



# ADVANCING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Navigating the Labyrinth of Leadership in Sport: A Community of Practice of Femininity**

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**The following qualitative study examines a social learning initiative to support the leadership development of women in sport. Specifically, a Community of Practice (CoP) of femininity was cultivated to inspire women (and male allies) to develop their leadership capacities in the male-focused and dominated field of sport. Data were generated from 12 sport leaders (10 women and two men) over a year and a half to collect their experiences of participating in this initiative. Data collection included interviews, observations, surveys, and informal discussions. Subsequently, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The themes discussed include: supports to develop confidence, improved leadership skills, self-awareness of leadership capacity and influence, increased leadership opportunities, men supporting women in leadership development, and the value of social learning. The findings provide steps that can be used to nurture women leaders in other fields where masculinity is dominant. This may allow other CoPs of femininity to emerge to support women in their leadership development.**

**Keywords:** *leadership development; community of practice; sport; social learning*

### **Introduction**

When it comes to leadership positions, it is promising to note the progress women have made in several fields such as business and politics (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Women are now securing positions of power in many private and public sector organizations (Rhodes, 2017). This progress for women in leadership is important for a variety of reasons. Women can see themselves reflected in roles with positional power when leaders are female. Role modelling and mentoring of women by women holds leadership development promise, when mentoring focuses on “helping women traverse the route to the top from role models they can identify with” and helps them achieve leadership success (Chrobot-Mason, Hoobler, & Burno, 2019, p. 117).

Research from a range of contexts and sectors clarifies the value and impact of having women in leadership positions. According to Goethals and Hyot (2017), women may apply different leadership strategies than men and bring unique perspectives to values and ethics when they lead. Despite knowing the evidence-informed benefits of bestowing positional power to women in organizations, they continue to be underrepresented in

government, education, and non-profit leadership positions (Madsen & Dahlvig, 2018). One key factor that restricts women from moving into leadership roles is their lack of access to meaningful and effective leadership development opportunities (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011).

Our purpose in this paper is to describe how access to a leadership development opportunity supported women sport leaders in building their leadership capacities, and the impact of this opportunity on male allies. Similar to other disciplines and fields, leadership opportunities for women in sport are limited. In some cases, such as head coach positions, there has actually been a decline in the number of women in these leadership roles in recent years (Acosta & Carpenter, 2019). Thus, studies examining development opportunities to promote and retain women in sport leadership positions are needed. The research question which guided our inquiry is: How is leadership learned using a Community of Practice (CoP) approach and a two and a half year initiative focused on improving leadership skills and capacities for women in sport? The next section delves into social learning theory (CoPs) and how this theory informs the project of focus specifically and leadership and sport broadly.

## Barriers to Leadership Development

According to Mate, McDonald, and Do (2018), women experience barriers to leadership development opportunities through both covert and overt instances of discrimination in male-dominated organizations. The discrimination that inhibits women's career advancement opportunities is prevalent across several fields including healthcare, academic, and business (Kalaitzi, Czabanowska, Fowler-Davis, & Brand, 2017), despite the evidence showing that offering women leadership opportunities may increase the productivity of an organization (Coleman, 2010). This access barrier was originally referred to as the glass ceiling, an invisible impediment preventing women from attaining leadership roles. More recently, this phenomenon has been labelled in the literature as the *labyrinth of leadership*. Eagly and Carli (2007) describe this metaphor as "passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead... for women who aspire to top leadership, routes exist but are full of twists and turns, both unexpected and expected" (para.6). Although the labyrinth may exist regardless of whether women have access to leadership development opportunities or not, having access to these opportunities could at the very least prepare women for navigation through the labyrinth. Literature exploring women's experiences developing their leadership capacities and how to effectively develop women leaders remains scarce (Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci, & Burke, 2017); it is a central focus of our inquiry. The purpose of this paper is to describe and examine a social learning initiative framed to develop the leadership skills and capacities of 10 women leaders in sport.

## Women's Leadership in Sport

Women in sport experience many challenges along their paths to reaching leadership positions, because sport is a deeply gendered space where women are often considered the "other" (Burton, 2019). When a dominant group defines, diminishes, and disempowers another group we witness othering. Groups who are othered are reduced to subordinate status relative to the in-group or those in power (Jensen, 2011). Through the process of othering, women experience discrimination in many forms, for example, when women are not provided with the same organizational resources that their male colleagues can access, they experience treatment discrimination (Greenhaus, Parasurman, & Wormley, 1990). Treatment discrimination and the negative stereotypes associated with women in sport impact how they are viewed and limit their access to leadership opportunities (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). In addition to these negative perceptions of women, LaVoi, Baeth, and Calhoun (2019) explain that in some cases, men hold gatekeeper positions in sport and decide who will have access to leadership in sport programs. Gatekeepers control access to resources and experiences in a group – they determine who is welcomed and who is denied access to positions in a group. When gatekeepers in sport organizations are male, they are more inclined to give leadership opportunities to other men (Taylor & Hardin, 2016).

To address the barriers to leadership development and positions for women in sport, a social learning initiative was framed to support women in sport organizations through access to leadership development opportunities not otherwise available to them. We describe this initiative, the Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program (AWiSL), in the following section.

## Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program

In 2017, the AWiSL received a grant from the federal government (Women and Gender Equality) to develop a program to increase gender equity and leadership diversity across the province of Alberta, Canada. To frame this initiative, the program lead initiated a social learning approach, more specifically a CoP (Wenger, 1998). One of the aims of this program was to provide 10 women and two male allies, (the 12 were universally referred to as sport leaders in this project and paper) from various sport organizations, with leadership development opportunities. In addition, each of the 12 sport leaders was tasked with developing and implementing a project in their sport organizations aimed at increasing gender equity. Examples of these projects included implementing a women's-only coach developer program to increase the number of female coach developers, and facilitating women's-only clinics and training opportunities for coaches and referees. Six mentors were also a part of this CoP and played an important role in supporting the sport leaders and each other in developing their leadership capacities. These mentors also worked with the sport leaders to facilitate the achievement of their specific gender equity project goals. The CoP met approximately once a month for two and one-half years, both in person and online. These meetings included professional development activities, check-ins, and informal discussions. Example topics from these meetings included workshops on presentation skills, unconscious biases, and the skill of confidence. Learning opportunities focused on developing communication and time management skills were also included over the span of this CoP. In addition to the group meetings, one of the mentors facilitated a leadership skill-development online course in which a small number of the sport leaders and other mentors opted to participate. This group met regularly to learn about evidence-informed leadership best practices, to read and discuss leadership literature, to identify and live into their core values, and engage in other social learning activities to develop their leadership skills.

## Theoretical Framework

### Communities of Practice – Social Learning Theory

The CoP approach was originally presented by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger subsequently took a deep dive into the concepts in his 1998 text *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. CoPs are described as a group of people who engage in learning because they care to make a difference. More specifically,

Members of a community of practice may engage in the same practice while working on different tasks in

different teams. But they can still learn together. A learning partnership around a practice is a different structuring process than working on a joint task (Farnsworth, Kleanthous & Wenger-Trayner, 2016, p.143).

CoPs have been used for many purposes and in many fields including medical education (Cruess, Cruess, & Steinert, 2018), teacher education (Trust & Horrocks, 2017), business (Harris, James, & Harris, 2017), and sport (Bertram, Culver, & Gilbert, 2016). A CoP offers a site for knowledge sharing and developing and improving practice among other goals. In our case, the ongoing interactions between the AWiSL CoP members were focused on developing the sport leaders' leadership capacities and increasing gender equity across the region. In the next section, we discuss gendered CoPs and what this means for leadership CoPs.

### **CoPs of Masculinity and Femininity**

According to Paetchter (2003) CoPs are aligned with masculinities or femininities because knowledge and power are associated with the masculine or feminine. Burkinshaw (2015) builds on this point by explaining that roles in the workplace have specific gender expectations. For example, CoPs in higher education and leadership are generally CoPs of masculinity because of the underrepresentation of women in higher education and leadership. That is not to say that women are not present in these CoPs, rather they are predominantly populated with men, and leadership is generally associated with masculinity (Burkinshaw, 2015). As a result, women experience challenges in leadership CoPs: "Women are disadvantaged and disorientated within leadership communities of practice of masculinities. Often women doing leadership means many women face a contradiction between their identities that arise from societal roles and contexts" (p. 39). Burkinshaw (2015) continues that in higher education and leadership CoPs, there is a constant negotiation of meaning. Women are negotiating the meaning of being a leader while facing a misalignment with their feminine identity. Sport is also very much associated with the masculine. Burton and Leberman (2017) argue that "all processes in sport operate within a shared understanding of sport as masculine" (p.19). So, how do we nurture a CoP to develop women leaders when both leadership and sport are associated with the masculine? In this program and our research, we have deliberately fostered a CoP of femininity to enable women sport leaders to develop their leadership capacities in a setting that predominantly focused on women and women's needs. Acknowledging that sport and leadership align with the masculine, we intentionally developed a CoP of femininity. We believed this could empower women to negotiate their identities and develop leadership skills without being obligated to replicate male leadership characteristics. Our design and facilitation of this CoP was focused on supporting women sport leaders in building the characteristics they sought in service of becoming successful leaders.

### **Methods**

This study was conducted using a qualitative inquiry approach and aligned with a constructivist lens. Both the participants and the researchers played active roles in co-constructing realities (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018) as they were able to meet and discuss the sport leaders' experiences in the CoP on several occasions over the year and a half period.

### **Participants**

As mentioned above, 12 sport leaders (10 women, two men) participated in the CoP evaluation. Initially, the CoP consisted of 15 sport leaders, but three leaders had to end their participation for reasons such as employment changes. All participants held an administrative position at a sport organization, with positions ranging from coaching development coordinator to executive director. The types of organizations also ranged from regional sport organizations, to multisport organizations, to sport clubs.

### **Data Collection**

In 2018, two researchers were invited to conduct a program evaluation of the AWiSL CoP to assess leadership development, gender equity change, and knowledge transfer. In this paper, we focus on the leadership development piece. Upon receiving ethics approval from the University's research and ethics board, the researchers sent a recruitment text to the lead of the CoP to distribute to the sport leaders. The primary researcher then attended a CoP meeting and received signed consent forms from all interested participants. Data collection began in 2018 and continued over a year and a half. Although data were collected from the sport leaders and mentors during the project, the data included and analyzed in this paper are solely from the perspective of the sport leaders, focusing on their experiences in a CoP of femininity.

The majority of sport leaders participated in an initial survey, two semi-structured interviews (that were conducted one year apart) as well as a number of informal interviews and discussions with the primary researcher. A few sport leaders were not able to participate for the full duration of the AWiSL initiative. The researchers did however retain the data collected from those participants and have included their accounts in this study. Examples of interview questions included: Did you engage in any memorable conversations/interactions with others from the CoP (mentors/sport leaders) which may have impacted your leadership development? Did this program allow you to take on any additional leadership opportunities/roles? The primary researcher also participated in several of the CoP meetings and took field notes to supplement the survey and interview data. In addition, a small group of sport leaders, mentors, and the primary researcher participated in the above-mentioned opt-in opportunity called the Leadership Legacy course. The course meetings were usually hosted online, and the group had on-going interactions via Slack (an online collaboration hub) where they could engage asynchronously in discussions, share resources, create threads for sharing books or podcasts or other relevant information mainly related to

leadership. The primary researcher participated in a number of these meetings and used the Slack channel to collect additional observational data on the sport leaders' experiences with leadership development. The researchers chose to engage with various data sources to capture the richness of the sport leaders' experiences in a CoP of femininity for leadership development.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed iteratively and inductively throughout data collection using Braun, Clarke, and Weate's (2016) six-phase guide to thematic analysis. This guide was chosen as it has "entered the 'cannon' as a recognizable and reputable method of qualitative analysis" (p. 191) and has been used in previous research focused on leadership in sport (Slater, Barker, Coffee, & Jones, 2015). The six phases include phases 1-2: familiarization and coding, phases 3-5: theme development, refinement, and naming, and phase 6: writing up. The primary researcher was responsible for collecting most data, which she sent to graduate students to transcribe verbatim or used NVivo transcription software, resulting in 260 pages of transcriptions. After familiarizing herself with the transcripts, she engaged with the other forms of collected data, such as surveys, observations notes, and field notes. Although the interviews accounted for the majority of the data, Mathison (1998) suggested using other sources to triangulate the data and explore any convergences, inconsistencies, and contradictions that occurred. Following, the primary researcher developed initial codes which she then discussed with the second author. Examples of these codes included: confidence, leadership development, organizational supports, barriers, male allies, social learning, and knowledge transfer. The authors then collaborated on the development, refinement, and naming of themes. Considering data were collected and analyzed over a year and a half, new codes were constantly generated, and preliminary themes were developed as new data were introduced. Specifically, the authors reviewed the transcripts and codes for instances of leadership development and examples (positive and negative) of the sport leaders' experiences participating in a CoP of femininity. The themes were then adjusted overtime as the sport leaders continued to develop their leadership capacities. These adjustments were necessary to ensure the themes continued to be reflective of the sport leaders' experiences as they evolved during their participation in CoP activities. The write up was also an iterative process as data were used to write a series of focused papers on this program (e.g., Culver, Kraft, Cayer, & Din, 2019; Culver, Kraft, & Cayer, 2020; Kraft & Culver, 2020; Kraft, Culver, & Din, 2020).

### Research Quality

The use of the term validity for assessing the quality of qualitative research has long been contested (Eisner, 1991) as it is argued that this notion is fundamentally aligned with quantitative research and that qualitative data may continuously be reinterpreted (Angen, 2000), therefore rendering "validity" an ill fit. According to Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011), criteria to determine the so-called "validity" of research should be

relative to the case. Thus, the authors aligned with a relativist approach to develop criteria that were relevant to the research at hand. Burke (2016) suggests a list of criteria that may be suitable for research in sport and exercise, of which the following were deemed appropriate for the current research on women in sport leadership: substantive contribution, width, and credibility. As mentioned above, sport and leadership are generally associated with masculinity; in our research, we have created a *substantive contribution* by developing a CoP that aligns with femininity. The activities and interactions were not geared towards replicating typical, masculine leadership styles, but rather supporting women in developing their leadership skills and capacities relative to their own needs. As for *width*, the primary researcher conducted a survey, interviewed the participants both formally and informally, monitored the Slack channel, and engaged in numerous in-person discussions and conversations with the sport leaders. This immersion into the CoP, allowed the researcher to collect numerous accounts and narratives of the sport leaders' experiences with the CoP of femininity to substantiate the interpretations of the data. Finally, the researchers gained considerable *credibility* with the CoP. One author was the lead of this project, one was a mentor and led the Leadership Legacy course, and two of the authors became immersed in the program through attending the online and in-person CoP activities over a period of a year and a half.

### Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present the six major themes that reflect and describe the sport leaders' experiences participating in a CoP of femininity to develop their leadership skills and capacities. These themes are: supports to develop confidence, improved leadership skills, self-awareness of leadership capacity and influence, increased leadership opportunities, men supporting women in leadership development, and the value of social learning. We discuss these themes in relation to current literature to contextualize our findings.

#### *Supports to develop confidence*

Many of the women credited the CoP activities and opportunities to engage in leadership discussions with like-minded women and male allies, as a contributor to their increased confidence. Jane explains:

I definitely would say I have more confidence now. I think we had a lot of opportunities to stand up in front of a group of people and talk about something that we were passionate about in a lot of different formats. Lots of those were formally prepared, lots of them were informal. So, I have a lot more confidence maybe kind of speaking like my truth or what's important to me. That's another thing I think I really took away [from the CoP]... the thing about our presentations and our slides and not having a lot of words and how when you stand up there you should just be talking from your heart or talk about what's important to you. And I think even

outside of just presenting, I can take that to my every day when I'm in meetings or when I'm in different groups just talking about like, what I know or what I believe in more confidently.

In Rebecca's experience, she had previously described herself as an introvert. But being a part of a group of individuals who supported her growth, enabled her to gain more confidence in herself:

I definitely have prospered from it; the confidence I guess is the big one knowing that the social aspect for me, it's confidence. And I'm quite an introvert, so to be put into that position where I have to...I have to socialize, and I have to do that it's been very beneficial in that sense. It's forced me to get out of the shell a bit.

Karen mirrors this sentiment, feeling that not only has her confidence grown, but her identification with the term *leader*: "I did not view myself as a leader before, I think the change in me is profound and my confidence has grown so much. I have a real, truer perspective and, I think, appreciation of the value I can bring... Yeah, it's been huge for me". In Wenger's (1998) CoP text, identity is a key element in negotiating and developing one's practice. Karen's quote captures the augmented alignment between her identity and leadership, stemming from her increased confidence. This seems to differ from women's previous experiences in CoPs of masculinity, where their identities and leadership created an internal conflict. According to Burkinshaw and White (2017): "in order to 'fit in' women were continually walking a tightrope because of the exclusionary structures and practices embodied through communities of practice of masculinities that made their leadership much more precarious than was the case for male colleagues" (p. 7). For the women in this CoP of femininity, they were not faced with the same tension of attempting to align with masculinity, when this was not authentic to their values. Although many leadership traits are often seen as masculine, the sport leaders were in a space where they could build their confidence and develop leadership skills that aligned with their personal values, rather than trying to 'fit in' to a role. Further to their identity development, the increase in the sport leaders' overall confidence may play a key role in their access to future opportunities. Mathipa and Tsoka (2001) explain that confidence is a possible barrier in the advancement of women into leadership positions and that, "Confidence is important in leadership because performance is based on it. Confidence actually drives performances" (p. 327). By supporting these women in building their confidence, they may have gained the necessary self-perception to take on future leadership roles.

#### *Improved leadership skills*

In addition to feeling more confident in themselves and their leadership capacities, many of the women touched on the specific skills they developed as a result of their participation in the CoP. Ellen discussed the changes in her communication skills:

I've definitely developed on the communication side, again just always being reminded how important communication is and the way you communicate, and [that] different people will respond in different ways. And communication, I know I've kind of always considered a strength of mine and relationship building, but at the same time, I feel like I've developed more of a professionalism over the last two years. And knowing, like I used to get offended really easily and now I'll sit back and listen and be like 'OK is this really something to be offended about? Or respond to? Or do I just kind of let this one go?'

Earlier this year, Ellen was unexpectedly placed into a new leadership position in her sport organization. Because Ellen was prepared with important new leadership skills, this sudden change gave her the opportunity to effectively put them into action:

Actually, just recently, just before our last meeting took place, my supervisor was let go and I was then assuming the role of the head of our [sport] department. So, there were a lot of pieces in there about communication and leadership and organization that I had to put into practice right away.

Susan's job included using her communication skills to have discussions with different groups across the sport system. By participating in the CoP, she gained a sense of support from the women and male allies, which enabled her to become more confident talking about gender equity and refined her communication skills:

I think it has increased my competency to just kind of take tasks head on. We're actually doing meetings with every league, so it's my job right now. I'm going up to every one of our leagues and discussing exciting stuff like bylaws, regulations, and policies to make sure they understand [the importance of gender equity]. Sometimes I might have been intimidated a bit to do that.... go into these groups or talking about the females in the sport and coaching and why it's important.

Danielle found that her communication style improved across her time participating in the CoP and she is now more secure in her leadership style. She also attributed a higher effectiveness across her team to this improvement in her communication skills.

Just in everyday interactions with our team. I think the biggest thing it has made me more comfortable in my authentic leadership style, which is huge... because I am communicating better with the team, upwards and downwards like all the way around, three-sixty. Yeah, we are more effective as a team. And personally, yes because it makes me feel more confident and comfortable in who I am.

Another sport leader (Jane) found that her access to new leadership skills also had an impact on her role in her organization. She expressed that some of these new skills were not anticipated:

So, I got really unexpected things I think from participating in [the CoP]. I think presentation skills were really big one. I think also leadership skills because we had that opportunity to work so closely with [one of the mentors] through the Leadership Legacy group. We also did really great work with Brené Brown's work in giving us little projects to kind of focus on more of... the connection side of leadership, which I think is often undervalued or ignored but has a really big impact on my work.

Previous literature has suggested that leadership CoPs produce and reproduce hegemonic masculinity (Karatas-Özkan & Chell, 2015). However, we can see in this case, that the women were able to develop leadership skills that are not necessarily a reproduction of hegemonic skills, but skills that aligned with their authentic leadership styles. For the sport leaders, developing their communication skills was important for their workplaces. In a CoP of masculinity, developing strong and confident communication skills may not be considered a priority, but for women, a lack of assertiveness has been identified as a barrier in sport (Allen & Shaw, 2009; Kilty, 2006) and therefore those skills are important. As mentioned in Jane's quote, another strategy that was appreciated by the sport leaders was the use of resources from other well-known women leaders (including Brené Brown, 2018) to support their specific development needs as women.

#### *Self-awareness of leadership capacity and influence*

As mentioned above, leadership (especially in sport) is often associated with masculinity. Kristen experienced considerable backlash from other sport organizations (particularly from men) while leading a new sport program. However, she realized that despite the struggles she endured, she knew that by pushing through and maintaining her leadership role, she would inspire other women to do the same:

Because I was a female leader heading [the program], I think my role inspired other women. I actually heard that a lot from other women. I even heard it from mothers who I would see [playing the sport] because we encourage parents to come because we need additional people to be at the end of the group.... So, we try to have a very inclusive program. And so, I noticed that a mom would say 'you're the one that inspired me to get into [the sport]; I haven't [played] since I was young'. So, I think I never really thought of myself as a leader. I knew I was beginning a group, but I thought of it more as an organizer type of a leader. I didn't know that I was a female leader that people looked up to.

Similar, to Kristen, Amanda did not recognize the importance of her influence in a leadership role prior to her participation in the CoP. By developing a newfound awareness, she knew that she could use her influence to keep pushing gender equity forward in sport:

I think now I understand a little bit more just the impact I have within our organization. So, it was still the same role, but understanding that, you know, my behavior or the words I use has an impact on the people around me every day. So, understanding that piece of it, then I guess just making sure that we're always working towards pushing [gender equity] forward and not taking for granted the opportunity that we have to develop things right now.

In Karen's experience, she became more aware of her reactions to others. She deliberately reflected on her reactions and changed her actions to enhance her leadership role as a female sport leader:

Well, I think one thing that I've learned from [CoP mentors] for sure is really being self-aware and thinking about, you know, 'Why am I feeling like this and why am I reacting like this? How do I want to react to this? How am I going to be the most effective kind of leader in this situation?' So, I think those [are] very specific practical tools. So, here is where I am. 'Why am I feeling like this?' You know, 'how can I adjust and head in a better direction?' So yeah, I think just sort of practical everyday kind of tools and thought processes to put into place. I think it has made me more effective in my role.

The sport leaders described a heightened awareness of their influence and how they believe it inspired others in their organizations and other women. Kane (2016) suggests the absence of women in leadership roles can create a vicious cycle for other women:

One could even argue that the lack of women in leadership roles sets up a classic Catch-22 dynamic. Research has shown that under circumstances of insufficient information – which is certainly the case if we don't see or experience women as leaders – people rely on traditional (stereotypic) notions about gender and leadership capacities (p.37-38).

This organizational dynamic reinforces the masculinization of leadership roles and upholds gendered beliefs about who should lead, thus perpetuating discrimination against women and keeping them out of positions of authority and power.

#### *Increased leadership opportunities*

The women in the CoP proudly described their increased confidence and leadership skills which they see serving them well in their futures in sport. It is vital to note, many women in this study took these skills and confidence and secured new leadership opportunities they may not have otherwise had as a

result of their participation in this two and a half year CoP of femininity. For example, Ellen's opportunity to move up to a new leadership role appeared quickly after joining the CoP:

I mean being part of this Community of Practice, my first year in this role I was standing in front of our entire group of Athletic Directors and board and executives presenting on the importance of developing female coaches in all of our sport. And without this Community of Practice, I would not have been in a position to do that. I would have just been a body sitting around the table raising my hands to vote every once in a while.

Rebecca was also recognized as a leader in her organization and was entrusted with running her gender equity project on her own. Today, she is the primary point of contact for a women's mentorship program:

Yeah... I've been able to take the project and completely run with it. So, the fact where everybody just refers back to me with any questions. Whereas before I went to the meeting and presented and it was still kind of a shared project.

Hayley described a similar experience, where she was originally part of a larger collaborative group running her sport's regional gender equity project. She was then supported by her CEO to take on a leadership role and ownership of this project with one other colleague:

So, my role evolved with the organization. You know at first, we're like cool here are these projects and it was like I...had a hand in it. And then [the CEO] was like 'you know what, I don't, I can't own this. I need you to own this with [a second sport leader] supporting'. So, I think for both [the sport leader] and I, we were able to then dive into our academic backgrounds, our previous and current experiences of being in school and being able to talk to researchers. You know it was just something that wouldn't have happened otherwise or at least not within this timeline.

The sport leaders felt that having the support of the CoP enabled them to take on additional leadership opportunities in their own sport organizations. This mirrors other initiatives supporting women in sport. For example, in the United States, there is the Alliance of Women Coaches, which is an organization that supports women as they develop as leaders (LaVoi, 2014). On a global scale, there is the Women's Sport Leadership Academy which aims "to be a central point of reference for scholars and activists involved with women and sport, and to support the education and development of women leaders from countries where women face particular challenges" (Pike, White, Matthews, Southon, & Piggott, 2018, p.812). Having this kind of community available in Canada supports another group of women in developing these skills to take on leadership opportunities. It is also important that the sport organization recognizes the sport leaders' leadership skills and capacities.

Kilty (2006) explains that women have felt that they have been passed over for leadership opportunities for "exhibiting an atypical/unfamiliar leadership style" (p.224). This is another reason to have a leadership network of supportive women and male allies to provide additional credibility to the sport leaders' skills and capacities.

#### *Men supporting women in leadership development*

Although the CoP was primarily focused on developing women's leadership capacities and skills, two men chose to participate in the CoP to support women in leadership. Shawn acknowledged that: "For me as a guy in the room, one of the few guys in the room, there is tremendous personal learning for me". This shows that the CoP was also an important learning opportunity for men. The male sport leaders also shared their experiences working in an androcentric field and identified some of the work that still needs to be done to promote more women in leadership. Shawn described the stereotypes that he sees in sport:

If a guy screws something up, he screwed it up. You know, Tim or Johnny screwed it up. Whereas when a woman screws it up in high level sport it's 'that woman screwed it up'. And it's a gender thing, it's not, it's not an individual, it's the gender. She screwed it up, 'I told you, women can't be at this level and they don't know what they're doing'. And so that dynamic, I think is, for me... teaching men just some of the differences in the approaches [to support women in leadership] ... and maybe some different applications for how we enable, support, inspire, and sponsor our women leaders.

Shawn had recently moved to a different region and expressed that he was seeing the same barriers for women in leadership all over the country:

It's amazing having moved across the country from the Alberta Program in the challenges that we're facing and trying to address with the projects out there, and listening to some of the challenges out here that our organization is hearing; and trying to plan out the projects this week, they are so similar... It's interesting to me, similar organizations, but the two sides of the country and how the rhetoric is very similar in looking at these sort of leadership projects and the need for them.

The second male who was part of this project, Paul, was able to leverage his participation in the CoP to support more women in leadership roles and hoped that this would lead to future generations of women enriching sport through positions of authority and power:

We were able to push to the point where we now have these two women as certified learning facilitators who are now going to be able to go in and deliver a course, which we've not been in a position to do before. So, for us, it has helped push that agenda forward. By putting



these two women in a role where they will now have influence over this generation; that's next. You know, for example, generations of [women] coaches coming in by virtue of the fact that we have them certified and they're going to go deliver that course. It was all really through the support and the interest behind it from this program.

The male allies in this CoP developed a strong understanding of the gender inequities that exist in sport and may use their leadership positions to promote and support women in leadership. In recent literature, Kraft, Culver, and Din (2020), also found that strong male allies played an important role by leveraging their leadership in sport organizations to support women in breaking down barriers in sports culture. LaVoi and Wasend (2018) also highlighted the significance of having male and female allies in sport organizations to create a climate where women are supported and valued and have the opportunities to secure leadership roles, such as head coach positions.

#### *The value of social learning*

The sport leaders expressed the value of participating in a CoP of femininity which enabled them to achieve their goals and develop their leadership capacities. Caitlyn considered the CoP to be important in making her feel like she was not alone in her journey to develop as a leader in sport and push for gender equity:

Honestly, I sometimes feel like the [CoP] is like a big support group. And so, for me, the confidence comes from knowing, I sound really cheesy, but from knowing that I'm not alone and that this is something that others value. And so, it's not me being idealistic or, self-serving isn't the right word, but it's helpful to know that there are other people who are fighting the same things... [this] adds credibility to what I'm doing.

Shawn builds on this by sharing his appreciation for having a group of women leaders together working to overcome their shared challenges: "I think the power of the community is in getting of bunch of motivated female leaders in the room and getting them working together, and hearing the commonalities between their challenges". Finally, Karen found considerable value in meeting with a group of like-minded individuals to build connections and learn from the various opportunities the CoP offered:

I think that coming together and actually being able to be together in person, you have like those real comfortable one-on-one conversations and learning concepts together. All of that really kind of bonds you. Another one would be the optional offerings like the leadership courses and stuff. Those are kind of interesting too because it was a different way to learn from each other, but in a smaller group setting... with a specific focus.

Ten years ago, in a session conducted by Dr. Penny Werthner, women coaches were asked to describe why there was a lack of women coaching at the national level. One participating coach mentioned that "the best aspect of the session was hearing the voices of other female coaches – voices that she noted were a silent minority when they gathered at her sport organization meeting" (Werthner, Culver, & Mercier, 2010, p.49). We found similar accounts from both the women and the men participating in this CoP of femininity. There was great value in having a group of women and male allies come together to create a space for underrepresented voices in sport leadership to be heard and strengthened.

#### **Implications and Conclusion**

The results of this study provide insight into sport leaders' experiences participating in a CoP of femininity for leadership development. This two and one-half year experience enabled them to negotiate and identify the meaning of leadership, rather than participating in a CoP of leadership that explicitly or implicitly reproduces characteristics of masculinity. The implications of this study highlight that women may be supported in their leadership development through a CoP that aligns with concepts of leadership as they pertain to women. Organizations, including sport, education, medicine, and others, may consider replicating a similar social learning initiative to enable women (and male allies) to engage in ongoing learning opportunities to support each other in their leadership development journeys. Specifically, the authors recommend that similar initiatives are carefully designed and facilitated in male-dominated contexts like sport. Framing CoPs of femininity could disrupt the othering and gatekeeping features of organizations where women are diminished and prevented access to leadership positions. The CoP of femininity we co-created with sport leaders in this project positively impacted participants' leadership development. We imagine similar impacts in unique contexts are possible based on our collective experience of this social learning initiative.

We recommend framing a CoP of femininity in relation to the needs and projects participants identify and seek support for implementing in their unique context. More specifically, the lead of this initiative made a point of relying on the sport leaders to drive the selection of activities (workshops, presentations, etc.) the CoP undertook based on their specific and changing needs. This enabled the sport leaders to develop leadership skills that were relevant to their own contexts, rather than hyper-masculine and hegemonic skills that are typically associated with leadership and sport. The authors recommend readers to (Culver et al., 2019; Kraft et al., 2020) for practical insight into the inner workings of this CoP including specific activities used to facilitate and promote learning, challenges, and lessons learned. An example learning activity CoP participants engaged in was an interactive workshop on unconscious biases, which is suggested as an important topic in women's leadership development opportunities (Madsen & Andrade, 2018). The authors also suggest reading (Culver et al., 2020; Kraft &

Culver, 2020) for additional information about social learning theory. More specifically, to host an effective CoP, learning how to frame, facilitate, and assess this type of social learning initiative is important. Finally, this study primarily used the perceptions of the sport leaders for data collection. Future iterations of this research may include collecting accounts from those who work with the sport leaders to further support (or oppose) the accounts of the sport leaders' development, including more men.

Considering women are still faced with a number of barriers when accessing leadership development opportunities and leadership positions in sport, it is important to create nurturing environments to support women in their growth. Although we have seen positive trends in the number of women securing leadership positions in many fields, the balance remains uneven. In Canadian sport, only 39% of sport board member positions are currently held by women (Canadian Women & Sport, 2020). The nurturing of CoPs of femininity for developing women leaders in the androcentric field of sport shows there is potential to even the playing field, empower women in leadership, and inspire future generations of women leaders.

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