biathlon Union

Warsaw, Poland
24–26 May
Research background

Suvi Heikkinen
PhD, Postdoctoral researcher
School of Business and Economics, University of Jyväskylä
Email: Suvi.s.Heikkinen@jyu.fi

- Social and Economic Sustainability of Future Working Life: Policies, Equalities and Intersectionalities in Finland (WEALL)
  - 2015-2020 and funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland.
  - Consortium: University of Helsinki (Gender Studies and Ruralia Institute), University of Jyväskylä Business School, Hanken School of Economics.

- Moral intensity and social responsibility in elite-sport organizations (MORE)
  - 2016-2019 and funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland.
  - Partners: Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics and LIKES Research Centre for Physical Activity and Health.

www.weallfinland.fi
https://morehanke.wordpress.com/
Objectives for the presentation

• To acknowledge different theoretical approaches to gender and understand why gender equality is important in sport organizations.

• To understand that careers in leadership positions are not gender neutral phenomena.

• Become aware of the main exclusion mechanisms for women in leadership positions in sport organizations.
Why is gender equality important in sport organizations?

- Gender equality is beneficial to sport organizations (business argument: image, positive employee and organizational outcomes)

- Gender equality is an ethical imperative in the field of sport (moral argument: right way to act)

- Gender equality is a source of legitimation for a sport organization (licence to operate argument: filling norms, social value)
Conceptual clarification: Sex and gender

- The terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ mean different things to different theorists.

Simply put sex refers to one's biological characteristics, and gender is a social and cultural construction (social role, social identity, social behavior).

Gender socialisation: masculinities and femininities are considered to be products of nurture or how individuals are brought up.
Doing gender: gender is done actively in various social and cultural processes and practices, masculinities and femininities are dynamic, fluid and changing?
Doing gender in sport organizations?

• (Sport) Organisations are not gender-neutral; on the contrary, assumptions of gender underlie the documents, practices, contracts used to construct organisations. Gendered nature of organizations can be seen (e.g.) in hiring, recruitment procedures, evaluations of performance, as well as in their management and leadership (Acker 1990;1998).

• Even nowadays, women are often represented only as gendered objects following such discourse as “gender = sex = women = problem” (Calas & Smircich, 1996; Kelan 2008).
Metaphors of women in leadership

- Token
- Glass ceiling
- Glass cliff
- Glass labyrinth

- Double-bind
Women’s career equality: A multilevel phenomenon

- According to Kossek, Wu & Su (2017, p. 229) women’s career equality is a multilevel, multidisciplinary dynamic phenomenon that reflects the degree to which women, compared to men
  
  a) Have a equal access to and participation in career opportunities
  b) Experience equal work and nonwork outcomes: intrinsic (job, life, family satisfactions) and extrinsic (pay, promotions).

- Individual and organizational levels, outcomes of individual and organizational levels are interrelated, and are influenced by national socio-economic and gender context.
Careers in leadership positions

- Traditional career model was based on a hierarchical, highly structured pattern and rigid, one-dimensional steps toward the upper echelons of the organization (Baruch, 2004; Sullivan, 1999).

- Women’s careers in leadership positions have been described as a snake-like and ‘zigzag’ (Richardson, 1996; Gersick & Kram, 2002).

- Managers are expected to show their commitment and availability 24/7 for the organization.

- Family is a highly gendered in leadership positions (Heikkinen, 2015).
Exclusion mechanisms

• Homosociality and ‘old boys’ networks
• Gender stereotyping
• Work-family relationship
• Organizations and organizational practices
Homosociality and ’old boys’ network

- Theory to explain why men dominate powerful positions in organizations and society.

- Homosociality: ‘the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex’ (Lipman-Blumen, 1976, p. 16).

- Homo-social practices such as marginalization and competitiveness are demonstrated in establishment where male managers portray a fondness for “men and men’s company’ (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008).

- Do men in leadership position then recruit and advance career of similar kind of people as they are?

- The lack of structure in the recruitment procedure and the narrow search create room for informality (Holgersson, 2013).
And then in the top sport, of course, especially in the top sport, so the division is really, really masculine, and especially on the operational side, so the leaders have been very, very much in many respect men, which has resulted in the birth and justification of certain practices and so. It has been a problem, I have experienced in my own career, and very concretely, in situations where there have been a small circle deciding upon things.

(A top manager in Finnish sport organization)

I am very annoyed how things are handled in here when... particularly as a woman you notice how easily boys hold a meeting among themselves. I have many times remarked on that. I tell them that if I see that you plan something among yourselves and I should be aware about it, don’t leave me outside of it.

(A top manager in Finnish sport organization)

“I think sport just surrounded me.”

Stacey Allaster, CEO of the Women's Tennis Association
Gender stereotyping

- Main discourses in gender stereotyping about women in leadership positions:
  - Extreme perceptions and never "right" kind.
  - High competence standards/lower rewards.
  - Competent but disliked.
Gender stereotypes

We analyzed existing research on stereotypes that affect women’s management careers.

- Period of analysis is 1976–2013. The results of this research suggest that women executives are subjected to stereotypical beliefs

  1) women lack various specific and necessary attributes of leadership.

  2) feminine leaders are superior to male leaders.

  3) belief that people have to manage (androgyne leadership style) on their own.

Work-family relationship for women in leadership positions

- Work-family relationship is a multidimensional, multidirectional construct, and it is also changing over the life course.

- The family has been most often seen as a source of conflict with women's careers. Work and family roles in leadership positions are demanding, the role of spouse and spousal support are emphasized.

- Enabling work-family integration is an important part of attracting a competent workforce and keeping talent not only in working life, but also for sport organizations.
Some relevant findings about the role of the spouse in women and men managers’ careers


Research data and analysis

• This study draws upon an approach to personal narratives which has its focus on individual experiences (Squire, 2008). The managers (29 women and 29 men) were interviewed to share their life stories about career and family life from the early phases of the career until today.

• Managers in the data are in mid- and late career, aged between 35 and 63, and they represent different branches of industry.

• A dual-phase analysis was used to analyze the research material:
  • Content analysis (Krippendorf, 1980) was carried out to interpret constructions of different forms of spousal support.
  • The idea of a story line from Gergen and Gergen (1988) was adopted to examine the evaluative shifts in the perceived spousal support throughout the manager's careers.
Spousal support in managerial career

• *Psychosocial support* were narrated by both genders quite similar by giving meaning that the spouse cheers up, discusses with, listens and gives realistic feedback to the manager.

• Help with the household and children were narrated by men as their wives being in charge of the domestic duty (*Running the household*), while women narrated their spouses as helping with the household and children (*Hands-on support*).

• *Career assistance* were narrated as the spouse giving practical help and guidance in business and career related matters such as being present at work-related social events and reading and commenting on e.g. speeches, texts.

• The male managers did not narrate about non-supportive behavior as women did.
# Narratives of spousal support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storyline</th>
<th>Name of group of narratives (W/M)</th>
<th>What kind of gender is produced in the narratives?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Quitting deficient spousal support</td>
<td>Traditional relations for women and men; it is assumed that the family is woman’s and work is man’s moral duty and responsibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiated spousal support</td>
<td>Fluid and varied, equal relations for both genders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happily-ever-after</td>
<td>Harmoniously flourishing spousal support</td>
<td>Fluid and varied, equal relations for both genders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enriching spousal support</td>
<td>Traditional relations for women and men; it is assumed that responsibility for the family is the woman’s moral duty and for work is the man’s moral duty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Inconsistent spousal support</td>
<td>Changing between traditional and equal relations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Declining spousal support</td>
<td>Changing from equal to traditional relations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>Irrelevant spousal support</td>
<td>Remains an open question and not made particularly visible. A woman manager is constructed as a strong and independent individual who does not need or want help.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Organization and organizational practices

• Fairness and non-discriminative organizational culture?

• Is the top management supportive or is there a hostile climate for women leaders?

• Explicit and implicit bias and norms in the workplace? For working? For networking?

• Are there role models and powerful mentors for women in leadership positions?
Final thoughts

• Gender is a constitutive element in logic of organizing and how the organization is constructed.

• Underlying assumptions and practices that are embedded in all levels of operations and management in sport organizations.

• In sport organizations, there is a need for involving men to gender equality work.