

## Examining senior women's experiences in New Zealand sport organisations: a critical perspective

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The continuing under-representation of women at higher levels of sport administration has been well documented and researched. Most of our understanding of women's experiences in sport organisations, however, comes from the 'bottom up' that is from the perspective of those who have not been able to achieve senior management roles in sport (Hovden, 2000). There is a lack of research with the few senior women who are employed in the administrative positions in their organisations. Many guides to increasing numbers of women in high level positions focus on 'fixing the women' (Bensimon & Marshall, 2003). In contrast we utilise critical theory to inform our perspective, opening up discussions about a variety of ways that women have achieved their senior roles and offering alternative pathways for organisational decision makers to increase numbers of women in senior management (Alvesson, 2008). By focusing on senior women's experiences, we intend to create a greater understanding of senior women's career pathways and the ways that they have navigated the traditional and conventionally male dominated environments of sport organisations. This focus will contribute to our conceptualisation of gender relations within sport organisations. The purpose of this research was therefore to investigate the career experiences of senior female sport administrators (CEO level) within New Zealand sport organisations.

The ten female CEOs of New Zealand sport organisations were identified through an internet search and the researchers' personal networks. All ten were invited to take part in a face-to-face, skype, or phone interview. Eight consented to be interviewed and were asked questions regarding their preparation for a career in sport management and their subsequent career path, particularly their experiences in sport management. We focused specifically on areas such as preparation for leadership roles, mentorship, role modelling, and the nature of gender relations in the industry. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The researchers independently reviewed the transcripts for thematic development. The data themes were: varied backgrounds; pay; skills women need in the sector; mentors; and advice for students.

Two participants had degrees in sport, two had degrees in business, two had teaching backgrounds and two had no degree and considerable experience in the field. Five participants had extensive experience in the corporate and business world before joining the sports sector. Relationship building was considered to be the most important skill for women. A variety of strategies were outlined for a successful career in the sport sector, ranging from active critique of, and resistance to, old boys' networks to 'playing the game' and exploring ways of becoming part of those networks and trying to facilitate change from the inside. Pay was recognised as being a particular problem for women in the sport sector as they were faced with a double bind of low pay in the sport sector, and traditionally lower pay for women executives. Again, diverse strategies were outlined to deal with this problem. Some respondents felt that women should be responsible for negotiating their rates of pay, whereas others felt that it was an organisational duty to ensure equal pay. Informal mentoring was considered to be more useful than formal mentoring. Advice for students varied from the pragmatic to get as much experience as possible, to the more whimsical 'be true to yourself'. These findings will be presented and discussed in more detail. There was some critique of organisations and calls for change within organisations (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000).

We conclude that there are common stories regarding women's experiences in the sport sector, but that the strategies to address them are varied and individual. As far as understanding gender relations, within sport organisations, this is encouraging as there is no one sole approach to achieving high level positions. This means that graduates and less experienced managers should feel confident addressing some of the constraints faced by women with a variety of approaches and not just fitting with current structures and norms. We will be able to use the findings to improve our preparation of our own students and to inform our teaching practice, using examples such as relationship building in a case study example.

### References:

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