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Leadership in Football: Explanatory mechanisms of racial and gender in- and exclusion & recommendations

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1 Mechanisms behind limited diversity

In previous research, several mechanisms have been identified to explain the underrepresentation of women and ethnic minorities in leadership positions in sport, including football. Many of these studies are theoretically grounded in feminist and/or Critical Race Theory and empirically substantiated by qualitative data based on the opinions and experiences of people in leadership positions in sport, both from dominant social status positions (white men) and from underrepresented groups (women and minority ethnic people). In this section, we list the main mechanisms that help make sense of the limited diversity in football leadership and coaching in football¹.

¹ This chapter is based on a number of academic sources and reference works. In order to make the report more readable and accessible for non-academics, we will not use the academic system of citation consistently. All sources consulted can be found here and in the literature section at the end of the report: Acker, 2006; (different chapters in) Bradbury, Lusted & Van Sterkenburg, 2020; Bradbury, Van Sterkenburg & Mignon 2014; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Dunn & Welford, 2015; (different chapters in) Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2018; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017; Hylton, 2009; Magee, Caudwell, Liston & Scraton, 2007; Olushola-Ogunrinde & Carter-Francique, 2020; Van Sterkenburg, 2020).

(i) Country specific historical and socio-political context

- Scholars have shown how racial exclusion and the limited racial/ethnic diversity within the domain of elite sport, including professional football, cannot be separated from the wider country specific historical and socio-political context. Explicit forms of racism (and sexism) are not as prevalent in all European countries. Research showed how overt forms of racism and explicit opposition to the recruitment of Black and minority coaches is especially evident in some East and Central European countries, with more racial/ethnic homogenous populations and more nationalist political ideologies and where explicit forms of racism are more common for minority ethnic players. West European and North European nations rely more often on subtle and implicit forms of racial exclusion and prejudice, though these serve just as well to accord less value, 'quality' and status to minority ethnic coaches and leaders (Bradbury, Lusted & Van Sterkenburg, 2020). Overall, discussions

about ethnic and racial diversity in football leadership is still largely absent in many European countries.

- Regarding gender equity, the Nordic countries Norway and Sweden rank high as gender-equalized nation states. These countries have a long tradition of public policy on gender equality, including gender quota (Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2018; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017). Different than in other European countries, both women and men comprise of at least 40 percent in governance of all national federations in Norway and Sweden, including male dominated sports like football.

(ii) Prevailing sexist and racist stereotyping

- Research shows how racial stereotypes are still widespread in the football industry, in particular associating ‘Black people’ with notions of natural physicality and strength/speed, while associating ‘White people’ with notions of leadership and organizational skills and ‘thinking’ positions on and off the field (Hylton, 2009; Van Sterkenburg, 2020). Minority and Black football players are often seen as less capable coaches and leaders and are stereotyped as ‘fit for playing but not for managing sport’. This already becomes evident in the positioning of players on the playing field - a phenomenon referred to as

‘stacking’ – with Black players mainly into more peripheral positions requiring speed and White players more often in central or leadership positions. The lack of appointment of ‘visible’ minorities as team captains further limits their opportunities to show qualities of leadership, disadvantaging them in career trajectories from ‘captain to coach’ in the game (Bradbury, Lusted & Van Sterkenburg, 2020). Some minority ethnic leaders and coaches report they are often judged in relation to perceived ethnic and cultural traits rather than in terms of their qualifications and certificates.

- The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (in sport and football) is often attributed to a natural lack of independence, ambition and/or leadership skills, compared to men, who are generally regarded as more decisive and better problem-solving leaders (e.g. Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2018). Such essentialist discourses on gender differences are perpetuated by continuing gender inequalities in care responsibilities for children and the elderly that still dominate in many European countries. This may further complicate and limit women’s ability to pursue double-career positions in paid and voluntary work such as in sport governance. Moreover, essentialist discourses on men’s innate leadership

qualities and women’s lack thereof tend to be more prevalent in a traditional male defined sport like football. Mainstream football organizations like UEFA and national football federations only allowed girls and women to play since 1971 (Dunn & Welford, 2015; Magee, Caudwell, Liston & Scraton, 2007). Women’s competences in and knowledge of football are generally questioned, both on and off the field. Moreover, women athletes may be ‘complicit’ in reproducing essentialist notions on men as having more natural football knowledge and leadership.

- The sports media play a role in reproducing racial/ethnic and gender stereotypes (Van Sterkenburg, 2020). Racialized sport media discourses that associate Black and minority ethnic athletes with natural athleticism and White athletes with leadership capacities may linger on in the domain of football coaching. Minoritized ethnic coaches themselves mention how sports journalists focus on the assumed merits and suitability of White (ex-) players to become good coaches, while neglecting ‘visible’ minorities from these media narratives.
- Ethnic minority women experience a double burden of intersecting exclusionary mechanisms and tend to be seen as lacking



the necessary knowledge and capabilities and/or even may be attributed undesirable traits for coaching and leadership (Olushola-Ogunrinde & Carter-Francique, 2020). They, in particular, are severely under-represented in leadership and coaching positions in football.

(iii) Closed and selective processes of recruitment and selection

- The definitional power of racial and sexist stereotyping may influence recruitment and selection processes (Acker, 2006). For example, since hiring a minority ethnic coach may be associated with ‘risk and ‘insecurity’ (Bradbury et al., 2014), minority coaches may be overlooked in the process of recruitment and selection while favoring coaches who are perceived as more culturally and racially similar to the people in key positions in European football.
- There is a tendency in football organizations, across countries, to apply institutionally closed mechanisms of recruitment based on personal networks and recommendation and recruitment from dominant (white, male) social and cultural networks. This results in the reproduction of homogeneous (White, male) leadership in football and in restricting opportunities for minority ethnic coaches to access leadership and coaching positions (Bradbury, Lusted & Van Sterkenburg, 2020).

- Earlier research shows how ‘visible’ ethnic minorities feel they have to work twice as hard for fewer and less high profile opportunities compared to majority White coaches and are less likely to be offered second chances to become coaches at other professional clubs (Bradbury, Lusted & Van Sterkenburg, 2020). When women and minority ethnic leaders do reach leadership or coaching positions, they are relatively often regarded as representing their wider group (‘women’, ethnic minorities’), especially regarding attributed failures.

(iv) A lack of women and ethnic minority role models

- The gendered male and racial/ethnic homogeneity of football coaching and leadership results in a lack of women and minority ethnic role models in positions of leadership, that may also negatively influence experienced competence and ambitions of potential female and ethnic minority leaders inside and outside of football. Whereas white males may be much more socialized and supported in career paths that lead to senior coaching, management or governance positions.
- Previous research shows how the low numbers of ‘visible’ minorities achieving high level coaching positions complicates the

situation for ambitious minority coaches; on the one hand they are seen as lacking the relevant experience for consideration for coaching posts whilst simultaneously they are being denied opportunities to gain such required experience.

(v) Continued lack of problem awareness and resistance to targeted policy and action

- Gender equality in football leadership (and other traditional male dominated sports) in most countries lag behind compared to other types of sport and to gender equality in society at large (Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2018). Despite the increase of girls and women in playing football, in all European countries, boys and men still largely dominate and often comprise at least 75 percent of all members of national football federations. Such male dominance among players is often accompanied by a lack of recognition or acknowledgement of the need for more gender balance. Moreover, leadership positions in football are often regarded as positions that hold high societal status among men. These two factors lead to more conservative, masculine organizational cultures that resist change and that resist gendered redistribution of power. Furthermore, since football may be regarded as one of the few bastions where ‘men



can be men’, preserving sexist cultures and disqualifying women as ‘real’ football players and leaders in football may be beneficial for the reproduction of essentialist discourses that associate men with ‘natural (football) leaders’.

- Key stakeholders in the football industry are often convinced of their recruitment and selection processes being non-discriminatory and based on assumptions of meritocracy, like suitability and ability despite the operation of institutionally closed mechanisms of recruitment within homogeneous social and cultural networks (white, male) at national and European levels (Bradbury, Lusted & Van Sterkenburg, 2020).
- The widely held conviction of neutral, non-discriminatory mechanisms among people in key positions (gatekeepers) in football to recruit, select and appoint other people in leadership positions serves to reproduce a lack of problem awareness or non-acknowledgement of institutional discrimination. Such a negation of institutional discrimination is often combined with a strong resistance towards targeted structural actions and measurements to ‘open-up’ access to leadership positions for women and ethnic minorities like target setting and quotas. Instead policy approaches and actions mainly remain targeted towards

stimulating and educating individuals from underrepresented groups. Such ‘fixing’ the women/ethnic minorities’ approaches may result in slow and slight changes in diminishing existing skewness. However, a growing body of research into the development of changing gender diversity in European sport governance clearly showed that the implementation of structural means in redistributing power are most effective over time in achieving sustainable gender equality in sport leadership (Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2018).

2 Recommendations for action

Some key recommendations for future action can be identified based on recent research on diversity and inclusion in football and sport leadership (e.g. Bradbury et al., 2014; 2020; Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2018). Five broad areas of key recommendation are listed below.

- Given football organizations’ tendency to adhere to notions of meritocracy and not ‘see’ or acknowledge subtle or institutionalized forms of racial and gender exclusion, it is important to collect ‘hard’ baseline data on (lack of) diversity in football leadership. It would

be relevant to repeat such data collection on a regular basis to monitor progress over the years. Furthermore, quantitative data collection should be supplemented with qualitative data based on interviews with people working in football governance and coaching in Europe. This will provide insights into the main obstacles to a more diverse and inclusive leadership. It will lead to recommendations that can be implemented in football policy making on a European scale and will enhance accessibility to leadership positions for those women and ethnic minorities who have the ambition and the capacities.

- Scholars such as Olushola-Ogunrinde & Carter-Francique (2020) advise more culturally and gender diverse recruitment panels within sport organizations, as well as providing proper feedback for women and ethnic minority candidates who get rejected so that they know what to improve in future applications. When designing positive action measures, consultation with the target group is important to ensure their experiences and input is incorporated by those with direct influence on and responsibility for their implementation. Moreover, organizations should attend to how gender and race-based exclusions are impacted by additional axes of discrimination along the lines of e.g. (dis)ability, sexual orientation, social class.



- Given the importance of networking to obtain leadership positions, football organizations need to invest time and energy in developing and strengthening networks available to (future) women and ethnic minority leaders in football. This should be supplemented with mentoring - and on-the-board programs where football organizations offer opportunities for future women and those of an ethnic minority background to develop themselves in (temporary) coaching or boardroom positions. It would be worthwhile to create a database for football organizations that includes names of certified and talented women and ethnic minority coaches and leaders. This enables organizations to proactively contact such potential leaders in case of a vacancy in the organization.
- The delivery of educational programs targeting influential stakeholders is key to breaking the 'glass ceiling' for women and ethnic minorities in football leadership. Educational activities should address, in particular, the conscious and unconscious forms of racism and sexism and institutionalized forms of discrimination that often remain unacknowledged but that limit opportunities and engender negative experiences on the part of women and ethnic minority leaders. This includes the discourses that associate Black and minority ethnic

leaders with natural playing capacities but not management capacities, or the association of women leaders with lack of ambition and leadership. It would also include awareness of how different dimensions of disadvantage intersect (Hylton, 2009).

- We recommend an interventionist approach in recruitment procedures and organizational culture through positive action and structural measures like gender/ethnicity quota and/ or the *Rooney Rule*. The Rooney Rule aims for (football) organizations to invite at least one suitable minority ethnic candidate to the interview round for a vacancy for a management or coaching position, or otherwise receive a financial penalty. Proper implementation of the Rooney rule and quota, including financial penalties for non-compliance will increase hiring opportunities on the part of women and ethnic minorities. Moreover, having more women and ethnic minority candidates in the (face-to-face) interviews may challenge some of the deeply engrained and persistent racial stereotypes from – usually White - club owners about women and minority ethnic coaches and leaders as incompetent. The English Football Association has introduced a version of the Rooney Rule (Bradbury, Lusted & Van Sterkenburg, 2020) and the Dutch football federation KNVB has set some qualitative

and quantitative goals for 2030 regarding the realization of more gender and ethnic diversity in the organization, including highest direction management.

