

Female sport administrators' experiences of organisational fit in the workplace

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Abstract

Gender inequality in South African sport has been legislated against by a number of constitutionally binding Acts. Although these policies have done much to address the general absence of women in leadership positions in sport, this absence is undoubtedly linked to gender inequality in sport. This is a reflection of the realities which shape women's understanding of their organizational experiences in the workplace. The purpose of this study was to report on female sport administrators' experiences of organisational fit in their places of work with regard to their experiences of resistance and exclusion, decision making, the absence of women in leadership positions and tokenism in sport. A qualitative method was used to explore organisational fit as experienced by participants in their places of work. Candidates were purposively selected to reflect the cultural and historical diversity of the women in leadership positions in sport in the Western Cape. Data was collected by using semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Reflexivity and trustworthiness were ensured by doing member checks, clarifying researcher bias and peer review and debriefing. A key finding of this study was that the experiences of these participants are not that of token members in sport and in their sport organisations. Findings in this study also show that there are differences in how men respond to the women's entry into sport. Further conclusions and recommendations are offered.

Keywords: Organisational fit, decision making, leadership, tokenism, women in leadership.

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Introduction

Despite the government efforts to reduce in-gender in sports, there are still very few women in top administrative positions in sport (South African Sports Commission, 2004). This development has been inextricably linked to gender inequality. Within male dominated areas, such as sport, lack of success reflects the reality of women's experiences of exclusion in the workplace (Ellison, 2001). This level of perceived success could be as a result of organisational fit which refers to the level of comfort or discomfort experienced by women in their organisations (Cassel & Walsh (1994) cited in Simpson, 2000). Furthermore, it highlights how the imbalances within different hierarchical levels shape the experiences of women further down the hierarchy.

Jackson (2001) claims that women are less likely to assume leadership roles in organisations. This is due to the fact that women are allocated to lower ranked tasks with less visibility and are not given a variety of jobs or special assignments which would enhance their visibility and expand their career (Jackson, 2001). The formal authority structures of bureaucracies endow some positions with more power than others. Most people with significant hierarchical power are men (Elliot & Smith, 2004). Even organisations with more female than male employees are usually directed or administered by men. This means that a gendered-power differential is perpetuated in sport organisations where women lack power in formal authority structures, while men retain the most powerful positions.

As a result of the underrepresentation of women in sport administration, sport is a site where social relations that underpin women's experiences of social exclusion are persuasively reproduced. It is therefore a prime site for challenging gender ideology and for encouraging involvement by the most disempowered women (Collins & Kay, 2003). Even though there are some opportunities for women in decision-making positions, they are still subject to discrimination and are unable to fill those positions. This is a reflection of how the advancement of women into leadership positions appears to be related to dominant chauvinistic organisational practices. Hargreaves (1997) reported that in South Africa women were given far fewer resources than men in terms of equipment, facilities, funding, coaching, and sponsorship and media exposure. Even when women were given more resources, this did not lead to more women occupying leadership positions (South African Sports Commission, 2004). A number of strategies to popularize women as leaders in sport administration were attempted. By appointing women in leadership roles, they were to serve as role models to other women. Furthermore, men in senior positions on a governmental level could advocate for gender equity as they were also viewed as valuable mentors (South African Sports Commission, 2004).

Further barriers to women in leadership cadre were positions related to organisational dynamics. Both token and non-token women highlighted that with regard to organisational fit, women were subject to practices which are seen as part of the male culture (Foster, 1999). The common perception is based on dominant beliefs that men are natural leaders. This leads to the assumption that women are not suitable candidates for leadership positions on the basis of their gender. Consequently, as also highlighted by Jackson (2001) this leads to women not pursuing leadership positions because they assume that males are more entitled to such positions. Hence, the advancement of women into top levels of management has been stunted due to gender constructions of leadership, which both men and women internalise (Hargreaves, 1994). Female sport coaches, for example, experience the marginalization common to token members of a workgroup. Their token status provides a context in which gender is highlighted through the number of men or women represented in the sporting world, stressing the physical differences between men and women and the assumptions about how this translates into the superiority of men's sporting experience (Theberge, 1993). The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (2002) suggested that the status of minorities and women managers were saturated in the public sector and other organisations, such as sporting organisations, but not where capital gain was an option. This means that businesses are

attempting to fill (gender) equity posts to advance their corporate image and not to increase their annual turnover. This form of tokenism could potentially have negative repercussions as it lowers the self-confidence of the token member. Furthermore, the experiences of women are likely to differ from that of men within the sporting context (Surujlal & Zhang, 2009) and as a result, women are more likely to become victims of bias and stereotypes (Breuning, 2005 as cited in Surujlal & Zhang, 2009).

The afore-mentioned issues indicate that hierarchical structures maintain the dominant status quo as only small minorities of women are promoted into leadership positions and face formidable organisational dynamics which undermine their participation at this level.

It is crucial to explore the female sport administrators' experiences as they relate to organizational fit so that we can expand the literature for theoretical and applied reasons. It is important to know more about women's interpretations and experiences of organisational fit. The findings of this study could also assist sporting bodies in all sport codes to effectively address gender bias in South African sport and consequently increase the number of women in leadership positions in sport.

This study therefore explores how organisational structures intentionally or unintentionally exclude women in sport from leadership positions. It examines women's experiences of resistance and exclusion in the workplace, decision making, the absence of women in leadership positions and tokenism in sport.

Methodolgy

This study employed qualitative methodology using in-depth structured interviews. This method is useful as it allows participants to express themselves in their own words and offer personal views of their experiences and interpretations (Flick, 2002). The sample consisted of four purposively selected female sport administrators in leadership positions who have been involved in sport administration for more than ten years. They were from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The participants were selected from an updated provincial federation database which was obtained from the Western Cape Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport (DCAS).

Two separate semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant for 60-90 minutes each. The second interview was conducted shortly after the first one was transcribed after approximately 2 weeks. The core questions asked during the interviews allowed the participants to draw from their own experiences in their places of work. To this end participants were interviewed using one-on-one individual interview schedules comprising 18 key questions covering various issues relevant to gender bias experiences. Some of the questions were: Do you think that men resist women's entry into sport? Do you feel that you have to work harder to prove your credibility? Do you feel that you are excluded from certain business discussions because these take place at / in forums which potentially preclude women, for example, the golf course or the toilet? Do you feel that you lack decision making power? To what do you attribute the general absence of women in leadership positions is sport? Interviews were tape-recorded with the written consent of the participants and each interview was

transcribed verbatim. The thematic data analysis entailed a thorough reading of transcripts by the researcher and coding and analyzing the data into chunks of meaning. The second round of interviews was done to seek clarity and to gain deeper understanding of participants' experiences as well as to explore emerging themes.

After the coding process, thematic categories were synthesized into a narrative summary which was aimed at reflecting the experiences of the participants. The researcher ensured reflexivity and trustworthiness whilst conducting this study. This was done by doing member checks, clarifying researcher bias which was done by acknowledging past experiences, biases, interpretations and dilemmas as these could shape the findings of this study. To this end a reflective attitude was adopted by the researcher. Other methods of ensuring reflexivity and trustworthiness were also employed by doing peer review and debriefing.

With regard to ethical considerations, permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Senate Higher Degrees Committee at the University of the Western Cape. The permission of the participants was sought before these interviews were audio-taped. All information was treated with the strictest confidentiality and the identity of participants was protected in so far as their names or personal information were not indicated in the reporting of the findings. Pseudonyms have therefore been used. Participants were given access to their transcribed information at their request and were allowed to amend or retract their transcripts, as well as offer additional information.

Results

In this section, the results from this study and the responses and experiences of the participants with regard to organisational fit are presented. This section covers the sub-themes of organisational fit: participants' experiences of resistance and exclusion, decision making, the absence of women in leadership positions and tokenism.

With regard to the participants' experiences of resistance and exclusion, the participants in this study were divided on whether they felt that men resisted women's entry into the administrative domain of the sport. They referred to sport in general and also commented on their personal experiences of being excluded. The results indicate that the participants were aware that in some sports organisations, including their own, men in fact resisted women's entry into sport. The results further show that all the participants were involved in making decisions in their organisations.

... women will always be treated differently (in sport)... they (men) are afraid that women will definitely do the job better than them and they (women) do...Dolly

... men are very challenged by women who are highly educated... how society views and accepts you depends a lot on how you are as an individual and (in turn) if you as an individual are affected by a lot of

stuff... [there is a] willingness to allow women in (to sport leadership positions) as long as there are no significant changes... Aeysha

With regard to decision making, the four South African female sport leaders in this study highlighted some of the complexities and challenges with regard to decision making processes and procedures in sport organisations.

... I'd rather seek to find a solution to the problem, so it's easy for me to make a decision and never get much recognition, and if I don't like what the prevailing decision on the table is and I'm out-numbered, I will accept it in good faith, carry it through, support it, and it might not be what I wanted'...Dolly

...I cannot make decisions- I am an administrator without a voice [but] I make a decision because of the knowledge of the game. When it comes to club politics then I will tell them [club members and other officials] I'll get back to them shortly and I will call exec and tell them how I feel about the situation and they will discuss and take my information as well...Noeleen

Results in this study show that the participants are able to make decisions alongside their male co-workers and at other times defer this function to executive bodies.

...I make a lot of decisions [and] one can never personalize it...Aeysha

...it's fairly easy, but I won't make a decision-I first consult with other executive members' ...Alice

With regard to the few/limited number of women in leadership positions, participants in this study were divided on the issue. They commented on their perceptions of women in leadership positions. In addition, they offered their explanations as to why they felt there are few women in leadership positions.

... and I must say the Western Province women always felt that the men were the leaders...They [men] only could drive [lead], and that mindset in unity carried over ...Dolly

... challenges, personality issues, family challenges have a lot to do with it.... If you are a mother that's a major challenge...Aeysha

Some of the participants felt that the commitment of female sport administrators and leaders is lacking and as a result, there are few women sport leaders and administrators.

... women no longer have commitment to the sport... I don't think the passion is there anymore...Noeleen

... commitment is lacking...Alice

All the participants thought that there were not enough females in top sport management positions. With regard to tokenism and for the purposes of this study the participants' experienced and interpreted tokenism in relation to how seriously they felt they were taken in the workplace.

... I was the best person for the job... lost that (the presidency) because I was female...Dolly

...I am taken more seriously... always telling him [the new director] what is and what is not allowed...Noeleen

Results in this study show that none of the women in this study considered themselves to be token members.

... worked myself up the ranks... Aeysha

... there is no such thing as a token member...Alice

Discussion

Participants' experiences of resistance and exclusion

According to Simpson (2000) women in the workplace can encounter blatant resistance which includes sexist bullying or hostile behaviour. Overt resistance claims, as explained by Simpson (2000), act as key criteria for exclusion and demarcating women as outcasts if they fail to fully participate. The following discussion elaborates on the participants' experiences of resistance and exclusion.

Dolly was resentful of the way she had witnessed and experienced men's resistance to women's advancement in administration in her sport. Aeysha agreed that men in sport administration and leadership positions resist women's entry into this level of sport. Like Dolly, Aeysha also thought that any resistance on the part of men to women's entry into sport leadership positions could be related to the degree to which they (men) felt threatened. However, she also claimed that societal factors played a role in this resistance and exclusion. These views suggest that in her experience, organisations allow women access to leadership positions in sport but do so only because they have to comply with equity regulations. This implies that if the dominant thinking in organisations is that responsibilities of women in sport organisations should be limited to those of traditional roles of women, then women sport leaders will encounter difficulties when they seek promotion to top administrative positions. Theberge (1994) offered three reasons why men resist women's entry into sport. Firstly, men have a desire to maintain sport as a socializing agent that prepares them for adult roles in the public sector, particularly in the workplace and political life. Secondly, they also keep women out to maintain hierarchical rankings of sex roles and thirdly, to promote an exclusively male realm that allows for expressiveness and solidarity amongst males themselves. Similar to findings from Hargreaves and Jones (2001), Aeysha attributed the lack of women in sport leadership to a combination of race, ethnicity, class and

gender. Furthermore, from this study it can be deduced that the power-relations in sport contribute to gendered societal practices that encourage domination of men over women in society, as well as in sport. It is therefore these practices which contribute to men's resistance to women entering into the realm of sport.

Decision making

Ellison (2001) indicated that horizontal segregation results in streaming women into the non-managerial less strategic decision making roles of an organisation. The following discussion elaborates on the participants' experiences of decision making.

Dolly claimed that she felt she was part of the decision making process in her workplace even if she did not agree with the final decision adopted. Noeleen on the other hand experienced little difficulty when making decisions and accepting that the authority to take the final decisions lies with the executive committee of her sport organization. However, she is unable to make final decisions as this responsibility lies only with the executive committee of her sport organisation.

Aeysha reported that the decision making process in her organisation did not pose any particular challenges for her. Similarly, Alice experienced no resistance to her being part of the decision making process in her organisation and acknowledged the support she received from her co-executive members.

The finding in this study is in contrast to Ellison's (2001) claim that women are streamlined into less strategic decision making roles of an organisation. Hargreaves (1997) suggests that South African sportswomen felt that they lacked power and what they were looking for was to share equally in a democratic process at all levels of decision making. The findings in this study do not indicate that these women felt that they were powerless when making decisions. Whether this is an accurate reflection of the situation for sportswomen in general in South Africa needs to be investigated. It also appears that since 2004, the policies, processes and procedures implemented by the South African Sports Commission has impacted on the functionality of the organisations in which these women work and contributed to efficient decision making. This is reflected in the finding of this study because there is no evidence to suggest that participants in this study are unable to make decisions in their organisations. In fact, all indicated that they are part of the decision making process in their organisations. There is no evidence in this study to indicate that the lack of decision making is intentional on the part of the men in the organisations. Furthermore, there is also no evidence to suggest that the participants in this study are not given an opportunity to make decisions.

Absence of women in leadership positions

According to Hovden (2004), the absence of women in leadership positions in sport is due to cultural and structural consequences of male dominance. In her view, the selection criteria of leaders benefits men more than women because corporate leadership experience is given preference. The following discussion elaborates on the participants' interpretation relating to the absence of women in leadership positions.

Dolly's perception was that some female managers believed that men were only capable of running an organisation. Aeysha attributed the general absence of women in leadership positions in South African sport to the challenges they face with regard to the barriers which constrain women in their pursuit of leadership positions. These barriers include childcare and domestic responsibilities.

Noeleen felt that women lacked commitment and that more women's forums in sport should be established for building capacity in young women and girls. Alice supported Noeleen's claim and implied that the general scarcity of women in sport leadership positions could be attributed to their lack of knowledge and skills in this regard. She claimed that some women take up leadership positions without the required skill and knowledge base. This begs the question as to whether or not Aeysha and Noeleen do not see this as a societal problem, but the problem of individual women who 'lack motivation'. Similar to Jackson's (2001) study, the perception that men are considered to be leaders within their organisations and women is seen as supportive followers, was reported. This could be attributed to personal factors such as family commitments which create career barriers for women pursuing leadership positions. This further concurs with Jackson's (2001) claims.

Jackson (2001) also claims that women are also less predisposed to pursue leadership roles as there is a perception amongst the women that leadership roles are reserved for men (Jones, 2001). The South African Sports Commission (2004) and Roberts (Personal Communication, 2007) indicated that during the apartheid era South African sport was not only a reproduction of exceptional power and privilege which was exercised by white men over subordinate groups, but was also a site of inequalities between men and women in all groups. It was as a result of apartheid that sport became popular because it was used as a mechanism to resist white supremacy. The participants identified only a few of the constraints initially reported by Hendricks and Jones (1992) as obstacles to sportswomen.

Tokenism

This section discusses each participant's view of tokenism and also her experiences of tokenism in her place of work. For the purposes of this study, tokenism is defined as a form of interclass mobility within a gender-class system (Laws, 1975). It is also referred to as women's occupational experiences and their reaction to such experiences with reference to the proportion of women in an organisation (Zimmer, 1988).

Dolly believed that her views are taken seriously and she attributed this partly to her contributions to the liberation struggle during the apartheid years. However, she also felt that she had lost out on the presidency because she is female. Noeleen reported that her views are taken seriously and attributed this mostly to her previous experience as the director of her sport. Aeysha explained that she worked hard to be in her leadership position and was appointed on merit. Alice claimed that because she was respected and taken seriously, she was elected as the president in her sport code.

The commitment to transformation has been the focal point of the South African government's aim in addressing historical and social issues in the light of constitutional reform. Due to this, tokenism, which is linked to transformation, has become a contentious issue within many organisations in South Africa. Tokenism is blamed for appointing token-members into organisations to redress interclass mobility. Sport in South Africa is a site of 'discerning disagreements over what transformation means' i.e. merit versus affirmative action (Padayachee, Desai & Vahed, 2004). These disagreements reflect the broader tensions over how restructuring in South African should be addressed. The findings of the study by Corocan-Nantes and Roberts (2002) revealed that females in the workplace are not taken as seriously as their male counterparts. This is not the case in this study. All the four participants expressed strongly that they were not token members of their organisations and therefore they were taken seriously. It is unthinkable to Aeysha that she should still have to be subjected to what Simpson (2000:5) referred to as 'greater performance pressure' than the 'dominant group' (i.e. the males in her places of work).

Tokenism in South Africa has been highlighted by various sporting institutions across the country. For example, the Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport in the Western Cape organised a symposium to discuss issues around quota systems in South African sport including the inclusion of quota players in teams and the level of quality of quota players. This conference failed to address quota systems in the sporting workplace of all people involved in sport administration as the emphasis was mainly on sport participation. This is evident of how quota systems are addressed and fails to recognize tokenism as equally important.

Limitations

Although the study was limited by the small number of participants, the study does provide some insight into the nature of organisational fit by female sport administrators in contemporary South Africa.

Although the objectives of this study have been met, it is imperative that further research should be conducted to investigate the complexities of female sport administrators' experiences of organisational fit in order to broaden our understanding of organisational practices in the workplace.

Conclusions

The findings of this study show that there are differences in how men within the sport organisations react to women's entry into sport. These reactions include acceptance and cooperation on the one hand and resistance on the other hand. Therefore, there is inconclusive evidence as to whether men resist women's entry into sport. There is also evidence that males are aligned with societal practices which preclude women from entry into sport at a leadership level.

The findings in this study also indicate that with regards to tokenism, the experiences of these participants are not that of token members. They attributed this to the fact that they

have knowledge, experience and expertise in the field of sport which takes them beyond the level of a token administrator. It can therefore be concluded that participants in this study did not see themselves as token members of the organisations where they work.

Findings in this study indicate that there is no evidence to suggest that participants in this study lack the opportunities to make decisions in their organisations and are regarded as authorities in their places of work. There is no conclusive evidence that the women in this study have negative experiences of organisational fit. However, there is evidence to suggest that the dynamics around organisational fit are complex, especially when it comes to decision making.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made on the basis of the findings with regard to gender bias in the workplace.

- A merit system should be put in place in order to ensure that both men and women are promoted based on their capabilities and not their gender, to ensure that they are not employed as token members and that they are not treated as such.
- Mechanisms which could assist women in making decisions alongside their male counterparts should be put in place as a support structure for women in pursuit of leadership positions in sport. This will also ensure that women feel empowered in their places of work and as a result feel that they are making meaningful contributions to sport administration.
- Leadership forums should be established to include both males and females in order to explore gender-based behavioural issues within the sport workplace. This will ensure that there is a level of understanding and cooperation between the two sexes in the workplace, especially when it revolves around access and entry into sport.

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