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Exploring Women's Pathways To Senior Leadership In Sports

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ABSTRACT

Despite a long tradition of research and action to promote gender equity in sports, women's representation at the highest levels in sports organizations remains low. Addressing how men and women can have equal access to leadership in sports remains questionable despite sustained efforts promoting equal opportunity. Although women remain underrepresented in elite leadership positions in sports, senior leadership is attainable; expected and unexpected barriers are not absolute. This literature review explores women's advancement to senior roles in sports by examining peer-reviewed research focused on the facilitators of their career progression. Previous research within the sport industry has examined the lack of women in leadership roles, focusing on obstacles and exclusionary practices that restrict women's career advancement (Burton, 2015; Darvin et al., 2017; Evans & Pfister, 2021). Identifying barriers that hinder women's career advancement acts as the foundation for examining the factors that facilitate their progression into senior leadership without placing the burden of navigating gendered systems on women. The literature identified strategic relationships, professional networks, developmental programs, and career self-enablement as key enablers of career advancement into senior leadership. These drivers create a pathway in which relationships and agency build access to opportunity, increasing visibility, experience, and credibility that support progression into senior leadership positions. This literature review highlights the need to examine women's career trajectories that consider the interconnected individual, relational, organizational, and intersectional factors that shape progression into senior leadership over time. Addressing the gaps in current literature and highlighting areas for future research provides a more thorough understanding of women's career advancement, informing individual pathways to leadership and organizational practices that create more inclusive opportunities for progression.

INTRODUCTION

There is a significant gender imbalance in the structure of senior leadership teams in sports organizations. Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, and within male-dominated industries such as sport, women occupy top leadership roles at much lower rates than men (Darvin et al., 2017). The Racial and Gender Report Cards, an assessment of racial and gender hiring practices in sports, indicate minimal to no advancements toward gender equality within the professional leagues in the United States (Lapchick, 2022; Lapchick, 2023). Among the leagues represented in the report, women held the highest proportion of senior leadership roles in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) at 61% (Lapchick, 2022; Lapchick, 2023). For the 2022-2023 season, the proportion of women in senior

leadership roles was 27% in the National Football League, 24% in Major League Baseball, 30% in the National Basketball Association, and 35% in Major League Soccer (Lapchick, 2022; Lapchick, 2023). These disparities only increase for women of color. Men dominate the elite leadership platform in professional sports. Examining gender alone may therefore overlook how race and gender interact to influence access to senior leadership.

Despite multiple social movements and legislative doctrines advocating for gender equality in society and organizations, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions in professional sports. The enactment of Title IX sought to ensure equal access and opportunity in collegiate sports, including athletes and those in leadership positions, regardless of sex (Darvin et al., 2017). Established in 2003, the Rooney Rule addressed the need for more inclusive hiring practices in the NFL, yet a 2022 class action lawsuit against the organization reported discriminatory hiring practices. #MeToo and Times Up became prevalent social movements focused on exposing sexism and sexual harassment. The United States Women's National Team drew international attention when they filed a landmark gender discrimination case against the United States Soccer Federation for equitable pay and treatment. The 21st century has brought an emergence of traditional and unconventional feminist and social movements resisting systemic sexism.

Although women comprise nearly half the total labor force, progressively achieve higher education levels than men, graduate with more sports management degrees, and have gained a more significant presence in entry-level and mid-level positions within the sports workforce in recent years, women remain peripheral figures on the leadership platform (Darvin, 2021; Evans & Pfister, 2021). Gender parity in senior roles extends beyond workplace equality and inclusion. Decades of studies link the presence of women in senior leadership to shareholder value, exceptional organizational performance, and an enhanced culture of collaboration (Burton, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021). Despite the demonstrated organizational value of women's representation in senior leadership, less scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how women successfully navigate the gendered barriers to top positions.

Factors facilitating women's pathways to senior leadership in sports remain an understudied topic (Cosentino et al., 2021). The purpose of this literature review is to examine peer-reviewed research on career progression and advancement strategies of women in senior leadership roles in men and women's sports organizations. This literature review departs from historical scoping and narrative research on gender inequality in sports by analyzing leadership as it pertains to women's strategies and insights for advancing to senior leadership roles. As such, this literature review aims to answer the following question:

Research Question*:* Through analyzing existing research, how do women navigate gendered barriers on their pathways to senior leadership roles in sports organizations?

Women can attain senior leadership roles in sports organizations, but it requires identifying and highlighting the drivers that enable their advancement. Research indicates that negligence toward gender equality in sports leadership will impede an organization's ability to thrive in the global business environment (Burton, 2015; Cosentino et al., 2021; Evans & Pfister, 2021). Although identifying and recognizing challenges women face along the path to leadership is essential, how women have successfully navigated their way to senior leadership and their impact on organizational performance are crucial to enabling inclusive gender practices (Cosentino et al., 2021). Ultimately, women need a map of the barriers they may encounter and the strategies that support advancement to illuminate the pathways to elite leadership, navigate the challenges, and make more informed choices in their leadership journeys.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following definitions for key terminology provide clarity for their use in this literature review.

- *Gender parity* is the equal contribution of women and men.
- *Senior leadership* refers to executive leaders, athletic administrators, coaches, and owners who are among the most influential personnel ultimately responsible for developing and executing the overall strategy and operations of the organization or team.
- *Sports organizations* refer to professional sports teams and leagues, collegiate athletic departments, sports governing bodies, and national and international sports federations.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents a literature review based on pre-existing articles examining the intersections between gender, sports, leadership, and career advancement. A keyword search has been conducted across electronic databases, including Google Scholar and ResearchGate. Manual searches within reference lists provided additional sources. 18-19 articles were identified to be relevant to the topic, and after reading through for redundancy, twelve were used. To ensure current relevance, this review focuses on scholarship from peer-reviewed articles from 2015-2026. Literature examining sports organizations, including professional teams, sport governing bodies, collegiate athletic organizations, and national and international federations, was considered relevant for inclusion. Due to the limited number of women in leadership roles in sports, studies addressing leadership and career advancement within front office, ownership, coaching, and athletic administration were also included when relevant to scope the review. Search terms included combinations of the following keywords: sport AND (management OR governance OR leadership) AND (gender OR women OR female) AND (career progression OR pathways). Common themes were identified across the articles and synthesized to highlight patterns and findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Barriers That Limit Career Advancement

Although there is considerable research to support the presence of barriers that impede women's progression in sports leadership, few studies focus on senior women leaders' successful journey into elite leadership echelons within sports organizations (Burton, 2015; Cosentino et al., 2021; Evans & Pfister, 2021; Stone et al., 2024). Scholars have provided informative reviews on women in leadership and sport (Burton, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021; Forrest & English, 2025). These reviews examine extant research on the lack of women in leadership positions in sport, highlighting the obstacles and exclusionary practices that hinder women's career advancement in sport leadership.

Past research highlights gender stereotypes and discrimination, societal norm expectations, gendered processes, and lack of self-efficacy as obstacles to career advancement for women in elite leadership roles in sports organizations (Burton, 2015; Cosentino et al., 2021; Darvin et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2024). Further, although work-home conflict affects both male and female leaders, women face greater challenges due to gender role expectations as primary caretakers (Burton, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021). Additionally, the authors posit women are often excluded from networking opportunities and continue to experience limited access to mentorship (Burton, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021). Informal networking, referred to as the old boys' club, contributed to gendered organizational culture, creating an additional obstacle for women in pursuit of leadership roles. Extant research shows the gendered nature of sport and leadership in sport as male dominated.

Leadership opportunities continue to be concentrated towards men, reinforcing the long-lasting system of gender inequality. This imbalance extends beyond representation, as men continue to hold gatekeeper positions in sports and determine who will have access to leadership (Evans & Pfister, 2021) . Men were more inclined to give leadership opportunities to other men (Darvin et al., 2017). Because men occupy a majority of senior positions, women may have fewer opportunities to build relationships with the decision-makers who influence hiring and promotion. Race can further influence disparities, as women of color face additional barriers to resources often shaped by white male leadership. Despite evidence that coach gender showed no significant difference in leadership effectiveness, men continue to hold a disproportionate share of leadership roles compared with their female counterparts (Darvin et al., 2017). This finding challenges assumptions that male coaches are inherently effective leaders and suggests that gender stereotypes, rather than demonstrated differences in performance, may contribute to women's exclusion from leadership opportunities Collectively, these findings suggest that the gendered structure of sports maintains inequality by concentrating decision-making power among primarily White men who

shape hiring, advancement, and organizational culture (Burton, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021). This suggests that disparities are enforced through unequal access to higher relationships, hindering advancement.

While existing literature has the potential to inform action toward gender parity, studies have focused on the existing barriers, which keep the focus on the problem instead of the solution. Identifying what inhibits career progression provides only part of the picture. Women can attain leadership roles in professional sports organizations, but it requires addressing the obstacles impeding their advancement. By analyzing and understanding the pathways of women who successfully ascended to senior roles, the route to leadership in sports becomes achievable.

Pathways That Support Career Advancement

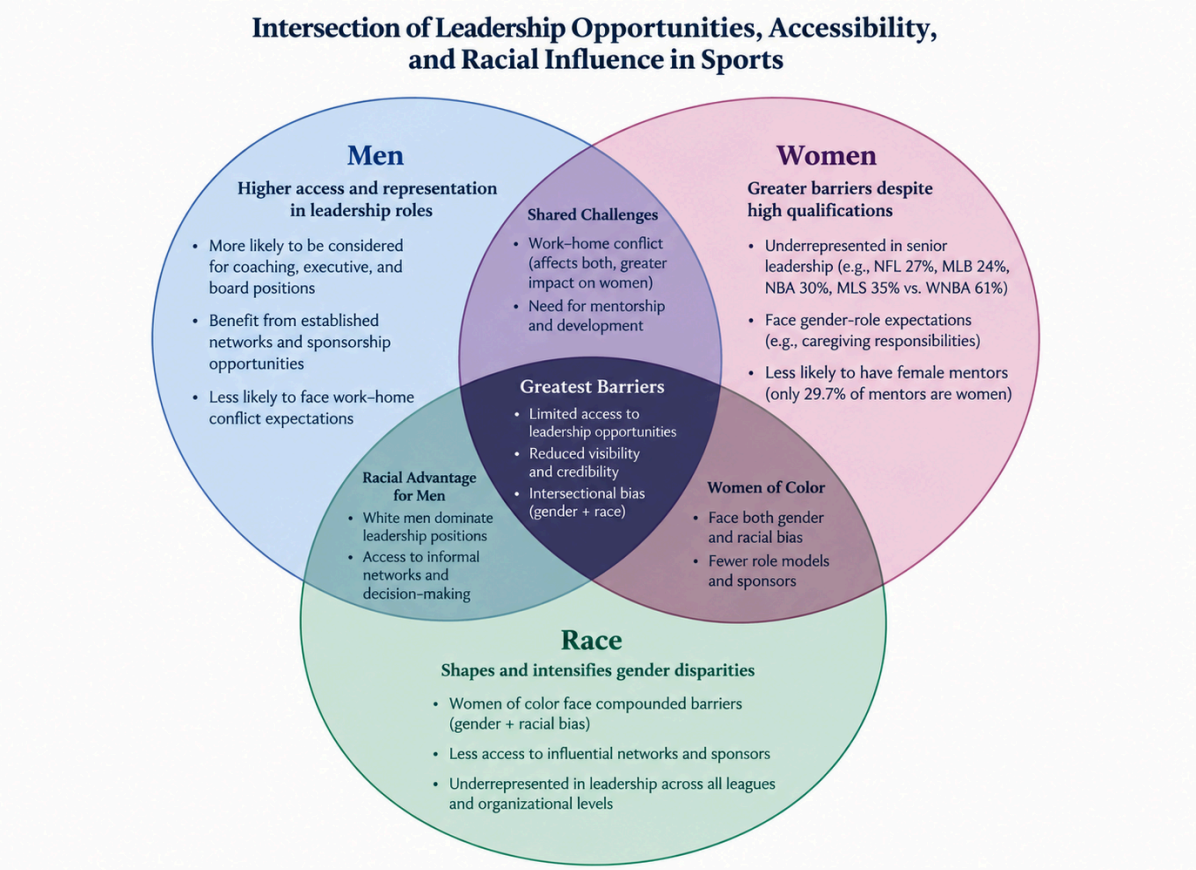
Build Strategic Relationships

Building relationships has proved advantageous in the development of careers in sports.
The male-dominated leadership platform in sports requires women to create a strong network of mentors and sponsors in dealing with career opportunities, organizational challenges, and work–life conflicts (Burton, 2015; Cosentino et al., 2021; Gerasimuk, 2025; Stone et al., 2021). Empirical research points to role model, mentor, and sponsor roles as one of the most effective strategies for career advancement (Aman et al., 2018; Cosentino et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2024). Empirical qualitative research focusing on senior women leaders in Canadian professional sports unanimously found that having role models, mentors, and sponsors were the most important activities that aspiring leaders could undertake if they seek to have careers in senior leadership in sport (Aman et al., 2018; Cosentino et al., 2021). Darvin et al. (2019) research on women assistant coaches in the NCAA confirmed the critical role that role models, mentors, and especially sponsors have on career progression and advancement.

Representation mitigates gender inequality in sports organizations. With the passage of Title VII, opportunities and access in the workplace continued to increase for women as they gained access to higher levels within organizations. Although women could not gain leadership roles, they could 'see' these opportunities as within their grasp (Darvin et al., 2017). Aspiring female leaders need to connect with other strong female leaders, including those from other industries where sponsorship practices are more prevalent and effective (Cosentino et al., 2021). The literature consistently highlights the need for more female mentors as it is difficult to aspire to something you cannot see, sport is lacking female role models (Aman et al., 2018; Burton, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021; Stone et al., 2024). Women in senior positions in sports can act as contemporary role models presenting a sense of possibility and relevance to aspiring future leaders.

Collectively, mentors and sponsors not only helped women achieve short-term milestones but also enabled women leaders navigate the long arc of a leadership journey, one that spans decades, with its highs and lows. A proliferation of literature highlights the importance of social capital and career advancement in sport. However, researchers often interchange the roles of mentor and sponsor. Gerasimuk (2025) asserts that the creation of structured mentorship and sponsorship programs were strong facilitating factors supporting career advancement yet did not distinguish between mentor and sponsor. Aman et al. (2018) establish mentorship as part of a relational infrastructure that supports career advancement. Current research emphasizes the unique and distinct function that mentors and sponsors provide in the support system (Cosentino et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2024). While a mentor provides wisdom and guidance focused on professional issues, they do not always hold direct power over leadership advancement. Sponsors took actionable steps to drive career progression using their reputation, influence, and power. Stone et al. (2024) and Cosentino et al. (2021) found that sponsorship is a more powerful driver of career advancement than mentorship. Despite the impact on career advancement, limited research has been conducted on women strategically using sponsors to advance their careers into leadership roles in sports. A key element on the path to senior leadership is the presence of individuals who, at pivotal moments, opened doors, recognized potential, and offered support, giving women a chance to prove oneself.

Men are essential allies for women seeking to advance to senior leadership roles in sports. Male allyship operationalizes through mentorship, sponsorship, advocacy, and professional networks. As men hold most of the senior roles in sports organizations, their experience offers necessary support and guidance, giving women access to critical advocates and developmental opportunities. Male allies become supportive facilitators recommending women for positions (Burton, 2015; Cosentino et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2024). Because men occupy a large amount of senior positions, these relationships are particularly important when women lack access to influential decision-makers within their organizations An empirical study on women working in sales-related leadership positions across the five professional sports leagues found that 61.4% of the respondents have a mentor, with just 29.7% of those respondents identifying another woman as their mentor. In another empirical qualitative study, women referred solely to male colleagues and mentors who were instrumental in hiring or promoting them into the positions they held (Stone et al., 2024). While current literature points to male allyship as central to shifting the structures, attitudes, and systems that maintain gender inequality, sport scholarship has yet to empirically substantiate this mechanism. Research on men's specific behaviors that advance women in sport leadership remains limited.



Leverage Professional Networks

Researchers have documented the impact that networking can have on career advancement, including success in the sports industry (Cosentino et al., 2021; Gerasimuk, 2025; Stone et al., 2024). Collectively, the literature points to the value of networking as one of the most critical factors in advancing women into elite leadership roles. Access to social capital, including networks, provide greater advancement opportunities for women in leadership (Cosentino et al., 2021; Darvin et al., 2017; Gerasimuk, 2025). Networking has been shown to have an impact on the career trajectory and advancement of women.

Extensive literature details women's lack of powerful social capital as a barrier to advancement in senior leadership (Burton, 2015; Darvin et al., 2017). Networking initiatives play a crucial role, particularly in mitigating the exclusionary effects of male-dominated informal networks. Gendered circumstances limit opportunity for networking (Burton, 2015; Cosentino et al., 2021; Darvin et al., 2017). Lack of social capital creates obstacles for women to increase their human capital. As a result, women created different ways of networking, providing them a wider circle of support, expertise, and sense of belonging.

Representation of women in professional networks cultivate a culture that normalizes female authority. Through social networking, women lend their voices to women and show women in decision-making positions, and realistically portray the possibility that women are qualified to be sports leaders. Cosentino et al. (2021) findings support that women in senior leadership have very few examples of female leaders to network. While limited in quantity, gender-specific networking opportunities provided access to role models and mentors for women aspiring to executive roles (Gerasimuk, 2025; Stone et al., 2024). Gerasimuk (2015) underscores the role of women's leadership conferences in increasing visibility and fostering career progression. In contrast, Stone et al. (2024) reported networking and continued professional relationships with both male and female colleagues as primary drivers of career advancement, notably in securing initial leadership appointments. Although the literature remains inconclusive regarding the effectiveness of gender-exclusive networks, a well-structured network of connections provides guidance that nurtures success, strengthens resilience, and accelerates development. Diversity in leadership roles provide powerful representations that serve as tangible examples for others to follow. Access to leadership development opportunities through networking supports women sports leaders in building their leadership capacities through development opportunities.

Strengthen Leadership Through Professional Development

Developing aspiring women leaders creates a robust leadership pipeline. Formal development programs enhance visibility and support women leaders in gaining access to pivotal networks (Gerasimuk, 2025; Stone et al., 2024). Impactful professional development strategies empower employees to expand their skill sets through relationship building, targeted learning and curriculums, and experiential development opportunities (Burton, 2015; Darvin et al., 2017; Forrest & English, 2025). Professional development programs facilitate the equitable distribution of high-stakes opportunities that are essential prerequisites for senior leadership positions.

Research has shown that organizations must identify and develop leadership talent below the executive leadership team level and prepare them for broader roles and responsibilities (Cosentino et al., 2021; Forrest & English, 2025). Structured systems in organizations ensure that leaders identify women with potential early and systematically prepare them for leadership (Burton, 2015). Organizational-driven development plans for women must incorporate challenging opportunities, experiential learning, and connecting desired behaviors to business outcomes (Darvin et al., 2017). Effective leadership programs are those that are tailored to the specific needs of women.

The literature supports cultivating a high-potential program in organizations to develop women for leadership opportunities. Cosentino et al. (2021) emphasizes the significance of mentorship programs in professional development, pairing women with experienced mentors to help build confidence, gain access to professional relationships, and access opportunities for leadership advancement. The same study

suggests professional groups stage professional development programs for current and aspiring females seeking senior leadership roles in sport (Cosentino et al., 2021). Development programs may be more effective when implemented within a comprehensive strategy that includes quotas and mentoring (Gerasimuk, 2025). Although the impact of professional development is well-founded, programming and implementation remain elusive. Due to limited attention to the contextual moderators that may shape research outcomes on professional development, further empirical investigation is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of which programs are most effective and under what conditions.

An integrated approach to leadership development is critical and must align with the strategic objectives of the organization, as well as with organizational culture. Research consistently indicates for development programs to be consequential, they must be part of a broader strategy within the organization that includes commitment from senior leaders and institutional accountability (Forrest & English, 2025). Top-down mandates risk functioning as symbolic initiatives rather than mechanisms for transformation and equity (Gerasimuk, 2025). Integrating strategic development programs for women creates a more equitable leadership pipeline and organization. While the specific development programs most effective in advancing leadership outcomes remain unclear, evidence supports that implementing these initiatives enrich women's confidence, enhancing skills, and exposure for career growth into senior level roles (Cosentino et al., 2021; Forrest & English, 2025). Therefore, professional development can strengthen women's qualifications while also providing the experience, skills, and visibility needed to compete

Cultivate Career Self-Enablement and Expand Experience

The overrepresentation of men in senior roles reflects women's disinclination to self-promote and, subsequently, undervalue themselves. Research in sports leadership recognizes socially constructed perceptions of gender as fundamental aspects of social and organizational processes (Burton, 2015; Stone et al., 2024). Decades of literature highlights how structural barriers inhibit career self-enablement, but women need to stop engaging in self-limiting behaviors (Burton, 2015; Cosentino et al., 2021; Gerasimuk, 2025). Women internalize socially constructed perceptions of gender roles and expectations, superseding their confidence to pursue high leadership positions (Burton, 2015; Cosentino et al., 2021). Although research highlights the importance of self-promotion for career advancements, women are uncomfortable taking the initiative to self-promote (Cosentino et al., 2021). Women's lack of self-promotion and leadership self-efficacy hinders their ability to ascend to senior leadership positions.

The literature supports self-promotion as an important factor in the path to higher leadership positions. By operationalizing self-promoting behavior, women strategically build their careers by focusing on the acquisition of diverse and transferable skill sets throughout their careers (Cosentino et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2024). Women must self-promote throughout their careers to help bolster their visibility and

experiences. Women's access to diverse career experiences through self-promotion impact their pace and path to senior leadership roles.

To advance and remain in executive roles in sports organizations, women must not only self-promote but also actively cultivate transferable skills in leadership and communication (Cosentino et al., 2021; Gerasimuk, 2025). Women must take on projects and assume risks in their career to gain experience, a track record of success, and the opportunity to bolster their level of confidence (Cosentino et al., 2021; Gerasimuk, 2025; Stone et al., 2024). Diverse experiences across different roles or industries enable women to acquire the leadership competencies and agility necessary for senior positions.

DISCUSSION

Following this review, the gaps in literature suggest future directors for research targeting gender and leadership in sports organizations. While most literature in this field focuses on the barriers and bias women encounter in their careers, scholars have started to shift their focus from obstacles to pathways to leadership. Burton et al. (2015) and Cosentino et al. (2021) note the need for more research on women's perceptions of their abilities within sports organizations and experiences throughout their journeys into senior leadership roles. This study reinforced the need for future research to employ longitudinal methods to investigate how barriers and facilitators interact to affect women's professional career progressions throughout their careers and illuminate how experiences evolve over time.

Across multiple studies, women identified that mentorship and sponsorship as the most important factors supporting career advancement, yet the current literature provides little insight into these relationships and how they are initiated, developed, and sustained. Future research should address how women identify and access mentor and sponsor relationships, be it male or female, the characteristics that make these relationships effective, and the mechanisms in which these relationships translate into career advancement. Researchers should examine interventions that have been statistically relevant in removing obstacles to support the advancement of women in sports.

Existing research has drawn from a narrow range of participant population, leaving the experiences of several groups of women including women of color, mothers, and LGBTQ+ insufficiently represented. Future research should examine how race and gender cross to shape women's leadership opportunities and whether existing facilitators, such as mentorship and professional networks, are equally effective for women from different racial backgrounds. Studies often overlooked the effects of intersectionality. A greater level of the intersectional complexities of gender in sports leadership is needed. Future research should examine how the unique experience of living with multiple marginalized identities shape women's experiences, opportunities, and pathways in sports leadership. Additionally, although work-family conflict continues to be a prominent reason women exit the leadership ladder, researchers have yet to examine

strategies that enable mothers to navigate career transitions with motherhood and sustain advancement in the leadership pipeline.

Existing research focuses on the successful ascension to senior leadership roles, limiting the understanding of the experiences of women whose leadership routes were interrupted by non-appointment or departure. Future research should investigate the experiences of women who either step down or are not appointed to leadership positions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the discontinuous path, roadblocks, or withdrawal from the leadership pipeline. Finally, although research has examined women's experiences across a range of sports organizations and positions, limited research evaluates advancement to senior leadership differ between men's and women's sports organizations. Future research should examine these organizational contexts to identify how differences shape progression to elite leadership.

CONCLUSION

Women need to have access to the strategies and advancement insights of other women who have forged their way into senior leadership roles in sports. The last couple decades have produced a proliferation of research and sustained efforts to advance gender equality in sport organizations, yet women remain peripheral figures on the leadership platform. Despite progress, gender stereotypes and discrimination, societal norm expectations, gendered processes, work-home conflict, and limited access to social capital and developmental opportunities continue to impede career advancement for women in sports (Burton, 2015; Cosentino et al., 2021; Darvin et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2024). Leadership progression is shaped by the interaction between persistent gendered barriers and the individual and organizational factors used that enable women to navigate them. This literature review adopted a progression perspective by addressing barriers in peer-reviewed research as a foundation to understand the strategies and insights that support women's career advancement in sports.

Mentorship and sponsorship, professional networks, career-enhancing developmental opportunities, and career self-agency emerged as enablers to career progression. These facilitators were most effective when there was also strong commitment from the organization. These factors suggest a pathway through which relationships expand access to opportunities, opportunities increase visibility and experience, and accumulated experience strengthens credibility and readiness for senior leadership. Career advancement is better understood not as the product of any single enabling factor, but as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of agency, relationships, opportunities, and the organizational environments in which leadership unfolds.

Gender parity in sports leadership requires a sustained and multifaceted commitment by both men and women at the individual and organizational levels to remain vigilant and design intentional practices, policies, and environments. Current scholarship has a strong understanding of why women are

underrepresented at senior leadership levels, but evidence is weaker regarding which interventions last and change systems that keep women out. This literature review suggests the need to examine career trajectories that address the individual, relational, organizational, and intersectional factors influencing progression into senior leadership over time. Continued research looking at long-term effectiveness of individual and organizational strategies will strengthen evidence needed to support lasting equity for women in leadership in sports. Future scholarship should extend beyond identifying barriers and facilitators in isolation to investigate how these factors interact across career stages and organizational contexts, particularly for women of intersecting identities and mothers.

Although some women have successfully navigated into senior roles, the path to gender parity in sports leadership remains complex and limited. Addressing gaps in future research can advance our understanding of women's career advancement while informing both pathways to leadership and organizational practices that support more inclusive and equitable opportunities for progression. Advancing women to senior leadership is not only about representation but also building stronger and more inclusive organizations that can handle the demands of an industry that is constantly evolving. Investigating and highlighting the advancement insights and strategies of women who have ascended to senior roles and their impact on organizational performance is crucial to accelerating a shift in the leadership landscape in sports.

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