

Gender equality may have reached the Olympic fields. But coaching is still a man's game.

By Emma Batha, Thomson Reuters Foundation, *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 12, 2024 (adapted)

The Paris Olympics will be the first Games to host an equal number of female and male competitors, but off the field it is another story with barely 1 in 10 coaches likely to be women.

Vicky Huyton, founder of the Female Coaching Network, a global platform for women coaches to connect, said the underlying problem was systemic with sports “created by men for men.” The father of the modern Olympic movement, Pierre de Coubertin, banned women from the first Games in 1896, later stating the Olympics were for the “exaltation of male athleticism” with “female applause as reward.” Although women participated in a handful of events at the 1900 Olympics, it took another 112 years until they could compete in every sport. Meanwhile, the top jobs in international and national sports bodies continue to be male dominated.

Many coaches said change had to start at the top with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), international sports federations, and national governing bodies. IOC Vice President Nicole Hoevertsz, one of only four women to ever hold the post, said IOC President Thomas Bach was “very serious” about getting more women into prominent jobs. In 2019, the IOC began its WISH training program, which aims to equip women to coach at the highest level. It has so far trained 123 female coaches—from 22 sports and 60 countries. At least six of them are heading to Paris.

Henriette Mero, a Norwegian triathlon coach, said women coaches provided important role models for girls and young women. She said many women athletes wanted female coaches, partly because they understand how women's bodies work. Menstrual cycles can affect performance, requiring nutrition and training to be adapted, and some sports injuries impact women differently than men. Ms. Mero said female athletes may also prefer to talk to a female coach about body image issues and eating disorders, which affect some sports.

Several coaches suggested having more female coaches might reduce the risk of sexual abuse and harassment. A growing number of athletes, including swimmers, gymnasts, and tennis players, have reported being harassed, molested, or raped by coaches. Sports hit by recent scandals include women's basketball in Mali and snowboarding in the United States.

Some barriers faced by women coaches reflect gender stereotypes. A common complaint was that everyone—from stadium security to other coaches—assumed they were a physiotherapist, a mother, or someone else in a caring role. Modern pentathlon coach Nicola Robinson said she used the gender-neutral name Nic in emails. “It makes my life easier,” she said. “I don't want any preconceptions.” Ms. Robinson, who also teaches a university sports coaching course, said a lack of role models was a factor behind the dearth of female coaches. Only 10-15% of her students are women. “Seeing someone who has achieved it is crucial,” she added. “Boys see male coaches in the spotlight and think, ‘I'd love that as a job.’ But who is inspiring our girls?”

A further deterrent is the difficulty of combining elite coaching with motherhood. “It's a really tough challenge,” she said. “Swimming coaches start very early, but nurseries don't open at 6 am. With athletics, you have training camps, but how easy is it for a mother to take two weeks away?”

Emily Handyside, a coach developer at the charity UK Coaching, which is trying to boost diversity in the profession, said another barrier was the lack of support and development for women coaches. This was particularly true in sports like football where there is a big disparity in funding and resources between the men's and women's games. Ms. Handyside said she was supporting a female football coach who had landed a prestigious role at a top club, but had no staff and was doing five different jobs—something a male coach at a similar career stage would not face. “This is what we call a glass cliff,” she said. “She's broken the glass ceiling, but a lack of resources and investment around the job mean there's a high risk of failure or burnout. I hear this a lot.”

But experts cautioned that providing women's coach development programs was not enough—and a plethora of such initiatives risked creating a bottleneck of very qualified female coaches with nowhere to go.

Ms. Huyton said recruitment often happened through informal channels and social networks, giving men an advantage. There was poor transparency in advertising roles and a lack of diversity on selection panels. She called for international and national sports bodies to standardize and professionalize coach selection policies.