

## **Challenges experienced by women high performance coaches and its association with sustainability in the profession**

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**Challenges experienced by women high performance coaches  
and it's association with sustainability in the profession**

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## Abstract

High performance (HP) coaching is a demanding profession (Didymus, 2017). The proportion of woman HP coaches is reported to be in the range of 8.4% - 20% (Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2016a; Kidd, 2013). Mental health concerns in elite sports have recently gained attention, but mainly focusing on athletes (Henriksen et al., 2019). Beyond coach burnout, limited attention has been given to coaches' mental health. A recent coach burnout review (Olusoga, Bentzen, & Kenttä, 2019) included only one paper that focused exclusively on women. It has been argued that women HP coaches face greater challenges in a male-dominated coaching culture. The purpose of this study was to explore challenges experienced by women HP coaches and their perceived associations with sustainability and mental health. Thirty-seven female HP coaches participated by answering a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire. All responses were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, which resulted in two general dimensions: *Challenges of Working as a WHPC* and *Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC*. Overall, results indicate that challenges reported might be common for all HP coaches, but also highlight gender specific elements. Consequently, coach retention and sustainability would benefit from more attention on well-being and mental health among HP coaches.

Key words: *female, coaching, challenges, sustainability, mental health*

**Challenges experienced by Women High performance coaches  
and it's association with sustainability in the profession**

High performance (HP) coaching is a demanding profession that challenges mental health and sustainability in the profession (Didymus, 2017). Coaches face constant pressure related to performance expectations, along with the perennial threat of negative consequences such as funding cuts and job loss. High performance coaches often work long, irregular hours and travel extensively (Dixon & Bruening, 2005). This and the unspoken expectation that coaches are 'on duty 24/7' can ultimately lead to work home interference (Bentzen et al., 2016a). Alongside media demands, and the often isolated nature of the role, it is job-insecurity that captures the stressful nature of the HP coaching context. Within elite sports, the typical role and expectation for the coach is to primarily look after their athletes' performance, physical health and well-being (Olusoga, Maynard, Hays, & Butt, 2012), which consequently places coaches' self-care in the back seat. Moreover, elite sport is typically a male dominated culture (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012) in which the dominant paradigm is one of 'stereotypically male' mental strength (i.e., not showing vulnerability, a lack of help-seeking, and suppression of emotional difficulties; Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). This potentially adds an additional challenge for the limited number of women high performance coaches attempting to thrive in this male-dominated coaching culture.

In the 2016 white paper *Women, Naturally Better Leaders for the 21st Century*, Young examined the strengths and unique skills associated with female leadership and their value within the modern workplace. Despite this recognition, leadership positions across professions are still predominately male, with just under 5% of the Fortune 500 CEOs and only 22% of their boards (Pew Research Center, 2018), and only 6.3% of world leaders being women (WIIP, 2018). Female leadership in high performance sport is no exception, with female HP coaches reported to be in the

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1 range of just 8.4% - 20% in Canada, Norway and Sweden (Bentzen et al., 2016a; 2016b; Fasting,  
2 Sisjord, & Sand, 2017; Kidd, 2013;). The implications of the under-representation of female  
3 leadership and subsequent lack of female role models within HP sport might have an impact on and  
4 for these women. It is suggested that female coaches face additional mental health challenges beyond  
5 general demands in the context that they need to overcome (Carson, McCormack, & Walsh, 2018).  
6 For example, it is often reported that female coaches experience challenges with work-life balance,  
7 lack of trust from organizations, lack of job security, and limited networking opportunities to a larger  
8 extent than males (Norman et al., 2010a; 2010b). While it is important to acknowledge that the  
9 underlying reasons are many and critically discussed, research has shown that in the general  
10 population, women are almost twice as likely to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder or unipolar  
11 depression as compared to men (e.g., DSM V, 2013; Remes, Brayne, van der Linde, & Lafortune,  
12 2016). Furthermore, mental health concerns in the general population and sick leave rates associated  
13 with stress and burnout have increased dramatically in Sweden, particularly among women (Perski,  
14 Grossi, Perski, & Niemi, 2017).

15         Mental health is also receiving more attention in the community of elite sports, as evidenced  
16 by five recent position statements on mental health targeting athletes (Henriksen et al., 2019;  
17 Moesch, Kenttä, Kleinert, Quignon-Fleuret, Cecil, & Bertollo Moesch, 2018; Schinke, Stambulova,  
18 Si, & Moore, 2018; Reardon et al., 2019; Van Slingerland et al., 2018). However, with the  
19 exception of research on burnout in coaching, coaches' mental health has been largely neglected to  
20 date. In a recent review of 45 coach burnout papers (Olusoga et al., 2019), only nine studies focused  
21 on coaches at the elite level, and only one paper focused exclusively on women (teacher-coaches,  $n =$   
22 2). Beyond burnout, however, research on major mental health disorders in the coaching population  
23 is still lacking, as evidenced by a notable absence of studies exploring depression, anxiety disorders,

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1 addiction, and sleep disorders in coaching. Mental health in sports has been defined in various ways,  
2 but poor mental health, associated with a limited capacity to sustain a career in sports commonly  
3 includes both psychiatric disorders and symptoms of psychological distress. Essentially, this has  
4 a substantial impact on quality of life, and causes functional impairment in work, social  
5 activities, or other important areas in life (Reardon et al., 2019).

6 Possible reasons for the low percentage of woman in sports coaching have been studied since  
7 the late 1980s (e.g., Knoppers, 1987; Knoppers, Meyer, Ewing, & Forrest, 1989). The findings  
8 related to various challenges for woman coaches have been organized, using the ecological model,  
9 into four different levels (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; LaVoi, 2016a): individual, interpersonal,  
10 organizational, and socio-structural. Research within the individual perspective has focused on  
11 explaining the lack of retention in women's high performance coaching (WHPC) and has attempted  
12 to gain insight into the perceptions of women regarding their skills, abilities, and confidence as  
13 coaches, and the coaching role not being compatible with general well-being and living a healthy  
14 family life (Carson et al., 2018). Consequently, these studies have led to the development of female  
15 coach specific initiatives and programs that offer a focus on helping female coaches develop skills  
16 and peer support networking (e.g. Kilty, 2006). Such programs can enhance the skills or confidence  
17 of the individual female coach, or help the individual to be more aware of their potential support  
18 systems (LaVoi, 2016a). However, criticism towards this perspective has argued that interventions  
19 like these make the individual female coaches responsible for their own underrepresentation. Thus,  
20 there is a risk that women are encouraged to self-blame, toughen up, or change in order to "fix" the  
21 problem (LaVoi, 2016b), thus potentially adding to the unique stressors associated with WHPC.

22 Within the interpersonal level, research has focused on how women in the coaching  
23 profession lack the support from systems around them, such as that from a partner or from the

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1 organization (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Furthermore, the NCAA Coaching and Gender Equity Report  
2 (Drago, Hennighausen, Rogers, Vescio & Stauffer, 2005) found that the majority of female collegiate  
3 athletes never had a female head coach at any point in their sport career, and that they did not want to  
4 play for a female head coach. The negative and harmful stereotypes regarding female HP coaches  
5 have been documented in the literature (e.g. Kauer & Krane, 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). A  
6 widespread strategy within this interpersonal perspective has been to find appropriate mentors for  
7 female coaches within the sport organization (Bruening, Dixon, Burton, & Madsen, 2013; LaVoi,  
8 2016b), which might alleviate some of the gender specific challenges faced by women in this HP  
9 coaching context.

10         At the organizational level, research has explored whether and how organizational policies  
11 and professional practices have influenced, systematically, the low percentage of woman in coaching  
12 (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Suggested strategies for change at the organizational levels have, for  
13 instance, explored revising organizational policies and responsibilities towards non-discrimination,  
14 allowing for job sharing of coaching duties, providing paid babysitters at the workplace, and  
15 implementing job training to arise awareness of gender biases for those who are hiring and recruiting  
16 coaches (LaVoi, 2016b, p. 259). Altogether, these policies may enhance both well-being and  
17 retention in WHPC.

18         Despite this research focusing both on causes and suggestions for improvements and/or  
19 interventions at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels (LaVoi, 2016; LaVoi &  
20 Dutove, 2012), woman today are still being systematically over-challenged and sidestepped in the  
21 context of HP coaching (Kane & LaVoi, 2018). It is timely to ask whether a shift in perspective on  
22 the absence of woman leaders in sport could add some nuances to the already existing literature on  
23 barriers and challenges in WHPC. In 2013, Fasting, Sand, and Knorre argued that more focus is

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1 needed on *what* it is about the culture of sport that is not allowing more women to thrive. Following  
2 this line of argument, more research and attention on barriers and support associated with  
3 sustainability and well-being in WHPC is needed. Furthermore, a question that could be raised is  
4 whether coach well-being in women is something *other/different* than coach well-being in men.  
5 More recently, scholars have focused on well-being and ill-being for all coaches, in order to  
6 encourage a more healthy, sustainable and fulfilling career in the coach profession (Bentzen et al.,  
7 2016b; Stebbings, Taylor, & Spray, 2015).

8         While researchers have begun to examine the experience of the professional coach (e.g.  
9 Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016; Purdy & Potrac, 2014), examination of the foundation of the  
10 professional experience across a wider section of individuals is needed, so that commonalities of the  
11 profession can be explored before unique lenses such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and parenthood  
12 are considered. This call is also described by LaVoi (2016) and it is based on her updated  
13 Intersectional Ecological Model. The model was originally presented by LaVoi and Dutove in 2012  
14 and suggests that an individual's experience must be considered not only based on the factors unique  
15 to the individual, but also within the sociocultural, interpersonal, and organizational contexts of their  
16 situation. More specifically, this suggests that barriers and supports for women in coaching are  
17 multifaceted and compounded by a wide variety of influences, many of which are outside of the  
18 individual's realm of influence, such as those present at the organizational level. To our knowledge,  
19 while studies have discussed the multidimensional concerns over the masculine culture of sport  
20 creating a glass ceiling for women within coaching (e.g., Kamphoff, 2010; Lewis, Roberts, &  
21 Andrews, 2018), few studies have explored sustainability and mental health specifically with female  
22 coaches in the HP context. Thus, the aim of this paper was to explore the challenges that are



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1 experienced by women within the unique context of HP sports coaching, and their perceived  
2 associations with sustainability and mental health issues facing women in HP coaching.

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### Method

#### 5 **Study design, data collection procedures, and participants**

6 The Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) has, since 2000, arranged a network for HP female  
7 coaches and leaders connected to a national team as support staff in any role. The aim of this network  
8 is to nurture strength and support the development of women leaders in sports based on peer-  
9 learning, formal education, and shared experiences. After invitation from the SSC, the researchers  
10 gained accesses to collect data during one of the network meetings where 37 women participated.  
11 The researchers provided information about the background and aim of the study, and the members  
12 were invited to participate. Those willing and interested signed a written informed consent prior to  
13 participation. The ethics were judged by faculty members at the university to ensure that the  
14 Declaration of Helsinki's ethical principles for research involving human subjects were complied  
15 with before approval to conduct the study was granted.

16 As the aim of this study was to better understand the experiences and perceptions of all the  
17 participants in this exclusive group gathered at this meeting, the method for data collection needed to  
18 be tailored with respect to the limited timeframe (i.e., 30 minutes) given for collecting the data. This  
19 group of participants were purposefully targeted due to their specific experience and competencies  
20 related to the aim of the study, as recommended in purposeful sampling (Cresswell & Plano Clark,  
21 2011). This study had a cross sectional design, and due to the relatively large sample of participants,  
22 the data in this survey was collected via an open-ended questionnaire on paper during the meeting.

23 In an attempt to capture the experiences of the participants, the questionnaire was developed  
24 by the researchers based on existing literature and the aim of the study, with seven themed, open-

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1 ended questions. Participants were asked to freely respond to each of the questions based on their  
2 experiences and associations, and a blank space (a half to a full page) was provided for each  
3 question to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses. As an example of the survey  
4 question phrasing, the first open-ended question asked: "*Based on your experiences and what  
5 you have learned, please outline/develop your thoughts about the challenges of being a coach,  
6 keeping in mind that we wish to have more female coaches at the high performance level.*".  
7 Further, the seven themes were designed to (a) explore the participant's perceived challenges based  
8 being a HPC, (b) how they care for their own health (well-being/ill-being), (c) their motivation to  
9 stay in the profession, (d) their experiences combining work and their private life, (e) self-awareness  
10 with special attention to being female in a male dominated culture, (f) thoughts about expressing  
11 vulnerability in elite sport, and (g) their perception of how others accept their role as a female HP  
12 coach. . As all the participants were Swedish, the data was collected in their native language. The  
13 complete questionnaire can be provided by request to the corresponding author.

14 In total, all of the 37 coaches at the network meeting agreed to participate in the study. They  
15 represented 25 different sports, including para-disciplines, team and individual, summer and winter  
16 sports. Even though some of the participants now work in HP sport leadership, they all had  
17 experience working as HP coaches, reporting on average 7.7 years coaching experience ( $SD = 6.5$ )  
18 with a range of 1 – 27 years. Their age ranged from 27 – 61 years old, with an average of 42.3 years  
19 ( $SD = 9.5$ ).

### 20 **Data Analyses**

21 After data collection, a research assistant transcribed all the data into an excel document.  
22 Further, thematic analysis following Braun and Clark's (2006) six-phase approach was used to  
23 guide the data analysis in this study.

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1           In phase one of the data analysis, both researchers read all the data thoroughly to get an  
2 overall perception of the data as a whole. During the second phase, initial codes were inductively  
3 created for all the data within each question, using pen and paper. During this phase, the content  
4 of the data was evaluated both semantically and conceptually, as the researchers discussed the  
5 codes that emerged directly from the text, and interpreted the meaning found in-between the  
6 lines (Clark & Braun, 2013). It should be noted that during phase two, the data from the question  
7 regarding the participants' perceived acceptance by others of their role as a female HP coach  
8 from four various contexts was coded into the three lower-order themes "Well accepted", "Both  
9 well and poorly accepted (mixed)", and "Poorly accepted". These data were therefore excluded  
10 from the rest of the overall data analysis, and will be presented more quantitatively at the end of  
11 the results.

12           During phase three and four, both the lower-order themes and the higher-order themes  
13 emerged from across the initial codes of all questions when searching for meaningful patterns  
14 across the dataset. The analytic process during these phases was also inductive. The researchers  
15 used both pen and paper, and a large blackboard, to guide this process. As the emerging lower-  
16 order themes became clearer, some of the initial codes were both replaced and combined (Braun  
17 & Clarke, 2006), which resulted in clearer placing of the lower-order themes under-higher-order  
18 themes. This phase ended with a finalized draft of 95 initial codes, 26 lower-order themes, and  
19 four higher-order themes. However, at a final level of abstraction, two General Dimensions were  
20 also created reflecting the initial coding and representing the challenges associated with WHPC  
21 and efforts to maintain sustainability and well-being in the profession.

22           Due to the language of the gathered data, the first and second author conducted phases  
23 one through five. These two researchers contributed equally in a joint effort when cooperating

1 and discussing alternative interpretation at all phases of the data analysis. Analysis during phases  
2 one to four was done in the original language. An important aspect of phase four included  
3 reviewing the coded raw data extracts and evaluating whether these reflected the full data set  
4 (Clarke & Braun, 2006). Discussing possible interpretations of the analyses to that point was a  
5 central element of this phase to counteract possible biases within the qualitative analyses (Patton,  
6 2002; Watt, 2002). These discussions and reflections led to some adjustments and refinements  
7 both in naming the lower-order and higher-order themes, and when choosing the quotes that best  
8 illustrated the core findings of the data during phase five. Also during phase five, initial codes,  
9 lower-order, and higher-order themes were translated into English in a collaborative effort by the  
10 two first authors. The two non-native speaking authors joined the analytical process thereafter,  
11 serving as critical friends when discussing alternative interpretations of the data (Marshall &  
12 Rossman, 2006). Discussions between all co-authors took place at this stage to ensure the best  
13 choice of language and that translations retained the original meanings. Quotes are also displayed  
14 in the results to better ensure trustworthiness of the data, as the readers themselves can evaluate  
15 and interpret parts of the data by getting insights from both the quotes, and the lower- and  
16 higher-order themes (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001).

17

### 18 **Results**

19 The results derived from the thematic analysis are presented in two separate figures. More  
20 specifically, Figure 1 represents the General Dimension, *Challenges of Working as a WHPC*,  
21 comprising of two higher-order themes: Stereotypical male culture/coach and Work-life balance.  
22 These themes were represented by nine and four lower-order themes respectively. Figure 2  
23 represents the General Dimension, *Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC*, which comprised

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1 two further higher-order themes: Coping with the stereotypical male culture/coach and Managing  
2 work-life balance. These higher-order themes were represented by four and nine lower-order  
3 themes respectively.

### 4 **Challenges of Working as a WHPC**

5 *Stereotypical male culture/coach* emerged as a major challenge and was a higher-order  
6 theme more specifically represented by several lower-order themes (*lack of role models, no*  
7 *equality yet, men chose men, prejudice against female coaches, male dominated culture, macho*  
8 *culture, not okay to show vulnerability, lack self-confidence, and competence compared to men -*  
9 See Figure 1). *Lack of equality* and *men choose men* were two specific, but related lower-order  
10 themes. The latter was represented by the following quote: "*Men have each other's backs and*  
11 *want those who are like-minded – a man wants a man*" (ID27). In addition, several responses  
12 addressed the challenge of a *male dominated culture* (i.e., more men in the coaching  
13 environment) and a *macho culture* (i.e., an environment characterized by sexist and inappropriate  
14 language that made female coaches uncomfortable). A number of participants explicitly reported  
15 that the *lack of role models* (i.e., a lack of female HP-coaches, authors note) was a challenging  
16 factor as was *prejudice against female coaches*. A final challenge that emerged was represented  
17 by the lower-order theme labelled *competence is compared to men*, in which women perceived  
18 that their competence is assumed by others to be inferior to male counterparts. This was  
19 described by one coach who stated that, "*I often perceive that people I meet in my sport expect*  
20 *me to be less knowledgeable, experienced, and dedicated in comparison to my male coach*  
21 *colleagues*" (ID23). Several participants reported *lack of self-confidence* as a challenging factor  
22 for women that seems related to their competence being compared to men. Specifically, one  
23 coach said, "*Your coach confidence is diminished when you coach male athletes, because you*

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1 *know what they think about a female coach, and how could I possibly prove them wrong, making*  
2 *them think that they could actually learn from me" (ID26). Finally, the fact that it is not ok to*  
3 *show vulnerability in sport was reported as a challenging factor in order to stay in HP coaching,*  
4 *as expressed like this by one of the coaches: "But it is a world (HP sport) that has a long way to*  
5 *go regarding acceptance of vulnerability without shame" (ID4).*

6         The other higher-order theme that emerged, reflecting a major challenge for being a  
7 female HP coach, was *Work-life balance*, represented by the following lower-order themes:  
8 *Work-home-interference (WHI), demand of travel, time demands and high workload. Demands*  
9 *of travel, work-home interference, and high workload* were independent, albeit related lower-  
10 order themes. As one coach answered: "*I think even workhours, it is a lot of evenings and*  
11 *weekends that altogether serves as a hindrance. This along with high travel demands, which*  
12 *leads to time without friends and family, becomes exhausting in a way" (ID22). Several of the*  
13 coaches described *WHI* as leading to negative consequence of the three other demands related to  
14 the HP context, and explicitly questioned whether HP coaching is a job that can be combined  
15 with having a family life: "*Having children seems like a challenge and not something positive for*  
16 *the organization, but this is not just about women it also includes men" (ID12). This quote also*  
17 illustrates that struggling with work-life balance (WLB) is not only a female HP coach issue,  
18 rather a challenging factor for all HP coaches in this context. Indeed, all the four lower-order  
19 themes can, at first glance, seem to be challenges in HP coaching irrespective of gender.  
20 However, the data also indicated that *WHI* was perceived to be a specifically difficult challenge  
21 for female coaches, with this quote seeming to showcase gender specificity; "*When I discuss this*  
22 *problem with my male coach colleagues they don't understand the problem, since they all have*

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1 *full service at home (by their wives) that allow them to more easily manage coach work also at*  
2 *home" (ID28).*

### 3 **Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC**

4         The first higher-order theme within this General Dimension was *Coping with the*  
5 *stereotypical male culture/coach*. Specifically, this higher-order theme consisted of four lower-  
6 order themes: *Adjust to macho behaviour, equality/no problem, courage and knowledge about*  
7 *showing vulnerability, and overachievement*. Underlying the lower-order theme *adjusting to*  
8 *macho culture* were findings indicating that the female HP coaches just tried to adjust to and  
9 accept this culture, rather than fighting or challenging it, in order to focus on getting their jobs  
10 done. For instance these two quotes exemplify how two coaches reacted and adjusted to the  
11 macho-language within the HP context; "*Sometimes you just have to act dumb and play along*  
12 *and just let it "bounce off" (ID18); "I have toughened up because of all the bullshit" (ID1).*  
13 Further, the data also indicated that the female HP coaches were aware of their own behaviour  
14 changes made in order to try to fit in; "*Normally, I like to make jokes to contribute to the*  
15 *environment, however, in a male-dominated sports world, I hold back. I get more quiet and*  
16 *careful about what I am saying so I won't seem like an idiot" (ID9).*

17         *Overachievement*, which captures findings about the female HP coaches' perceptions  
18 that they have to achieve better to prove their knowledge and competencies as female HP  
19 coaches in comparison to their male HP colleagues, was evidenced in the following quote: "*I am*  
20 *aware that I try to be extra serious and 'important' to avoid becoming 'the small girl' (which I*  
21 *often become anyway)" (ID9).* Another coach expressed some of the same feelings by answering:  
22 "*I have always been in a male-dominated world of sport, even as an athlete. I analyse a lot and*  
23 *ruminate about how I should do things so I would be perceived in a certain manner" (ID22).*

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1 More explicitly regarding *overachievement*, the coaches seemed quite aware of how harshly they  
2 are judged on their performances as female HP coaches: "*As a woman I have to be better to be*  
3 *accepted, and even now (when I am quite famous) I become a threat to some (male) colleagues*"  
4 (ID27).

5 Despite all the previously reported findings, it is also of importance to acknowledge that  
6 about half of the coaches experienced equality between genders in HP coaching, did not consider  
7 gender issues as a problem within their job. As one coach expressed it: "*In our sport it is mostly*  
8 *men, however, I experience it as equal based on how we treat each other*" (ID33).

9 *Managing work-life balance* was the other higher-order theme within the General  
10 Dimension of Sustainability and Wellbeing as a WHPC. Nine different lower-order themes  
11 emerged from the data indicating a range of different adaptive coping strategies (*exercise, time*  
12 *with family, recovery strategies, strategies to balance workload, family support, balance*  
13 *ok/good, and monitor workload and recovery*). Spending *time with family* and perceiving *family*  
14 *support* emerged as two important, yet distinct lower-order themes for many of the coaches.  
15 Merely having time with family emerged as an important strategy for managing sustainability  
16 and well-being: "*Time for myself and with my family is important. That we do something*  
17 *together! Finding a way to calm down. What we do is not of importance, however, it is spending*  
18 *time together that is of importance*" (ID7). However, knowing that the family was there in  
19 support was also a key factor: "*My husband supports me*" (ID5). Deliberately choosing activities  
20 to psychologically detach by occupying their time with recovery was also frequently mentioned  
21 as important. One lower-order theme related to this was *exercise*, mentioned by several coaches:  
22 "*I strictly take care of my own health by frequently exercising and eating properly*" (ID28). "*I*  
23 *exercise a lot and make sure I have time to do this during my work hours*" (ID26). However,



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1 other *recovery activities* (i.e., calm activities to enhance positive emotions) were also discussed:  
2 "*I do mindfulness activities*" (ID33). Several of the coaches also mentioned that they were both  
3 aware of the importance, and carefully monitored the balance between workload and recovery in  
4 order to maintain a good balance in life. In the lower-order theme, *monitor workload and*  
5 *recovery*, coaches discussed several strategies, for example, "*I plan my days like an elite athlete*  
6 *– training, breakfast, work, pleasure, etc.*" (ID34). Some of the coaches also had specific  
7 strategies about avoiding work during their off times: "*On the week-ends when we are not at*  
8 *competitions, I don't answer phone calls from my athletes* (ID30). Some coaches were also  
9 conscientious about finding *strategies for a balanced workload* when traveling with athletes  
10 (train camps/competition): "*I don't understand how many leaders find the energy to sit up late,*  
11 *grab some beers, sleep few hours. I am often "the boring one" who doesn't show up, but it is*  
12 *necessary to look after my health, though I know I miss out on some important conversations*"  
13 (ID20).

14 Altogether, the results indicated that the female coaches had a range of adaptive coping  
15 strategies in order to maintain a balance that they feel is healthy, however, the findings also  
16 clearly yielded two different lower-order themes revealing maladaptive, or non-existing, coping  
17 strategies (*no strategies* and *difficult finding strategies*). About half of the coaches answered that  
18 even though they were aware of different types of coping strategies related to balance in life, it  
19 was very difficult to find time, or prioritize time, and actually act upon them. The consequences  
20 of this were non-existing or maladaptive coping strategies, resulting in work-overload: "*It*  
21 *(finding balance) is very difficult for me. I try to turn off the sound on my cell phone and think*  
22 *about something else, but it is hard*" (ID15). Further, one of the other coaches expressed how this  
23 unbalanced work-home relationship seems to occur periodically in time: "*During some periods, I*

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1 *find it (balance) really hard to manage. But my family reminds me about taking care of myself*  
2 *"(ID37). A considerable amount of the coaches expressed that they did not have strategies for*  
3 *balance between job and private life at all: "Not at all actually (about finding time for*  
4 *recovery/balance). I just keep on going as long as it is possible "(ID 6). Moreover, some of the*  
5 *coaches also expressed insight on how the lack of balance had negative consequences for their*  
6 *private life: "I don't find the balance. I go all in in my leader role during intense periods, which*  
7 *affects my private life in a negative manner" (ID3).*

### 8 **Acceptance for working as a female HP coach**

9 Finally, the third topic of interest in the findings was the higher-order theme related to  
10 *acceptance for working as a high performance coaches* in various contexts. The responses in  
11 these categories were inductively and qualitatively categorized as either "*well accepted*", "*both*  
12 *well and poorly accepted (both)*" and "*poorly accepted*" and thereby quantified in each of the  
13 contexts. In total, the coaches perceived themselves as "*well accepted*" from their athletes ( $n =$   
14  $25$ ) versus "*both*" ( $n = 4$ ) and "*poorly accepted*" ( $n = 4$ ), and this is how one of the coaches  
15 describes the acceptance from the athletes: "*I perceive high acceptance and a good response in*  
16 *all situations. I feel that many athletes enjoy working with female coaches" (ID15).*

17 Similar findings were apparent looking at perceived acceptance from their leaders and  
18 support team, "*well accepted*" ( $n = 24$ ) versus "*both*" ( $n = 10$ ) and "*poorly accepted*" ( $n = 6$ ).  
19 This is illustrated by this quote: "*In my closest support team most staff members are men, but*  
20 *there are more females at higher levels in my sport federation and I have never experienced any*  
21 *a problem of acceptance of females or female leadership" (ID3).*

22 From the HP environment in general, the coaches have a more mixed experiences of  
23 acceptance; "*well accepted*" ( $n = 18$ ), "*both*" ( $n = 11$ ), and "*poorly accepted*" ( $n = 12$ ). As an

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1 example of "both": *"Mostly, I am met with respect. But sometimes I experience that some people*  
2 *more easily accept and turn to my male colleagues. Especially internationally, they think I am*  
3 *my male colleague's company and sometimes they do not even greet me"* (ID26).

4 These findings of perceived mixed acceptance for being a female HP coach were also  
5 mirrored looking into their experiences with society in general: *"well accepted"* ( $n = 20$ ), *"both"*  
6 ( $n = 9$ ), and *"poorly accepted"* ( $n = 11$ ). The following quotes exemplifies how two coaches are  
7 met by a lack of understanding for their work and poorly accepted as female HP coaches: *"They*  
8 *(other people) wonder what I do (for work), what is your work "in real life"?* (ID26) and *"Do*  
9 *you work with this? In your leisure time? How strange". They (other people) really do not*  
10 *understand it"* (ID37).

11

12

### Discussion

13 The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges that are experienced by women  
14 within the unique context of HP sports coaching, and their perceived associations with  
15 sustainability and mental health issues. The findings of the current study both mirror and extend  
16 previous research exploring challenges related to being a female HP coach. To a large extent,  
17 findings indicate that female HP coaches experience the same challenges related to being a HP  
18 coach as have been reported in research conducted within the HP coaching profession in general  
19 (Joncheray, Burlot, & Julla-Marcy, 2019). For example, WHI was reported here as a challenge  
20 echoing the same issue that has been highlighted in research with largely (e.g., 92.5%) male  
21 samples (Bentzen et al., 2016a). Nevertheless, as previously noted, additional challenges may be  
22 placed upon women because of motherhood or persisting cultural expectations on women to

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1 manage household duties and other family responsibilities (Dyrdal, Røysamb, Bang Nes, &  
2 Vittersø, 2019).

3         It should also be noted that while the labelling of the overall General Dimensions  
4 (challenges associated with WHPC and issues related to sustainability) was influenced by  
5 existing literature and our research question, they merely reflected the initial coding and analysis  
6 and captured the higher- and lower-order themes that emerged from the data. However, the  
7 challenges tied more specifically to being a female HP coach found in the present study can also  
8 be discussed and mirrored according to the ecological model by LaVoi and Dutove (2012).  
9 These challenges have been associated to what LaVoi and Dutove described as the masculine  
10 and male dominated nature of sport spaces. In summary, our key findings describe that female  
11 HP coaches perceive and report that they have to adapt to the stereotypical male culture, rather  
12 than trying to change the culture in order to sustain in the profession and maintain their mental  
13 health. In the following sections, the two main higher-order themes experienced as *Challenges of*  
14 *Working as a WHPC*, will be discussed jointly with the issues regarding *Sustainability and Well-*  
15 *being as a WHPC* that were reported.

### 16 **Stereotypical male culture and coping strategies**

17         The higher-order theme *Stereotypical male culture* had the most lower-order themes  
18 attached to it, yet these findings, suggesting the multifaceted and challenging nature of such  
19 male-dominated cultures has a negative impact on HP coaching for women, mirror previous  
20 research. The male dominated HP context, and occasionally macho culture, stood out as a  
21 distinct 'old fashioned gender stereotypes' within the HP context. What is associated with  
22 masculine and male dominated sport environments has previously been viewed from multiple  
23 perspectives (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Fasting & Pfister, 2000). In the current study this theme

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1 explicitly emerged as inappropriate language (e.g., sexual undertone), that men were looking out  
2 for one another, and that the female HP coaches perceived that gender equality was not yet  
3 within reach in the HP community. Altogether, most lower-order themes that relate to a  
4 stereotypical male culture seem to closely align with the sociocultural level of the ecological  
5 model of barriers and support to female coaches (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

6         It is understandable that a central theme emerged that was about coping with the  
7 stereotypical masculine culture and adjusting to it, rather than fighting or challenging it, in order  
8 to "survive" and prioritizing energy in getting the job done. These coping strategies further align  
9 with LaVoi and Duvotes model (2012), mostly at the individual and interpersonal level.  
10 Unfortunately, these coping strategies at the individual and interpersonal levels are not likely to  
11 change such an environment to become healthier or better. Interestingly, the masculine and male  
12 dominant culture in HP sport can also be harmful to the mental health of the male population, but  
13 arguably to a lesser extent (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). However, it should be emphasized that the  
14 responsibility to change such a "harmful"/narrow subculture, should not be put on the female  
15 coaches themselves, rather it is a responsibility for the sport environment, its stakeholders, and  
16 organizations to be aware of and act upon this need for change (i.e., at the organizational level).  
17 Moreover, it is suggested that these efforts in general should include a greater emphasis on  
18 mental health and well-being strategies, and more specifically address challenges that female HP  
19 coaching professionals face.

20         Despite results that showed the stereotypical male culture continues to be a challenging  
21 factor in coaching for women, it is of importance to look at some of the other findings of the  
22 current study. Of importance, the female coaches experienced higher acceptance for being a HP  
23 coach from their own athletes and their closest colleagues, than compared to the HP environment

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1 in general and in society outside sport. The acceptance from their closest companions is  
2 presumably of great importance, as these are the prominent stakeholders affecting the  
3 individual's well-being and ability to thrive at work (Allan & Shaw, 2009). However, the  
4 findings showing that half of the coaches reported either being accepted poorly or both  
5 accepted/not accepted in the HP environment or by society are alarming. Lack of acceptance and  
6 relatedness will thwart basic psychological needs and has been linked to poor mental health and  
7 ill-being (Stebbing et al., 2012). This issue requires attention both in practice and in future  
8 research. In contrast, the results also indicated a lower-order theme that gave a more optimistic  
9 prospect of a more balanced proportion of HP coaches regarding gender for the future, since a  
10 meaningful proportion of the coaches did not experience inequality as a problem/issue.

11 Lack of female role models was cited by several female HP coaches as a challenge for  
12 them in their job, as has been reported in previous research (Drago et al, 2005). Female role  
13 models are of importance at the HP level, and striving for this would facilitate more female  
14 coaches not only in getting HP coaching jobs, but also in remaining in coaching at the HP level.  
15 In the present study, some female HP coaches reported experiencing a lack of self-confidence in  
16 their jobs, and felt they had to overachieve as female coaches to prove their competencies,  
17 something that has previously been described as a burden and a strain on mental health by other  
18 elite female coaches (Norman, 2010a; 2010b). It could be argued that these findings of few role  
19 models and lack of self-confidence/overachieving co-exist in a negative cycle. These negative  
20 cycles are described in the literature (e.g., Bickenstaff, 2005), and serve as part of the foundations  
21 upon which specific female coach programs are built. Despite several initiatives in the last  
22 decades, the 'problem' with the low proportion of HP female coaches in the sports world clearly  
23 has not yet been solved, given the low numbers of female coaches reported in recent studies

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1 (e.g., Bentzen et al., 2016a; 2016b; Kidd, 2013). Consequently, we ask whether the current  
2 women-specific coach programs are sufficient, and suggest that other complementary strategies  
3 with a different perspective need to be considered to reach the goal of larger diversity in the  
4 coach population. It is suggested that context-specific strategies are also needed to address how  
5 to enhance the retention of female coaches that enter the HP context without compromising their  
6 mental health and well-being.

### 7 **WLB and coping strategies**

8         The results support previous findings in that female HP coaches found it difficult and  
9 challenging to have a balanced work life in combination with private life (Bruening & Dixon,  
10 2007; Bruening, Dixon, Burton, & Madsen, 2013). This topic has recently gained increasingly  
11 attention, as a number of studies have indicated that working as a HP coach, regardless of  
12 gender, is a demanding and highly stressful occupation (Didymus, 2017; Joncheray et al, 2019).  
13 This is due to work hours without boundaries, job-insecurity, and extreme travel schedules that,  
14 taken together, challenge the notion of a healthy work-life balance. Ultimately, this lack of  
15 balance between work and life commitments might well put coaches at risk for burnout and other  
16 mental health problems such as depression-, anxiety-, sleep-, dependency disorders (Olusoga et  
17 al., 2019). In summary, these findings suggest that the challenges related to work-life balance  
18 may have both gender neutral and gender specific issues that require attention. More specifically,  
19 we suggest that WLB is a challenging factor related to the “old school” stereotypical male coach  
20 role that needs to be revised and applied in a manner that would consider sustainability and  
21 mental health to a greater extent in HPC and that would take into considerations the complexities  
22 of compounding variables such as gender and societal expectations. A greater balance between  
23 private life and professional life, might result in a professional culture that would support greater

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1 diversity among professionals willing to commit to HP coaching as a career, without giving up a  
2 private life and thereby expanding the typical expectation of the coaching role. Role models that  
3 represents a greater diversity among HP coach professionals could encourage and motivate more  
4 people to enter the coaching profession with the aspiration and desire of becoming a HP coach  
5 and pursuing a career in HP sport. This could include younger coaches both male and females,  
6 coaches with small children, male coaches not fitting in the typical macho-roles, several female  
7 coaches, older and more experienced coaches, and coaches with disabilities. It should also be  
8 noted that the main theme of work-life balance aligns well with LaVoi and Duvote's model  
9 (2012) primarily at the interpersonal level, but they are driven by job demands situated at the  
10 organizational level.

11         It is also of importance to point to the mental health challenges that specifically relate to  
12 being a woman in a HP coaching context, for example, having to overachieve to demonstrate and  
13 prove competencies, perceiving less support at home in comparison to their male colleagues, and  
14 at times not being accepted in the coaching role. Minority groups often tend to have fewer  
15 resources, and less power and status as compared to the dominant groups in any context, and this  
16 is a possible explanation for some of our findings. Aligned with this is the proposed minority  
17 stress hypothesis suggested by Schwartz and Meyer (2010). Future research should address these  
18 topics in order to develop more adaptive strategies and content for future coach education and  
19 professional development support that should foster diversity and well-being and speak to the  
20 beneficial nature of it. Moreover, coach education should address the importance of stress and  
21 recovery imbalance that can result from overachievement and the lack of coping resources that  
22 was reported by several participants in our study. This is especially important in the culture of  
23 HP sports since vulnerability is often perceived as a weakness and thereby limiting help-seeking



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1 behavior with the risk of coaches attempting to mask severe mental health problems. This notion  
2 was also reported by participants in our study. More recently, organizations such as ISSP and  
3 FEPSAC have published position statement on mental health that have focused on athletes with  
4 limited attention to minority groups (Henriksen et al., 2019; Moesch et al., 2018). It is suggested  
5 that future research should address mental health in the profession of coaching with special  
6 attention to work-life balance and how the current male dominant culture may be challenging to  
7 mental health across genders. Moreover, more longitudinal approaches to evaluate the effect of  
8 various initiatives that aim to support women coaches to strive, sustain and stay healthy in high  
9 performance sports are warranted. That could, for example, be specific coach programs or  
10 initiatives (Kilty, 2006), or more enduring networks with female HP coaches as hosted by The  
11 Swedish Sports Confederation. This type of research may better empirically support future  
12 initiatives. An interesting finding in this study was that nearly half of the sample perceived  
13 gender equality. The level and perception of gender equality and its impact on sustainability in  
14 the profession and mental health should be examined in future research.

### 15 **Limitations**

16 The design of this study was an open-ended questionnaire making it possible to reach out  
17 to a large number of female HP coaches. However, even though the coaches could freely  
18 elaborate on their thoughts about the question asked, the written format limits to this one answer,  
19 and follow up questions or further elaborations are not possible. The method would have been  
20 strengthened by in-depth follow up interviews with these coaches and, as such, a mixed method  
21 approach would have strengthened this study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

### 22 **Conclusions**

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1           The authors argue, that while some of the challenges reported in the current study may be  
2 common for all HP coaches to a large extent, gender specific concerns continue to persist,  
3 particularly for females in the HP sport environment. Specifically, the coaches in this study  
4 discussed the stereotypical male culture associated with sport (e.g., macho culture, and men  
5 looking out for each other) as a particular challenge for women coaches. Moreover, findings  
6 revealed that rather than attempting to instigate any significant cultural shift within organizations  
7 or engage in problem-focused coping solutions, women coaches instead tended to adapt to the  
8 stereotypical male culture in which they found themselves operating, in order merely to  
9 "survive". This has obvious implications for the sustainability of the profession as the women in  
10 our study highlighted the need to divert and focus energy into getting the job done, with limited  
11 resources left to manage the unique stressors associated with the role. Instead of reviewing  
12 arguments and motives to support the notion that more women coaches are needed, we need to  
13 start focusing on a more sustainable work life balance for coaches in general as well as address  
14 the specific support needs of the many subpopulations within the coaching profession. Sport  
15 organizations have a responsibility to recognize both the general challenges regarding HPC, and  
16 the specific challenges for WHPCs. For the specific strategies, retention of and support for  
17 women coaches in HP environments must be carefully considered, as our findings suggest that  
18 the actions taken at individual and interpersonal levels are often not sustainable, and could lead  
19 to mental health issues and burnout (Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2017; Olusoga, et al., 2019) .  
20 Sustainability and mental health in the HP-coaching profession will be challenged to another  
21 level during and after motherhood. An important task for future research would be to explore this  
22 “critical period” with an effort to identify and implement support systems. Ultimately, both the  
23 general, and the specific strategies will lead to a more diverse coach population including mothers

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1 Future research should address the specific challenges for WHPCs in different cultures and also  
2 across different sports Finally, it can be argued that HPC will always be highly demanding,  
3 taxing and thus somewhat unsustainable by its very nature. For this reason, explicit efforts in  
4 research and practice that strive to enhance work-life balance, sustainability and mental health  
5 can make this profession less dominated by stereo-typical male culture and more attractive to a  
6 diverse population.

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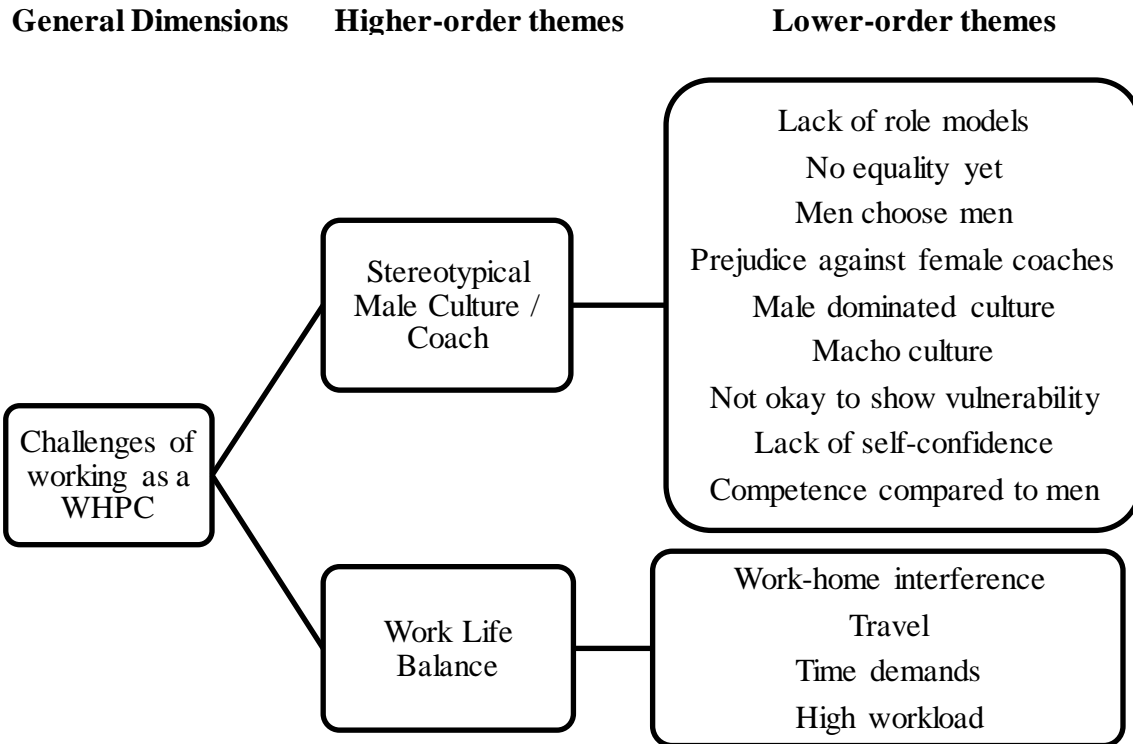
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# CHALLENGES AMONG WOMAN HIGH PERFORMANCE COACHES

1 Figure 1. Themes related to the *Challenges of working as a WHPC*

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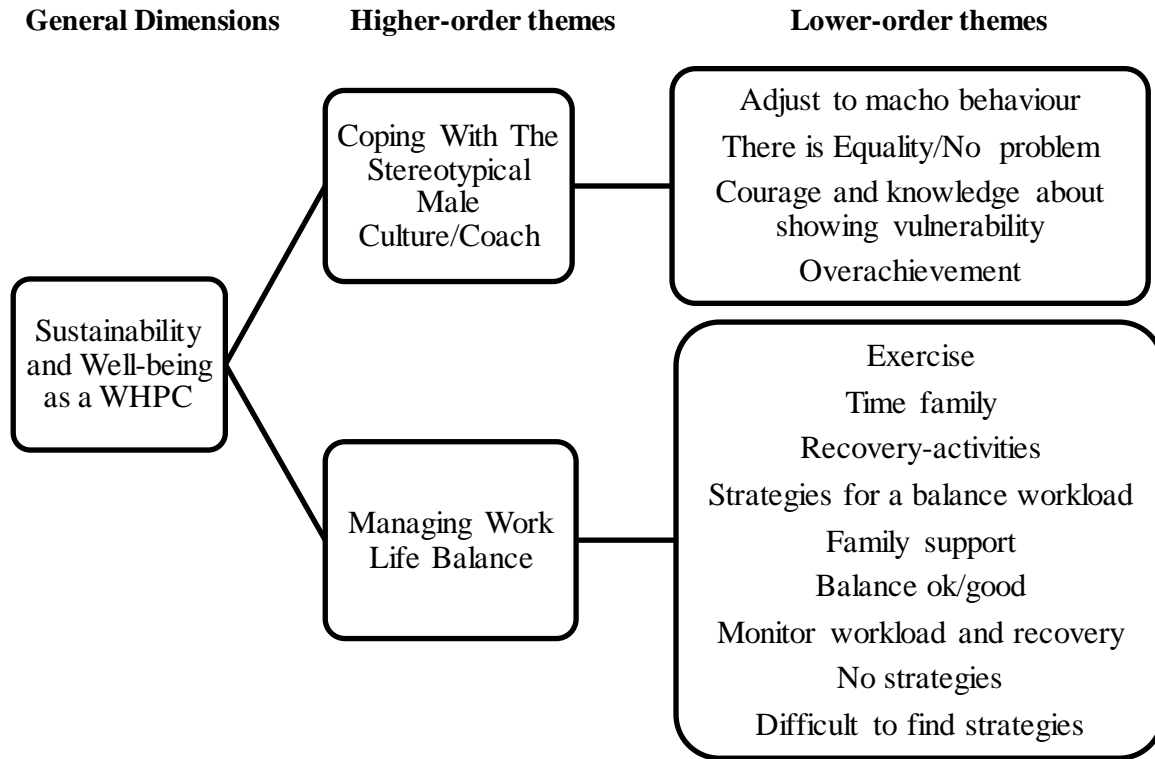
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CHALLENGES AMONG WOMAN HIGH PERFORMANCE COACHES

1 Figure 2. Themes related to *Sustainability and Well-being as a WHPC*



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