Article

Is Sport Coaching a Social Sustainable Profession for Women? Analysing the Experiences of Women Coaches in Spain

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Abstract: While there are several studies showing the importance of social sustainability in different settings (e.g., Democracy and Governance: the Role of Sport Governing Bodies, urban planning, architecture) there is a lack of studies investigating social sustainability in the sports coaching profession, and even less research has specifically addressed women coaches. Using Barron and Gauntlett's model of social sustainability (2002), the purpose of this study was to analyze the women coaches' experiences of their profession and the extent to which it is a sustainable livelihood for women coaches. Semi-structured interviews with 20 women coaches were conducted from a variety of sports and performance levels. From a social sustainability perspective, the women coaches' experiences were analyzed using Barron and Gauntlett's principles of equity, diversity, interconnectedness, and democracy and governance to ascertain their quality of life. Our findings reveal that women coaches face multiple barriers and difficult working conditions in their profession, yet they continue to be committed to coaching largely because of the strong positive interpersonal relationships and social interactions they have with their sporting community. This study shines a light on the extent to which coaching is a livable and sustainable profession for women coaches today and highlights the importance of considering social sustainability principles to improve the experiences of women in the sports coaching profession.

Keywords: equity; diversity; social interactions; quality of life; sport community

1. Introduction

Social sustainability plays a vital role in the broader sustainability discourse [1]. Nevertheless, the social dimension of sustainability has frequently been pinpointed as the weakest or the "missing pillar" in debates and studies of sustainability and regarded as the hardest to implement and easiest to neglect [2–5].

Social sustainability has been conceptualized in diverse ways, reflecting the complexity of defining and applying the term to wider sustainability projects, studies, and professions. According to Barron and Gauntlett [6], social sustainability occurs when formal and informal processes, systems, structures, and relationships actively support the capacity of future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected, and democratic and provide a good quality of life [6]. Prior research generally shows that social sustainability has been deployed in different disciplines, for instance in urban planning, housing, public spaces, architecture, psychology, sociology, and policy [7,8].

The concept of sustainability has been increasingly applied in the workplace in recent years, as individuals face complex, unstable, and unpredictable career environments [9–11]. According to Van der Heijden and De Vos [9], sustainable careers refer to "sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing

meaning to the individual" (p. 7). From the sustainable perspective, a career promotes the connection between individuals' career development and organizations' enabling of career opportunities [9]. In other words, it implies a balance between individual and organizational needs. Such positive interactions between work and broader life realms can increase the beneficial outcomes for individuals, such as job satisfaction, and well-being [12,13], and also for organizations, such as organizational commitment and improved job performance [11]. In the same way that scholars have described the main characteristics for sustainable careers, Bennet [14] outlined the factors that make the coaching profession sustainable.

Regarding professions, social sustainability has been studied in the academic profession by Hammond and Churchman [1], who examined the social sustainability of academic work in universities. Sustainability in the coaching profession has recently gained attention. A few studies show that high-performance coaching is a demanding and highly stressful occupation [15]. Coaches face constant pressures related to performance expectations, along with the threat of negative consequences such as funding cuts and job loss. High-performance coaches often work long, irregular hours and travel extensively [16]. Furthermore, coaches face common stressors which include lack of support, job insecurity, inadequate salary, difficulties in working with parents, coaching at evening and weekends [17], difficulty managing a work-life balance, prolonged time away from family, insufficient preparation time, and managing financial support [18]. However, women in coaching positions experience greater challenges than their male counterparts for a wide range of reasons including being in the minority of the profession [19–23] male-domination and preferential hiring policies towards men [19,24]; the pressure of having numerous roles and responsibilities [25]; a lack of trust from their organization; a lack of security in their role and few opportunities to network [26]; gender discrimination and homophobia [27]; early mornings and long days/weeks [28]; lack of social networks and role models [26,29]; and difficulty managing work-life balance [30,31]. Despite the existence of few studies focusing on causes and suggestions for improvements and/or interventions for women coaches in sport, women are still being underrepresented and systematically over- challenged within the coaching profession [19,21–26,30–32]. Within this context, the organizational culture of sport organizations is found to be most influential on the career development and progression of women coaches [23,26], and in turn, it can have a significant impact on their quality of life. However, despite the extensive above-mentioned research, the literature has yet to capture women coaches' voices regarding social sustainability in the coaching profession.

Considering the underrepresentation of women in coaching roles worldwide and given that women coaches face greater challenges in a male-dominated culture [19], a social sustainability perspective can contribute to more in-depth understanding of women coaches' experiences and how this affects their quality of life. The aim of this study was to analyze women coaches' experiences of their profession and the extent to which it is a socially sustainable profession for women in Spain.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Need for an Alternative Theoretical Approach

To address the aim of the present study, we used Barron and Gauntlett's model of social sustainability as a basis for discussion [6]. This model comprised five key principles that contribute to a definition of social sustainability (equity, diversity, interconnectedness, quality of live, democracy and governance). This model [6] "seeks to capture the goals of socially sustainable communities and describe what makes a community healthy and liveable, both now and in the future" (p. 4). According to the authors, social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes, systems, structures, and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities [6]. Therefore, this theoretical framework is of great potential in reference to women's social sustainability in the coaching profession.

The first principle, equity, is described by Barron and Gauntlett [6] as "a filter through which all other principles are viewed" (p. 7). In this study, equity is defined as a sports

coaching community's ability to provide equitable outcomes for the women coaches. Equity is a fundamental component that cannot be separated from the other principles. In sports coaching, women coaches remain in the minority in nearly all sports at all levels worldwide, due to the complex, numerous and interconnected barriers they face [33].

The second principle is diversity, which refers to the community's ability to promote and encourage diversity, valuing difference rather than homogeneity. Diversity is based upon opinions, backgrounds, perspectives, and encourages creativity and originality [1]. In sports coaching, there is a lack of racial and gender diversity [34,35] and a lack of female role models [24,25,36]. In addition, Norman's study found that lesbian coaches in the UK suffered discrimination, and most of them reported difficulty in disclosing and negotiating their sexual identity with governing bodies [35].

The third principle is interconnectedness, and includes the community's processes, systems and structures that promote connectedness within and outside the community at the formal, informal, and institutional level. In this study, interconnectedness is defined as women coaches' implicit and explicit connections with the coaching community, including social and professional interactions. Regarding the coaching profession, the Norman et al., study on women coaches in the UK [26], found that several coaches felt that coaching was a lonely and isolating job, many of them felt excluded and did not feel a sense of connectedness or belonging to a coaching community.

The fourth principle is democracy and governance. To facilitate social sustainability, the community provides democratic processes and open and accountable governance structures, encouraging participation and inclusion. In this study, democracy and governance refers to the role of sport governing bodies in promoting and advancing women coaches. In sports coaching, the experiences of female coaches revealed a lack of responsibility taken by governing bodies for the development of aspiring female coaches [24]. The fifth and last principle, quality of life, enables community members to have a sense of wellbeing and belonging at all levels. Characteristics include a sense of self-worth, belonging, engagement, empowerment, safety and a sense of place and pride in one's own contribution [6]. Two recent studies demonstrated the difficulties that women coaches have in managing their work-life balance, which in turn can cause burnout and other mental health issues [19,20]. The five principles suggested by Barron and Gauntlett [6], inter-relate, with equity serving as a "filter" and quality of life indicating the presence and effectiveness of all five principles. The model provides a rigorous framework for interpreting the social sustainability within the coaching profession, and more specifically of women coaches.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

A qualitative approach was used, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 women coaches in Spain. The participants were aged between early 20s to early 60s, their mean age was 35.5 years old; twelve of them indicated being lesbian and eight heterosexuals; six of the twenty coaches had children. Participants in the study included coaches from a variety of sports and performance levels. The sports represented by the participants included football, tennis, athletics, basketball, volleyball, figure skating, gymnastics, mountain sports, and two disabled sports (cerebral palsy football and adapted field hockey). Coaches occupied different positions such as technical director, head of grassroots coach development, head coach and assistant coach. In the Spanish context, technical directors develop multiple tasks inside their organizations besides coaching such as recruiting coaches, providing work guidelines for the teams, and supervising training sessions and matches. The dedication to coaching ranged from full-time to part-time positions. All the coaches had at least three years' experience in coaching at the time of the interview. This was so that the participants had been immersed within the coaching system for a prolonged period (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants.

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Sexual Orientation	Children	Current Role	Sport	Years of Experience	Employment Type
Ana	Woman	34	Heterosexual	2	Head coach	Gymnastics	8	Part time
Irene	Woman	30	Heterosexual	0	Technical director	Volleyball	6	Full time
Sonia	Woman	56	Heterosexual	2	Technical director	Basketball	40	Part time
Mar	Woman	26	Heterosexual	0	Technical director	Basketball	12	Part time
Manuela	Woman	33	Heterosexual	0	Head coach	Football	12	Part time
Cristina	Woman	34	Heterosexual	0	Assistant coach	Gymnastics	16	Part time
Mercè	Woman	32	Heterosexual	0	Head coach	Football	7	Part time
Ainhoa	Woman	49	Heterosexual	1	Technical director	Swimming	29	Full time
Mabel	Woman	29	Lesbian	0	Head coach	Football	5	Part time
Mireia	Woman	44	Lesbian	2	Head coach	Tennis	35	Full time
Xenia	Woman	51	Lesbian	2	Head coach	Volleyball	36	Full time
Montse	Woman	34	Lesbian	0	Assistant coach	Basketball	10	Part time
Sonia	Woman	31	Lesbian	0	Head coach	Cerebral palsy football	5	Full time
Aina	Woman	24	Lesbian	0	Head coach	Football and field hockey	5	Part time
Samanta	Woman	62	Lesbian	3	Assistant coach	Basketball	44	Full time
Andrea	Woman	28	Lesbian	0	Assistant coach	Mountain sports	6	Full time
Amanda	Woman	26	Lesbian	0	Head coach	Figure skating	6	Part time
Sandra	Woman	31	Lesbian	0	Technical director	Football	15	Part time
Gala	Woman	44	Lesbian	0	Assistant coach	Basketball	25	Part time
Alba	Woman	45	Lesbian	0	Technical director	Football	21	Full time

3.2. Procedures

Recruitment to the study was achieved primarily using research adverts placed in the university website and social media channels, and other participants were also recruited through snowballing [37]. According to Denzin and Lincoln [38], one-to-one semi-structured interviews were seen as the most suitable means to achieve a greater understanding of the participants' experiences. The semi-structured interviews provided in-depth conversations with the participants, and it helped to discover the influences of the social agents in the development of their profession [37]. After achieving institutional ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Catalan Sport Administration, the authors conducted the interviews either at the participants' chosen location or online, always adapting to their preference of choice to make them feel comfortable. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the study began. Following Norman [24], an interview guide approach was created for the purpose of the study. The guide began by asking the participants about their background in coaching and early experiences. Questions then progressed onto issues surrounding their experiences within the sport coaching community, and several questions about their lived experiences as women coaches and their prospects (e.g., "how is your relationship with other coaches and staff members of the sport community?").

The purpose and the format of the interviews were explained clearly, assuring the participants that their confidentiality would be maintained. Some of the coaches refused to be anonymous, and others preferred to maintain their confidentiality. Therefore, to protect the identity of those coaches who wanted to maintain their confidentiality, we anonymised all the participants' names and used pseudonyms in the reporting of our

findings. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. They were first recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The transcript was sent to the participants so that they could check it for accuracy. They agreed that the transcribed data reflected their experiences, and none of the participants requested any changed to their interview transcripts.

3.3. Data Analysis

Researchers employed a deductive approach in analysing the data [39]. The deductive approach was used to analyse the core concepts from Barron and Gauntlett's [6] theoretical framework and was organized using a start list [40]. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis [37]. According to these authors, we identified and categorized the themes into the following six steps: (a) familiarization with the data, which included transcribing and reading the interviews; (b) generating the initial codes based on the purpose on the study, and some of the codes were "discovered" as the data were analysed through an inductive approach; (c) grouping the codes in main themes; (d) reviewing the themes; (e) defining and naming the themes; and (f) producing the report. Software Atlas.ti version 8 was used to organize data codification and interview analysis. The most significant statements from participants were identified to exemplify the themes in the findings section.

4. Results

The findings section applies Barron and Gauntlett's [6], five principles of social sustainability (equity, diversity, interconnectedness, democracy and governance, and quality of life) to the experiences of women coaches in this study.

4.1. Equity in Sports Coaching

Participants felt that they had fewer opportunities to access coaching roles in relation to men, including those sports where there are proportionately high number of female athletes (figure skating, volleyball, gymnastics). They perceive themselves to be limited to coaching children or lower-level female categories, and that opportunities for women to coach in men's sport is almost non-existent. Gala, a basketball coach explained: "I have never had the opportunity to coach a men's team, it was practically impossible to get the attention of a men's team. At the end, you make a name for yourself in women's basketball" (Gala, basketball coach). Women coaches are conscious that stereotypes of the role of women tend to shape their coaching responsibilities, as women are often seen by technical directors as "sensitive, caring, and motherly" (Mireia, tennis coach), and several participants point to a sexist hiring policy which favors external or preferential hiring of men. Montse, a basketball coach received comments from parents saying that "I want the coach to be a man because he is stricter (…) We did not think that you were going to be so strict and demanding with the boys!" (Montse, basketball coach). The lack of access to coaching opportunities was more pronounced in male-dominated sports such as football or basketball, as Samanta, a basketball coach indicated that "there was a glass ceiling that would not let me progress and grow in the men's section" (Samanta, basketball coach). Consequently, women coaches were not approached for positions on the men's side:

> "*An opportunity came out to go to Brazil as the main football coach director, and I had all the requirements and qualifications (…) However they told me that this spot was for a man, because a woman there [Brazil] would not have had enough drive and credibility in front of the other men*" (Mabel, football coach)

The opportunity to gain experience is important for developing confidence although it is very difficult for women to get exposure if they are never given the opportunity. Despite some coaches feeling confident in their competency and knowledge of the sport, they do not feel they are given a fair chance. This creates a double standard in which men have coaching opportunities in both men's and women's sports, whereas women are limited to coaching in women's sports and lower categories. Women coaches´ awareness of the lack

of equal opportunities feeds into a cycle of insecurity and lack of confidence, which can affect their willingness to put themselves forward for opportunities when they do arise.

Most women coaches reported barriers to progress in their coaching careers. However, the study found that women coaches from disability sport (women's cerebral palsy football and mixed adapted hockey), reported more opportunities to progress. Aina, a field hockey coach who stopped coaching football and took up adapted hockey felt that "I have more opportunities in adapted hockey to be seen and get far than football" (Aina, field hockey coach). Some of the women coaches' report facing so many daily challenges such as lack of resources to do their job or allocation of odd hours for competitions, that it lead to them feeling tired or less motivated to fight for professional development and career advancement opportunities. Aina, a football coach, described the lack of support from the male board members of the club who "always treated us like an afterthought. All the financial support went to the male team which was in a lower category than the female team. At the end the team was disbanded" (Aina, football coach).

When women coaches do step into a more senior role or take on more responsibility, they tend not to be supported with the corresponding structural or financial support to succeed. Gala, a basketball asserted: "the club got into debt the year I took the top division women's team. Structurally and financially, we did not have enough support, and after four months I was fired" (Gala, basketball coach). Furthermore, women coaches feel that their ability to coach male or professional teams is questioned, and they must go above and beyond men to prove themselves to be capable and worthy coaches. This sentiment is backed up by the experience of Alba, a professional football coach with more than 20 years of experience in a male-dominated sport:

> "*There were parents and coaches who made derogatory comments about my way of coaching, meaning that 'women do not understand football'. As a woman, I felt I was being judged and questioned, and I always had to give more explanations, prove myself or justify my coaching model. If I had been a man, I certainly would not have had that*" (Alba, football coach)

Consequently, in many cases women coaches felt that to be successful in their career, they must prove themselves and overcompensate for being women and work harder to "fit in" within the sport community. Samanta, a basketball coach with many years of experience at national and international levels, described her professional journey as "constantly battling and breaking down walls" (Samanta, basketball coach). Despite this, she indicated feeling more valued, respected, and supported by her peers in an international coaching position where she has responsibility: "I am coaching the best coaches of all categories, we are seven women and one man in the team, even the programs director is a woman! Here I feel valued for my professional experience because I have been coaching for many years and have excelled" (Samanta, basketball coach). The one exception among all women coaches interviewed is Montse, a basketball assistant coach of a male team in a sports club with a strong sporting culture and history in basketball, who indicates that "I have never felt judged, it has always been a very positive experience. The sport culture is quite important, and in general terms they are very respectful and well educated in that sense" (Montse, basketball coach).

4.2. Gender Diversity: Welcome or Not?

The findings present a sports culture steeped in male dominance and sexism in various forms, especially at the elite level and in traditional male-dominated sporting contexts such as football, basketball, tennis, and mountain sports. Women coaches report having to navigate a hostile and unpleasant work environment where they did not feel included or fairly treated because of their gender or sexual orientation [35]. Andrea, a mountain sports coach recounted angrily how "the managers were making sexist jokes all the time (…) mountain sports are highly male dominated, with a very hegemonic masculinity that creates an uncomfortable atmosphere (…) that space did not generate confidence in me, and I did not feel safe" (Andrea, mountain sports coach). Consequently, several

coaches did not feel comfortable within their coaching environment and lacked trust in other coaches and colleagues. Furthermore, many of the women coaches did not have strong female role models to look up to throughout their coaching careers. The findings point to discrimination being a part of the everyday experiences of women coaches which often perpetuates a sporting culture where it is socially acceptable to express sexism and homophobia against women.

Nevertheless, there were some women coaches who experience a diverse and inclusive sport culture which made their coaching job fun and they felt welcomed. This was particularly prominent in smaller sports such adapted cerebral football and adapted hockey, as well as in women-dominated sports, such as volleyball or figure skating. Amanda, a figure skating coach stated, "it is a minority sport, with mostly women and gay male coaches which creates a relaxed environment to be around, we also know each other very well and it is fun" (Amanda, figure skating coach). Similarly, Xenia, a volleyball coach described her coaching community as "mostly female, inclusive, and diverse. We have disabled children, and children from different backgrounds" (Xenia, volleyball coach).

Twelve of the twenty women in the study disclosed being lesbian. Already facing discrimination based on their gender, the findings highlight that being a lesbian in this already reportedly hostile environment further complicates their experiences as coaches. Most lesbian coaches shared having difficulties in disclosing and negotiating their sexual orientation to their clubs and governing bodies because of a covert "don't ask, don't tell" mantra about their sexuality [35,41,42]. Lesbian coaches are secretive about their sexuality and tend to perceive homosexuality as a "private issue" that is separate from their profession in sport, as Mabel, a football coach shared: "I did not talk about it directly within the club, but I did not hide it either. I mean, maybe I had my partner waiting at the end of the session, and they could see it. It is a grey area" (Mabel, football coach).

The findings reveal that lesbian coaches experience constant and ongoing doubt as to whom they should reveal their sexual orientation. They cite a range of considerations and factors when deciding whether to come out or not, such as fear or judgement by athletes' parents and the awareness of the assumption that "lesbian coaches will convert athletes into lesbians", fear of being judged by their sexuality over their professional competences, and fear that their sexual identity will be used against them. Consequently, this leads lesbian coaches to compartmentalize their sexual identity. Aina, a football coach illustrates this issue:

> "In the end it is the heavy weight of having to constantly hide, to think about to what extent I explain about myself or not, to constantly ask myself all of this ... I was like uncovering myself in different environments. Here I am 100%, at work I am 30% and little by little they will get to know me better" (Aina, football coach)

Despite this, although being a minority, few of the women coaches have found spaces where they are able to express their sexual orientation and feel comfortable with their peers. Explanations for this can be that there are many lesbians in the sport, as Montse, a basketball coach explained "basketball is a safe space, and it is my world. I am super comfortable, plus there are a lot of lesbians" (Montse, basketball coach). Similarly, Xenia, a volleyball coach who coaches in a mostly female environment said, "I have never had a problem, actually all the opposite, I have always felt love, and I was the one who opened the Pandora's box!" (Xenia, volleyball coach). Andrea, a mountain sports coach explained that she felt more comfortable with her sexual orientation once there was an increase of women and diversity in her sporting community: "Especially the early years there were more guys exercising their masculinity, and then women entered and changed the dynamic completely. The female presence generated something else" (Andrea, mountain sports coach).

4.3. Interconnectedness: Being Part of "the Tribe"

While the extent and experience of social interactions between fellow coaches and staff was varied, most of the women coaches in our study had positive social interactions with their colleagues on and off the field, which lead them to feel connected and a sense of belonging to the coaching community. Xenia, a volleyball coach stated: "I have always had

a very good relationship with the players, and a lot of confidence with them. In fact, two players got married and they asked me to talk at their wedding" (Xenia, volleyball coach).

The findings suggest that there is a relationship between positive social interactions, job satisfaction and a sense of belonging to the coaching community. Xenia, a volleyball coach indicated that having great relationships with players, parents' families, coaches, and some members of the federation is "what gives me strength to face any problem when I feel so much love from my sport community" (Xenia, volleyball coach). In addition, she highlighted having a great relationship with the president of the federation, as well as with the coach (male) of the senior women's team, with whom she collaborates in sport-related initiatives, as well as participates in social gatherings off the sports field: "We know each other and work together in a lot of things. He runs a podcast about the volleyball community, and he invited me as a guest to speak about my experience" (Xenia, volleyball coach).

The findings indicate that, in many cases, the creation of strong, supportive female-based networks among women coaches is crucial for their social and professional wellbeing [24]. Andrea, a mountain sports coach started out in a role where: "the leadership and the environment was very sexist and hostile. I felt very uncomfortable, and I avoided all social interactions with them. I had zero desire to expose myself, to show myself, but I loved the work" (Andrea, mountain sports coach). She later stepped into a new role under the guidance of a senior female coach who she described as a role model to her on many levels:

> "*I admire her personally and professionally with her I feel like I'm in a safe space, it is comfort zone, we have a very healthy relationship., with respect. We have a great bond on and off the mountain. She takes care of me and the sport, everything is more natural. My environment now is very diverse, and I think this is allowing me to open other doors such as talking to the players about life concerns and sexuality*" (Andrea, mountain sports coach)

Aina, another football coach, shared a similar experience. In lieu of having a relationship or conversations with other male coaches, she bonded with other female coaches and found a supportive and encouraging group of female coaches where they shared their experiences about coaching: "Female teams were coached by women and most of us also played in the same team, so we all knew each other, and we talked a lot and shared things about coaching techniques or tactics for our teams" (Aina, football coach). Sonia, a cerebral palsy football coach indicated having the flexibility to choose her technical team and stated that "I chose two female assistant coaches and one female sports physiotherapist, not because they were women, but because they support me and help me so much, and we also have a great relationship outside football" (Sonia, cerebral palsy football coach). This suggests that establishing networks of female coaches and other staff members, led by an experienced female coach, allows individuals to share coaching practices, bring practical or professional issues for discussion and form an important component of women continued professional development away from an often male-dominated environment [24].

Nevertheless, there was one exception for Alba, who was coaching an elite football male team in a highly male-dominated environment, where social interactions were non-existent and that relationships with the sporting community were not great, despite many hours dedicated within the sports community:

> "*I spent a lot of time at the sports club with my colleagues, but our relationship was almost inexistent, everyone had a lot of things on their plate and did their own thing. It was very complicated leading a men's football team, and operating in such highly dominated environment, I often got stabbed in my back from other coaches, players, parents, and even board members*" (Alba, football coach)

One of the most important and prevalent findings was the reported positive social interactions that women coaches had with the sport coaching community, which have a significant impact on how they feel within their coaching communities, and on their level of engagement and happiness in the coaching profession.

4.4. Democracy and Governance: The Role of Sport Governing Bodies

The women coaches talked about the various campaigns and initiatives that their sport governing bodies run to promote women in sport and women coaches across different sports such as figure skating, volleyball, basketball, or football. The women coaches shared several examples, for example in basketball with "the creation of a women's basketball committee, which is formed by women, and they are very dedicated and are advancing women's sport a lot" (Samanta, basketball coach); in volleyball, with "a national program to encourage female athletes become coaches" (Xenia, volleyball coach), or in figure skating, with "the creation of scholarships for elite female athletes to do the coaching training qualification courses" (Amanda, figure skating coach).

Nevertheless, women coaches feel that the actions promoted by the sport governing bodies aimed at promoting women coaches are ineffective and often remain one-off actions without continuity, or that they are awareness-raising actions that do no transform power structures. Samanta, a basketball coach said, "the Spanish Federation gave a little support to women's sport, then stopped, and the Catalan Federation gave institutional support to a girls' project which they did not end up doing" (Samanta, basketball coach). Furthermore, in terms of governance structures, most of the women coaches observed that managerial positions in sport governing bodies are still highly dominated by men. The impact of this is that "they are reducing the opportunities we have", and that programs for women are designed by men, as expressed here by Xenia, a volleyball coach:

> "*Men crated the program for women! What they say does not happen: men are still head coaches in federations and elite teams, while women coaches are not even head coaches in regional volleyball teams under 14. It is a disaster! and you can see that there is no real intention to promoting women coaches*" (Xenia, Volleyball coach)

Gala, a basketball coach summarized her experiences of her sport governing body as "all talk and no action":

> "*The Federation had five scholarships for women coaches to get coaching qualification. This might be a good initiative, but for what? Then you put women coaches in assistant roles or doing internships. It is all talk and no action. Instead of paying them a coaching qualification course, make them visible, provide them with access and exposure and real opportunities to advance in their coaching career and to demonstrate their talent. If a program is created to promote women as coaches, plans are needed to implement those actions . . . there is much talk and no action*" (Gala, basketball coach)

While there are several initiatives promoting women coaches' involvement in sport at national and local level by sport governing bodies such as training opportunities, qualifications, and coach education scholarships, some of the women coaches feel, however, that they fall short in helping them develop and grow professionally.

4.5. Women Coaches' Quality of Life

The last theme that emerged from the data was quality of life, which is a measure of the social sustainability of the coaching community for women coaches, and it indicates the (no) presence and (no) effectiveness of all five principles (equity, diversity, interconnectedness, democracy and governance, and quality of life).

In our study, while many women coaches profess their love for the sport and for coaching, many experience poor and unstable working conditions and precarious salaries. On top of that, some of the coaches shared that their job was very demanding and that being a coach takes up a lot of their time both on and off the pitch. They cite issues such as working long and non-traditional hours, not having free quality time and feeling pressure to perform well. The case of Gala, a basketball assistant coach illustrated this issue:

> "*I am also working fulltime at the school and cannot attend the morning coaching practices. Why? Because the club cannot pay me a salary to live off basketball. They give me some pocket money, but I do not have a contract, the only one who has a contract is the*

> *head coach (male) (. . .) I have five minutes of spare time every day, and I have four days of coaching, travel, if necessary, do scouting, and more . . . it is embarrassing!"* (Gala, basketball coach)

This coach reached breaking point after many years of trying to progress in this environment. On top of the poor working conditions and a lack of spare time, combined with the over-commitment to coaching, lead her to quit her job and relocate to another city in search for a better quality of life:

> *"I am leaving my two jobs because here I am very stressed out. With the new job, they have offered me to live off basketball. It will change my life and I will be calm, doing what I like and with the security that I am in a very good place in terms of working conditions, without expenses and with professional opportunities. This is a gateway to more and more things to come!"* (Gala, basketball coach)

This is echoed by Alba, a football coach, as the challenges and barriers started to outweigh her job satisfaction. The lack of social interactions combined with feeling undervalued within her sporting community lead her no other option but to quit her position in coaching to gain job stability, good working conditions and a supportive environment in education:

> *"From being crazy about football, recording games and analyzing them, to watching practically nothing. I have spent many years, and a lot of money to get far in football, but now I would never go back. I am very comfortable as a Physical Education teacher; I have a very stable job with good working hours and a good salary. I feel very useful and rewarded, and the environment is very supportive. It is a different profession than coaching, and I am very happy. I feel that I can influence my students and I am a role model for them, and that is very important to me"* (Alba, football coach)

For some coaches, having to work late in the evening and on the weekends adds an extra burden to the demands of the job, and most of the coaches who have children indicate that work-life balance is not easy to manage, as Ana, a gymnastics coach indicated that "I would like to have another schedule to dedicate more time to my children" (Ana, gymnastics coach). Nevertheless, most of the women in our study experience job satisfaction deriving from the positive social connections with their peers. Having strong social connections with their colleagues and feeling valued lead to women coaches feeling a sense of belonging to the coaching community, empowerment, and engagement with their job. This was also influenced by opportunities to develop and progress as coaches. The personal and professional circumstances of Montse, a passionate and dedicated assistant basketball coach illustrate this:

> *"I am very lucky to get to do what I love the most, basketball! In an environment where I can grow. An opportunity to teach basketball in the sports science degree came up last year and I was lucky to get it. Imagine, teaching basketball at university, it is super fun, and it is also well paid! (. . .) Next year I am going to be the assistant coach of the women's top division team, and I will also be part of the coaching management structure"* (Montse, basketball coach)

The findings indicate that each women coach's situation and perception of quality of life is influenced by multiple factors, including their intrinsic motivations and aspirations as sport coaches, as well as external factors such as working conditions, culture of sport, opportunities to grow and develop professionally, or social connections within the sport community. On the one hand, all woman coaches who report to be thriving in their sport coaching careers cite having strong and positive social relationships and support from their peers, which in turn helps them having more possibilities to grow and progress professionally. On the other hand, however, it is important to draw attention to those women coaches who face difficulties and complexities in the sports coaching community due to a lack of equity, diversity, governance, and democracy. In addition, the lack of positive social interactions and a sense of belonging to the sport coaching community has a significant impact on their quality of life, and further hinders their experiences as women coaches.

5. Discussion

Using Barron and Gauntlett's model of social sustainability [6], and a gender equity lens, this study analyses on the extent to which the coaching profession is socially sustainable for women in Spain. It provides significant evidence that women coaches face distinct challenges that affect their wellbeing and impacts on their overall quality of life [19–23].

This study highlights prevalent inequalities in the coaching profession in Spain, which complicate the access, retention, and progression of women coaches in their careers. Furthermore, it presents a sports culture steeped in male dominance and sexism in various forms, especially at the elite level and in traditional male-dominated sporting contexts [19,22,23]. While the coaching profession has been described as a challenging job for both men and women [15–17], women in coaching positions face greater challenges for being in the minority of the profession and in a male-dominated coaching culture [19,21–23,43]. The participants feel that traditional gendered roles of women shape the coaching responsibilities and levels they are allocated, for instance being seen as "careers, supportive, sensitive" and therefore limited to coaching children (Mireia, tennis coach). In this study, women coaches report a lack of access to coaching jobs and no possibility to coach men's teams or higher levels, a reality that Hinojosa-Alcalde et al. [31] explained led to narrowing the field of employment.

Relating to the principle of diversity in Barron and Gauntlett's model of social sustainability [6], this study shows how being women and lesbian in this already reportedly hostile environment further complicated their experiences in sport. The openly out lesbian coaches in the study face micro-aggressions, such as remarks and comments, relating to their gender or sexual orientation, which leads them to experience internal conflicts and unable to be themselves in their professional environment. Such findings are in line with previous research [41,42,44], and are what Norman described as experiences everyday gendered homophobia in the sporting context [35]. The study highlights the importance of having same-sex role models that provide and inspire women with insights when pursuing a career in sports [45], and to creating a more diverse environments in sport [36]. Considering the findings relating to equity and diversity, it is impossible for the sports coaching profession in its current form to be considered a socially sustainable profession, according to Barron and Gauntlett's definition of social sustainability [6]. Previous studies have documented the influential structural factors that can impact on women coaches' professional experiences and development, these include fewer opportunities to practice, unequal gender relations, unequal ideas of coaching competency, lower self-confidence due to their marginal status, poorer working conditions, and homophobia [22,24,29,46].

More promisingly, the study reveals that women coaches enjoy varied, positive, and healthy social interactions in their professional environment, which they feel are vital to their personal and professional development, happiness, and wellbeing. Despite the aforementioned structural challenges that women coaches face, such social interactions in the coaching profession are an essential reason why women coaches continue coaching. An organization's culture can either propel women away from its core and diminish their willingness to want to progress, or it can draw women closer to the organization and increase their desire to want to remain and advance [47]. In Allen and Shaw study [29], female coaches reported that opportunities for learning and development and interpersonal relationships with other coaches and leaders in the organization were important factors to them feeling valued and supported in their role. In our study, there is a direct relation between positive social interactions and job satisfaction. The women coaches who experience positive and healthy relationships with their peers were more confident with their abilities as coaches and had a greater sense of belonging to the sport community where they felt they can be themselves. According to Allen and Shaw [32], the acceptance from their colleagues is of great importance, as they affect women coaches' well-being and ability to thrive at work.

Furthermore, the women coaches in our study with a higher presence of women in the sport, or with strong female coaches as role models in her sport community, showed higher levels of job satisfaction and happiness with work, experienced career growth and personal

development. This resonates with previous research that demonstrates that informal networks of female coaches have been shown to help many female coaches persist in their careers [25,32], that positive work relationships are crucial to the retention and progression of women as coaches [23,25], and the creation of female-based networks led by experienced female coaches is crucial for their social and professional wellbeing [24]. On the contrary, one women football head coach coaching in a male-dominated and in a high-performance environment, experienced isolation, and lack of support from her colleagues, that when coupled with often negative feelings towards her organization or poor social relationships within her sports community, lead her feeling isolated and not motivated to remain in the coaching profession. This supports the findings of Knoppers et al., Fasting et al., and Norman [43,48,49], with elite women football coaches often feeling side-lined.

The public discourse driven by sport governing bodies suggests there is support for women coaches, and several initiatives promoting women coaches' involvement and development in sport at national and local level, however the findings suggest that there is a mismatch between the rhetoric and decisions made by sport governing bodies and challenges faced by women coaches as part of their experience in sport. The women coaches perceive such initiatives fall short in addressing gender issues, facilitating access to professional opportunities, or changing power structures in male-dominated spaces. The rhetoric of "equal opportunities" promoted by sporting organizations seems to ignore the construction of white male privilege, hetero-sexism, and sexism [35]. This article posits that gendered discrimination is ingrained in the culture of sport, yet the findings throw up a debate about where the responsibility for education and sensibilization on gender issues lies.

Relating to the last principle in Barron and Gauntlett's model of social sustainability [6], quality of life measures the social sustainability of the coaching community for women coaches, and it indicates the presence and effectiveness of all five principles (equity, diversity, interconnectedness, democracy and governance, and quality of life). Our study suggests that the coaching profession is a far from being socially sustainable for women coaches. Despite their love and passion for coaching, many women coaches are not thriving in their profession due to several structural challenges that prevent them from having a good quality of life, such as poor and unstable working conditions, precarious salaries, high demands, working long and non-traditional hours, not having free quality time and feeling pressure to perform well. Furthermore, some of the coaches who have children indicate difficulty managing work-life balance [31]. Other studies have previously showed that women coaches have pressure of having numerous roles and responsibilities [25], early mornings and long days/weeks [28], and work-life balance [31]. As a result, many coaches feel overwhelmed, overworked and often unpaid which leads them to consider dropping out of coaching in search for an environment in which they feel that their contributions are valued, recognized, and developed [24].

The intention of this study was to analyze the coaching profession for women through a model of social sustainability. While social processes and structures are dynamic, difficult to anticipate and often lead to unanticipated developments [3], future research should be directed at analyzing the multiple social experiences, and implications of what is means to be a women coach within the organizational and cultural structures of coaching. Development of gender specific networking groups and coach education programs may address the issue of the consistent lack of support for female coaches [24]. Creating a vibrant, livable, and sustainable sport community in sport organizations is only possible if all the voices contribute to the debates and decisions on such environment. Thus, it is important to work in the beliefs and relationships in organizations to foster positive change [50,51]. From this standpoint, sport can create new ways of working that are socially sustainable and will lead to a future that enables equity, diversity, interconnectedness, democracy and governance and quality of life. Moreover, academics and practitioners who study and work might experience some of those challenges that have been raised in this study. Lastly, it is important to highlight that our study can contribute to advance literature on social sustainability of other professions and organizations more generally, as the model of social

sustainability provides a holistic framework and lens through which analyze and explore the social sustainability in other fields.

Turning to the implications of this study, the findings highlight that there is a need for researchers and practitioners to develop interventions that focus on the five principles of the social sustainability model such as equity, diversity, interconnectedness, democracy and governance, and quality of life. Thus, it is important to consider social sustainability as a key element. In order to transform coaching communities into a healthier and more livable environments, and for women coaches to work in socially sustainable ways, sport organizations have to implement measures that promotes social sustainability. For instance, organizations can actively help women build relationships within the organizations and the sport system through mentorship and female networks. Future research should work toward a greater scrutiny of organizational cultures and how they may or may not enhance the work experiences of its employees.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to examine, from a gender perspective lens, the social sustainability of the coaching profession for women, a topic that has not yet been widely addressed in the research literature. There are prevalent inequalities in the coaching profession which affect women coaches differently than men. This study brings a new and fresh perspective to the extensive existing literature which has already analyzed and shown the gendered complexities women coaches face in the coaching profession [19,25,31,35,50,52]. In this regard, the present study points out the relevance of the social sustainable aspect within the coaching profession, which to be taken into consideration by academics and practitioners. In addition, our study can contribute to advancing the literature on the social sustainability of professions and organizations more generally.

While coaching is a stressful occupation irrespective of gender [15–17], the women coaches facing additional challenges [19] in our study are not thriving due to several structural challenges that prevent them from having a good quality of life, such as poor and unstable working conditions, precarious salaries, high demands, working long and non-traditional hours, lack of quality time and feeling pressure to perform well, difficulty managing work-life balance [31], and the pressure of having numerous roles and responsibilities [25]. Additionally, there is prevalent homophobia in the coaching profession that is subtle and hard to identify, but that is rooted to the sports culture, and manifests in different ways, which Norman described as everyday gendered homophobia in the sporting context [35].

Despite these wide-ranging challenges, the study highlights that social relations, support networks, and female role models are important for women coaches personal and professional wellbeing. Sport governing bodies have a mandate and responsibility to set an inclusive culture for sport. However, a quick win for clubs and governing bodies to better support women coaches could be to provide space and strengthen mechanisms for these social relationships and network to thrive. The importance of promoting wellbeing, connectedness, a sense of belonging, and fostering good relationships, particularly for those who are underrepresented and excluded, cannot be understated. This study advocates for the importance of listening to voices and experiences, especially those subjected to discrimination, as the departure point to (re) designing and transforming a sports system and making key decisions that benefit and include everyone.

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