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## Combining coaching with family life. A study of female and male elite level coaches in Norway

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### ABSTRACT

The challenges of combining work and family life has been considered a women's issue, also reflected in research. In recent years, scholars have argued that the work-family interface may also concern male coaches. Therefore, the present study takes both genders into account. We made qualitative interview with 13 women and six men. The findings revealed similarities as well as differences. For women, support from the spouse was decisive for taking on and maintaining the position, whereas men primarily made the decisions on their own. The responsibility for childcare was far more important among the women. The male coaches seemed more traditional, except for two younger men who gave priority to the fatherhood role. The findings are discussed in relation to a multi-level model, where individual choices/practice may be understood in relation to requirements from the organisation of sport as well as gender roles in the society at large.

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## Introduction

In general, coaching has been, and still is, a male domain and on the elite level, female coaches comprise a minority, which is well documented in studies from various countries (e.g., Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Demers, 2009; Fasting & Sand, 2009; Pfister, 2013). The skewed gender ratio does however vary among countries as well as among sport disciplines (Robertson, 2016). In a Norwegian context, 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 underrepresentation of women in coaching is a political issue as well as a topic that has evoked scholars' interest in later years.

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Since coaching is a male dominated profession, much research has focused on working conditions and organisational aspects such as homologous reproduction and prevailing hegemonic masculinity as systemic barriers for women (Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Greenhill, Auld, Cuskelly & Hooper, 2009; Norman, 2008, 2014); and dominant masculinistic discourses impacting on women's experiences in coaching education (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2011, 2016). Furthermore, studies have examined workplace related issues like: inadequate salaries; the uncertain nature of work in high performance coaching as an effect of short-term contracts (Kubayi, Coopoo & Morris-Eyton, 2017; Purdy & Potrac, 2014); and coaches' experiences of gender relations in terms of gender stereotyping, marginalisation, discrimination and harassment (Aicher & Sagas, 2010; Kamphoff, 2010; Kerr & Marshall, 2007; Norman, 2011, 2013; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Schlesinger & Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2013; Surujlal & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2015).

Other scholars have focused on the individual level, exploring the work-family interface of coaching mothers, such as the competing demands from the sport organisations and family responsibilities (Bolorizadeh, Tojari & Zargar, 2013; Bruening & Dixon, 2007, 2008; Bruening, Dixon & Eason, 2016; Leberman & Palmer, 2009; M.A. Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Robertson, 2007). The focus of work-family experiences is, however, strongly gendered, and largely viewed as a women's issue (Bruening, Dixon & Eason, 2016).

Until recently, male coaches' ways of handling the dual roles have not been explored. Graham and Dixon (2014) identified the gap in research, then later explored how fathers who are coaches managed the day-to-day challenges, and experiences of conflict and strain, coping strategies, non-utilisation of organisational support, as well as experiences of enrichment (Graham & Dixon, 2017). As noted by Schenewark and Dixon (2012), by only examining coaching mothers, the topic becomes labelled a women's issue and findings are not likely to be applicable to men's lives. Furthermore, mothers' and fathers' experiences from work-family interactions may be quite different. Hence, knowledge about the combination of coach-parent roles of both genders is needed, particularly for coaches at the elite level – which is scarcely examined. Therefore, the research question of the present article is: How do female and male coaches experience the combination of family life with coaching at the elite level? The intention, here, is to reveal differences as well as similarities in their experiences.

Much of the research on the family-work interface takes a multilevel approach, which is used as a theoretical framework in the present study. The multilevel approach and former studies are presented before methods and the findings of the empirical investigation.

## A multilevel approach

Several scholars have argued for the incorporation of multiple theoretical levels to explore work–family interface in coaching. Dixon and Bruening (2005) suggested a model including three levels: individual, organisational/structural, and socio-cultural to explore factors influencing the processes and outcomes of work-family conflicts. The integration of the levels makes it possible both to take a top-down and a bottom-up perspective in exploring “the causes and consequences and interpretation of work-family conflict as an individual experience bounded by and shaped in organisational and social realities.” (p. 227). For example, from a top-down perspective, what is the long-term influence of a male-dominated sport culture on the work–family interface, and further, who chooses to work within this type of culture? A bottom-up perspective may illustrate how individual behaviours emerge to affect collective organisational and social change. The authors argue for an integrated lens in exploring the impact of work-family conflict. This is needed in order to make organisational changes in work-family policies and culture, which in turn may lead to cultural changes within the sport-coaching world. In other publications, the authors use the three levels – individual, organisational and socio-cultural – to discuss results from their empirical work.

Dixon and Bruening made an investigation based on a sample of National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I head coaches with children, utilising on-line focus groups for data collection. From a top-down perspective they analysed factors that affected the coaching mothers’ job and life satisfaction, with particular attention to how work climate and culture shaped and constrained the coaches’ attitudes and behaviour such as individual conflicts and time management (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Another publication has a bottom-up perspective, illustrating the coping mechanisms (i.e. stress-relief, self-awareness, organisation and time management, support networks) the women used to achieve success in their work and the quality of life with their family (Bruening & Dixon, 2007). The three levels approach is also presented by Bruening, Dixon, Burton and Madsen (2013) in a discussion of former studies on the topic while also identifying gaps in the literature in the understanding of work-life interface, for example, the need to examine coaching as an occupation in relation to socio-cultural views of gender, and structural and organisational practices related to work and gender. Likewise, Bruening, Dixon and Eason (2016) recommended the multi-level approach to explore the experiences of coaching mothers allowing for a bottom-up perspective.

LaVoi and colleagues expanded the multi-level approach to four levels. LaVoi and Dutove (2012) developed the model inspired by Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. The first level, the *individual/intrapersonal* level, includes personal, biological and psychological factors, such as emotions, beliefs, values, expertise and personality of the individual. The next level, *interpersonal* level, is comprised of social-relational influences such as colleagues, friends and family. The third level, *organisational/structural* level, is defined by the organisational policies, professional practices, and opportunities or lack thereof. The fourth level is the *socio-cultural* level, which encompasses norms and cultural systems that indirectly affect female coaches. The levels are not mutually exclusive and intersect in dynamic and multiple ways. For example, gender stereotypes associated with traditional femininity and leadership may affect women's behaviour within the coaching role. LaVoi and Dutove (2012) presented an extensive review of studies of women in coaching, examining the complex and multi-dimensional barriers that affect or prevent females from seeking or remaining in coaching positions, and factors that support and facilitate career advancement and retention. The referred studies were categorised and discussed according to the individual, interpersonal, organisational, and socio-cultural levels.

In the book *Women in Sports Coaching* (LaVoi, 2016), the model is extended to include intersectionality and power. Intersectionality refers to various identities like gender, sexual identity, social class, race/ethnicity, and (dis)ability. Power refers to the dynamics in power relations, which may function both ways – top-down and bottom-up. What is clear from the data is that far more barriers than supports exist for women coaches, particularly for women with systematically marginalised identities. And, as emphasised by LaVoi, McGarry and Fisher (2019), the individuals in the system with least power (i.e. women) often get blamed for the lack of female head coaches.

The two approaches mentioned above have much in common, yet a few differences exist. With reference to the work–family interface, the distinction is on the lower levels. In the three-level model, family structure is placed on individual factors (Dixon & Bruening, 2005, p. 230). The four-level model has family–work balance on the interpersonal level, while the individual level covers for example, skills, personality-related dimensions, and “single, no children” (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012, p. 20). For this article, we prefer the four-level model due to the distinction between the individual level (without family responsibility) and the interpersonal level that relates to the family–work balance.

## Methods

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 was 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 organisation with respect to the coaching role and gender; (2) barriers that women experience with regard to entering elite level coaching. 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 where we employed an online questionnaire. Along with demographics, the components in the questionnaire were related to coaching education and coaching experience, 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 sample unit was defined "elite coach" and the population was national team coaches working for the federations in the umbrella organisation The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF), and coaches who had completed NIF's elite-level coach education. 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 in-depth interviews with 24 female and 12 male coaches. The 36 coaches represented 25 sport disciplines, small and large federations, including team and individual sports. Since the main focus of the study was the underrepresentation of female coaches, we invited more women than men to the interviews in order to provide a broad picture of their personal experiences. On the contrary, males were the majority of the sample in the quantitative questionnaire that focused more on organisational and cultural aspects in the sport organisations. The interviewees were recruited from the respondents in the quantitative part of the study. The majority were ethnic Norwegians; four participants came from other Nordic countries, two from other European countries, and one from North America.

Among the 36 interviewees, 13 women and 6 men lived in a household with children under 18 years old. Consequently, the present article is based on interviews with 19 coaches. So, about half of the sample, and no visible gender difference. Among those, except for one man, all lived in a household with a spouse. The findings relate to results from the quantitative part of the study

(phase 1), where no statistical significance was found between women and men in terms of elite-level coaches' marital status and children in the household (Fasting, Sisjord & Sand, 2017). Most of the interviewees were in the age group 35–50 years. In terms of coaching experience, some commenced in a club they belonged to and had taken “all the steps” to elite level, others had started in higher divisions or as assistant coaches before taking over as head coach. Most of the interviewees (relatively more women than men) had formerly been elite-level athletes in the sport they coached (Sisjord, Fasting & Sand, 2021).

A semi-structured interview guideline was developed and tested among four elite-level coaches before the actual data gathering was conducted. The guidelines covered biographies and pathways to coaching, details about the coaching career, qualifications (coaching education, experience as a coach, and former athletic competition level), recruitment/employment, and several themes related to experiences and perceptions of being an elite-level coach. Some questions were only for women, for example, experiences of being a woman in a male dominated profession. The main themes were followed up by sub themes/probes to get deeper into the interviewee's responses (Patton, 1990). The theme work-family interface was not among the main themes. In most cases it appeared during the interview, and/or as a follow-up question related to positive/negative perceptions of the coaching job to the interviewees who lived in a household with children. The interviewees were contacted via email with attached information about the project and an invitation to participate. After the consent to participate, the interviews were conducted (face to face) at places suggested by the interviewees, which might be in their private home, their office, or elsewhere, as well as at the researcher's workplace. Before each interview we reviewed information from the questionnaire in order to familiarise and update ourselves on the interviewee and the topics, for example, the family and work situation. The interviews lasted from about one hour to two and a half hours, averaging one and a half hours. The authors conducted the interviews, the women interviewed female coaches, the man, the male coaches. Each author conducted twelve interviews. The female authors decided on which women to interview based on their own experience and/or knowledge about the sport in question. 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 language. 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 using MAXQDA, a software program for qualitative data analysis. The authors decided to read the same three interviews and discuss possible codes. 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 at 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 codes relevant for this article were three second level codes. The code “the meaning of the family” was a second level code of “the coaching career”. The other codes were “positive aspects of the coaching job” and “negative aspects of the coaching job” where “experiences and perceptions of being an elite coach” was the first level code. 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 of the head of the project in case they had any questions or wanted to withdraw from the study. Many sports in Norway have relatively small milieus at the elite-level, and especially the low number of female elite-level coaches and coaches living in a household with children as in the present case. Thus, sport (federation) is omitted in the presentation, as are specific concepts that might identify the sport.

## **Results**

Based on the data analysis, the results are presented and discussed in the following sections. The first section covers the full-time versus the part-time coaching job. Thereafter we focus on the spouse’s role for the interviewees’ coaching job, and the last section is devoted to challenges with combining coaching and family life.

### ***Full-time versus part-time job***

Relative to the question of having coaching as a full-time versus part-time job, the results showed that one woman and one man had coaching as unpaid jobs. This was understood as voluntary work. Four women and three



men had coaching as a part-time job. In that respect, an interesting gender difference appeared. The men were coaching part-time in addition to regular work, whereas the part-time women had coaching as their main income. The results revealed that the interviewees experienced their part-time jobs quite differently. One of the men said that coaching as an extra job worked well, it did not take that much time for practice, travels and competitions. The other two had just quit their coaching jobs, one of them explained:

I was asked to continue, but I wouldn't. I guess I am the kind of person who doesn't want to do things halfway, and it turned out to be much more work than I had expected. Then I had to discuss it at home as well. Could I live with doing something that I do not find totally satisfying? My family agreed that there was no point to continue, so I dropped out.

Although, he discussed the issue “at home” the statement does reflect his primarily perception of performing well as a coach – not do things half-way. His consideration of family responsibilities was further expressed as: “I have a very flexible wife (laughing) – and I am in very good spirits when I am home”, which may be understood as home affairs to a large extent was the wife's matter, a reflection of a traditional gender role perception. Another factor behind the decision of withdrawing was related to payment, as he said: “It's not much money in Norwegian [the sport] so there is not enough to keep it going.” The other man mentioned the dropout was solely a family decision, which will be discussed in a later section.

The women, on the other hand, related the choice of part-time job to the family economy and/or that it was easier to combine with childcare compared to a regular job, while also revealing rather conservative gender role perspectives. One expressed: “My husband earns or has earned ten times more than me during my years as a coach. Of course, he must be prioritised, have time to . . . [work] that's why I work part-time. You know he is the breadwinner.” Another said: “with a husband who works very much and two kids, it's a good opportunity to combine with family life, frankly I was not really interested in a full-time job.” Yet another gave her impression of motherhood that associates to essentialist perspectives of gender:

I feel there is something in my nature. For me as a person, I feel it myself, I feel that it's important to take care of the family. Therefore, my priority is to work less. Quite a few others do this as well. I would not get rid of part-time jobs for women even though I earn a little less, because I want to have the choice to say 'no, I cannot work that day, because I am taking care of my family.' And, I have the power to do so, because I am working part-time.

The women's voices reflect the interplay between the interpersonal and socio-cultural levels (LaVoi, 2016; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012), where “traditional” gender roles apparently impact on the way the families organise

their lives. A similar perception of gender and the division of labour in society in general, came through in an interview with a female who was full-time employed. She expressed challenges with combining work and family obligations, inconvenient work schedules and much travel, while adding “then you are dependent of a very flexible husband. I guess there are still more men with wives who will work 60–70 percent in order to be flexible than the other way around, I think there is something there.”

In comparison with former research, Reade, Rodgers and Norman (2009) based on two studies (the first of Canadian coaches undertaking introductory coaching certification, the second of high-performance coaches), reported that females more often than males had part-time jobs in coaching. The quantitative part of the present study (phase 1), however, showed no statistical significance between women and men coaching half-time versus full-time (Fasting, Sisjord & Sand, 2017). Relative to the latter it is worth considering of the benefits of a mixed-method approach for the matter of complementarity, where qualitative data may provide a deeper understanding of rather complex phenomena, as in the present case. It also reflects gendered perspectives of the parent role.

### ***The spouse's meaning for the coaching job***

Relative to the code “the meaning of the family” the results showed that influences from the spouse/family for taking on, or continuing, the position as an elite coach, was particularly important for the female interviewees, and less pronounced for the males. The great majority of the women had a spouse who was or had been active in sport, most of them in the same sport discipline as their coaching wives and therefore “was well aware of the requirements”. Many of the spouses were also experienced coaches. None of the men mentioned the wife's sport activities, or her interest in the coaching job except for one man who usually brought his family to camps and competitions, he explained: “We have the opportunity now when the child is young, it will probably get worse when he gets older and will go to school.” Another man, indicated that he did not involve his family in the coaching job, as he said: “the family is very important to me, because that has been a free zone to me, so I have not involved any family in my daily work with the athletes.” From his narrative one can further read that the coaching job was so absorbing, that he needed relax when off duties and concentrate on other, everyday things.

The results showed that the spouse apparently played an active role in many of the females' coaching and decision making, an issue hardly mentioned by the males. Only one man uttered “I had to discuss with my wife.” A few of the

women had been encouraged by their spouse to take the job, expressed in terms like “he noticed qualities in me that I have not seen myself, he said I am doing well, and he was the one to encourage me” and “I have from the very beginning had a husband who believed in this.” In addition to his encouragement, one of the women explained how her spouse had served as mentor for her:

He used to coach on a high level for many years. He is certified coach in two different sports. He has always supported me and was the main reason for me to accept the job. I have learned very much from him and used him as a mentor in many different ways.

Several women revealed negotiation in the family, as one explained:

You know, I did not want to become a coach, because it does not fit in with family life. However, when I was asked [to start coaching] and we as a family discussed it, then it actually seemed possible to combine family with coaching.

Another related that the spouse, an elite-level coach himself, had quit his coaching job to help her. As she explained, he emphasised that she should use her qualifications and gain more experience and knowledge in coaching.

The results are comparable with former research, reporting support and encouragement from the spouse and family as vital for women’s entry into coaching and/or maintaining the job (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Callary, Werthner & Trudel, 2012; Kilty, 2006; Robertson, 2007). The findings are also comparable with studies on female leaders in the private and public sector. For example, a Norwegian study showed that in this group, more were married or lived with a partner and had more children compared to the average Norwegian woman (Amble & Gjerberg, 2009). However, similar with the women in our study, women in leadership positions are a small and select group and there seems to be some specific conditions connected to their private life that makes it feasible. The authors of the study indicate that the partners were of major importance; they had an equal position in their relationships and the vast majority specified support and motivation from their partners as crucial for their career. Hence, women in the kind of occupation perceived as requiring tend to benefit from support at the interpersonal level.

It should be noted that for two of the women the coaching job was strongly interwoven into their family life. One had her husband as co-coach, the other was one of the coaches of the team where her husband played, so both couples used to travel with the family in relation to the job. In the latter situation, her spouse considered quitting elite-sport at the end of the season with the consequence that she would quit as well.

## ***Negotiating family-work interface***

The interviewees' experiences of negotiating the work-family interface relates primarily to the organisational and interpersonal levels, although socio-cultural aspects are interwoven with these two.

### ***Organisational matters***

In this context, organisational matters refer primarily to working conditions, such as contracts, wages and irregular working hours. Some of the interviewees pointed to aspects of unpredictability, as explained by one woman: "I miss more predictability and stability, because you never know for sure. And then you are so dependent on results and economy. There is so much more outside of the sport related issues that count." A male interviewee explained: "I am concerned with security. Not primarily for my own part, but on behalf of my family. And now we have a house and all that stuff, so I am dependent on some sort of predictability." Further, he compared the situation to his life as a single person, when he did not have to bother, while adding, "it's quite a change when you get a family". This also illustrates the distinction between the individual and interpersonal levels (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

A few interviewees pointed to low income in coaching, as a woman explained: "I have worked far more than what I'm employed for. And, the fact that it's badly paid, is nothing positive in the long run, it's running you down over time." A male coach related the income to when he was a teacher at an elite sport school (high school level), and said: "In that job, I earned more, worked less, and had more regular work schedule. But, you know, in coaching we are used to low wages, or nothing." To the latter it should be noted that Norwegian sport is featured by voluntarism, in particular in local sport clubs (Seippel & Skille, 2015).

Furthermore, a great many of the interviewees faced challenges in terms of odd hours and work-family balance/conflicts which is illustrated by former research highlighting conflicts between family commitments and lack of family-friendly policies in the sport organisations (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Kamphoff, 2010; Kerr & Marshall, 2007; Robertson, 2007). Typical comments were "this kind of job is not at all family friendly", or "as an elite coach you work 24/7, it is really a challenge for the family." It should be noted that relatively more women than men were concerned with this topic. Some of them were troubled by the issue of working evenings and weekends, one expressed it this way: "we as parents have to get used to just meeting each other in the doorway" and "I work evenings, and mornings, and I hardly see my husband."

### ***Combining coaching with family life***

When the interviewees spoke about combining coaching and family life, most of them pointed to challenges. Yet, a few highlighted the advantage of flexibility, for example, to work at home with planning etc. and thereby “being there for my kids during the day-time, when they come home from school and such” as a female interviewee explained. For her the situation appeared perfect, she went to practice when the father came home to follow up the kids. A man with two small children used to have practice mornings and evenings interchangeable, which he found favourable: “then you have the time to take them to day-care, or when they were babies, I could stay home all day, and when my wife came home in the afternoon, I went to work.”

The greatest obstacle for many interviewees, both men and women, seems to be the absence from the family over longer periods, for camps and competitions. In that regard, however, a few gender differences appeared in the way they elaborated on the topic. First, women expressed a feeling of guilt for leaving the children for longer periods noting in terms like “it’s just the very feeling, it’s tough when you have a family” and “the bad conscience you feel for those at home, the kids and stuff, although I know they are doing very well with their dad. But, staying away for two to three weeks – that hurts at times.” The statements emphasise several former studies where women expressed the feeling of guilt, particularly in periods of absence from home (Bolorizadeh, Tojari & Zargar, 2013; Bruening & Dixon, 2007). The men’s expressions sounded like “It’s tough, not so bad for me, but most for my wife since she is employed full-time” and “I miss my family, always when I am out I miss my family, although it is also possible to close that door, right?” The statement “close that door” indicates that he was able to forget or disregard the issue, compared to the women’s feeling of guilt, which may be understood as different emotional reactions and coping at the individual level.

Second, only women mentioned the need of other family members’ help “to keep it going”, as one explained: “it was my mother, at times, but that was at the most extreme when I was away two or three weeks, continuously. So, it may be more than enough for the person at home, irrespective of gender.” Another said: “If my husband had a more regular job, there would not be a problem. But we both have really abnormal jobs and working hours, so it is difficult. So, we become dependent on mother in law, or grandparents, right?” The value of support is likewise reported by Dixon and Bruening (2007), where participants in the study with family members living near that they could rely on for support, in contrast to those lacking family members in close proximity. Although, many interviewees revealed traditional gender roles in terms of females’ responsibility for childcare (feeling guilt or finding a substitute), a few women indicated a shared household approach while emphasising the spouse’s flexibility and caring

for the children. One explained, “It’s no problem for my husband when I go away three weeks for the Olympics, he drives, and he is following up the girls just as much as I do.” Another said:

Being a coach for the national team means that you spend much time away for training camps and such. To have small kids during that period, that was quite demanding at times. My husband is however fantastic, he has been there, done all that was needed. And, in the same way, if he had been out travelling, I would certainly have done the same. But, that’s not so common yet, the gender role pattern is still such that it’s more common that it is the men that are out and about.

While family related issues were mostly mentioned by the female interviewees, two males also pointed out that family obligations were a critical issue. They were both coaching sports with long competition seasons and revealed different stories. One had recently decided to step down due to family obligations:

Last year I decided that I cannot travel that much, because I have a little boy back home and a wife who needs to see me once in a while. So, I said I cannot travel. I could quite well have played a role on the national team without so much travelling, but the federation did not want me to.

The statement indicates that the role as a father and spouse was not compatible with the requirements from the federation. From his narrative one can read that he used to coach part-time: “for my part it has been something additional, right? I could never make a living of it.” When he was single, he said, then it was possible to handle an extra job. But not with a family, because “the family is priority one, it’s just so, that becomes the most important, that I must adjust to, that’s how I see it.” According to LaVoi and Dutove (2012), the change in his life situation may be explained from the interpersonal level instead of the individual level.

The other one did also speak about periods of much travelling however, adding that the situation had improved the last few years: “We have better arrangements in that respect, now we are rarely out travelling more than two weeks at a time. During winter, it’s like in one month we are out for two weeks and home two weeks.” Later in the interview, he explained that all the national coaches were in a similar situation with small children, which assumingly had given rise to some sort of negotiation, as he told:

All the coaches that are relevant right now, they are at the age of having small children, but it is accidental that it concerns all of them now. It’s because there are so few to choose from, if there were someone without [children], probably they would have been picked. However, all of them got the job before they got kids, so, you can’t just fire them only for that. But, it’s probably why we find it challenging too, because we have kids?

The problems with combining the father/coach roles is examined in a study of Dabbs, Graham and Dixon (2016). They found that males, particularly those with children experience the highest levels of conflict early in their

careers. This seems reasonable since an early career often coincides with family establishment. The males' narratives also indicate that the issue is not solely a "women's problem" although most attention in scholarly research has been devoted to female coaches. As suggested by Graham and Dixon (2014), the context of coaching subculture is featured by cultural norms reflecting hyper-masculinity, time requirements and sacrifice, in which fathers often face strong demands from both family and work, and that women and men may experience the context of coaching differently – and handle the situations differently.

An interesting topic in the two narratives, was the federation's way of handling the issue. With reference to LaVoi and Dutove (2012), the first case may be understood from a top-down perspective, where the federation did not accommodate to the coach's family situation. The other case may be explained from a bottom-up perspective, since the federation apparently had adjusted to the coaches' wishes. However, from the way the latter is explained one may interpret a "supply and demand" discourse, because "if there were someone without [children], probably they would have been picked." Yet, the results show that it is possible to make changes at the organisational level based on requirements on the interpersonal level. As LaVoi (2016) reminds us, power refers to the dynamics in power relations, which may function both ways – top-down and bottom-up.

### **Concluding remarks**

In summary, the results showed that coaching at the elite level may conflict with family lives for both women and men, and particularly for coaches in sports with long competition seasons and periods away from home. The findings revealed that women and men were coping differently with the issue. The women were apparently more bothered as manifested in guilty conscience, reflecting the interplay between the individual and socio-cultural levels in terms of perceptions of motherhood, and women's responsibility in finding substitutes for child-care that relate to the interpersonal level.

Another gender difference on the interpersonal level is the spouse's meaning for the women's coaching position. First, personal experience as an athlete, for many of them also as a coach, and often in the same sport discipline. Another feature is the spouses' encouragement and support in the decision to enter the coaching job or maintaining it. The males' narratives give little information about the spouse's sport activities or interests, and the spouse appears less visible in decisions about the coaching job, except for the two coaches with small children. The finding may indicate that males, far more often than females, make independent decisions about entering or maintaining a coaching job, which may reflect the gendered

labour market, with men as obvious participants. With reference to LaVoi and Dutove (2012) one may suggest that the interpersonal level tend to have a stronger impact on women than men in their job decisions.

Gender differences were also observed in relation to full-time versus part-time coaching. Males had coaching in addition to regular work whereas females had part-time coaching as their main occupation, where a traditional gender role pattern became conspicuous reflecting how the individual and interpersonal levels are closely connected to the socio-cultural level, in terms of gendered perceptions of the division of labour in society.

In contrast, the findings also revealed changing gender roles in the interviewees' negotiation of the work-family life. A few of the women noted equality in childcare and household obligations in their personal lives, while admitting that their way of organising family life was probably not the most common. Likewise, we identified younger, male coaches who gave family life higher priority than the coaching job, which turned out differently for the two. One was able to negotiate better working conditions, the other was not and decided to quit. The two men's narratives illustrate the dynamics in power relations, which may function both ways – top-down and bottom-up (LaVoi, 2016).

Although, the results primarily relate to the interpersonal level described from a bottom-up perspective, the coaches' narratives reflect organisational and socio-cultural dimensions which illustrates that the levels intersect in multiple ways. As argued by Dixon and Bruening (2005), to use an integrated lens in exploring the impact of work-family conflict, may result in organisational change in work-family policies and culture, which in turn may lead to cultural changes within the sport world. In that regard, studies including both genders may extend our knowledge and provide a better understanding of gendered experiences in the coaching professions – not solely being a women's issue. As such, the present study has advanced knowledge in this area by evidencing how women and men may face similar as well as different challenges and opportunities as elite-level coaches with respect to the work-family interface.

In terms of limitations of the study, one should recall the gender bias in the sample where the number of female interviewees is double that of the male participants. Having equalised the numbers might provide a wider picture of the men's narratives. However, taking into account the aim of the overall study, that was to examine women's experiences in elite coaching, the sample was decided purposively. Another limitation to address, is that we have not referred to each particular sport discipline, which might have painted a more detailed picture since the results showed great variations, particularly with regard to long periods away from home.



Concerning implications of the findings, it seems reasonable to point to requirements from the federations' side, which leads us to emphasise the need of proactive initiatives in order to facilitate the combination of family life and coaching, for both women and men. Hence, one should take into account structural and cultural aspects, since the work-family balance is not simply an issue at the interpersonal level. According to Graham and Dixon (2014), the sub-culture of coaching is featured by cultural norms reflecting hyper-masculinity, and Dixon and Bruening (2005) point to the long-term influence of the male dominated culture particularly with respect to female coaches' working conditions.

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