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Women in Coaching: Removing Barriers to Start and Stay



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Introduction: ICOACHGIRLS

Research shows that women and girls face multiple challenges to participate in sport and physical activity. For example, the gendered nature of sport, a lack of female role models and unequal provision all hinder girls' ability to participate. Girls in the EU across a broad range of sports and countries, are four times less likely than boys to engage in organised sport (Emmonds et al., 2021). By not participating, girls are missing out in all the potential physical, mental, social and professional benefits of regular physical activity. Importantly, early negative experiences of sport, physical education and physical activity during the primary school years contribute to girls' lower levels of activity.

ICOACHGIRLS (ICG) is an Erasmus+ funded project, which is part of the larger [ICOACHKIDS](#) (ICK) family. ICOACHGIRLS has two key objectives:

- 1) To increase physical activity and sport participation among primary school age girls
- 2) To increase the number, competence and confidence of female coaches.

The key targets linked to these objectives are as follows:

Objective 1:

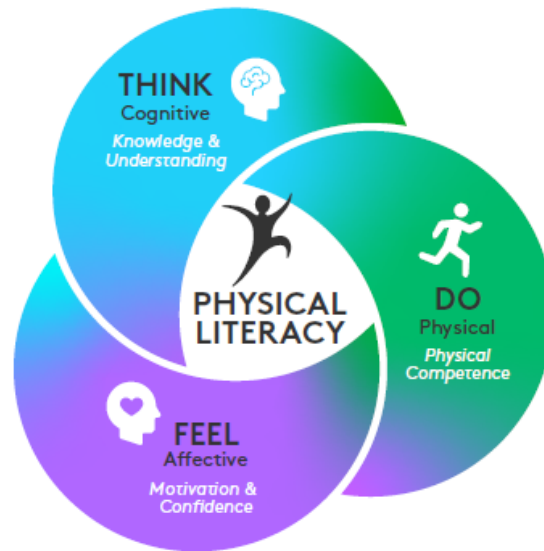
- Creation of 35 'Girls Play Centres' across 6 countries
- 1050 primary school age girls attending the sessions
- 350 sport and physical activity sessions delivered
- 95% satisfaction among girls and parents
- 50% of girls transitioning into regular physical activity on completion of the 10 week programme

Objective 2:

- 70 Head Coaches appointed to run the 'Girls Play Centres'
- 350 newly qualified or new-to-coaching female coaches completing a 'Come into Coaching' course and attending the 'Girls Play Centres' to receive mentoring from Head Coaches
- 95% satisfaction among Head Coaches and mentee coaches
- 95% of coaches improve their coaching competence
- 80% of coaches improve their confidence to lead coaching sessions



We recognise that long-term participation is crucial for girls to receive the benefits of sport and physical activity as outlined above. Therefore, through the delivery of the play centres, we will aim to support girls in developing their physical literacy. Sport Ireland identify that physical literacy encompasses three inter-connected domains: cognitive (knowledge and understanding); affective (motivation and confidence) and physical (competence). ICOACHGIRLS will aim to positively influence primary school age girls across these three domains, and support them to become more physically active over the long term.



Physical Literacy domains (Sport Ireland)

Women in Coaching: Removing Barriers to Start and Stay

Hi Coach!

This guide is designed to facilitate the creation of the ICOACHGIRLS programs that support women in coaching, by providing nine elements relating to women in coaching for delivery partners to consider. These elements are not meant to be overly prescriptive – they are purposely generic as they are meant to be applied in relevant ways across national and local contexts. However, the overarching elements should be considered in the design of programs focusing on female coaches.

This guide is, in alignment with other guides of ICOACHGIRLS programs, structured around the Youth Sport Compass¹, a tried and tested framework that provides direction how to create a positive and safe sports climate. It is built on four evidence-based pillars: the development-oriented, the motivational, the caring and the socially safe climate. Attention must be paid to all four pillars in order to achieve the best climate in youth sport. This approach is considered useful for creating an optimal climate for women in coaching as well.

In this guide, each element is introduced and explained, and brought to life with some practical recommendations. We start by introducing the Youth Sport Compass and then map the 9 women in coaching elements onto this compass.

The 9 women in coaching elements are:

DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED

1. Focus on empowering female coaches
2. Provide clear pathways for development

MOTIVATIONAL

3. Offer support and remove barriers
4. Use role-models

CARING

5. Support relationships and networks
6. Provide mentoring programs
7. Help administrators to understand female coaches' needs

SOCIALLY SAFE

8. Create a positive and inclusive environment
9. Resist biases and stereotyping



The Youth Sport Compass

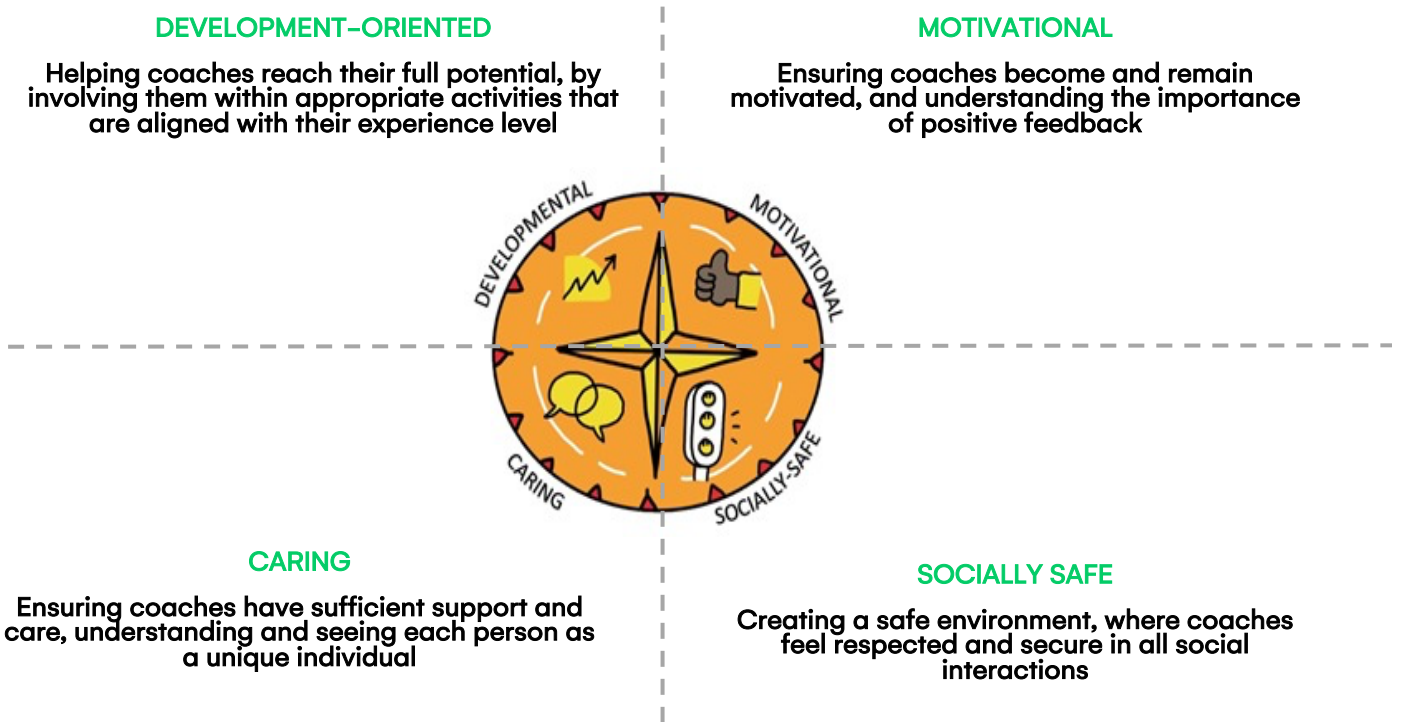
The youth sport compass is a great tool to help us think about how to create an optimal climate in youth sport. This will support children and coaches alike to feel welcomed, valued and safe within sport and physical activity.

DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED

Helping coaches reach their full potential, by involving them within appropriate activities that are aligned with their experience level

MOTIVATIONAL

Ensuring coaches become and remain motivated, and understanding the importance of positive feedback



CARING

Ensuring coaches have sufficient support and care, understanding and seeing each person as a unique individual

SOCIALLY SAFE

Creating a safe environment, where coaches feel respected and secure in all social interactions

For more information, please see the following videos:

[The Youth Sport Compass](#)

[The Making of the Youth Sport Compass](#)

In the next image, we map the ICG women in coaching elements onto the Youth Sport Compass. Although some ICG elements may fit across multiple areas of the compass, we have shown where they most closely align.

DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED

Focus on empowering female coaches

Provide clear pathways for development

CARING

Support relationships and networks

Provide mentoring programs

Help administrators to understand female coaches' needs



MOTIVATIONAL

Offer support and remove barriers

Use role-models

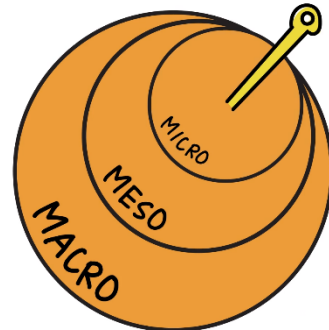
SOCIALLY SAFE

Create a positive and inclusive environment

Resist biases and stereotyping

It is also important to consider how practice work on different scales. Programs and their activities can target issues on different levels:

- **Micro level:** 'on the ground', what's happening at the playing field including children and coaches' interactions.
- **Meso level:** 'at the club', about the club policies and strategies, interaction with parents, coach recruitment, education, development and support.
- **Macro level:** policy-makers, sport association, (local) government.



We now turn our attention to the 9 specific women in coaching elements which will help you remove barriers for women in coaching. This is not intended to be a prescriptive list, and as such they are purposively broad and generic. However, we do offer some illustrative examples across micro, meso and macro to bring these elements to life.

1. Focus on empowering female coaches

The self-perceptions of female coaches often act as a barrier. Research shows some women have low self-efficacy, low perceived confidence and competence, and generally believe they are not qualified for the position, even when they possess a high degree of athletic and coaching capital.

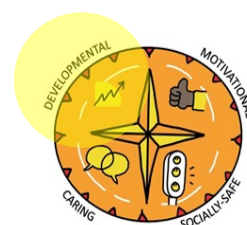
Programs focusing on the empowerment of female coaches can support women to become and/or remain active as a coach. It can make them more confident and resilient to 'own' their job as a coach and to live up to their fullest potential.

Self-care and self-love have been identified as two essential leadership skills and should be part of an empowerment program. Positive coaching has been identified as an important ingredient as well while emphasizing on the unique qualities of specifically female coaches.

Recommendations

MICRO LEVEL

- Acknowledge female coaches' specific needs
- Use positive coaching as part of the empowerment program



MESO LEVEL

- Help staff understand how to empower female coaches
- Provide empowerment programs for female coaches
- Support male coaches and administrators understand how to actively support and mentor female coaches

MACRO LEVEL

- Promote empowerment activities
- Develop empowerment programs for female coaches

2. Provide clear pathways for development

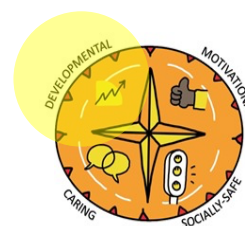
Visible, clear and credible pathways for progression and continued support for each stage of development/career are needed to increase the number of female coaches in sports. A strong learning culture within an organization, including the creation of ongoing opportunities to learn and collaborate is recommended for female coaches to progress.

Organizations that recognize female coaches' efforts and provide financial assistance for professional development, appeal to both potential and experienced female coaches. This is especially true when it includes female-only coach education (run by women), when women are offered pro-active feedback and recognition about coaching performance, and when coaches are involved in participatory decision making and mentoring opportunities.

Recommendations

MICRO LEVEL

- Acknowledge female coaches' specific needs
- Emphasize on the development of female coaches
- Provide legal training/advise for women in relation to contracts and negotiations



MESO LEVEL

- Create opportunities for female coaches to develop (i.e., apprenticeships)
- Create transparent career pathways
- Take control in the recruiting process to create sufficient opportunities for female coaches
- Offer opportunities for employment within men's sports

MACRO LEVEL

- Use policies of positive discrimination (i.e., women quota)
- Develop a fair recognition system (e.g., equal salaries, equal status)
- Reward organizations that hire women for coaching and leadership positions

3. Offer support and remove barriers

An overarching theme to get more female coaches involved and retain in sports revolves around appropriate support. Appropriate support from any social agent appears to facilitate a woman's coaching career. Specifically, developing a sense of relatedness with coaching colleagues is positively received. Moreover, the encouragement from parents is important when starting out on a coaching journey – some coaches interpreted parental support as meaning that coaching was considered a ‘normal’ career for women.

Unfortunately, female coaches face multiple and interwoven barriers that make sustaining a career in coaching challenging. Together, these barriers account for the historic stagnation of the percentage of women coaches. Identifying unique barriers together and developing support for female coaches at different competitive levels, and for female coaches experiencing critical windows across the coaching career (e.g., entering coaching, burnout, getting married, having children, changing jobs from assistant to head coach, revealing their sexual orientation) is recommended to support and create better opportunities for female coaches.

Recommendations

MICRO LEVEL

- Encourage women to coach
- Provide positive feedback
- Consult female coaches about their needs and preferences
- Identify and remove barriers together



MESO LEVEL

- Encourage and create a supportive environment for female coaches
- Develop female friendly and family friendly policies
- Identify and remove barriers together

MACRO LEVEL

- Create awareness-raising programs that help administrators be more supportive of female coaches' issues.
- Use role-models for administrators to support female coaches

4. Use role models

Foremost, young women want and need strong, confident same-sex role models, who positively affect their self-perceptions and make it more likely they will start and stay in coaching. Existing stereotypes can be very difficult for women in sport to overcome. As such it is important to demonstrate positive female role models within the sporting context that can inspire (young) women to become and stay as a coach.

Specifically, the quality of female coaching role models contributes to coaching self-efficacy and interest in coaching. This suggests that the quality of female coaches may be more important than the actual number of role models in increasing coaching self-efficacy beliefs and coaching interests.

Recommendations

MICRO LEVEL

- Ensure there are enough female coaches act as role models
- Find suitable male allies to champion women in coaching



MESO LEVEL

- Acknowledge that young women need same sex role models
- Identify and promote role models for female coaches (prioritize quality over quantity)

MACRO LEVEL

- State explicitly that you want more female coaches to be involved
- Promote females in coaching in any way
- Identify and promote role models for female coaches (prioritize quality over quantity)

5. Support relationships and networks

In general, it is important to female coaches to develop a culture of care where they feel known, needed, valued, heard, and that they belong. A specific way of facilitating women in coaching is supporting relationships and networks.

Building relationships and networks are important for female coaches to resist loneliness, feeling like a fraud, or sensing exclusion. Gaining advice from a trusted colleague can be important, because female coaches do not always feel that they have someone in their organization with whom they could meaningfully converse. A sense of community can harness feelings of belonging, motivation, optimism and resilience.

Female coaches indicate that having an (in)formal network of other female coaches helped many persist in their career.

Recommendations

MICRO LEVEL

- Create time for socializing between (female) coaches
- Provide activities to create connections and support networks
- Encourage new contacts

MESO LEVEL

- Provide (side) events to support relationships and networks
- Provide space and opportunities to support relationships and networks

MACRO LEVEL

- Promote coaches' networks through various communication means



6. Provide mentoring programs

Mentoring programs can be a strong tool to develop and empower all coaches, but research suggests this is particularly important for female coaches. Mentoring sessions can play a significant role in their feelings of belonging and support in the field of coaching. Mentorship is important for helping and developing female leaders, building relationships to resist loneliness, and nurturing resilience through community.

Although both woman and men can act as mentors, mentoring programs run by female role-models are recommended since it seems that female coaches who are coached by a woman are more likely to persist in the coaching profession, especially in their early coaching careers.

Recommendations

MICRO LEVEL

- Acknowledge that female coaches have specific needs
- Provide mentoring programs for female coaches



MESO LEVEL

- Educate mentors coaches about female coaches' preferences and needs
- Emphasize on the recruitment of female mentors

MACRO LEVEL

- Develop and promote mentoring programs

7. Help administrators to understand female coaches' needs

Many sport and physical activity contexts have been traditionally dominated by men, and therefore a more masculine culture has developed over time which may pay less attention to the needs of girls and women. This needs to be considered when aiming to increase the number of female coaches.

A successful program to promote women in coaching needs administrators that acknowledge female coaches have different needs compared to men, have knowledge about these needs and act accordingly. Athletic administrators are very important in supporting female coaches achieve and maintain work/life balance in their careers.

Within this education, a strong emphasis should be placed on how to enhance female coaches' beliefs about their own competence as a coach and to strengthen their confidence to overcome barriers.

Recommendations

MICRO LEVEL

- Acknowledge that female coaches have different needs and act accordingly
- Interact with female coaches about their needs and preferences

MESO LEVEL

- Educate administrators about female coaches' needs and preferences
- Provide tools to administrators to empower their female coaches

MACRO LEVEL

- Create educational programs for administrators including empowerment tools



8. Create a positive and inclusive environment

The atmosphere and culture within a certain sport or physical activity context is crucial to ensure women coaches feel a sense of belonging. Unsurprisingly, women like to feel welcome and encouraged. It is very important for women that they feel as though they are treated as equal.

Unfortunately, exposure to discrimination, harassment, gender bias, homophobia, stress, pressure to perform, and the constant scrutiny that comes with coaching cause many women to burn out and quit the profession. This is particularly true for women coaches of color, who are dramatically underrepresented in coaching positions. The male-dominated and masculine nature of sport spaces often made women feel like intruders, unwelcome, not taken seriously, and even humiliated. Therefore, it is important to create a positive, inclusive and welcoming environment. Everyone is responsible for the creation and maintenance of this socially safe environment, which needs to champion women in coaching and call out unequal or discriminatory behavior.

Recommendations

MICRO LEVEL

- Ensure everybody feels welcome and encouraged
- Specifically show that female coaches are welcome
- Ensure a socially safe climate
- Be aware of stereotypes and reformulate/rethink them together



MESO LEVEL

- Include policies ensuring a positive and inclusive sports climate and safeguarding in sports
- Value diversity authentically

MACRO LEVEL

- Be explicit, intentional and unapologetic in communicating an inclusive culture
- Create benchmarks for a positive and inclusive sports climate
- Create benchmarks for safeguarding in sports

9. Resist biases and stereotyping

A specific aspect of creating a positive, inclusive and welcoming environment for female coaches is resisting and challenging outdated stereotypes. Women in coaching are often met with stubborn stereotypes about their suitability and confidence to coach. As with many aspects of sport, coaches are often deemed to need masculine qualities – such as assertiveness, leadership skills and emotional control. On an individual level, women can be disregarded if they do not show these qualities, and deemed as a poor coach. Conversely, when they do show these traits they can be chastised or insulted, because they are deemed to be too masculine. On a macro level, these stereotypes harm the entry of many women into the coaching profession. When the low percentage of women coaches is raised, it is often accepted because it is deemed to be normal or natural. However, it is important to refrain from blaming women and perpetuating myths about the lack of female coaches as ‘just the way it is’.

Recommendations

MICRO LEVEL

- Acknowledge and address personal bias
- Be aware of stereotypes and reformulate/rethink them together
- Resist blaming women for the lack of women coaches



MESO LEVEL

- Value diversity authentically
- Explicitly state the intention of hiring women
- Be aware of stereotypes and reformulate/rethink them together

MACRO LEVEL

- Create a consistent and strong culture of valuing women
- Be explicit, intentional and unapologetic in communicating an inclusive culture

Other considerations

In addition to the 9 elements, we like address some issues that are important to create successful programs for women in coaching.

First, it is recommended to use a **multicomponent strategy**. This entails a program focusing on more issues parallel to each other. It appears that the more 'green lights' can be established, the higher changes to increase the number of female coaches on all levels.

Second, although it was intended to provide 9 general elements, it must be acknowledged that not all female coaches and contexts are the same. In practice, we deal with young and older women with different contexts and backgrounds. Preferences and needs likely vary between different individuals and groups. For that reason, it is recommended to **create tailor-made approaches** to find the best solutions within a certain context.

Third, increasing the number of female coaches entails a **change in culture** within the context of sport. This requires a long term approach in which the continuous search for connections between people should be centralized.

As previously mentioned, this guide is designed to facilitate the creation of the ICOACHGIRLS programs that support woman in coaching, by providing 9 elements. The elements are not meant to be overly prescriptive – they are purposely generic as they are meant to be applied in relevant ways across national contexts. When more information or guidance is required, please contact the project lead [Ruth Brazier: r.brazier@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:r.brazier@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

Glossary of Terms

Elements — refers to particular elements which are specific to encourage more girls to participate in sport and physical activity

ICOACHGIRLS — A specific project within the family of ICOACHKIDS, which recognizes that girls may face additional challenges to participate in sport and physical activity, and aims to support more girls in overcoming these barriers

ICOACHKIDS — A non-profit global movement to help kids get the most out of sport. The online platform gives youth sport coaches the knowledge and tools to share and learn from one another

Micro, Meso, Macro — different levels of impact from individual (micro), organizational (meso) and regionally/nationally (macro)

Physical Activity — refers to all movement and exercise that causes a person's body to work harder than normal. This can include sport, but also less organized activities such as walking, active play, skipping and jumping. It is recommended that children get at least 60 minutes of physical activity a week

Play Centre — refers to the specific activity centers which will be designed, delivered and evaluation through ICOACHGIRLS

Physical Literacy - Physical literacy is the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding that enables a person to value and participate in physical activity throughout life

Principles — refers to the 10 principles in the ICK pledge

Sport — refers to organized games and activities in which teams or individuals compete within the boundaries of defined rules (e.g. football, basketball, cricket, netball etc.)

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The Making of This Guide

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Methods:

Electronic database searches were conducted in PubMed and Springer Link. The search was limited to peer-reviewed systematic reviews published in English from January 2008 until the 1st of March 2023. Search terms for all databases were ‘female coach(es)’ AND sport(s). Articles were included if 1) focused on female coaches in sports and 2) included information about factors promoting/facilitating and/or preventing/hindering to recruit, hire and/or retain female coaches in sports. Duplicate articles and articles without full-text access were excluded. Titles, abstracts and full-text articles were screened by one researcher (IF). In addition to the systematic search in databases, also a hand search was conducted using Scholar Google for additional findings.

Results:

The search in Pubmed and Sprinker Link yielded 19 and 47 hits, respectively. After screening 5 studies were included from Pubmed and 1 from Springer Link. The hand search in Google Scholar yielded another 15 (17) articles. See table 1 for an overview of the included studies.

First author (Database)	Publication year	Focus
Adom-Aboagye (PM)	2022	Thus, the purpose of this research essay is to highlight the unexplored dynamics of women in sport coaching in scholarly research.
Borland (GS)	2010	Using the literature on barriers, identity salience, Black feminist theory and critical race theory discussed above to work toward a critical race feminist approach, the current study was guided by the following research questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What barriers do Black female assistant coaches perceive limit their opportunity to interview for and obtain head coach positions? 2. How can/do these barriers impede Black women in pursuing leadership positions? From the perspective of Black women in athletics, how can these barriers be addressed?
Clarkson (GS)	2019	The aim of the present study was to explore the lived experiences of women head coaches to identify the extent that gender influences the English football workplace.
Fink (SL)	2008	This article utilizes the work found within the special issue to note that sport as an institution still serves to produce, reinforce, and perpetuate male hegemony. However, it additionally argues that the collective works point to progress in some areas of sport. It highlights the ideas for future research regarding sex and gender diversity in sport and notes that these concerns are often situated in multi-level, sometimes subtle, and usually taken-for-

		granted structures, policies, and behaviors embedded in sport organizations. It concludes with a call for continued work in this area.
Greenhill (GS)	2009	The present study assessed the experiences of males and female coaches and administrators using a case study approach to determine the impact organizational factors have on career pathways for female coaches.
Joseph (PM)	2022	The aim of this study was to partner with the BFCMP to collect qualitative data on who participants are, what they have experienced in sport, and what the program has offered them. We were also interested in their suggestions for improving sport in terms of women and girls participation, racial representation, program adherence, as well as leadership involvement more broadly..
Kamphoff (PM)	2010	Therefore, the central aim of this study was to better understand how the experiences of former female coaches and their decision to terminate their careers were shaped by the patriarchal nature of U.S. collegiate sport.
Kilty (GS)	2006	The purpose of this article is to review the challenges that women coaches must overcome and to discuss coach education strategies for facilitating the development of women coaches.
Kubayi (PM)	2020	The current work aimed to systematically develop and rigorously assess a Barriers to Sports Coaching Questionnaire for Women (BSCQW) via two independent but related studies. The purpose of study one was to assess the content and face validity of the BSCQW. Study two aimed to determine the factorial composition of the BSCQW using principal component analysis (PCA).
Kubayi (GS)	2017	What are the major constraints encountered by female coaches? Are there any significant differences among female coaches regarding self-perceived constraints based on their coaching experience?
LaVoi (GS)	2012	The overarching goal of this paper is to synthesize and summarize in model form the multitude of research on female coaches conducted over three decades. We seek to highlight both the complex and multidimensional barriers that affect, impede or prevent females from seeking or remaining in coaching positions, and the factors that help make coaching easier for females and facilitate career advancement and retention.
LaVoi (GS)	2019	Editorial Special Issue
Moran-Miller (GS)	2011	The primary purpose of this study was to test a mediated paths model to investigate predictors of coaching interests (see Figure 1). Consistent with SCCT, we hypothesized that (a) participants with greater exposure to female coaching role models and fewer perceived barriers (working hours, perceived discrimination) would report greater coaching self-efficacy; (b) participants with higher levels of coaching self-efficacy would report higher levels of coaching outcome expectations; and (c) participants with higher levels of coaching self-efficacy and coaching outcome expectations would be more interested in a coaching career. A secondary purpose of the study was to examine whether differences in sport or

		division level affected the measured variables. These analyses are exploratory, given the limited empirical support for this research question.
Norman (PM)	2010	This study examined how master female coaches based in the United Kingdom experienced relations with men within their profession.
Norman (GS)	2008	This paper engages with feminist cultural studies to illustrate how a cultural analysis of the coaching structure can contribute to our understanding of the underrepresentation of women in high performance coaching roles.
Norman (GS)	2012	The purpose of this study was to explore strategies for the development of aspiring female coaches based on the ideas of existing high-performance female coaches.
Norman (GS)	2018	The purpose of this study was to explore what particular areas of organizational cultures facilitate the development and progression of women as football coaches and coach developers.
Siegele (GS)	2020	Focusing on a single sport such as swimming may provide some nuance or differentiation into the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women in college coaching. With a relatively equal representation of male and female athletes in collegiate swimming, as well as the training environment often being a shared gender space, the environment is contextually different from other collegiate sports. Therefore, the sexism experienced by female coaches in swimming may be more or less pronounced or demonstrated differently than other sports.
Walker (GS)	2011	What are the experiences of women coaching men's college basketball and how have these experiences affected their perceptions of women coaching men? As we investigate the elements surrounding the phenomenon, we will aim to explain to what extent female college coaches acknowledge this as a phenomenon, how female basketball coaches interpret the lack of women coaching in men's college basketball, and what female coaches see as the determinants and outcomes of this phenomenon.
Wasend (GS)	2019	This study focuses on two research questions: (1) Are female collegiate Division-I basketball players who are coached by female head coaches more likely to enter the coaching profession than athletes who are coached by men? And; (2) If female basketball players do enter coaching, are those who were coached by women more likely to persist in coaching?
PM = Pubmed; SL = SprinkerLink; GS = Google Scholar		

