

Gender equality in Nordic football governance

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Background

Regardless of the growth of women leaders in general and women being different actors in sport, the number of women sport leaders remains low, especially in the top management positions (Burton & Leberman, 2017). This applies also in football and in the Nordic countries, which are rated as top countries in work-life gender equality (OECD, 2018). The lack of female leaders in sport has also started to attract academic attention (see Burton & Leberman, 2017 for a review). However, the research has been rather narrow focusing on specific country contexts, often the US context and the US intercollegiate system. In the Nordic context, research has largely focused on elected leaders in the boards of sport organizations (e.g. Elling et al., 2019). Furthermore, previous research has often treated sport as a monolithic block, disregarding the game-specific characteristics of different sports and the gendered and segmented nature of sport. In the football context studies on gender issues have often concerned women players and coaching positions, not leadership positions (see Valenti et al., 2018 for a review). Therefore, the aim of this study is to increase understanding on the lack of women as employed leaders in Nordic football governance and thus bridge the gap in the present literature and answer Valenti et al. (2018) call for research on gender equality and employed leadership positions in football. More specifically, this research studies the barriers women leaders face in the Football Associations of Finland (FAF) and Norway (NFF). The aim is operationalized into the following research question: How does gender affect the barriers of women aiming for a leading management position in the context of football?

Methods

Multi-level framework (Cunningham, 2019) basing on the multilevel organizational theory (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000) was chosen to guide the analysis as it captures the complexity of the multi-level entity of sport organizations and of the interrelated and dynamic factors influencing women leaders' careers in football. The factors influencing women leaders are complex and to some extent unconscious, and they must be studied in their context. Therefore, the research problem is approached from a case study perspective as it is phenomenon- rather than theory-driven. The two cases are studied monolithically as examples representing the phenomenon in the Nordics. The main research data consists of 9 semi-structured interviews (5 women, 4 men), that are analysed with abductive content analysis. The number of interviews can be considered representative enough, as the number of leaders is naturally rather low in these organizations and saturation was reached in the data collection. Organizational documents (strategic plans, equality plans) and archives are used as secondary data.

Results and conclusion

The study discusses in depth the gendered, multi-level barriers in football leadership. Furthermore, it shows that regardless of the high level of gender equality in general, gender equality lacks behind in the Nordic football leadership. The traditionally masculine football culture seems to slow down the change. In addition, the study discusses a change in the leadership styles towards a more feminine style, which however has not impacted positively on the number of women leaders. Lastly, the study gives further evidence on the barriers women leaders face being dynamic, multi-faceted and emerging from several levels. Even if major barriers have been broken down in Nordic football, the women still struggle to reach top leadership positions.

Applicability

To the author's knowledge, this is the first study to explore the phenomenon in Nordic football context. Thus, this study contributes to the continuing conversation on women and leadership in sport by introducing a new interesting angle combining a traditionally masculine single sport context and a country context generally perceived as gender equal. For practitioners, the results provide understanding on gender inequality in football leadership to be utilized in the aspirations of FAF, NFF and other football organizations to increase gender equality.