

Where are all the female coaches?

Published 19 days ago by [lucy moore](#)

A flash of inspiration at 3:34am on a Tuesday.

Link to the original post on LinkedIn: [HERE](#)

In England, 43% of coaching is conducted by women[i]. Yet, only 38% of these women have a formal qualification[ii] and they are much less likely than men to identify with the title of “coach”. We know that 30% of coaches within talent pathways are female and that only 11% of the coaches at the Rio Olympics were women[iii]. So where are all the female coaches?

This isn't a new problem, and it isn't unique to us. In fact, it is stated objective for the sporting federations of many countries in the world and has been for some time.

I have been privileged in the last few months to be party to many conversations on this topic. And for me, the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to some quite philosophical reflections about the future of sport and physical activity. Many of which hit me when I least expect it!

So I figured, what if I put something out into the wild and see what came back...

This brainwave, I hope, captures some thoughts and demonstrates the interwoven nature of the issue, in anticipation that it might inspire some collective action and new ways of thinking. A call to arms really. A request for more eyes and brains on this conundrum.

Where to begin?

Targeting interventions at the women doesn't really work...

There, I said it.

Investment into programmes of upskilling for cohorts of female coaches is not the solution. Why? Because a lack of female representation is a symptom not the problem. You could make the women the best coaches in the world, and it still wouldn't fix it.

The women are not the problem. We need to stop approaching them as such.

Don't get me wrong, targeting underrepresented groups for positive action and additional opportunities is definitely a really, really, really important piece of the puzzle.

I'll say it again, **REALLY** important. ****Please don't stop doing them!****

Not least they are important as a means of the Establishment overtly reaching out to a broader range of people to let them know that these environments ARE for them, we want to meet them, help them get involved and that fundamentally we care because WE NEED THEM in order to make our offer better.

But it is not the entire puzzle.

Targeted interventions serve as important ways of breaking through the closed doors, and giving people access to environments and opportunities that they wouldn't ordinarily be able to be a part of. They are a

means of succession planning and talent development outside of the established and traditional routes.

“Opportunity begets opportunity”. “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know”.

We have all heard it before, right? Business leaders talk of the Matthew Effect, based on Christian parables, which essentially describes how those who are well recognised, are put in positions to get even more recognition, because they already have the recognition to get there in the first place. “The rich get richer, the poor get poorer”.

This is true in the coaching world also. Particularly where appointments are made either based on solely on CV or personal recommendation.

Yes. That happens.

Logistically, organising practical interviews for coaches is really challenging and particularly in voluntary organisations, we are lucky to have enough people, let alone an oversupply. So people with experience get access to more opportunities to gain more experience. When a paid role comes around, their CV stands out strongest and if there is a practical session, they may well be more confident and comfortable because they have had more practice. Job descriptions may even specify certain experiences or qualifications which inadvertently cut the pool of potential candidates unhelpfully. It is hard to take a punt on unproven potential, especially when your participant’s experiences are on the line. Layer in the preferences, relationships and unconscious biases of those people making the appointments and our challenge starts to look rather muddy.

What about quotas? They work for board diversity, right?

Quotas are really great tools to have. Especially when there are lots of people that could fulfil a role or a function, like the millions (not hyperbole) of people who would be great as a board member. But they need to be deployed with caution. Even without any quota system, female coaches often report feeling as if they are perceived as ‘the diversity hire’ or the ‘token’. They will feel compelled to justify and prove their place. When things don’t go well, their suitability will be questioned, because of who they are not because of what they do. Andy Murray recently wrote an interesting piece in the Guardian^[iv] about how everyone seemed obsessed with his coach’s gender when he didn’t play so well. As if that was somehow relevant.

Quotas also kind of assume that there are lots of people who would want to do the role but can’t get the place because of societal or interpersonal barriers. For me that would be another missed opportunity to tackle the status quo. Fundamentally, if we want a broader range of people coaching, we need to look at how the roles are constructed. If we recognise that a more diverse workforce enhances the experience for everyone (participants and workforce alike), then we need to make efforts to include as many people as possible.

Where are the co-coaching roles? What are the guest coaching opportunities? What do we want this person to do? When do the sessions happen, and do they have to happen then? What are the unintended assumptions getting in our way? For example, in some sports it is customary for the coach to be the person driving a vehicle pulling a trailer, or in others where the coach is also the nominated life saver. These customs which have morphed over decades into requirements immediately discount people who might be amazing at the act of coaching but can’t or don’t want to do those other things. As you can imagine these hidden barriers significantly impact people with disabilities who may have exceptional coaching potential. We are losing out, and by accident. Our bucket is leaking.

Coaches typically are good folks, taking on too much, with good intentions but from a PR perspective the image of the lifer coach isn’t a hugely appealing representation of hobby/profession for lots of people, especially women.

“Hey Lucy, we are looking for a coach to take over from Geoff/Dave/Alan. He is a fantastic coach. He knows so much about our sport. He coaches every evening of the week and all-day Saturdays and now he’s retiring we need someone to take his groups otherwise they can’t run...”

It is commonly accepted that people fear volunteering in case they get overloaded. There exists a culture of almost martyrdom in coaching, and it is scarily common for me to meet coaches who openly talk about issues with personal relationships and poor mental health which they attribute to coaching. What’s more, these people are usually the volunteer coaches for whom it is a vocation, a calling. The people who do it for the love of what they do and have a burning need to help others. I regularly fall into this hole and have in the past felt the consequences of not checking myself. I think it is great progress that more coaches feel comfortable to speak about these issues and it is time to try to tackle them at the root too.

It needs to be acknowledged that our targeted interventions with female coaches over the years have taught us lots. Typically, projects targeting specific demographics of people have had more creative licence to deliver things differently, they are more person centred, more compassionate and often use a broader range of delivery mechanisms.

Through experimenting with targeted interventions, organisations have had to consider how coaches access support, development and learning. To think about what actually helps people to improve and progress in their coaching practice. We have had to consider what that learning looks like and understand our target audiences better.

For example, we have learned that many women prefer women only environments. We know coaches often feel isolated and relish the opportunity to meet and network with other coaches and that female coaches often don’t have the same kind of networks as male coaches. These are things which can be facilitated in person and virtually and really help people to improve.

We know that women still remain responsible for a large amount of domestic work, and also contribute more significantly to the gig economy and part time roles in society. So timing, location and pricing of learning opportunities may disproportionately disadvantage women especially in periods of economic austerity. We also know that many women struggle with confidence and Imposter Syndrome in their coaching and would like support to overcome these feelings.

These issues have been tackled creatively in many of the female coaching programmes and projects very successfully. Positive action has provided interesting, useful and meaningful development experiences for the women involved by creating environments which fit their wants and needs.

But if I’m honest, I feel like all of this is now just good customer service. None of these things are really women’s problems. They are people problems, and I’m sure there are other barriers not mentioned here that I need my awareness raising to. I believe we should be doing these things anyway, having these conversations, not just to increase accessibility for women, but for everyone. There’s still a long, long way to go.

We also have to recognise that a coach’s development is life long, and experiential. Yes, formal qualifications and training do add to your practice as does informal and social learning, but ultimately coaching is a practical, relational pursuit.

You can’t be a better baker just by reading cookery books just like you can’t get better abs by watching Joe Wicks do crunches.

The best way to get better is to get stuck in. Try some stuff. Fail. Reflect. Go again. Ideally with a coach developer or mentor and a network of peers to help you along the way. But that requires opportunity, trust, support and the psychological safety to make mistakes. You need to feel able to be yourself, and not to have to hide parts of who you are, be that faith, sexuality or anything else. That is quite a special

environment. I'm not sure how many coaches (regardless of gender) have that.

That's why we need to change the perception of what good sports coaching is. Of who coaches are, as fallible human beings, essential people, trying their best. We need to raise the profile of a more empathic, supportive, listening style of leadership. A more participant centred, self-aware, experience orientated coaching approach, to engage a wider range of people in sport and physical activity.

We also need to break the myth that these are 'female' qualities and stop using this as a reason for trying to include more women. Having more women in the coaching workforce and changing the perception of good practice in sports coaching are two interrelated but not synonymous problems. Not all women demonstrate a soft, stereotypically feminine style of being. Not all men are bulldozers.

This clumsy but common stereotyping not only feeds heteronormative gender roles (women as nurturing home makers) but also inadvertently plays into the idea that once the job is no longer one of nurturing (i.e. is now a performance role), a different, more 'masculine' skill set is required. It is just not that straightforward.

While we are at it, let's not muddle coaches of women with women who are coaches. Again, these are two issues which are very much related but not the same thing.

We need more people who are able to deliver to women, in different ways, we need people who can connect with their audience and empathise with the experiences of their participants. Sometimes that person is a woman. Sometimes they are not. Reducing people to one of their protected characteristics is unhelpful and misses not only the impact of intersectionality but also a whole heap of other interpersonal factors.

Of course, we need more women in frontline roles supporting women and role modelling for future generations of coaches, but wouldn't it be brilliant if just as many women also worked with people who don't have the same gender identity as them. Somehow it feels less remarkable for a man to be delivering a session to women, whether that be football session or a Zumba class, than the reverse. But why should that be the case?

The challenge is that perceptions of coaches and coaching are societal with a long and prestigious history. Likewise, conceptions of gender are socially constructed and contested. Maintained by media, movies and marketing.

How can we get the press to stop showing football managers kicking water bottles on TV? How do we challenge the *Any Given Sunday* style representation of coaching speeches? How do we mandate to the marketing team in every organisation that a whistle and a clipboard are no longer to be the symbols for coaching, especially when the alternative isn't obvious?

Lucy: "I'm looking for an icon which says supportive yet challenging, togetherness but empowering, subservient leadership, engagement, trustworthiness, expertise; something which encompasses all ages, genders, ethnicities and is inclusive of people with disabilities (but not just visible ones). Oh and also it mustn't be sport specific because coaching is coaching no matter the sportiness of the activity...do you have something like that?"

Sorry marcomms!

What if we flipped the suggestion? What if we started work on changing the perception of coaching, as part of our mission to attract and retain a greater diversity of people as coaches? What if we really showcased HOW elite performance coaching is done well? Because it is happening.

Can we train photographers and commission pictures of coaches, male and female, in the act of really,

really, darn good coaching? Can we capture the magicalness of relationships?

Because that is what it is, magic. Just like the top hats and white rabbit kind, coaching happens in the subtle almost imperceptible moments. How a coach positions themselves. The inflection in their voice. A fist bump here or a nod there. The way they distil all the complexity of their activity into a single practice. The spontaneous yet carefully crafted questions. Remembering a birthday party happened or listening to someone talk about their crummy day at work. The bucketloads of knowledge, experience and skill it takes to adapt the session to help the people in front of them along their way to wherever they want to go.

The kind of people we are looking for are diamonds, and as in a regular treasure hunt it is our job to find them. They won't land at our feet. We know women often don't put themselves forward. So how can we ask them? At scale.

Just as a doctor needs to understand the whole person, we need to discover what the symptom of a dearth of female coaches represents for our sporting ecosystem. Of course, topical solutions will always part of the treatment, but my hope is that they will be delivered tandem with some more oblique but essential interventions and approaches.

This isn't intended to criticise what has gone before, I wouldn't be here now without these foundations. It is just time for a more sophisticated conversation and in truth it is way beyond the binary of male:female coach ratios. There won't be a sliver bullet project, change won't be easy. That's ok. All the little bits of work, the direct interventions, all the innovative ideas, all the genuine meaningful conversations; these are the way we change the zeitgeist. These are the way we change the world.

“Cumulatively small decisions, choices, actions, make a very big difference.” — Jane Goodall (anthropologist)

Does anyone want to help?

Lucy x

[i] UK Coaching (2019) Coaching in the UK, 2019, Coach Survey <https://www.ukcoaching.org/resources/topics/research/coaching-in-the-uk>

[ii] UK Coaching (2017) A Spotlight on Gender <https://www.ukcoaching.org/UKCoaching/media/coaching-images/Entity%20base/Guides/coaching-in-the-uk-coaching-setting.pdf>

[iii] Women at the Olympic Games Statistics <https://www.olympic.org/women-in-sport/background/statistics>

[iv] Why Shouldn't Women Coach Men <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2020/mar/07/why-shouldnt-women-coach-men-tokyo-olympics-are-ideal-driver-for-equality>