

Sisjord, M. K., Fasting, K., Sand, T. S. (2021). Gendered pathways to elite coaching reflecting the accumulation of capitals. *Sport, Education and Society*, 26(5), 554-566.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1732904>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1732904>

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Gendered pathways to elite coaching reflecting the accumulation of capitals.

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## Abstract

While earlier research on coaches' careers and the development of coaching expertise appears 'gender blind', the focus of this article on the underrepresentation of women in elite-level coaching is how various forms of capital interact in recruitment to coaching. Using Bourdieu's analytic concepts, the study explores Norwegian female and male elite-coaches' pathways to coaching positions with respect to qualifications and recruitment procedures. Qualifications are understood as being both individual athletic performance level (physical and symbolic capital) and coaching education (cultural capital). Qualitative interviews were completed with 24 female and 12 male elite-level coaches. The findings revealed that relatively more women than men had previously been elite-level athletes. The majority of the participants had coaching education from the sports organisations, while a few had coaching education from their university studies. Relative to gender, two men had no coaching education and several women had completed a program developed by the sport organisations – with the aim of increasing women's participation in elite-level coaching. Recruitment of coaches seemed to happen through informal channels, which indicates the benefits of social capital acquired through acquaintances and social networks. This indicates symbolic capital in terms of individual athletic achievement. The use of Bourdieu's analytic concept of capital and the 'labyrinth' metaphor facilitated identification and understanding of the longer pathways and challenges women must negotiate on their way to elite-level coaching positions when compared to men. The article closes with the implications of the findings, with particular attention to coaching education and the recruitment/employment procedures of coaches.

Key words: Elite coaching, gender, Bourdieu, capital, labyrinth, qualifications, employment

## Introduction

As studies across a range of countries confirm, coaching has long been a male domain (e.g. Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Demers, 2009; Fasting & Sand, 2009; Pfister, 2013). In the Norwegian context, women's lower participation in leading positions in sport governance and coaching, has been addressed by national authorities as well as by sport organisations (e.g. Fasting & Sand, 2017; Jeppesen, 2012; The Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud, 2008). These gender bias relates to human rights and to democratic expectations in terms of equal rights to participate in various elements in the society. Furthermore, the under-representation of female coaches results in having fewer female coaches as role models and provides fewer opportunities for female athletes to have coaches of their own gender (Fasting, Sand & Knorre, 2013), and an inability to challenge or resist negative stereotypes of women in leadership positions (Lavoi & Duvote, 2012). More women, and a better gender balance in coaching, might also have a positive impact on organisational values as well as structural, cultural and social change in sport (Kerr & Marshall, 2007; Lavoi & Duvote, 2012).

The underrepresentation of women in coaching has been studied from various perspectives. Some have addressed organisational factors like homologous reproduction, organisational values and strategies, and prevailing hegemonic masculinity as system barriers for women (Allen & Shaw, 2013; Greenhill, Auld, Cuskelly & Hooper, 2009; Hovden, 1999; Kerr & Marshall, 2007; Norman, 2014). Other studies have examined workplace related issues such as the uncertain nature of work in high performance coaching as an effect of short-term coaching contracts (Purdy & Potrac, 2014); coaches' experiences of gender relations in terms of gender stereotyping; and, discrimination and harassment (Aicher & Sagas, 2010; Kamphoff, 2010; Norman, 2010, 2011; Schlesinger & Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2013). While much of research has addressed challenges and barriers that female coaches experience in their position as a coach, the present article focuses on recruitment to coaching. In that regard, we compare women's and men's paths into elite coaching, with particular attention to qualifications as well as to recruitment procedures by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital to analyse the field-specific capital valued in the employment of coaches.

When explaining women's underrepresentation in leading positions (in politics, the workplace, business life, etc.), scholars have often referred to the 'glass-ceiling' as a metaphor for organisational and structural barriers. LaVoi and Dutove (2012), however, inspired by Eagly and Carli (2007), argued for the concept of a 'labyrinth' to illustrate the complex interplay of various barriers that females may face in pursuing a coaching career. In *Through the Labyrinth*, Eagly and Carli (2007) present a comprehensive and detailed explanation of the obstacles women face, that men do not, on the route to becoming a leader. The metaphor 'labyrinth' illustrates both the complex journey, with its challenges, and a goal worth striving for. According to the authors, 'passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead'. (p. x). The notion of a labyrinth is structural, built on social and cultural patterns and practices in organisations. As such, the metaphor appears useful in analysing women in leadership positions in sport organisations – such as for elite coaches.

In order to contextualise the study, we present earlier research on pathways to elite coaching. In exploring coaches' careers and the development of coaching expertise, many

studies have focused on the coach's prior experience as an athlete and their success as a coach, as well as sources of acquiring their coaching knowledge. Sources of coaching knowledge refers to formal learning (coaching education) and informal learning including role models. Scholars have explored the impact of learning in different situations and contexts as well as the leadership experiences necessary to become an elite-level coach (Callary, Werthner & Trudel, 2011, 2012; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2003; Erickson, Bruner, Macdonald & Côté, 2008; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2010; Mallett, Trudel, Lyle & Rynne, 2009; Rynne, Mallett & Tinning, 2010; Nelson, Cushion & Potrac, 2006; Werthner & Trudel, 2009). It should be noted that gender issues are not addressed in these studies, except in relation to the composition of the samples.

Christensen (2013) broadened the approach of studies on career pathways by examining deeper insights into the variations in coaches' experiences and qualifications. Based on a study of ten high-performance male coaches, she outlined a typology of sport coaching careers: (1) the elite-athlete coach, (2) the academic coach, and (3) the early starter coach. However, the issue of gender is only touched upon in the concluding comments, where the author noted that 'it was unexpected that no female coaches in the Danish high-performance environments fulfilled the inclusion criteria used in the study' (p. 109).

Additionally, Rynne (2014) compared a former elite-level athlete coach with a coach who had followed a traditional pathway, with respect to their paths towards high performance coaching settings. They were both men, employed in one of Australia's most popular team sports. He identified two categories: 'fast track' and 'traditional path' coaches. He discussed a recent development in large-scale coach accreditation, where fast tracking 'refers to special concessions offered to former elite athletes so that their progress through formal coach education structures is expedited' (p. 300). Blackett, Evans and Piggott (2017) examined 'fast-tracked' head coaching appointments based on interviews with eight male directors of men's professional football and rugby union clubs in England. The authors suggested that head coaching appointments were often based upon perceptions of earlier athletic ability to develop technical and tactical qualifications, as well as leadership, 'from which, "respect" could be quickly gained and maintained' (p. 744).

In general, earlier studies have explored the development of coaching expertise and pathways to coaching based on the coaches' own athletic performance level and/or in combination with coaching education. These studies appear, however, 'gender blind' in terms of research questions as well as the samples included, except for a recent study of women who had completed mixed-sex football coach education that revealed high levels of gender discrimination and inappropriate cultural practice (Lewis, Roberts & Andrews, 2018). Therefore, while identifying the gap in knowledge the present study takes into account both women and men and investigates their entrance into elite coaching with particular attention to women's manoeuvring the labyrinth. In line with former research, we focus on qualifications operationalised as coaching education and the coaches' own performance level, which in Bourdieu's terms may be understood as cultural capital and physical capital – or athletic/sport capital as explained in the next section. Additionally, we examine how the coaches were recruited to their position as an elite coach. The research question is: How does gender interplay with the accumulation of capital in recruitment into elite coaching?

The article is organised as follows. First, we give a presentation of Bourdieu's concepts, after which we provide an overview of the organisation of Norwegian sport, coach education, and gender differences in elite coaching in Norway. Then, we present the empirical investigation with methods and results where the findings are discussed in relation to former research as well as to Bourdieu's concepts. Finally, conclusions and implications of the findings are presented.

### **Bourdieu's concepts**

Bourdieu (1985) explains the social world as a space constructed on the basis of principles of distribution or differentiation of properties active within the social universe in question. Agents are thus defined by their relative position within the space, which may refer to the society at large, or specific fields such as the academic field, the field of art, or the field of sport. Within sport, the field of coaching can be seen 'as a structured system of social positions that define the situation for its occupants' (Cushion & Jones 2014, p. 278).

The social space constitutes three main dimensions: the relative composition of capital (economic and cultural); the total volume of the two forms of capital; and, changes in these properties over time (Bourdieu, 1984). Economic capital relates to economic and material resources, while cultural capital exists in three forms – embodied, objectified and institutional. Education is the most distinctive element of cultural capital. With respect to coaching, courses and/or exams provide formal education, whereas informal learning relates to learning situations during practice as part of the socialisation to coaching. Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, reflecting a network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. For example, social capital may have an impact on one's recruitment to coaching in terms of being invited to take on the position. Symbolic capital is the form that the former species of capital take when it is grasped through perceptions that recognise the specific logic of its possession and accumulation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002). Relevant examples for the current study are medals and prizes for sport accomplishment. Capital is closely connected to distribution of power, since the relevance and volume of capital has an impact on 'access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002, p. 97).

Bourdieu (1978) also introduced the term physical capital, predominantly in relation to social class and embodied practices in the article *Sport and social class*. In his book *Distinction*, he regarded sport and physical activity as part of cultural capital in terms of investment in the activity itself, how to maintain and use the equipment needed, as well as verbalising the experiences. Additionally he used the term 'bodily capital' in general terms, exemplified with its decline through age (Bourdieu, 1984). Scholars inspired by Bourdieu, have further elaborated on terms of capital connected to the sport and physical activity, for example physical capital (Shilling, 2003) and bodily capital (Wacquant, 1995). Moret and Ohl (2019) suggest the term sport capital in relation to elite sport, because 'bodily capital is broadly shared, but sport capital is concentrated at the top level' (p. 904), reflecting performance measured by victories and rankings and thereby symbolic recognition.

In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu (2001) expanded the conceptions of power and domination to gender relations. The social relations of domination and exploitation between the sexes are instituted according to distinctions that are reducible to the male-female opposition. The biological difference between the sexes, and between male and female bodies, can thus appear as the natural justification of the socially constructed differences between the genders, and in particular of the social division of labour. Although changes have taken place, Bourdieu argues women have found their career openings mainly in intermediate middle-range occupations. This has come about thanks to the feminist movement, particularly women's increased access to higher education, the consequent economic independence, and the transformation of family structures.

Worth noting, is that gender issues were largely ignored in Bourdieu's writings before *Masculine Domination*. Also, considerable changes have taken place during the last twenty years. In terms of gender perspectives, one should be aware of the critique raised by feminist scholars, accusing Bourdieu for being androcentric and classified as 'a *malestream* theorist' (Pringle, 2015, p. 173). Yet, Bourdieu's elaborations of the masculine domination in society may be a useful tool in the analysis of gender relations and gender regimes in specific fields. A pertinent example in that regard is mentioned in the study by Lewis et al. (2018) of women in mixed-sex coach education in football. The authors employed Bourdieu's notions of social acceptance, symbolic language and power in discussing the findings revealing that women often found the atmosphere intimidating and uncomfortable with sexist and bigoted nature of the coach educators.

### **Norwegian organized sport and coach education**

In Norway, sport is organised under the umbrella organisation the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF). NIF consists of 54 national federations, 19 regional confederations, and about 11,500 clubs. NIF is the largest voluntary organisation in Norway. It includes about 2.1 million members out of a population of a bit more than 5 million. Girls and women account for about 40% of the memberships, a ratio, which has been relatively stable during the last few decades.

The number of women in leadership positions, however, does not reflect the gender proportions of the memberships. Therefore, inside NIF specific initiatives have been made with the purpose of increasing the number of female members, and those in leadership positions. As early as 1984, the NIF board appointed a Woman's Committee to review the organisation's commitment to women and sport. Plans of action were adopted and various initiatives, such as 'education of women leaders', were implemented (Skirstad, 2009). Furthermore, the president of NIF (a man) led the way in addressing gender quotas, which was passed at the NIF General Assembly in 1987. The quota regulation led to a better gender balance on boards of the sport federations (Sisjord, Fasting & Sand, 2017).

The proportion of female coaches, at all levels in the organisation, remains relatively low. A Norwegian study conducted in 1999-2000, based on a sample of members of sport clubs from the ages of 12 years and upwards, showed that 17% of the participants who

competed at a low level had a female coach, whereas 12% competing at a medium level and 5% on a high competitive level had a woman as a coach (Seippel, 2009). A study from 2008, investigating the number of national team coaches reported 8% female coaches (Fasting & Sand, 2009). A recent study showed that the proportion of female national elite coaches had increased to 18% (Fasting & Sand, 2017). The increase may possibly be explained by more focus on coaching education among female coaches.

Norwegian sport coach education is developed along three main paths; 1) the sport federations; 2) Olympiatoppen (department of NIF, delegated with the responsibility and authority to develop elite sport in Norway) and, 3) higher education at the university level. The coach education programs in the federations are sport-specific in their focus from level 2 to level 4. Level 1 is the same basic course for all sports in NIF (Strandli, 2012). As a supplement to the sport-specific coach education programs in the federations, Olympiatoppen has had a two-year (part time) study program for elite-level coaches since 2003. The program is developed and carried out in cooperation with either the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences or The Norwegian University of Science and Technology. The coaches are credited with 60 ECTS- points, equivalent to one year of study. With respect to the small proportion of female coaches at the elite level, NIF/Olympiatoppen has made specific initiatives to educate women as elite-level coaches.

The most prominent is *Kvinneløftet* ('Lifting the women' authors' translation), a project aimed at promoting female elite athletes from selected sports along with female coaches. The project was launched in 2006 and completed in 2012 (Jeppesen, 2012). The coaching section was labelled Project Women Elite Coaches (translated from Norwegian) and its target was to have at least three women coaches in the Olympic Games in 2012, and thereafter increase the number of females in coaching teams (Prosjekt Kvinnelige Topp-Trenere, 2010). Lastly, coach education is an option at several academic institutions in Norway and offered as integrated parts of sport and PE studies or as specific sport coaching majors in some educational degree programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Since coaching education is perceived a vital capital the topic is central in the present investigation.

## **Methodology**

The results in this article are part of a larger study focusing on the role of coaching and gender. The aim of this larger study is to gain knowledge with the purpose of recruiting more women into coaching positions as well as into coaching education. The main questions relate to 1) attitudes and values in the sport organisations with respect to the coaching role and gender; 2) barriers that women experience with regard to entering elite level coaching; 3) implications of the attained knowledge about attitudes, values and barriers for the recruitment of women to coaching education. The study has a mixed method design with quantitative and qualitative methods. The study was implemented in a sequential order, a survey in phase 1 then qualitative interviews in phase 2. The qualitative part is perceived as the dominant status in relation to the research questions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).



The quantitative part is a survey study. The coaches received e-mails containing information about the study objectives which included a URL link to an online questionnaire hosted by Questback, a provider of online survey platforms. Along with demographics, the components in the questionnaire were related to coaching education and coaching experience (e.g. sport discipline, level of performance, age and gender of the athletes), a variety of items reflecting perceptions and attitudes in relation to female and male coaches, and open questions about reasons for the underrepresentation of women's participation in coaching and suggestions to increase their opportunities. The population was national team coaches working for the Norwegian federations in NIF, and coaches who had completed NIF's elite-level coach education. Based on the inclusion criteria the sample unit was defined 'elite coach'. With a response rate of 67 % from a population of 469, the sample resulted in n=309. Women comprised 19 % of the respondents.

In the second phase, we conducted qualitative interviews with 24 females and 12 males, based on their identification as 'woman' or 'man' in the survey. The 36 coaches represented 25 sport disciplines, both small and large federations, including team and individual sports, Olympic and non-Olympic sports, and gender separated and gender-mixed sports. Twenty-two of them were national team coaches, 10 were club coaches (generally in the higher leagues and performance levels), and four were not active at the time that the interviews were carried out. The majority were ethnic Norwegians; four participants came from other Nordic countries, two from other European countries, and one from North America.

Although the main focus is women's underrepresentation in coaching, we included men in the sample in order to explore their attitudes and perceptions of the issues raised in the study. The interview guidelines covered; biographies and pathways to coaching (when it began, motivation for coaching; former coaching positions); individual experiences as a coach (positive/negative, coaching contexts, coaching females and/or males); ethical aspects (double relations, conflicts, bullying and harassment); personal experiences, and; perceptions of the coaching role. Central questions were: athletic performance level and potential benefit of individual elite career, coaching education, with additional questions to women (i.e. experience of being a woman in the commonly male-dominated programs and potential benefit of women-only programs); and recruitment procedures. In this article, we present only data from the second phase of the investigation.

Semi-structured interview guidelines were developed and tested with four elite-level coaches before the actual data gathering was conducted. The researchers approached the interviewees via e-mail with attached information about the project and an invitation to participate. After the consent to participate, the interviews were conducted at places suggested by the interviewees, such as; their private home, their office, or the researcher's work place. The interviews lasted between one hour and two and a half hours. Three interviewees were not fluent in the Norwegian language therefore these were conducted in English. Interviewees from other Nordic countries were able to communicate with Norwegians by using their own languages. In cases where quotations from the interviews are presented as results, we were

assisted by a colleague, fluent in the English language. The first author made the translation before the colleague corrected the quotation against the original version in Norwegian.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded into thematic text segments by the use of MAXQDA (a software program for qualitative data analysis). After having read through the text several times, and having used memos for emerging themes relevant to answer the purpose of the study, different segments of the text were assigned code names providing the basis for the inductive analysis. The code system was organised on two levels. This is in accordance with what Sparkes and Smith (2014) describe as higher order and lower order themes, when using computer-assisted data analysis. The following categories at the first level are relevant for the present article: 'the coaching career' and 'experiences as a coach'. Examples of second level codes are 'recruitment to coaching job', 'coaching education', and 'personal athletic career'. Based on the retrieved segments of the codes, the data was cross-case analysed (Patton, 1990) in order to compare each issue across the sample of interviewees.

In terms of ethical considerations, the study proposal was guided by the Norwegian Data Supervision Bureau (NSD), which evaluates proposals from scholars at Norwegian universities and research institutes. The participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and they were guaranteed confidentiality. They also signed a declaration of consent and received an information letter with contact details for the head of the project – in case they had any questions or wanted to withdraw from the study. None of the interviewees made further contact. Many sports in Norway have relatively small milieus with few coaches at the elite-level, which means that some of the coaches might easily be recognised. Therefore, sport (discipline or federation) is omitted in the paper.

## **Results and discussion**

The results are presented and discussed in three sections reflecting different forms of capital. First, the interviewee's own athletic career. Secondly, we address formal coach education. The third section covers recruitment to elite coaching, which may reflect social capital.

### *Athletic career*

Relative to the question of athletic career, we noted the interviewee's highest level of competition: international level, national level, and regional level. Among the women, eighteen participants had competed at an international level, five at a national level and one at a regional level. In comparison, six men had competed internationally, four at a national level and two at a regional level. Consequently, relatively more women (three-fourths) than men (half) had competed at an international level. The findings are comparable with a Canadian study reporting that relatively more females than males in high-level coaching had national or international competitive experience (Reade, Rodgers & Norman, 2009). With reference to Moret and Ohl's (2019) conceptualisation, relatively more women had gained sport capital reflecting performance at the top level.

As part of the discussion of the personal performance level, we asked the participants about the potential benefits of being a former elite-level athlete on their role as a coach. In this regard, the interviews revealed different perspectives. Most of those who had achieved success at an international level as an athlete admitted that it was an advantage. Some noted that it aided in 'gaining respect among the athletes you coach' or 'it creates a feeling of authority among athletes as well as from people around'. Others referred to it as 'having a name' or 'you get much for free, just having been on TV a lot', which reflects symbolic capital in terms of 'the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 166). A woman, coaching a 'typical' male-dominated sport, reflected on the value of her own performance and the symbolic capital as such:

It's not something I usually brag about, but after becoming more experienced, I use it more consciously. For example, if a father somehow indicates 'what do you know about this', then I can reply 'I have been a world champion, so I actually know quite a lot about participating in a world championship.

Other interviewees emphasised the value of experiences acquired through competing at an international level: 'I believe you should have some international experience as an athlete, it's not enough to see only what happens in your own country. You should feel the tension of competing internationally' or 'to know the sport well from having travelled widely is valuable in order to understand and communicate with athletes.' The statements are in various ways comparable with the study of Blackett et al. (2017), where interviewees emphasised personal characteristics and competencies derived from a competitive playing background they associated it with developing positive player relationships and respect.

As for gender issues, two main dimensions appeared. First, the majority of the women emphasised self-confidence as an effect of former achievement, a topic not mentioned by the men. In particular, women with long athletic careers related to the feeling of 'having succeeded yourself, and sort of have the sport in your blood, I think that's important', or 'I feel a strong confidence in what I know, what I am able to do, I have been in most of the situations myself, have lived a life so to speak'. The results somehow contrasted with former research that commonly reports a lack of self-confidence and lower self-esteem among female coaches (Cunningham, Doherty & Gregg, 2007; Demers, 2004; Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2011; Greenhill et al., 2009; Kilty, 2006; Robertson, 2004). The discrepancy may, however, be explained by different performance levels where participants in our study had entered elite coaching, which may have an impact on their self-esteem. The findings may also relate to sport capital (Moret & Ohl, 2019) as useful in relation to passage through the labyrinth (Eagly & Carly, 2007).

Another gender difference includes psychological and emotional aspects, which were only mentioned by female interviewees. One of them said: 'I recognise the situations on the field, tactics but probably even more emotionally, what happens among the players'. Other interviewees pointed to expectations to perform in terms like: 'I can recognise the feeling in a way, having felt the same pressure to perform' and 'I know where the shoe pinches, as they say. I have been in those shoes myself' or 'to understand what kind of challenges and situations you face is very important'. Other interviewees emphasised the importance of understanding the mental and psychological challenges elite athletes experience, and that

women are more likely to express empathy, which corresponds to results from the Kerr and Marshall's (2007) study.

Interviewees without international experience as athletes held ambiguous perceptions. Some mentioned that it might be useful 'to know the context from personal experience' whereas others indicated that coaching education and practice as a coach seemed to 'make up for that'. Two of the interviewees argued that having an elite athlete background oneself could also be a disadvantage 'because, then you only have your own references' or 'you do not have the same understanding of not succeeding, reaching the top, sort of'. In contrast, another emphasised the benefit of elite performance as: 'Status number one is to have medals from a championship as an athlete, and second comes other medals achieved through coaching on the elite level'.

In general, experience from elite sport as an athlete appears valuable for the job in coaching. One may suggest that athletic/sport capital and symbolic capital are particularly beneficial for women in terms of passing through the labyrinth. Furthermore, coaching education may have an additional effect as will be discussed in the next section.

### *Coach education*

In this section, we present an overview of the interviewees' various kinds of formal coach education, as an essential element of cultural capital. For example, whether the participants are educated within the sport system and/or having formal education from the university, as an occupation in the longer term. Additionally, we present female interviewees' experiences on their way into elite coaching in terms of perceived/valued qualifications.

Table 1. Coach education with respect to gender.

Gender	Fed	Fed + OLT	OLT	Fed + Univ	No education
Women	3	14 (1 also Univ )	4	3	
Men	3	2	1	4	2

Fed: Coach education organised by respective federations

OLT: Elite coach education organised by NIF/Olympiatoppen including the Project Women Elite Coaches

Univ: Sport/coach education at the university level

The table shows that the majority had taken courses offered by the federation. The most common combination is federation and OLT which means taking the steps through the federations' education program followed by elite coach education. The high proportion of

women with OLT education is primarily due to Project Women Elite Coaches. Four women and men were educated as coaches at the university level, which may be understood as a conscious choice for coaching as an occupation. The relatively lower number of females may reflect women's perception of coaching as a possible career, because of a glass ceiling. As illustrated here: 'there are not many jobs available, and if so only in the women's league. They would never employ a woman in the men's elite clubs. So, should you have ambitions, there's not much to hunt for'. Four women and one man had gone directly to elite coaching programme (OLT), which may be characterised as 'fast track' coaches (Rynne, 2014).

Two men had no coaching education, which indicates that formal coaching qualifications are not required for taking on an elite-level coaching position. The latter is comparable to the study of Greenhill et al. (2009), reporting that male coaches thought that experience could make up for the lack of accreditation, whereas female coaches would not apply for a job unless they had the required accreditation level. The findings may be understood in light of Bourdieu's (2001) perspectives of masculine domination in society. He explains how girls during socialization are directed to stay away from certain careers regarded as masculine whereas boys are encouraged to choose them. Hence, a whole series of 'previous experiences, particularly in sport, which often gives rise to experiences of discrimination, has prepared them to accept such suggestions as foreshadowing and has made them internalise the dominant vision' (p. 94-95).

The results revealed that the majority of the participants had started in a local club. Some had coached in several clubs, before entering the elite-level, usually as assistant coaches or as a coach for a junior team. Some of the female interviewees indicated 'a longer path' for women than for men. One woman with coach education from the federation as well as from a university of sport studies, and many years of coaching said:

NN [the sport director] once told me, that if I ever would think about becoming an elite coach, I should be certain to take all the steps. But it was not like that for the men who quickly progressed to that level.

The statement relates to the 'labyrinth', which according to Eagly and Carli (2007) is more likely to be passing through rather than traveling a straight path. In Bourdieu's conceptualisation, the statement may be understood as an effect of symbolic domination, which is exerted 'not in the pure logic of knowing consciousnesses but through the schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are constitutive of habitus' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 37).

In order to support and encourage women to enter elite-level coaching, initiatives like Project Women Elite Coaches seem to have valuable effects. Among the interviewees who participated in the project, most of them were satisfied with the content in terms of curriculum as well as the mentoring. Several mentioned that learning leadership and understanding how to communicate with the athletes was important. Others emphasised the development of a feeling of community among the participants. This was particularly true where participants had the same or a similar sport background and had been together for quite a while. One explained that 'I was with that group for almost four years and I think we all benefitted from that, with camps and such....and you got some professional clues, of course, in addition'.

Another emphasised the mentor's support 'I really got the feeling, of confidence, that I was on the right track'. It is noted that many interviewees emphasised that the women-only community was a positive environment for learning. A few compared it with their earlier coach education when there had been only one or a few women. One said, 'When you are a lone woman in a group of 30 men, and even if you are better than them, you tend to hold back, often, unless you have lots of self-confidence'. Although, the results do not reveal discrimination and inappropriate behaviour as reported by Lewis et al. (2018), the findings point to the feeling of being alone or one of a few women in a male dominated context.

A couple of the interviewees were less enthusiastic, mainly because of the mentoring, as one explained, 'the mentoring was not particularly successful, probably mostly because she came from a completely different sport and did not have so much insight in what we are doing'. Another had less contact with the mentor. She explained: 'he was not particularly good at following up. It was usually me that made contact'. However, generally it was felt that women-specific initiatives appear useful in helping females through the labyrinth to being employed or invited to elite coaching which is discussed in the next section.

### *Recruitment to coaching*

When we asked the participants about employment procedures most of them admitted to having been invited to apply for the position. It happened when 'the leader in my former club approached me and asked me to take on a coaching role' or 'people in the federation thought I might be the right person for the job so I accepted it after being asked'. While discussing the issue most interviewees indicated that the procedure seemed natural, that 'you never see coaching jobs announced', or 'it is the only way to do it', which according to Bourdieu (2000) may be described as a doxic situation, inscribed in social structures and in cognitive structures, and thereby taken for granted. Several explained that in 'small federations' it seemed quite natural 'since there are so few coaches, a transparent context, those in the federation have an idea of whom to ask' or 'I assume that those who hire coaches, know what they are looking for'. A couple of the former elite-level athletes pointed out that to 'have a name' or 'doing well internationally may be useful, people know about you', which reflects the symbolic capital gained through elite-level accomplishments. A few indicated that potential candidates would not have applied in an 'open' announcement process, as a male coach explained:

It has become a well established practice, that positions are not being announced. And consequently, if you suddenly should start to announce a position, I think that many of the most competent candidates would not apply, because it is just not something you do. You don't apply for a position, because – if they find me interesting, they'll call me.

A few women also approved of the closed system, however, with a different perspective and with reference to women's possible lack of self-confidence. As one said: 'you know women care so much about what they can contribute, whether they are good enough'. Another explained that in her case it was imperative for her to have been asked, because 'you

know, from the very beginning we have learned that we cannot make it' while adding that she never would think of applying 'because it seems obvious that a man should have that kind of job'. Yet another revealed an apologetic attitude while elaborating on how she got the position as a coach for the national team for women in a heavily male dominated sport. She said: 'But I was probably lucky because they did in fact ask me, a woman, so I sort of became an insider, because it is not an easy thing'. The women's perceptions of themselves in the field of elite-level coaching are additional examples of socialization and the internalisation of the dominant visions of gender appropriate careers (Bourdieu, 2001).

Several interviewees, both women and men, made comparisons between coaching and business life (another male dominated field), where qualifications and 'finding the right people' was perceived the most important when potential candidates were approached. A few referred to 'having the right philosophy' others emphasised 'personality' or 'finding people that fit in with the culture'. A male coach said: 'I was asked to take on this job, so I think it's how it should be. If you do a good job on what you are doing, as a coach, then people will recognise you over time'. Other interviewees were more sceptical to the current practice that might result in recruitment from 'closed networks' and 'the old boys club' as one man explained: 'I think it's kind of a danger, only asking those one knows, who are too like oneself. I think we are doing that in my federation, and other federations as well, it's like "the old boys club" employing each other'. The statement reflects homologous reproduction (Greenhill et al., 2009; Hovden, 1999; Schreiner & Thiel, 2011) which primarily referred to males in the interviews. However, a couple of the women representing women dominated sports emphasised that the same pattern might appear among females, which corresponds to former research in the field (e.g. Darvin & Sagas, 2016; Sagas, Cunningham & Teed, 2006).

A few interviewees more strongly supported open announcement of coaching positions, by arguing that one may overlook the 'pool' of potential candidates. Therefore, as one of the women argued: 'I think it might be beneficial to announce the positions, to have an open process, because, suddenly someone from outside may turn up, someone you had not thought about'. One of the male interviewees who had recently resigned as coach of the national team in an individual sport clearly advocated announcing the position. When his position became vacant, people in the federation decided to try an 'open announcement' in order to reach beyond 'the traditional networks', as he said. In doing so, a person in a local club got the idea of contacting a coach from abroad and encouraged him to apply, which resulted in employment. The interviewee explained that the initiative was so successful that 'when he quits it is not obvious that we will have a Norwegian head-coach again, it is quite possible that we will find someone from another country... and yes, to get new impulses.'

Taken together, the results show how social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002) may influence the employment procedures of elite coaches, also that the practice appears as a doxic situation being taken for granted (Bourdieu, 2000). Only a few saw the advantage of an open application process.

## **Concluding comments and implications of the findings**

The results revealed various kinds of capital interacting when women advance through the labyrinth into elite-level coaching. With respect to qualifications, relatively more women than men had competed at an international level, which may be understood as higher amount of sport capital (Moret & Ohl, 2019). Apart from the fact that two men had no coaching education there were no clear gender difference in 'traditional' formal coaching education. The Project Women Elite Coaches, however, had apparently had a positive effect for some of the women in passing through the labyrinth. With regard to recruitment procedures, it seems reasonable to suggest that symbolic capital reflecting an athletic career appeared beneficial, particularly for women to being recognised for qualifications and accumulating valued capital, and thereby gaining social capital in the networks where employment of coaches takes place.

The results show that the field of sport (and coaching), as society in general, is organised according to the androcentric principle (Bourdieu, 2001). The androcentric vision imposes itself as natural and thereby legitimating the masculine domination, and the natural justification of the social constructed differences between the genders and 'distribution of the activities assigned to each sex' (p. 9). As a result, women are considered 'the other' and have to negotiate more challenges and likely experience longer pathways to elite-level coaching positions compared to men.

With regard to implications of the study, we highlight the following issues. First is the requirement of coaching education, because knowledge obtained in coaching education is perceived to be valuable in order to enter the profession, at all levels. The requirement of education may also result in a more appropriate search for candidates, beyond close networks. Secondly, we would question the recruitment/employment procedures. Although people in sport organisations apparently take the common practice for granted, public announcement may provide a larger 'pool of candidates' and a more open process for hiring. However, as suggested by Schlesinger and Weigelt-Schlesinger (2013), formalisation of the recruitment process will not automatically reduce the gender imbalance of female coaches, yet it can lead to better and fairer recruitment practices. Thirdly, people in sport organisations, employees as well as elected representatives, should make specific initiatives in order to recruit women and facilitate education and mentoring. The latter may result in more female role models, which is important for younger women's motivation for entering the coaching profession. However, in order to decrease the gender bias, as Eagly and Carli (2007) remind us, one has to take into account structural and cultural aspects, not only women but also men and the organisations need to make an effort to help dismantle the labyrinth.

In terms of limitations, one should recall the gender bias in the sample where the number of female interviewees is the double of male participants. Having equal numbers might have provided a wider picture of the men's perceptions and attitudes. However, taking into account the aim of the overall study, namely to examine women's experiences in elite coaching, the sample was selected purposively. Further, we did not relate the findings to the different sports in the sample, which might give a more detailed picture, for example with reference to 'smaller' and 'larger' sports, male-dominated versus female-dominated sports, and the variations of professionalisation in terms of fulltime versus part-time jobs. Since the main



focus is on qualifications in order to manoeuvre the labyrinth, we did not cover deeper understandings of the experience of barriers on the road, which will be more elaborated in other publications from the project.

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