Professional Experiences, Leadership Growth, and Progression Approaches Adopted by Women Working Within Professional Sports Organisations in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study explored experiences, leadership growth, and progression approaches adopted by women working within higher professional sports leadership organisations in Ghana. An interpretive research paradigm was adopted. The data was collected using interview guides and analysed with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study revealed interest in a particular sport propelled women in sports leadership positions to select sports-related careers and accumulate the best knowledge and experience that placed them in such advantageous positions to make meaningful contributions to sports in Ghana. The study established that women with clear-cut career advancement pathways have it easy when it comes to assuming leadership positions. It was recommended that qualitative and quantitative examinations be made to understand the differences in the experiences of males in similar sporting positions.

Keywords: leadership, progression, approach, professional sports, leadership.

INTRODUCTION

History is replete with the struggles of women from all walks of life in their quest for an equal place in society within the context of the sporting world, Lemmon (2019). The struggle has been fierce, and unrelenting and it is not surprising, because, for several decades, women had limited legal rights, and career opportunities to their male counterparts. Traditionally, women's rights and responsibilities have been limited by culture, religion, and other social constructs within the Ghanaian setting, making it difficult for them to break through to become leaders in organisations other than the home (Tsikata & Ampofo, 2015).

The issue of unequal involvement of women in sports, and leadership positions dates back to the ancient Greek era when there were no organised sporting activities for women (History of Women in Sports, 1997). Aside from women not being represented at the inaugural ceremony for the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, they were not given the chance to compete (Papanikos, 2020). In effect, it took ages for women to be officially allowed to participate in the Olympic Games. It is not

surprising that women were denied management positions in sports. A woman was first appointed to the IOC in 1981, almost a century after its inauguration (Chappelet, 2022). It appears that the battle for leadership positions by women in the sporting industry has been a long-drawn one because it took several decades for their concerns to be addressed by the powers that be.

Despite increased participation opportunities for girls and women in sports, they are still underrepresented in leadership positions (Burton, 2015). This claim supports Shaw's (2016) assertion that women are underrepresented at all levels, including management, media, commercial sporting activities, coaching, and decision-making at the local, national, regional, and international. This is not surprising because, after several decades of women playing second fiddle to their male counterparts, there is the likelihood that it might take policy initiative, such as affirmative action to increase the number of females in leadership positions within the sporting discipline. Research conducted by the Global Association of International Sports Federations in 2013 which comprised 94 full members, and 21 associates revealed that out of 107 leadership positions held by members under various umbrellas in the international sporting world, females occupied only 18 positions, 12 (11%) female General Secretaries, and 6 (6%) female Presidents. Also, out of thousand five hundred and fifty (1,550) executive committee positions, males occupy 1,342 (87%) whereas females occupy only 208 (13%).

Darvin (2020). argue that it is difficult to trace statistics of women occupying leadership positions in the sporting industry throughout the world. In a report on gender analysis of political appointments in Ghana since independence up to 2017 by the Institute of Local Government and Friedrich-ErbertStiftung (2018), there was no single woman in sports occupying national leadership positions which invariably could have empowered men in influencing decision-making that would propel more women to leadership positions in sports. In support of this claim, Vyas-Doorgapersad and Surujlal (2018) conducted a study which assesses gender equality in the South African sports sector. The study's finding also indicates that female participation in leadership, and governance positions are lacking due to the perception that sports are a male-dominated profession.

Within the Ghanaian context, a policy document by Tsikata (2009) provides a blueprint regarding the empowerment of women across the diverse social, political, and economic spectrum which in turn, provides a space for them to understand and demonstrate their prowess in every facet of life. This is significant because it creates an all-hand-on-deck approach to nation-building. However, much is not known regarding the extent to which the empowerment process has influenced the participation of women in sports leadership positions within the Ghanaian socio-cultural context. Hence, it is necessary to explore this phenomenon.

Statement of Problem. The population of women in Ghana outnumbers that of men, and also immensely contributes towards its socio-economic development (Ghana Statistical Service, 2020). However, when it comes to leadership positions, it appears to be a preserve of men. This low representation can be attributed to gender inequality in women's access to leadership opportunities, or difficulties women face in their pursuit of leadership positions (Leung, 2018; Singh & Naidoo, 2017; Harris, 2019). This explains why many women who have leadership potential tend to shy away from such positions.

By implication, women with leadership qualities who actively participate in decision-making processes have been empirically proven to enrich decision-making just as men who occupy similar roles do. It is in light of this that Junk (2021) argues that society would function better if all its members both men and women were equally represented in development processes, public policy-making, political participation, and decision-making processes. This is why several organisations, including feminist groups, are empowering themselves to take up roles in decision-making across several spheres of life (Burton, 2015). It is in light of this that several nations, including Ghana, have moved a step further to create ministerial portfolios, gender desk portfolios, and also mainstreamed gender issues all in the bid to change the perception of women and also address issues that hinder their development (Dzradosi, Agyekum & Ocloo, 2018; African Center for Women/Economic Commission for Africa, 1998; Republic of Ghana, 1992). However, despite all efforts to empower women in decision-making particularly in sports, at all levels within the sporting world, challenges persist.

In support of this claim, a study conducted by Mwisukha and Rintaugu (2013) suggests that the issue of underrepresentation of women in decision-making is most prevalent in African countries. The question that arises, is whether the unequal ratio is due to issues of competencies, academic

qualifications, intelligence, and personality differences. The World Economic Forum gender gap study (2015) provides succinct answers to this question. These study findings revealed that even though a higher percentage of women and men hold university degrees, women consistently outperformed men in academic achievement. Studies conducted by researchers such as (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2012; Epitropaki, 2015) revealed that predictors of good leadership, such as extraversion, openness to experience, empathy, emotional intelligence, and conscientiousness are higher in women than in men.

In Ghanaian sports contexts, one's ability to attain a leadership role is not restricted to one's academic qualification in sports management. Anyone who shows interest in plays/participates or belongs to any sporting association at any level qualifies as a candidate to compete for a position in any sporting organisation (Mensah, 2019). Although one's academic qualification is not a yardstick for holding leadership positions, the proportion of women advancing to senior leadership roles is comparatively low (Wise, 2019). A study by Staurowsky et al., (2020) which assessed various organisations revealed that a relatively insignificant percentage of women hold higher leadership positions (coaching) at district, regional, polytechnic, university or national association levels.

Many of these associations do not even have a single woman who is part of their decision-making body. When it comes to administrative and managerial levels, men dominate. This unequal power relation between men and women in sports leadership is likely to have consequences regarding the sustainable development of sports (Burton, 2015). This is not surprising because there are certain issues relating to women which can better be resolved by themselves while in leadership positions due to lived experiences, and understanding needed to effectively deal with certain issues closely linked to women. When women are in such leadership positions, such issues are most likely easily resolved.

The significant roles women have played in sporting organisations across the globe are phenomenal. It is in this vein that several studies conducted in the Western world, as well as Africa (Burton, 2015; O'Neil & Hopkins, 2015; O'Neil, Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2015; Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014), have revealed the significant role women play regarding decision-making when they are at the helm of affairs in sporting organisations. However, in Ghana, there is a dearth of research regarding the role women in leadership positions play in decision-making

and other related issues. By implication, there is a gap in the literature. It is against this backdrop that this current study intends to fill the gap in question. This current study seeks to explore the experiences of women holding higher leadership positions in Ghana Sports.

Purpose of the Study. The purpose of this study is to explore experiences, leadership growth, and progression approaches adopted by women working within higher professional sports leadership organisations in Ghana. The study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the phenomenon in question.

Research Objectives. The research objectives seek to:

1. Explore past and present experiences of women working within higher professional sports leadership organisations in Ghana
2. Examine the leadership growth and progression approaches adopted by women working within higher professional sports leadership organisations in Ghana

Research Questions. The following questions guided the study:

1. What are the past and present experiences of women working within higher professional sports leadership organisations in Ghana?
2. What are the leadership growth and progression approaches adopted by women working within higher professional sports leadership organisations in Ghana?

Literature Review on Women in Leadership Positions. There have been several studies which have proven that gender equality policies can be implemented within the sporting domain (Norman, M., Donnelly, P., & Kidd, B., 2021; Pape, M., 2020; Sotiriadou, P., & De Haan, D., 2019). Ironically, according to some researchers, most establishments execute gender equity policies to secure funding (Huang, 2020). Institutions that somehow execute these policies use it as a means of hiding behind it to politically save their image as if they believe in it (Engeli, I., & Mazur, A., 2018). Organisational structure and culture can likewise impact women's experience working within a sporting organisation. Most sporting organisational cultures are geared toward masculinity and end up marginalising women (Hindman, L. C., & Walker, N. A., 2020). There is always a positive outcome when a leader of an organisation values gender equality (Lyness, K. S., & Grotto, A. R., 2018). According to (Lyness, K. S., & Grotto, A. R., 2018), top management that truly

embraces gender equity has consistent effects on employees' (men/women) psychological relationship with the organisations in comparison to equity when it comes to human resource management. Imbalances within the workforce have always been a challenge; hence, that calls for a pragmatic study of the experiences of women in sports leadership positions.

A supportive working environment and family help people to remain in their jobs and even advance without feeling obliged to quit their jobs (Berdahl et al., 2020). However, not all employers and families buy into this idea. Some may have other views leading to a contradictory opinion. According to Ayodhya, R. (2022), most women within an organisational setting may opt not to contest for higher positions and this attitude sometimes leads to creating male-dominant aspirant pools. Other studies also suggest that women are often less likely to be in contention for leadership positions, as the roles are assumed to require formulaic manly characteristics and behaviours (Wong, M., 2020). Women in high leadership roles are often seen differently and their deeds are often perceived as being unrelated to socially assigned gender roles (Tabassum, N., & Nayak, B. S., 2021).

In some organisations, women may be exempted from some social activities as a result of Old Boys links, and may also not have equal social support and activists as their male counterparts (Engeli, I., & Mazur, A. (2018); Boakye et al., 2021). Sense of judgment, self-awareness, and relationship building are essential elements to the success of every sporting industry. According to Sturges et al., (2020), there should be a change in the curriculum for sports management programmers to develop relationship-building skills and self-awareness skills to facilitate effective interaction. Few women who have been able to climb to high leadership positions mostly face indirect prejudice (Gandhi, M., & Sen, K. (2021). Those who can overcome this indirect prejudice are those who are not lazy, try harder and can impose themselves where they are not wanted. They are often portrayed as outsiders worthy of avoidance and exclusion. These incidental prejudgments however lead to supportive policies that disadvantage others. Evans, A. B., & Pfister, G. U. (2021) observed that both women and men are working in middle management positions in sports. However, they also noted that women were largely absent from upper-level roles. This scenario confirms what is going on in Ghana. No woman has ever occupied the topmost position at the Ghana Football Association, for example; hence, this calls for the study.

Perceived role incongruity and the double bind also have a lot of effects on women progressing from one level to the other. Many people have beliefs about what a leader is expected to be, or how they are expected to act, which are often based on gender stereotypes (Ellemers, N. (2018); Tabassum, N., & Nayak, B. S. (2021). Women are expected to exhibit communal qualities, such as being friendly, helpful, and sympathetic, while men are expected to display agentic qualities, such as being aggressive, ambitious, and self-reliant (Romero, G. J., 2021). When women display communal characteristics in leadership, they may be perceived as weak, but on the other hand, when women display agentic qualities in leadership, they come off as too strong (Hentschel et al., (2018); Badura et al., (2018); Wang et al., 2019). Elinsky, A. K. (2020) refer to this mismatch in his role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders as injustice.

This theory proposes that the perceived incongruity between a leadership role and the female gender role leads to prejudice against women. This prejudice can take two forms: (a) a less favourable evaluation of women's leadership potential based on stereotypically held beliefs that connect masculinity with effective leadership and (b) a less favourable evaluation of women's actual leadership based on the perception that the behaviours displayed by women are less desirable (Elinsky, A. K., 2020). The perceived incongruity between leadership roles and the female gender role leads to women leaders being perceived as less favourable than their male peers, which may result in it being more challenging for women to achieve leadership roles and subsequent success in those roles. Women are then stuck in a double bind (Keating Polson, 2018; Polson, 2018). If they exhibit the communal qualities women are expected to practice, they are not seen as a leader.

On the other hand, if they display the agentic qualities that are typically associated with men, they fail to exhibit the gender role expectations of a woman. Either way, women face this double bind and find themselves in a continual dilemma contending with the stereotype; others have about women in leadership; hence, relating to the Ghanaian situation, people perceived that women cannot do double bind work' hence, that is why the role of women in Ghanaian sports has been very limited; therefore, calls for the study in the role of women in a leadership position in sports, Amakye et al., (2022).

DISCUSSION/SUMMARY

Initially, study findings imply that rather than demonstrating a sincere dedication to the cause, the installation of gender equality laws in sports may be motivated by specific groups seeking financial support or wanting to improve their public profile. In addition, women are frequently marginalised in sports organisations due to the hierarchical structure and cultural norms that frequently favour masculine traits.

A supportive work environment and strong family ties stand out as essential components in guaranteeing the retention and professional progress of women. However, not all families and employers agree with this idea completely, which gives rise to divergent opinions. Women may decide not to compete for higher jobs as a result, which eventually contributes to a predominately male candidate pool. The underrepresentation of women in leadership jobs is further exacerbated by gender stereotypes that link these occupations primarily with characteristics that are traditionally associated with males.

The strength and ability of female leaders may not be adequately reflected by gender prejudices in society. In comparison to men, women could encounter less social support and rejection from particular organisations. Sports management curricula may need to be adjusted to place more emphasis on developing decision-making, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills to solve these issues. This change would be necessary to get over the previously described challenges.

Women who succeed in rising to high leadership positions may encounter subtle prejudices and may be painted as outsiders worthy of avoidance and exclusion. The Ghana Football Association serves as an example of how few women hold senior positions in sports organisations, underscoring the need for more research into how women can be effective in leadership roles.

Women's advancement is seriously hampered by the impression of a conflict between traditional gender norms and the demands made of them as leaders. The traits that good leaders are thought to possess are greatly influenced by gender stereotypes, with males being expected to be forceful and assertive traits being expected of women. Therefore, women find themselves in a predicament whereby expressing assertive attributes might be interpreted as being too dominating yet doing so may result in views of weakness. It is extremely difficult for women to obtain and succeed in leadership positions as a result of this incongruity, which supports prejudicial views against such positions.

The necessity to address gender equality in sports and to do an in-depth study on the experiences of women in leadership roles has been brought to light by this conversation. It highlights how crucial it is for organisations to prioritise gender equality and put up the effort necessary to establish welcoming environments.

METHODS

The study adopts an interpretive research philosophy. This study employed a phenomenological approach to qualitative research. This type of qualitative research is concerned with finding out the lived experiences of people from their perspective (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). It is based on paradigms of personal knowledge and subjectivity and also emphasises the importance of personal perspectives and interpretations.

The study participants are from Ghana. Although the study participants were scattered in the country, most of them lived in Accra, the national capital where head offices of many of the sporting associations are located and have the opportunity to play leadership roles in the national sporting platforms. Their regular participation in activities at the national and regional levels enriches their experiences in sports leadership.

Population. According to the National Sports Authority (NSA), there are forty-four (44) legally registered Associations/Federations under its umbrella. There are also three tertiary institutional sports associations in Ghana (Ghana University Sports Associations [GUSA], Colleges of Education Sports Association [COESA], and Ghana Technical Universities Sports Association [GHATUSA]); hence, the total Sports Associations in Ghana stand at forty-seven (47). Currently, according to National Sports Authority (2021), 85 women are holding executive positions in the various associations/federations in sports.

Sampling Procedure. The researcher used both the purposive and convenience sampling procedures to select 13 participants out of the 85 executives. The 13 participants were selected for the study due to the confirmed availability of those women leaders. The purposive sampling technique permitted the researcher to focus on a particular characteristic of the population (women executives from legally registered associations under the NSA), which aided in answering the research

questions relating to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). The purposive sampling procedure also allowed the researcher to identify the initial points of inquiry, being the first 8 respondents, following which snowballing, and convenience sampling were used in conjunction to identify other leaders who were available.

Following this, a sample of 8 respondents was originally selected for the focus group discussion. This sample was based on the proposition of Akyıldız and Ahmed (2021) that a focus group should comprise approximately 5 to 8 respondents. Moreover, respondents whose schedules conflicted with the focus group discussion's date withdrew from the interview, leaving 5 respondents who met the parameters outlined.

An interview guide designed by M'mbaha (2012) was adapted and modified to suit this present study. The questions were open-ended to allow participants to freely express, and share their experiences, and also for the researcher to gain in-depth information (Turner, 2022).

The respondents voluntarily agreed to participate in the study because they were keen to share insightful information on the experiences of women in sports leadership and related fields, enhancing our collective understanding in this area and domain.

Data Processing and Analysis. The data that were gathered from the interviews were transcribed, coded, themed, and triangulated before being analysed. The data were organised in different data files to facilitate easy retrieval (Deterding, N. M., & Waters, M. C. (2021). The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised to transcribe the interview. The first stage of IPA which is transcribing and coding was performed by listening to the audio recording of the interview which was replayed severally for clarity. This was followed by writing out the conversation verbatim. Also, member-checking was used for accuracy, and meeting with the participant's experiences. The written document enabled the researcher to code common words, concepts, and suggestions stated by the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Professional Experiences. From interacting with the study participants, it was evident that female leaders in the sporting organisation located in Ghana have had diverse professional experiences throughout their careers. This theme discussed the importance of strong sponsors, mentors, and role models, interest in sporting activities, training and capacity development, and the availability of career advancement pathways. Concerning the importance of strong sponsors, mentors, and role models, all the participants of the interviews acknowledged how impactful the inputs of their various mentors and role models have had on their professional development as female leaders in sports organisations. As recorded by a respondent:

I have received inspiration from various female role models to demonstrate competency in my field of work. For example, I can vividly recall a call to action delivered by the then minister of gender, which encouraged me to pursue excellence as a woman in sports.

Also, another respondent explained that:

Early in my career, my mentor at my first workplace laid bare to me the challenges I as a female would face when it comes to balancing my work life with my family life. I was further helped in devising a strategy to navigate these challenges. This has played a key role in my advancement to this position.

Further, a leader of the tertiary institutional sports associations recounted how she got her first job in a sporting firm in Ghana through the recommendation of her supervisor who also acted as her mentor:

Amongst the numerous candidates, I was recommended for a middle-level management position. Since that time, my career has taken an upward progression.

Another key observation made from the collected data was the rise in the number of males who actively ensured that females achieved career progression in the various sporting organisations. Sotiriadou and de Haan (2019) associate this phenomenon with enlightenment and the innate desire for such individuals to see their female counterparts excel. It has also been argued that such instances demonstrate the contribution of men in changing the negative narrative concerning how patriarchy insists on women not being fit for leadership positions (Aly & Breese, 2018). According to a participant in the focused group discussion:

I have had the opportunity of working in a sporting environment where the two male leaders I reported to demonstrated immense support for my sporting intellectual development.

It has been established in the literature that individuals are likely to pick up professions in a particular field when their interest in the said field is high. In the sporting world, this relationship

between interest, and career choice has been described as instrumental in attracting and retaining top talent in various positions across the sporting plain (Weight et al., 2021) From the analysed data, a similar pattern was established concerning the career choice of participants and their progression in sporting leadership roles. Below is a sample explanation of a leader of the tertiary institutional sports associations that was given during the focused group discussion**:**

I have had an interest in sports since my high school days. During that time, I was elected as the main sports prefect responsible for overseeing the sports development of the students in my school. Upon completion of high school, I decided to take up a tertiary program in physical education. With all this knowledge and experience, I find myself working as the head of physical education for a large jurisdiction.

In agreement with the opinion of Weinberg, R. S., & Gould, D. (2023)**,** this study, therefore, inferred that having such an interest in a field of sports goes a long way in shaping their career choice. Ultimately, it is characteristic of young athletes to strive for progress in their chosen sporting field and assume leadership careers later on**.**

Training and capacity development were also identified from the interviews and focused group discussion data as crucial to women taking up leadership positions, and being able to effectively execute their duties. Participants collectively agreed on how training and capacity development contribute to their abilities to function as female leaders and address challenges associated with their roles in their organisations. For example, the assertion below was captured during the focused group discussion:

For others to reach the level we have gotten to; it is required that they undergo the training we underwent. In these times, if we women would be able to assume the best leadership positions, it boils down to us demonstrating diverse competencies which surpass that of our male counterparts. This only results from training.

In addition to this take, Darvin and Sagas (2017) submit that by having a portfolio with different sporting experiences, it is easy for women to break the glass ceiling, they face in their career, and compete with other qualified candidates for topmost positions. Further, the focused group discussion revealed that while various theories like Liberal Feminism, and Eagly and Karau's Role Congruity Theory suggest that social constructs depict women

as poor leaders, there are men in sporting organisations who genuinely believe that specific positions in top management should be occupied by a female. A respondent from the tertiary institutional sports associations explained during the focused group discussion:

"There have been instances in my career where the men in my workplace have unanimously vouched for a woman to occupy the topmost position. They believed that choosing a female candidate with rich experience and confidence to oversee the role would yield positive results."

Agreeing with the stance of Weinberg, R. S., & Gould, D. (2023)**,** it can be inferred that with women gaining these training and competency development opportunities, they would be well-equipped to compete with their male counterparts for senior positions. This would help reduce situations where women are less represented at the decision-making levels of sporting organisations in Ghana.

Regarding available career advancement pathways, respondents were quizzed on the availability of opportunities to advance their careers. It was evident from the data that in most sporting institutions, clear-cut career advancement pathways were almost non-existent for females when compared to their male counterparts. As recorded by an interview participant:

If you take out the efforts of mentors, supervisors, and role models, there is no definite pattern that has been set for aspiring female leaders to follow.

A study conducted on professional athletes by Aly and Breese (2018) attributed this situation to the predominant assumption that all activities relating to sports, and its leadership must be spearheaded by men. While efforts have been made to develop these pathways for women, it is also evident from the similar studies conducted by Burton (2015), which have revealed a sense of reluctance on the part of current female leaders to make a substantial contribution to the development of such a career development curriculum for women in sports. During the focused group discussion, it was revealed that in the case of Ghanaian women leaders in the sports arena are more willing to assist with the development of such a structure to ensure that there is an increase in women's representation in the existing and upcoming leadership positions.

Leadership Growth and Leadership Style. Having a competent approach to leadership has been identified as correlating with positive leadership. As part of improving female participation in sporting institutions in Ghana, the theme, "leadership" and

"leadership style" recommend that organisations assess and develop the leadership capabilities of females, advocate for the retention of feminine traits in leadership, employ efficient leadership styles, and increase the engagement of females in the sports-related decision-making process.

An essential component of increasing the participation of a minority group is to first assess their capabilities, and proceed to develop it. The same can be said of the female leadership situation in Ghana. Lee and Chelladurai (2017) suggest that capability assessment would reveal where the strengths, and weaknesses of women are and undertake efforts to mitigate these weaknesses while improving the strengths. With this, the interviews underscored the need to develop special aptitude tests designed to examine the current physical, and cognitive abilities of women. As stated by a participant from the tertiary institutional sports associations:

I propose that, while embracing the general aptitude tests used in many job interviews, we develop a simplified test that enables a thorough evaluation of the skills and weaknesses of women. This would go a long way to assist in identifying the best role fit to associate with the candidates.

Following the role congruity theory, Berdahl et al., (2018) explained that those female leaders who utilise masculine leadership styles, and traits when they assume positions of power, are susceptible to situations of bigotry and dislike by both their male and female counterparts. Confirming this situation, the data analysis revealed that leveraging a masculine approach to leadership has not supported the cause of including more women in sports leadership in Ghana. A respondent from the interview explained that:

"Imagine a woman behaving like a man in our culture. To be frank, this would not rub off well with our people, especially with how our culture dictates women should act. There has been an advocate for fellow women to be much more flexible, and relational in the execution of their duties. While some might argue this would increase instances of disrespect, it doesn't go to say that we are not advising fellows to be firm as well."

In addition to this, Burton (2015) states that assuming leadership positions should encourage women to freely express their femininity, and utilise leadership styles that facilitate such expressions. Effective feminine leadership constitutes being able to organise a group of individuals in an organisation to achieve a goal without having to jeopardise one's identity as a woman (Vachhani, S. J., & Pullen, A.,

2019). A participant in the focused group discussion revealed:

Adopting an autocratic leadership style would work against the whole aim of advocating for more females to occupy leadership positions in sporting organizations in Ghana. Even amongst males, there is a general dislike for authoritarian styles and a preference for democratic approaches to leadership. Should approaches be encouraged amongst our ladies who assume leadership in our sporting organizations?

Accordingly, a similar study by Robinson, G. F. (2021) advocates for women to utilise leadership styles, such as democratic or participative leadership styles, and people-oriented leadership styles, as the philosophies of these styles accommodate women to easily lead groups of people in various organisations with little to no challenges. By so doing, Manzi, F. (2019) posits that it would facilitate congruity with their assigned roles without having to deal with situations of bigotry and discrimination.

Further, the thematic analysis stressed the need for women to be exposed to sports-related decision-making situations for them to appreciate the level of thinking required to steer sporting organisations in Ghana in the right direction. It has been deemed necessary in literature to give women exposure to environments of leadership. This would assist them in identifying the various managerial skills to learn and develop their preference for ascending to positions of power in sports. Per a participant from the tertiary institutional sports associations:

Looking at this approach from a behavioural science perspective, exposing some of these young and aspiring female leaders in our occupation to leadership, and decision-making settings would eventually nurture in them leadership abilities like critical thinking and good decision-making at a sub-optimal level.

In behavioural science, this phenomenon has been referred to as the exposure effect. Exposure effect results when an individual makes a familiar choice from a list of options due to previous experience with the chosen option. In effect, if women are exposed to leadership settings, and situations where decisions are made, it is expected that career-wise, they would select pathways that will put them in similar positions.

Progression Approaches. The first theme opportunities for career development details the perception of study participants on how easy it is for female leaders in sporting organisations in Ghana to assume higher leadership positions. This theme

covered three codes which are; Career Limitations, Sponsorship, and Networking. With regards to the career limitations, the data revealed that factors such as self-limiting beliefs, and organisational culture played a key role in the ability of female leaders to advance into higher positions in the sporting industry of Ghana. Regarding self-limiting beliefs, Furley, P., & Schweizer, G. (2020) explain them as the various perceptions and matters that individuals assume to be factual about themselves. These have been identified as being able to hinder one's ability to pursue set goals, fulfil one's potential, and reach self-actualisation (Burton, 2015). As explained by a respondent from the focused group discussion:

To be honest when you examine how things are structured in the industry, and the leverage that is given to the men in some of our sporting organisations, it is understandable to see most of our female leaders not having faith in themselves to assume powerful leadership positions where they can influence the industry.

In line with the conclusions of Manzi, F. (2019), participants of the interview collectively suggested that it is essential that females demonstrate a lot of confidence concerning the roles that are assigned to them, and also allow themselves to be exposed to various sporting environments to acquire experience. For Johns (2013), there exists a strong connection between the state of an organisation's culture, the progression of employees, and their longevity in an organisation. In societies such as Ghana where culture plays a key role in shaping the roles and responsibilities of individuals in society and their workplaces, cultural libertarian feminism has highlighted how these cultural dictates negatively affect the experience of women in leadership positions. In this study, it was evident from the session with the tertiary institutional sports association's leaders that the default cultural stance of most sporting organisations is that males are better suited to occupy important leadership positions. One of the participants from the tertiary institutional sports associations explained that:

A keen observer will note that preference is given to male leaders with the technical know-how in a particular sporting field as compared to their female counterparts.

While this may affirm the explanation of Mensah (2019), about Cultural Libertarian Feminism, it has also been suggested by Streifer et al., (2019) that essentially, there are sports-related situations where women have demonstrated higher abilities in contrast to their male counterparts. It can therefore be inferred that if organisational culture is structured to allow female leaders equal opportunity as their male counterparts, it is likely that they would give improved outputs which would result in their acknowledgement and further promotion up the sporting corporate ladder.

Maslow's Hierarchical Needs Theory highlights the importance of satisfying basic needs, without which all other desires would be disregarded (Maslow, 1943). A basic requirement for female sports leaders to have a positive experience with leadership is the presence of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. From the responses of the focused group discussion, it was emphasised that sponsorship, and mentorship opportunities available to female leaders played a key role in these female leaders having a positive experience in carrying out their duties. According to a participant from the focused group discussion:

My interactions with other females in our industry and key sporting personalities have stressed the need for women to be allowed to advance their careers by engaging them in sports-related workshops, further studies, and overseas practical training sessions if we want to change the 'male dominance in sports' narrative.

To complement this, respondents from the interview unanimously discussed how vital sponsorship is to the positive experience of women in leadership positions in sports organisations in Ghana. Primarily, these respondents associated their success as leaders with a mentor, and their belief that female sponsors are vital to the success of women having positive leadership experiences. For example, an interviewee stated that:

I owe my current professional progress to the investment the three sports managers I worked under made in me. I learned a lot, and this has helped me to be able to deal with difficult situations, especially as a woman.

These findings support the arguments of Pape (2020). According to Pape (2020), if such sporting organisations can integrate sponsorship and mentorship programmes spearheaded by women into their organisational culture, it is expected that women working in sporting organisations would be encouraged to take up responsibilities despite the numerous gender-based challenges they might face.

The concept of networking has been touted by professionals, and academicians to be an effective approach to facilitating inclusion in any industry. In the sporting industry, Senne (2016) sees it as crucial to the advancement of the industry, and

also the career aspirations of persons involved in such relationships. In the case of female leaders in the sporting industry, cultural libertarian feminism advocates for the development of competent relationships that provide women with the opportunity to develop their competencies and equally have access to the resources which are readily available to their male counterparts. From the interview, it was realised that participants belonging to various professional networks had access to diverse resources that allowed them to operate efficiently as female leaders. For example, a participant reported that:

With my years of experience, I have had numerous opportunities to connect with resourceful individuals whose experience, guidance, and assistance have added to my efficacy as a leader.

In the case of the focused group discussion, the participants from the tertiary institutional sports associations pointed to a general need for women to be exposed to networking opportunities where they can showcase their leadership competencies, and receive career guidance. As recorded from the focused group discussion:

I find it essential to expose my female mentees to the various sports societies I belong to. These societies have been instrumental to my development as a leader in my position. I am of the view that this would position these aspiring female leaders to be able to function effectively in our male-dominated field.

Conclusions and Recommendations. About the professional experiences of women in uppermost leadership sports positions, the study discovered a keen interest in the particular sporting activity or body that they were responsible for leading, having mentors and sponsors, and taking an active part in sponsorship and mentorship programs. The interest in a particular sport propelled these women in sports leadership positions to select sports-related careers and accumulate the best knowledge and experience that placed them in such advantageous positions to make meaningful contributions to sports in Ghana. These female leaders also highlighted how their sponsors and mentors' input in their career development ensured that they had exposure to the right sporting knowledge and facilitated their assumption of leadership in sporting organisations in Ghana. These, notwithstanding, the study identified the difficulty of achieving a proper work, and personal life balance as a challenge to women, having a positive experience when it comes to female leadership in sports organisations.

Most of these female leaders are expected to juggle their professional responsibilities in managing their daily home chores, unlike their male counterparts who are relatively not mandated to homely conduct tasks right after their work schedules. In addition to this, the study revealed that self-limiting beliefs also played a key role in women not wanting to assume leadership in sporting organisations. Even, if they had assumed leadership positions, most women often shy away from progressing in leadership primarily because they are intimidated by the success of their counterparts, whether male or female. Further, given the cultural setting within which the study was conducted, regards men to be best suited for leadership, the study identified that in sporting organisations where the pervading culture frowns upon women's leadership, there is the likelihood that female leaders would struggle to effectively play their roles as leaders.

Per the data analysis, this notion also influenced the hiring practices of such sporting organisations. It was discovered that organisations with cultures that were unreceptive to female leaders usually adopted a hiring approach that favoured male leaders to occupy sporting positions as compared to their female counterparts. In the case of the leadership growth and progression approaches, having available career advancement pathways, accessing mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, opportunities for training and capacity development, and networking played a significant role in women progressing further in their careers as leaders in professional sporting organisations in Ghana. The study established that women with clear-cut career advancement pathways relatively have it easy when it comes to assuming leadership positions and advancing in their roles as leaders.

Also, access to mentorship and sponsorship opportunities gave women the platform to showcase their existing knowledge and receive guidance that contributed to sharpening their sports leadership, and knowledge and exposure to opportunities for leadership in the sporting community of Ghana. Further, the study stressed on identifying the capabilities of female leaders, and training them to improve these capabilities played a key role in their growth, and progression as leaders. Also, networking allowed the female leaders to interact with other professionals in the sporting community of Ghana where they could share knowledge, expertise, and opportunities to gain leadership experience in professional sports organisations in Ghana.

In general, the study emphasised the significance of sports interest, mentoring, career advancement routes, training, and networking in fostering the experiences, growth, and progression of women working in leadership roles within professional sports organisations in Ghana. It also throws light on the difficulties women encounter in balancing work and family obligations and overcoming cultural prejudices in leadership positions in sports.

It is recommended that qualitative and quantitative examinations be made to understand how different the opinions and experiences of male executives in similar positions in sporting organisations. This would assist in producing a clearer picture of the qualifications, skills, knowledge, and experiences required for excelling in senior leadership positions in professional sporting organisations.

It is necessary to do further study to identify practical strategies for promoting gender diversity in sports organisations' recruiting procedures. This study may examine strategies for eliminating prejudice, challenging cultural conventions that favour male leaders, and fostering a climate that is more welcoming and encouraging of female leaders. A deeper comprehension of the advantages of inclusive leadership methods and the effects of diverse leadership teams in sports organisations would be beneficial.

Understanding the fundamental causes of self-limiting attitudes among women in sports leadership necessitates a closer look. This study may investigate strategies, initiatives, or programs that support and motivate women to face their fears, grow in their careers, and assume leadership positions. It would also be beneficial to look at how mentorship, coaching, and role modelling affect women's confidence and job progress.

Exploring successful tactics and assistance programs that might aid women in top leadership roles within sports organisations in striking a healthy work-life balance should be the primary focus of future studies. The focus of this inquiry would be on certain methods, regulations, and programs that might help women balance their career obligations with their obligations and regular domestic duties.

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LIST OF TABLES

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Table 1. **The Professional Experiences, Leadership Growth, and Progression Approach Adopted by Women in Uppermost Leadership Positions Working Within Professional Sports Organisations in Ghana**

Theme	Code	Code Description	Illustrative quote	Frequency	Saliency
Progression approaches	Career limitations	Obstacles that limit the ability of women to operate effectively as leaders in sporting organisations in Ghana	"It is understandable to see most of our female leaders not having faith in themselves to assume powerful leadership positions where they can influence the industry"	11	High
	Mentorship and sponsorship opportunities	The availability of opportunities for women to develop their leadership capabilities.	"I owe my current professional progress to the investment the three sports managers I worked under made in me."	11	High
	Networking	The chance to develop impactful relationships in the sporting community of Ghana would benefit female leaders in sporting organisations.	"Numerous opportunities to connect with resourceful individuals whose experience, guidance, and assistance have added to my efficacy as a leader"	5	Low
Leadership style and leadership growth	Work-life balance	How do female leaders manage their corporate and social life effectively	"I have had to juggle between my responsibility as a family woman and my responsibility as a senior manager in my sporting organisation"	9	High
	Social Issues and Perceptions	The various social constructs influence the organisational perception of female leaders in sports management positions.	"Not everyone in our organisation is fully sold on the idea of having a woman occupying the topmost position."	11	High
	Hiring Practices	How sports organisational recruitment favours or discriminates against women.	"One striking thing you will observe is how different the structure and duration of the contracts issued to male employees are from their female counterparts."	11	High
Positive Professional Experiences	Relevance of sponsors and mentors	The significance of individual sponsors and mentors to the development of female leaders in sporting organisations in Ghana	"I have received inspiration from various female role models to demonstrate competency in my field of work."	11	High
	Interest in sporting activities	Examines the relevance of interest in sporting activities to assuming leadership in sports organisations	"I have had an interest in sports since my high school days. During that time, I was elected as the main sports prefect responsible for overseeing the sports development of the students in my school"	6	Low
	Training and capacity development	Opportunities for developing intellectual and physical capabilities to meet the demands of the leadership positions available in sporting organisations	"For others to reach the level we have gotten to; it is required that they undergo the training we underwent."	9	High
	Available career advancement pathways	The available structures and systems that have been implemented to guide women to assume positions of power in sports organisations.	"We have had formal meetings and informal discussions on how to develop a clear structure to facilitate the young women we have identified as having the potential to lead like women."	11	High

Source: Field Data Collection (2022).