‘I didn’t know girls could coach football that well’: The experiences of female football coaches in the South East of England

Sport in Society

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Abstract

Although women's football has seen a significant growth of participation in recent years, this has not reflected in the number of female coaches. In this semi-structured interview research, we examine 10 female football coaches' experiences in the South East of England. Our findings document three central findings: (1) participants were motivated to pursue a coaching career either due to a love of football, an alternative to a playing career, or were inspired by a recent increase of female role models in the game; (2) the institutional support networks (i.e., those established by the game's governing body, the Football Association) were inadequate, forcing them to seek support from elsewhere, such as their family; and (3) consistent with previous research, all participants in this research had encountered some form of sexism in their coaching careers. Accordingly, this article contributes to a growing body of research centered on female coaches' experiences of football.

Introduction

Women's football in England is in a period of significant growth. Indeed, recent successes of the England National Women's National Team (the Lionesses) – who won the 2022 European Championships – has helped to further catapult the women's game into the public imagination (Williams, 2022). But, despite this, research suggests that there remain a range of individual and sociocultural barriers preventing the representation and progression of female football coaches (e.g., Barnes and Adams 2022; Bryan, Pope and Rankin-Wright 2021; Clarkson, Cox and Thelwell 2019; de Haan and Knoppers 2020; Knoppers, de Haan, Norman and LaVoi 2022; Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018; Norman, Rankin-Wright and Allison 2018; Sawiuk, Lewis and Taylor 2021).

The present article, which draws on data collected before the 2022 European Championships, contributes to this growing body of recent research. It does so by examining the experiences of 10 female football coaches in the South East of England. Specifically, through semi-structured interviews, we examine these coaches' route into football coaching, their support mechanisms, and a variety of negative experiences that these coaches had encountered both on coaching courses and during their every-day coaching practice. We conclude the article by making recommendations to ensure more positive overall experiences of female football coaches.

Sport, Gender, and Women's Exclusion

The antecedents of today's sporting culture can be traced to the years of the second Industrial Revolution—the mid-1800s through early-1900s. It was at this point that the organization, regulation, and codification of most dominant teamsports – including football – occurred (Guttmann, 1978). This cultural epoch can also be characterized by the modernization of working practices, with a shift, for the first time, from agrarian

practices to a focus on the male breadwinner (Cancian 1987). Against this backdrop, sport was thought to instill the qualities of discipline and obedience necessary for *men* working in dangerous occupations (Rigauer 1981). In particular, factory workers were 'required' to sacrifice their time and health for the sake of earning wages to support their dependent families. Predictably, participation in sport taught boys to reinforce the value of self-sacrifice (Anderson 2009).

Because of its historical role in facilitating normative masculine ideals, sport has served to privilege men—particularly straight men. Indeed, Birley (1993) argues that women's role in sporting history is best defined as a 'passive spectator', with Burton (2015, 156) noting that sport must be examined as a 'gendered space'. Thus, unsurprisingly, women's football has a turbulent history, characterized by exclusion, marginalization, and under-representation. Women's football enjoyed great success in England during and after World War I, however; most famously, a women's match between Dick, Kerr Ladies and St Helen's at Everton's Goodison Park attracted 53,000 spectators, with thousands more unable to enter the already-full stadium (Williams, 2013).

The following year, in 1921, the Football Association (FA) – English football's governing body – banned all women's matches with affiliated clubs and football grounds. Its ruling infamously described football as 'quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged' (Skillen, Byrne, Carrier and James 2022). Although an English Ladies' Football Association (ELFA) was established in the immediate aftermath, it had only limited success, and was disbanded a decade later. The FA's ban on the women's game lasted five decades and was lifted in 1971. Since then, the women's game has encountered a myriad of challenging gendered norms, including stereotypical attitudes and gender and sexual discrimination (e.g., Cox and Thompson 2001; Harris 2005; Scraton *et al.* 1999).

Since the inaugural Women's World Cup in 1991, women's participation in football across the world has increased considerably (de Haan and Knoppers 2020). Acknowledging this increase, FIFA comment on their website that, 'Women's football is the single biggest growth opportunity in football today'. Supporting this claim, at the time of writing – in the summer of 2022 – football is, according to Sport England, the most popular teamsport for women in the UK. Moreover, since the FA's *Gameplan for Growth* was published in 2017, the number of women (and girls) playing football in England has increased to approximately 3.5m, up from approximately two million, five years earlier. Naturally, there has also been a steady increase of officially sanctioned teams over the past decade.

This has also likely been impacted by the establishment of the Women's Super League (WSL), established as English football's flagship elite women's league in 2010 (with its first season in 2011), and relative success of the England National Women's Team. The WSL, which began as one league (a second division, WSL2, was added in 2013), initially operated over the summer before being moved to the winter, in 2016 (Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse and Sequerra 2018). Since its establishment, there has been an increase in the number of professional teams and a considerable growth of positive media coverage (Bourne and Pitkin 2019; Pope and Petty 2019).

There have also been consistent record attendances at the women's FA Cup Finals, with the most recent final, in May 2022, having nearly 50,000 spectators. Also, the most recent Women's European Championships, held in England in the summer of 2022, saw the highest-ever attendance not just at the final (either in the men's game or the women's game), but more than double the total attendance from any other Women's European Championships.

Despite this growth and increased professionalization, however, the elite women's game is 'increasingly complex and characterized by its gendered precariousness' (Cuvlin 2021, 4). Indeed, Culvin and Bowes (2021) highlight the incompatibility of motherhood in professional women's football and how these players do not enjoy the same job security, employment conditions or economic renumeration as male players. Moreover, Culvin's (2021) analysis of the working conditions for professional women footballers found that the 'majority of players…are undervalued at their clubs and are not treated as legitimate professionals' (12). The COVID-19 pandemic also negatively impacted elite-level women's football, including, as summarized by Clarkson *et al.* (2022), organizational and economic repercussions; uncertainty of player contracts, migration and investment; and player wellbeing (see also Souter, Tonge and Culvin 2022).

Women as Football Coaches: Participation and Barriers

The Women's Sports Foundation estimate that there are over a million fewer opportunities for women and girls to participate in sport, compared to men (LaVoi 2016). In football, Shaw (2006) argues that many clubs are strong masculine spaces. Therefore, the very presence of women as coaches remains ideologically problematic (Knoppers, Claringbould and Dortants 2015). Evidencing women's under-representation in English football, the FA (2018) estimate that around 70% of applications for leading positions are by men. Norman's (2008) research showed that only a quarter of qualified football coaches in England are female. This is likely a contributing factor as to why men continue to occupy senior management and leadership positions.

In the elite game, fewer than half of WSL managers since the league's inception just over a decade ago have been women. However, the FA's *Gameplan for Growth* notes that this has increased from three (in the 2016-17 season) to 13 (in the 2019-20

season). At the time of writing, 50% of WSL clubs were managed by a female coach. Outside of England, research indicates a similar trend; Filho and Retiig's (2018) analysis, for example, showed that since the Women's Champions League began in 2011, only 23 head coaches were women, compared to 147 male coaches. Moreover, there are also no women's coaches currently managing men's elite teams.

More generally, however, there has been an increase of women in football coaching roles. Indeed, the FA show that there were more than 5000 newly qualified coaches between 2017 and 2020, and a 67% increase in female head coaches with England National Teams. There has also been a steady increase of the number of female coaches with a UEFA 'A' Licence, from 41 (in 2017), to 82 (in 2020); however, this is in comparison to more than 2000 men (across the UK). But despite these improvements, Sawiuk, Lewis and Taylor (2021, 124) argue that:

> The FA have begun to address the under-representation of female coaches in the game with the 2017-2020 *Gameplan for Growth* strategy…[however], we caution them not to be self-congratulatory. Although the increased numbers may be deemed positive, this does not mean that the courses are more inclusive or that certain practices have diminished.

Thus, despite the statistical increase noted above, 'the coaching of football', as Knoppers *et al.* (2022, 880) write, 'remains a strongly male dominated position', and women face considerably more barriers than male coaches (LaVoi, McGarry and Fisher 2019; Norman, 2010; Shaw and Slack, 2002). LaVoi and Dutove (2012) organize these barriers, in an ecological model, from the most proximal (individual), to the most distal (sociocultural).

These barriers include an absence of role models (e.g., Avery, Tonidandel and Phillips 2008), family responsibilities and commitments (e.g., Bruening and Dixon 2007; Dixon and Bruening 2007), gender stereotyping (e.g., Clarkson, Cox and Thelwell 2019; Harris and Clayton 2002; Schlesinger and Weigelt-Schlesinger 2012),

unwelcoming coaching environments (e.g., Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018), a lack of opportunity (e.g., Shaw and Allen 2009), burnout (e.g., Durand-Bush, Collins and McNeill 2009), sexism and sexual harassment (e.g., Cunningham and Sagas 2003; Fasting and Brackenridge 2009; Fink 2016), and homophobia (e.g., Keats 2016; Norman 2012b, 2013). Clarkson, Cox and Thelwell (2017, 73-4) thus conclude that

> Women coaches' experiences, therefore, do not appear equitable in the football workplace, suggesting gender as an influential factor in a coach's career growth…[There is] limited career mobility…tokenism, [and] under-currents of sexism.

Indeed, these patriarchal structures have prevented female coaches' progression through the ranks (e.g., Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018), leading to a high level of dropout (or careers stalling) (Norman, Rankin-Wright and Allison 2018).

The FA's latest strategy for women and girl's football, however – *Inspiring Positive Change* – launched in 2020, highlights coaching as one of its key transformational objectives. Indeed, a core objective is to, by 2024, develop 'exceptional coaches at every level of the game who are representative of our society' (p. 37). To do this, they aim to focus on increased learning opportunities, continuing professional development (CPD), and implement a mentorship scheme—all of which are specific to the women's game. Given the increased focus on the women's game, there is a need to re-examine the environment for changes for grassroots coaches—as this article now addresses.

Methods

Participants

This research draws on semi-structured interviews with 10 female football coaches in the South East of England. At the time of data collection, participants were aged between 20 and 43 (most were in their mid-twenties), all but two were White British (the

exceptions were Black Caribbean and British Asian), and self-identified as either working- or lower-middle-class. To ensure that findings were accurately representing active football coaches, eligibility criteria for participation in the research was measured both by coaching qualifications and coaching experience (of football at both youth and adult levels, as well as both male and female football).

Overall, three participants held the FA Level 1 qualification; two held the FA Level 2 qualification; four participants held the UEFA B Licence; and one held the UEFA A Licence (the most respected coaching qualification before the UEFA Pro Licence). For clarity, a list of participants and their respective qualifications can be seen in Table 1. At the time of data collection, all participants were based in the South East of England and had developed their experience in this area.

Insert Table 1 here.

Participants were recruited in two ways. First, the research project was shared on social media, and those who were eligible encouraged to contact the first author (six participants were located using this approach). Second, we relied on a snowball sampling approach, where existent research participants recommended various other coaches in their social network to participate in the research. While several recommendations were made, many declined; thus, only four participants were recruited through this approach. We also recognize here that snowball sampling can often result in the recruitment of a homogenous sample (e.g., Sparkes and Smith 2014); this, combined with the geographical location of participants – all but two were based in or around a large city in the South East of England – means that we place restrictions on the generalizability of the results in this article.

Procedures

Given that all data was collected in March 2021, during the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online by the first author. They ranged from between approximately 40 and 75 minutes, averaging around 55 minutes. Prior to each interview, participants were emailed documentation entailing and reiterating the overall aims of the research and contact details of the first and second authors should they have had any queries or wished to stay informed about the research project. They were also emailed all relevant ethical documentation, and each participant signed a consent form. Ethical approval was granted by the first and second author's institution prior to data collection, and all ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (BSA) were followed. This included ensuring and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process – as evidenced by the use of pseudonyms – and removing any reference to specific clubs and/or locations.

Interviews began with a general discussion of topical issues in both football and coaching more broadly; adopting this approach – and engaging in "shop talk" (Cushion and Jones 2006) – has previously been documented as an effective way to develop rapport between participants previously unfamiliar to one another (e.g., Magrath 2017). The aims of the project were then outlined to participants, before interviews then focused on three main themes: (1) participants' background, and route into football; (2) the development of participants' careers in the game; and (3) participants' overall experience as a football coach.

All interviews were (securely) transcribed using the audio transcription software, Trint, and were coded upon completion. An inductive framework was then adopted with a thematic analysis (Charmaz 2014) employed when analyzing interview data. Adopting

this approach allowed each author to work together to identify and analyze the key findings in the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2022). We also endeavored, as a research team, to ensure that adopted a consistent approach to thematic analysis, and thus followed the guidance laid out by Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016). This included a systematic, exhaustive and comprehensive approach to coding, as well as a detailed interpretation of analytic claims. This ensured a rigorous and deliberative approach, focused on *quality* throughout the data analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2022).

Results

Coaching and Representation

Although football has been principally organized and structured around boys and men (Dunning 1986), women's participation has significantly increased in recent years. For participants in the present research, football was a central part of their lives, and each of them had played the game from a young age. It was this love of football which was the main contributing factor in becoming a coach. Sophie, for example, an experienced UEFA B Licence coach, said, 'I've played football all my life and I realized that I wanted to give something back and become a coach'. Similarly, Rachel, an experienced UEFA A Licence coach, said, 'I always enjoyed playing and I wanted to stay in the game when I stopped. I became a coach, and now I love that too'. And Amanda, an FA Level 1 coach, said, 'I love playing and being around the game. I still play, but now I coach now as well…I just basically can't keep away from football!'

For two participants, career-threatening injuries prevented them from further pursing their playing careers, so they instead turned their attention to coaching. Jessica, a UEFA B Licence coach, said, 'I was told I couldn't play at that level anymore. One of my former clubs got in touch and, after a year away from the game, I started doing

coaching and my badges [qualifications]’. The same was also true for Jordan, an FA Level 1 coach: ‘I was playing at a good level, but then got injured and couldn’t play anymore. Coaching was basically the next best thing’. And for Claire, an FA Level 1 coach, a strong desire to improve the experiences of young, female footballers was her biggest motivation for becoming a coach: ‘When I played, my coaches weren’t very good…So I wanted to coach and make things better for them. That’s why I became a coach’. For the participants in this research, then, motivation to establish a coaching career was multifaceted, albeit largely centered around a love of football.

Contrasting from previous research on gendered role modelling (Meier 2015; Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018; Norman 2012a), around a third of participants in this research spoke of how their interest in football was also coupled with – and inspired by – an increase of female role models in the game. Kerri, for example, an experienced UEFA B Licenced coach, said, ‘Hope Powell, who was England manager at the time [when she first started to watch football], was a very visible female coach. I read quite a lot about her experiences in football’. Similarly, Lucy, an FA Level 1 coach, said:

> There haven’t really been that many role models in the past, but now there is an increase. I look up to people like Casey Stoney [a former England player and now manager in the US] because she’s a great player and coach, and has also been involved in the FA.

Interestingly, however, this comment was caveated with, ‘Normally, though, I think you see more female role models in the grassroots game [than at elite level]’.

For Jordan, her biggest female role model was someone less high-profile: a coach from her formative years as a player. ‘One of my coaches I had when I was younger’, she said, ‘is definitely a role model. She was a great coach and is now at the FA now as well’.

Somewhat paradoxically, however – and despite the increase of female role models – these participants also acknowledged that there remains a general under-representation of women in football. Jordan, for example, said, 'There is still not enough female representation. We can see that in the fact that an U10s girls' team has an equal amount of male and female coaches, but a boys' team has only male coaches'. Similarly, Amanda said, 'I think there is definitely still an issue. It would be the next big area to develop by the FA'. And Claire provided an example of the gender inequity in her local County Football Association:

> I read a statistic that there are 200 qualified female football coaches in [redacted county]. If all of them are out there coaching, that's great. But I don't physically see them coaching in the leagues. There's only one local [girls'] league, with lots of teams, but most of the coaches in the league are still men.

Accordingly, even though the female coaches in this research acknowledged the role of female role models – and outlined their importance – they still recognized the under-representation of female coaches.

Support Mechanisms

Given the under-representation and often negative experiences of female football coaches (e.g., Clarkson, Cox and Thelwell 2019; Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018; Norman 2012a; Sawiuk, Lewis and Taylor 2021; Walker and Bopp 2011), ensuring a robust support network was discussed by these participants as being an important aspect of their experience as a coach. For eight of the 10 participants, they found this support and encouragement from their families. Lucy, for example, said, 'I was 100% supported by my family. My brother is a football coach and a footballer, so he was a big influence for me going into coaching'. Similarly, Kerri said, 'I had two brothers who play football. They were always keen to be helpful for my interest, both playing then, later,

coaching'. And Alison, an FA Level 2 coach, said, 'My family have always supported my interest to play football. I feel quite lucky that that's always been the case'.

Only two of the participants in this research did not have the same levels of support as outlined above. This included Jessica, an experienced FA Level 2 coach, who said, 'I didn't have any support at all from my family…I only really had the support from my friends, especially my local team who I played for'. Jaz, an FA Level 2 coach, had to overcome cultural barriers owing to her family's Asian background. She said, 'My culture is a bit different. My family were a bit "why are you doing that? Why are you coaching football?" I think it's a stereotypical thing within parts of our culture'. Overcoming cultural barriers and stereotypes is consistent with previous research on (British) Asian involvement in football (Ahmad 2011). However, once Jaz had explained that this was her passion, and continued to build her coaching experience, her family were more open: 'They accepted it once they realized. After that, there was no stopping me!' Nevertheless, this example serves as a reminder that women's involvement in football is not just subject to gender barriers, but can also be impacted by broader cultural barriers, too.

With respect to more football-specific support – that is, support tailored towards these women's coaching practices – around half of participants inferred that they would like a dedicated support network for female coaches. Ensuring that female coaches had a place to discuss and debate coaching issues was identified by Norman (2012a) a decade ago as an important mechanism through which confidence could be built and support could be offered. Although an e-platform does currently exist – the FA's Boot Room community, described as 'the home of coaching and learning resources for English football' – the women in this research wanted the female coaches' area to be more explicit in its support.

Sophie, for example, said, ‘If we had a networking community where we could share sessions, or meet up online and discuss certain topics or experiences, I think it would be a real help for us’. Likewise, Jaz commented that:

> I think having a female coaches’ support network, where we can talk about how I might’ve struggled with my session plan today, and ask for help, would be a great addition. The chance to get it off your chest and just talk about it, rather than Google it, would be invaluable.

And, finally, Rachel said, ‘I think, in terms of grassroots football, some kind of network for female coaches to get together and discuss coaching is really needed…A bit more than just the [online] forum’. While this is not a new recommendation for female coaches, it nonetheless remains an important one to both offer support and to reduce the loneliness and isolation often experienced by these women (Norman, 2012a). ‘When things occasionally go wrong, and there’s no one to talk to…It does make you feel quite lonely and question whether it’s really worth it’, said Alison.

That said**,** however**,** a lack of institutional resources may prevent these participants’ suggestions materializing (e.g., Parnell *et al.,* 2021); while research from further afield suggests that such efforts fail to address larger-scale systemic and structural issues which often prevent women from progressing not just as coaches, but also in sport more broadly (Barnes and Adams, 2022).

Negative Experiences

Alongside their route into coaching, this research also focuses on these coaches’ overall experiences of their coaching practice. As with female coaches in other research (e.g., Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018), these women felt there was extra pressure to ‘prove themselves’ in order to be accepted in football. Evidencing this point, Rachel said, ‘We’ve got to prove ourselves more. It’s hard because I don’t understand why, but

when I speak to other female coaches, they say the same…We have to prove we know what we're talking about'. Similarly, Jessica said:

> In my experience, you have to prove yourself [as a female coach]. I've had times where I've delivered a session and players say, "we don't do it that way". It's frustrating because there's always more than one way of doing things. I was getting to the point where I think, 'can I do this? Is it because I'm female?'

The same has also been true for Lucy, who also felt the burden of proof on her shoulders. She said, 'They start to respect you a bit more when they see you play a bit and when they can see that you're knowledgeable enough. That helps to change mindsets…But the initial stage is still there'.

This added pressure was also coupled with persistence of sexism in football. Indeed, consistent with a plethora of existing research (e.g., Clarkson, Cox and Thelwell 2019; Fielding-Lloyd and Meân 2011; Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018; Norman 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Sawiuk, Lewis and Taylor 2021), each of the 10 participants in this research had encountered some form of sexism in their coaching careers. Jordan, for example, said, 'I've had inappropriate comments made to me. The most obvious is when I coach the kids' team and they will say things to me like "my dad says you're hot"'. Similarly, Jessica said, 'Shortly after I finished my Level 2, I was coaching a session at a club and at the end the guy who arranges everything said to me, 'I didn't think female coaches got paid''. Jaz described a similar encounter: 'I was coaching a [kids'] and after one of them had finished a parent came up to me and said, 'I didn't know girls could coach football that well''. And in one extreme case, Claire said that she had had 'a few kids quit the team because the parents didn't agree that they should have a female coach'.

Perhaps more alarmingly, however, three-quarters of the participants in this research had also encountered sexism from male participants whilst studying for their

coaching qualifications. Indeed, similar to the participants in Lewis, Roberts and Andrews' (2018) research, these women were made to feel unwelcome and unwanted. Evidencing this, Lucy said:

> On one of my courses, this guy scoffed at me and said, "well, you'll definitely pass because you're a woman", and I basically felt totally discredited. I had worked hard to get there, and I was basically treated as if they just needed more female UEFA B coaches.

Likewise, Sophie, who was also studying for a UEFA B Licence, also recalled a similar situation:

> One of the goalkeeping coaches from the FA delivered a session to how to include goalkeepers in your [coaching] practice. We were working on corners, and he said to me, in a patronizing way, 'Move closer if you need to'. I was annoyed, but it didn't really affect me…It might for some people, though.

Alison said, 'On a couple of my courses, a few snide comments have been made, and it just feels like you're a bit of an outsider, sometimes'. And Claire recalled that on her FA Level 2 course, 'One man just wouldn't talk to me at all. Others didn't take any of my ideas. It was [pause]…interesting!' For Claire, however, this example acted as an added motivation to succeed: 'It made me work harder to try and always prove and push yourself as much as you can'.

These experiences – coupled with the fact that in a total of approximately 25 coaching courses completed by the women in this research, they were the only female on the courses nearly three-quarters of the time (see also Nash and Sproule 2012) – are enough to warrant their desire to complete female-only coaching courses. Amanda, for example, said, 'I wouldn't have done a mixed course [in hindsight], so a female-only course is a good option'. Similarly, Jaz commented, 'I was the only woman on my Level 1 course, and that experience made me want to do a female-only course when I did my Level 2'. Even for those who did not explicitly discuss female-only courses,

they did express a desire to attend a course with a female friend or colleague. Lucy, for example, said, ‘I only did my Level 2 because I was with another female who was a friend. I wouldn’t want to be the only one [female] there again’. And Jordan said, ‘It can be off-putting…You feel like you need to go with a friend’.

Discussion

Competitive teamsports such as football have typically been a ‘male preserve’ (Dunning 1986, 79), and described by Messner and Sabo (1990) as an institution created by men, for men. Football, in particular, should be recognized as a gendered space (see Burton 2015); one from which women have been historically excluded. This exclusion is best evident in England with the 50-year FA ban of all women’s matches with affiliated clubs and football grounds, which was finally lifted in 1971. In more recent years, women’s football has grown in popularity across the world, and in the UK is the most popular teamsport for women—even before the Lionesses’ recent success in the European Championships. This increase of playing opportunities, however, has not manifested in coaching roles (LaVoi and Dutove 2012); indeed, despite recent efforts to tackle the gendered disparity, women remain statistically outnumbered (Knoppers *et al.* 2022). By drawing on 10 semi-structured interviews, the current research explored the experiences of female football coaches situated in the South East of England.

Results indicate that the coaches interviewed in this research were motivated to pursue a coaching career for multiple reasons. First, football had been a central part of their lives from a young age; indeed, this love of the game meant a strong desire to positively influence the game – and their enjoyment of it – in some way. Second, a small number of participants had sustained injuries serious enough to prevent them pursuing their playing career; thus, to maintain their involvement with football, they turned to

coaching (some even phrased this as ‘giving something back’). And third – perhaps most notably given its incongruence with the findings of previous research (e.g., Meier 2015; Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018; Norman 2012a) – some participants also spoke of ‘being inspired’ to pursue their coaching career by an increased number of female role models in the game. Paradoxically, however – and consistent with other previous research (e.g., Bryan, Pope and Rankin-Wright 2021) on women’s leadership in football – participants unanimously agreed that women remain under-represented in the industry, and that female role models in the game were hard to come by.

Because of this under-representation, the women interviewed for this research discussed the importance of having a robust support network; a mechanism to guide them through their individual coaching journey. Problematically, however – particularly for participants with the least coaching experience or for those working their way up the coaching ranks – the support they received from ‘inside the system’ was limited, and there was evidence to suggest the need for a more formalized mentorship scheme. In its absence, however, most participants instead had to rely on the strong levels of support and encouragement provided to them by members of their family (c.f., Bruening and Dixon 2007; Dixon and Bruening 2007; Greenhill *et al.* 2009).

Given that this was the case, it is perhaps unsurprising that a recommendation of this work echoes that of Norman’s (2012a) research from *a decade ago;* to have a dedicated support network in place for female coaches. Remedying this shortcoming would, as Norman (2012a, 232) wrote, allow ‘individuals to share coaching practices, bring practical or professional issues for discussion and form an important component of women’s continuing professional development away from an often male-dominated environment’. Indeed, even by its very presence, a dedicated network for female coaches provides not just support, but also greater visibility – another important element raised

by participants in this research – to attempt to smash the glass (or concrete) ceiling (Norman, Rankin-Wright and Allison 2018). Alongside the practical implications, establishing a network may also positively impact female coaches' work-life balance; have a positive effect on retention; and even go some way to tackling feelings of isolation often experienced by female coaches.

While the FA's recent commitment to implement a mentorship program for female coaches is noteworthy here, it is, at the time of writing, difficult to predict whether this will be impactful in addressing some of the issues raised in this research. Moreover, while this is no doubt a positive move to better support female coaches, it does not necessarily change the sexist environment of football. Nor does it provide a solution to the need for 'long-term strategies to eliminate the sexism and harassment that make coaching a difficult occupational choice for many women' (Barnes and Adams 2022, 142). Indeed, there is a need for more complete strategies aimed at improving gender inequality in sport.

Nevertheless, introducing such a program may act as a sticking plaster in providing an important and safe space for those coaches on the receiving end of sexism, misogynistic attitudes, or indeed any other form of discrimination (e.g., Clarkson, Cox and Thelwell 2018; Fielding-Lloyd and Meân 2011; Norman 2008)—as was, regrettably, the case in this research.

These experiences ranged from what we refer to as *implicit* forms of discrimination such as the added pressure female coaches feel to prove their belonging in the coaching realm (e.g., Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018); and, of course, more *explicit* forms of discrimination, such as inappropriate, often sexualized and insulting comments and parents removing their child in protest at having a female coach. Congruent with Sawiuk, Lewis and Taylor's (2021) research, some participants even received multiple

disparaging comments (from male coaches and/or developer) when attending a coaching course or qualification. Accordingly, we concur with these authors' analysis that football coaching qualifications are 'currently delivered by men for the consumption of men and reproduced by men' (Sawiuk, Lewis and Taylor 2021, 124).

To address this issue, we echo our participants' assertions – as well as calls in other recent research (e.g., Lewis, Roberts and Andrews 2018) – for providers to offer an increasing number of women-only coaching courses. Doing so would likely provide a more inclusive environment away from the sexist, androcentric atmosphere of 'mainstream' courses; it may also combat feelings of isolation caused by being the sole female candidate on a course. While implementing female-only courses may, again, not directly address the androcentric culture that exists on coaching courses, it would provide a safe and encouraging environment for female coaches. Additionally, it may also be an effective strategy to encourage more women into the male-dominated world of coaching.

Conclusion

In summary, it is clear from our analysis that the experiences of female coaches in grassroots football have improved, but there remain significant issues, and football remains an inherently gendered space. We therefore argue that there are some important implications for coach education: these include a more concrete and robust support network, either through a physical and/or remote mentorship scheme, and enhanced calls for an increase of women-only coaching courses. Implementing these changes would, we hope, further increase (the opportunity for) a clearer pathway to improve the representation of female coaches at all levels of the game.

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Table 1

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Highest qualification
Jordan	White British	FA Level 1
Jessica	White British	UEFA A Licence
Rachel	White British	UEFA B Licence
Lucy	White British	FA Level 1
Kerri	White British	UEFA B Licence
Amanda	White British	FA Level 1
Claire	Black Caribbean	FA Level 2
Sophie	White British	UEFA B Licence
Jaz	British Asian	FA Level 2
Alison	White British	UEFA B Licence