

Barriers and Opportunities
for Women in High Performance
Coaching in Ireland:

Voices of Women

High Performance Coaches



November 2023

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Eithne Tiernan, November 2023

Disclaimer

Unless specifically indicated, the author is responsible for all opinions and observations contained in this report, and these should not therefore be taken to represent the official position of the Olympic Federation of Ireland or other official body.

FOREWORD

In recent years, huge strides have been made in the area of gender equality in sport. Gender Balance has been recognised as an important goal for all sporting organisations. Within the Olympic Federation of Ireland, we have 40% minimum representation across our Board, committees and staff. Externally Team Ireland is consistently gender balanced from an athlete composition perspective and plays a vital role in providing much needed visibility for female role models in sport.

We have established a Gender Equality Commission, who last year published their strategy, with very clear goals. These included addressing the area of the low numbers of women in high-performance coaching.

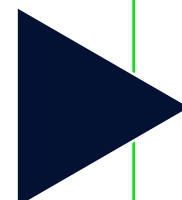
After the Tokyo Olympic Games, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) highlighted that while much work has been done for the Olympic Games to become the largest gender-equal sporting event in the world, a real gender gap still exists in the athletes' entourage, where the number of women holding leadership roles such as that of Chef de Mission, Technical Officials and coaches remains low. Globally only 13% of the coaches in Tokyo were women. This is also reflected within Team Ireland.

Acknowledging that much work is being done in high performance coaching, nationally and globally, the Olympic Federation of Ireland contracted an independent consultant, Eithne Tiernan, to analyse this area, specifically from the viewpoint of some of those coaches and leaders within Irish Olympic sport. This work is set out below. We thank Eithne for her expertise in bringing this research to fruition and hope that the findings will help everyone in the Irish sports system to bring about much needed change in this area over the next two Olympic cycles, from an informed position.

Sarah Keane
OFI President

Lochlann Walsh
Chair, OFI Gender
Equality Commission

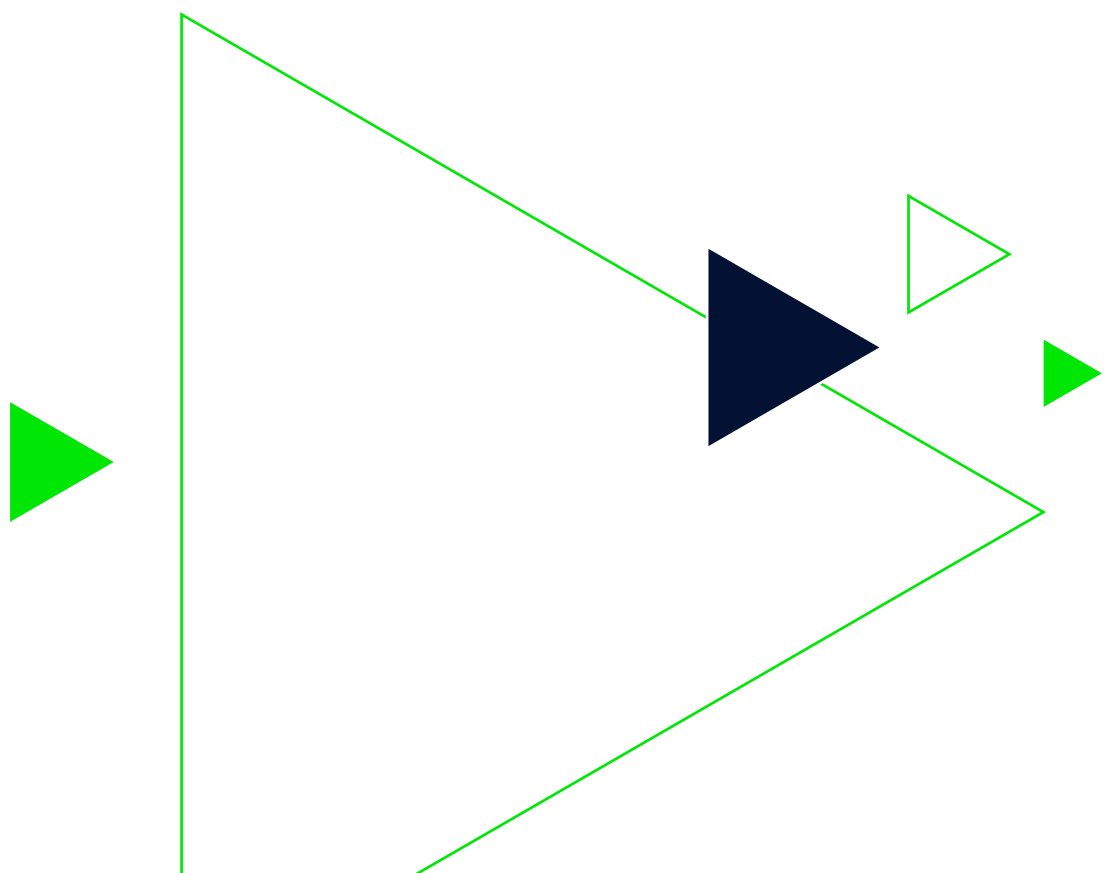
Peter Sherrard
OFI CEO



1. INTRODUCTION

This research was commissioned by the Olympic Federation of Ireland (OFI) Gender Equality Commission as part of their commitment to supporting research to identify barriers and opportunities for women in high performance coaching. The research was conducted by an independent researcher. The research was designed to explore the experiences and insights of women who were working or had worked as high performance (HP) coaches in Ireland and internationally to identify barriers and opportunities for women in HP coaching.

The process included a survey of National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to examine the current context for women in HP coaching in Ireland, a review of relevant national policies and strategies, and a qualitative study of women working in HP coaching, as well as key informants with expertise relevant to the research.. This report presents recommendations and suggests priorities for key areas of policy and strategy based on the findings of the review for consideration by the relevant stakeholders. .



2. POLICY CONTEXT

With recent advances and increases in funding for sport through Government and Sport Ireland, the system has been changed significantly. Much of this is driven by the creation of new strategies for sport. Many of these policies are relatively new and are in early stages of implementation.

National Policy Context

The **National Sports Policy 2018 - 2027** states that ‘Addressing women’s participation at all levels in sport is an important element of this policy.’ ‘Gender’ and ‘Coaching’ are two of the seven Key Action Areas identified in the policy.

COACHING:

‘We need to ensure that Irish sport can involve all those with the initiative, skills and competencies to coach well.’

The policy recognises that there is a need to broaden the base of coaching in Ireland to include more women and states that broadening the base should lead to increased levels of participation. ‘The coaching sector should be inclusive and reflect the population’s diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religious beliefs and economic circumstances.’

The policy commits to support developing a long term strategy for education, learning and development in the sports sector. It also emphasises the importance ‘that sports-related qualifications are included in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and referenced by the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)’ as the workforce expands and mobility within the EU increases.

In relation to high performance coaching, the policy states:

‘In terms of governance, it is recognised that talented leaders within the high performance sector have been lost to other countries and systems, and there is a lack of investment in talent at coaching and performance director level.’

GENDER:

Action 32 of the policy states:

NGBs will be asked to set gender diversity targets and develop equality action plans. Support will be provided for dedicated leadership training programmes for women including governance-related and technical training (coaching, refereeing and team management). Sport Ireland will monitor their progress in delivering on these and report annually. If sufficient progress is not being made, we will engage further with all stakeholders on the matter.

The **Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media Statement of Strategy 2021-2023** contains a goal in relation to the participation of women in sport. One of the six goals of this strategy aims to:

'Promote greater sports participation by all, with particular focus on female participation and diversity, while continuing to invest in new sports facilities, high performance athletes and the hosting of major events.'

The document also includes a high level strategy to increase the role of women in the management and leadership of Irish sport. The goals for this strategy are:

- ▶ All sporting bodies to deliver progress on their gender equality action plans including progress towards the target of at least 40% representation on their Boards
- ▶ Continued progress in closing the gender participation gap and increased women's participation in coaching, officiating and the leadership of sporting organisations

The **Sport Ireland Statement of Strategy 2023-2027** sets out a vision for sport in Ireland that the strategy aims to achieve:

'Once engaged in sport, participants will have every incentive to stay involved whether as players or in one or more of the many highly valued coaching, officiating and voluntary support roles that are available, invested in and appreciated. They will also, where they wish to and have the requisite talent, be afforded the opportunity to progress to high levels of performance.'

The strategy states that equality recognises and removes barriers that are faced by people who are involved in sport or want to be involved in sport. 'It is about changing the culture to one that values diversity and enables the full involvement of disadvantaged groups in every aspect of sport.'

In relation to coaching, the strategy contains a key strategic objective:

- ▶ In partnership with NGBs continue to increase the alignment and accreditation of coaching qualifications in line with the National Framework of Qualifications via roll-out of NGB coaching plans and alignment of coaching pathways from participation to high performance.

The **Sport Ireland Women in Sport Policy** contains specific objectives in relation to coaching:

- ▶ Broaden the coaching base to include more women from grassroots to high performance.
- ▶ Invest in targeted coach education programmes in NGBs
- ▶ Support NGBs to deliver flexible learning to women
- ▶ Invest in education programmes which target young people

The **OFI Gender Equality Commission Strategic Plan 2023-2025** sets out a mission:

‘Improve gender balance in high performance coaching through training, mentorship, pathway identification and education on barriers to entry in collaboration with stakeholder sports.’

Specific action areas are identified in the strategy in relation to HP coaching:

- ▶ Identify and utilise appropriate IOC support / programmes to deliver funding and educational opportunities to support the development of existing female coaches
- ▶ In partnership with the Athletes’ Commission support transition opportunities for female elite athletes to become coaches
- ▶ Create more visibility for elite female coaches and pathways
- ▶ Cooperate with Sports and Sport Ireland to provide opportunities for development of elite female coaches

The **Sport Ireland Coaching Plan 2020-2025** includes a policy goal to ‘lead and develop the sports coaching system’. The actions identified to achieve this goal include:

‘Lead the development and implementation of initiatives to recruit, train and retain more female coaches and coach developers’. Performance indicators:

1. The barriers to and causes for women not becoming coaches have been identified.
2. A range of initiatives to enable and support NGBs and LSPs to recruit, train and retain more female coaches and coach developers has been developed and implemented.
3. All NGBs engaged in the CDPI have in place specific plans to support the recruitment, development and retention of female coaches, including into high performance programmes.

‘Ensure there are appropriate & effective development opportunities and support structures for high performance coaches integrated into the Coach Development Programme for Ireland (CDPI)’. Performance indicators:

1. Working in partnership with key stakeholders, a strategy for the long term development and support of coaches working with high performance teams, players and athletes has been developed, resourced and actioned.
2. Specific programmes/initiatives to increase women coaching in High Performance are implemented.
3. NGBs and coaches are engaging with the high performance coaching development & support programme.

The **Sport Ireland High Performance Strategy 2021 – 2032** identifies the professionalisation of high performance coaching as ‘a major opportunity area which if Ireland gets right will enable us to realise our full potential as a high performance nation’.

The Strategy states that high performance systems rely on ‘quality coaching systems’ and many top nations are well advanced in developing ‘a culture of professional coaching’. However, the strategy states that ‘Ireland is under-resourced in terms of full-time, professional coaches who can train and develop high performance athletes.’ Coaching is one of seven strategic pillars in the strategy. The actions in this pillar are listed below:

WORLD CLASS COACHING & SUPPORT SERVICES

The best people possible supporting our athletes

KEY ACTIONS

1. Sport Ireland, in partnership with the NGBs, will increase the professionalisation of high performance coaching to ensure it becomes a viable career option for talented coaches in our system.
2. Sport Ireland will develop a comprehensive business plan to advance the capacity of high performance coaching across the system. This will include:
 - a. A review of the coaching model required for working with high performance athletes
 - b. Ensuring all our NGBs have appropriate coaching courses for high performance sport
 - c. Providing a professional development programme for coaches working with international athletes at junior and youth levels
 - d. Undertaking a gap analysis in the specialist knowledge required for Paralympic coaching
 - e. Undertaking a salary benchmark for coaches in our high performance system
 - f. Creating a development framework for high performance coaches based on their needs including exposure to international systems, competitive intensity, shared learning across the system and learning from high performance environments outside sport.
3. The Sport Ireland Institute will deliver a world class standard of performance support services to our priority sports and high performance athletes (outside of priority sports) through the following actions:
 - a. The adoption of a centralised model with supporting regional hubs for the provision of performance support services
 - b. Building collaboration across the system – NGBs, Higher Education Institutions, private sector
 - c. Creating best practice knowledge-sharing networks around support service provision.

The **Sport Ireland Athlete Welfare Policy** sets out the standards expected from individuals in the high performance environment in order to protect the health of the HP system. The policy notes that ‘High performance programmes operate in unique environments. These programmes can be challenging and intense for all involved. The pressures associated with a performance programme does not give permission or justify negative behaviour or poor conduct by anyone.’

Coaches are included in the individuals included in this policy. The standards outlined are:

- ▶ All individuals will treat each other fairly, with dignity and respect.
- ▶ NGBs value diversity and differences.
- ▶ NGBs foster a culture that is fair and inclusive, where people feel able to raise complains, and provide feedback, without fear of reprisal.
- ▶ Acts of discrimination on certain grounds are prohibited by law. All individuals are cognisant that the Equal Status Acts provide protection against discrimination on certain grounds
- ▶ All individuals are offered equality of opportunity, and advancement on the basis of ability, qualifications, knowledge and skills.

3. SPORT IRELAND WOMEN IN COACHING RESEARCH & TOOLKIT

3.1 Sport Ireland Women in Coaching Research Findings

In June 2020, Sport Ireland released its first ever Women in Coaching survey. This survey aimed to collect information from active and inactive coaches/instructors in Ireland on their coaching experiences to help inform the development of future plans, programmes and initiatives for female coaches in Ireland. One of the aims of the research was to use the feedback to develop resources for NGBs in the recruitment, retention, development and progression of women in coaching.

The findings from the Sport Ireland research include relevant insights in relation the barriers for women in high performance coaching. Participants were grouped by a self-defined description of their coaching level, including 'elite'. The research found that even though a large number of active coaches had coached at a competitive level, they did not have the ambition to become a HP coach. The reasons for this were 'advancement challenges, job role requirements, self-awareness, courses and personal influences'.

Some of the findings and insights shared in the Sport Ireland Women in Coaching Survey by elite coaches were:

"Unfortunately, our national governing body, it hasn't progressed any further than the level one in coaching. They just haven't completed level two or level three, whatever their presentation problems were or whatever. We cannot advance within the country here to level two or level three within our own sports. Therefore, if you want to gain an experience like that, you have to go out of Ireland and that's what I did as well." Elite Coach 3

"I think for my sport, there is not enough emphasis on the female end of it and then when you do look at the professional female element of it, all of the coaches and managers are male. When you look at the other international teams, they're all men. I suppose that it is hard for my sport, there isn't that many females involved in the coaching element of it and there isn't as much out there for the girls to see as in other sports where obviously, the females are a lot less than the males are. It's about seeing things being publicised for them to actually say, "I could be like them." New Coach 1

"Not having a mentor, and not having the money for courses and lack of direction on how to achieve status of national coach."

'FINANCIAL IMPACT Large investment required to progress, cost of courses and training is prohibitive.'
'One focus group with elite level female coaches described how they can feel isolated in their development and would benefit from a network of similar coaches for support and learning. Female coaches also identified that this coaching network could be based within the coach's own sport, though most recognised the added benefit of utilising those outside of their sport. The focus groups found a commonality in relation to issues faced by female coaches, irrespective of the sport – this may not have been evident prior to this consultation.'

3.2 Sport Ireland Coaching Toolkit

In 2021 The Sport Ireland Coaching Toolkit was published based on the findings of the research. An online interactive version of the toolkit was also developed and is available at [Coaching Toolkit | Sport Ireland](#).

The toolkit is designed to become ‘the constant reference for all organisational planning relating to the coaching workforce (staff or volunteers) in sport’. The four sections of the toolkit are Planning, Recruitment, Retention and Development. Each section presents information on the key points in relation to women coaches and provides suggested action plans to implement. The toolkit links each section to the findings of the earlier research, reflecting the views of the participants in the information provided on each topic.

This resource, designed for Irish sporting organisations, transforms the evidence gathered from women coaches in Ireland into a practical action plan. Although it is not specifically high performance focused, the issue of changing organisational culture extends beyond high performance to the wider context of coaching beginning at grassroots. This toolkit breaks down organisational culture and provides clear direction for bringing about change. The authors note that ‘The toolkit will only be effective if there is full organisational support from the Board to staff and volunteers who are clear on their aims and objectives, and want to provide an environment where female coaches flourish.’

4. SURVEY: WOMEN IN HIGH PERFORMANCE COACHING IN IRELAND

4.1 Methodology

In June 2020, Sport Ireland released its first ever Women in Coaching survey. A survey of National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) was carried out in September 2023 to identify the current context for women in high performance (HP) coaching in Ireland. An invitation to complete the online survey was emailed to the CEOs of the NGBs as identified by the OFI.

The survey was designed to collect the following information:

- ▶ What proportion of the national HP coaches in each sport are women?
- ▶ Do NGBs have a target to increase the number of women in their HP coaching staff?
- ▶ Do NGBs have any strategy to increase the number of women in their HP coaching staff?
- ▶ What are the requirements for high performance coaching roles?

Responses to the survey were received from 31 NGBs. The findings are presented in this report.

4.2 Main Findings

How many HP coaches are women?

High performance coaches are employed by 18 of the 31 NGBs who responded to the survey. It is important to note that high performance coaches in some sports work in a voluntary capacity. Although the survey asked about numbers 'employed', this may have been interpreted to include volunteer coaches in some responses. The second phase of the research explored this important aspect of high performance coaching for women and included volunteer high performance coaches as participants.

Of the 18 NGBs who employ HP coaches, 12 employ female HP coaches. Five NGBs reported that their HP Directors were women.

- Five NGBs have an equal gender balance in their HP coaches.
- Three NGBs reported that between 25% and 33% of the HP coaches they employ are women.
- Two NGBs employ 10% female HP coaches.

In interpreting these findings it should be noted that the percentages of HP coaches are based on small numbers. These figures provide a context and show that while there are women employed as HP coaches currently, only five NGBs have equal numbers of women and men coaches. Six NGBs do not employ any women as HP coaches.

Criteria for high performance coaching roles

The survey asked about the criteria NGBs have for high performance coaching roles. The criteria can be divided into three categories: skills, experience and knowledge, and qualifications. There was a strong emphasis on the need for communication skills. Most NGBs required prior experience working in a high performance environment. The responses are summarised below:

Skills

- ▶ Communication, interpersonal, and motivational skills
- ▶ Willingness to learn and adapt to new challenges and situations, and to seek feedback and improvement opportunities
- ▶ Leadership skills
- ▶ Organisational skills
- ▶ Ability to manage high pressure situations
- ▶ Credibility with athletes
- ▶ Team player
- ▶ High level of technical coaching skills
- ▶ Ability to manage athletes
- ▶ Ability to lead and influence with conviction
- ▶ Decisive with high levels of clear communication

Experience & Knowledge

- ▶ Experience in working with high performance athletes and teams
- ▶ Experience in developing and implementing coaching plans
- ▶ International coaching/playing experience
- ▶ A proven record of producing and developing elite athletes.
- ▶ Strong understanding of planning and periodisation for peak performance at benchmark events. Practical understanding and ability to implement advanced technical and tactical coaching and corrections. Good knowledge of where Sport Science and Medicine can enhance performance
- ▶ Strong knowledge of current training techniques and best practices
- ▶ Appropriate tactical understanding of current trends in the sport

Qualifications

- ▶ Relevant coaching qualification or certification
- ▶ Sport science qualification
- ▶ Level 3 coaching qualification
- ▶ High Performance coaching qualification with evidenced experience of producing final/medal potential athletes
- ▶ Recognised and accredited Coaching qualification

Targets to increase the number of women HP coaches:

Two thirds of NGBs have a target to increase the number of women on their HP coaching staff and half reported that they have a strategy to do so. Of those who do not have any female HP coaches, all but two have either a target or a strategy to increase the number of women on their HP coaching staff.

Some targets set by NGBS are specific numeric targets, while others are broader strategic targets around gender balance. Many targets described by NGBs did not include a timeframe. Targets included the following:

- ▶ A female head coach of all women's teams and regional women's high performance coaches. Numerically aiming at 15 people within 2 years.
- ▶ Piloting a Pathway coaching program which will be targeting four new HP Coaches.

- ▶ Target increase of 20-25%. Currently 4 female coaches working in HPU programme. Will also be applying for funds to appoint a part time female coach for the 2024 Paris Olympic programme. Aim to turn this into a full time role from January 2025.
- ▶ 33% increase in female HP coaches targeted.
- ▶ 10% increase on level 3 coaching course.
- ▶ Aim to ensure equal gender representation across all roles.
- ▶ Goal is to give current coaches in early careers an opportunity to gain experience to allow them to apply for full time roles in the HP unit in the future.

Strategy:

Half of NGBs have a strategy to increase the number of women employed as HP coaches.

The main themes of the strategies are:

- ▶ **Pathway:** The concept of a pathway is central in many of the strategies. Pathways are intended to provide opportunities for female coaches to progress to high performance and to ensure that the route to HP coaching is accessible.
- ▶ **Education:** providing opportunities to gain relevant qualifications and knowledge. Developing coach education courses. Financial support to attend courses and gain qualifications.
- ▶ **Experience:** providing opportunities to learn in a high performance environment. Attending training camps and international events. Mentoring.
- ▶ **Talent identification:** Identifying talented female coaches and giving them targeted supports to become high performance coaches.

5. HIGH PERFORMANCE VOICES: KEY FINDINGS¹

Methodology

One focus group and six key informant interviews were conducted in September and October 2023 to explore the barriers and opportunities for women in high performance coaching in Ireland. The process was designed to facilitate participants to share in an open and confidential discussion. Participants shared experience and insights from a variety of roles and settings.

Participants for the focus group were recruited from women working as high performance (HP) coaches or in performance director roles in Ireland. An invitation to participate and participant information document was emailed directly to the participants. Consent was obtained using a consent form. Key informant interviews were conducted with participants who had valuable insights to share from their experiences working nationally and internationally as HP coaches, performance directors and in leadership roles in women in sport.

The focus group and interviews were conducted online. Recordings were transcribed, coded, and analysed using qualitative analysis software. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach, (Braun & Clarke, 2006)².

Participants described their experiences as HP coaches, performance directors and women in sport roles. It should be noted that some of these experiences pre-date current policy implementation and others relate to experiences from outside Ireland. Some of the participants were in the early stages of their HP coaching careers and others had many years of experience working as HP coaches or in senior HP roles.

They discussed the barriers and enablers for women in HP coaching, and shared their insights on the change that is needed to increase the number of women high performance coaches in Ireland.

5.1 Pathways: The road to high performance

5.1.1 Finding a pathway: from grassroots to fast track

Participants described their individual experiences of becoming high performance coaches. Their pathways were varied and not linear. Almost all were former high performance athletes. They described their transitions from high performance athlete to high performance coaching.

...maybe two years away from high performance and getting really frustrated. What I was doing in life wasn't very high performing and I was kind of missing that bit and an opportunity came up to go into the team manager role.

... when I finished, I knew that I wanted to stay involved in the sport, so I contacted a coach and who I knew was looking for a junior coach to run their junior program within a club structure and started pretty much straight away.

¹ Quotes from participants are in italics. To protect the anonymity of women HP coaches, quotes are not attributed to a numbered participant or identified by the sport they are working in.

² Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

For some, being in the high performance environment as athletes gave them their first opportunity to gain experience as a high performance coach, but for others they had to seek out that opportunity. Opportunities to “fasttrack” to HP coaching through targeted programmes smoothed the transition somewhat. In the absence of a structured programme others returned to grassroots club level and built their career from that point.

I got into coaching because I was asked by some of the club leads...I think my overriding sense of it was I had got so much from the sport and loved it, that I thought wouldn't it be great to give that to someone else and to give those opportunities. And that's probably still the main driver.

Success as a high performing athlete was identified as a helpful factor in finding opportunities and having credibility as a potential HP coach. However, women retiring from successful careers in traditionally male sports described a struggle to be recognized equally to their male counterparts as potential HP coaches.

The journey to HP coaching arose for some participants followed the journey of the athletes they had coached at junior level. As athletes moved to high performance, their chosen coach developed to support them. Some faced the challenge of having to map their own pathway without any structure in place. Education was an additional cost and something that had to be navigated without direction. This lack of pathway meant that the role of mentoring became very significant in driving progress. However, in the absence of a structured system, finding a mentor became the responsibility of the coach. When opportunities were not available in Ireland, some participants made the decision to go to the U.K. to pursue their H.P. coaching ambitions.

I went out and got my own mentor, went to the UK, ... did all the courses... upskilled myself and basically you do it at your own expense.

5.1.2 Choosing HP Coaching: barriers and opportunities

The Career Risk and cost of HP Coaching

Participants emphasized that the decision to become a high performance coach was a decision to accept the risk this presented to financial stability, career and personal life. Many stated that they made that decision at a stage in life when they could take a risk. They described this as a stage when they had no family responsibilities, mortgages or other financial commitments and allowed them to take the risk of becoming a HP coach. However, the implications of the insecurity and demands of HP coaching meant that often the decision to pursue it as a career was short term as participants believed that HP coaching was not sustainable as a career in the longer term.

I applied for the coach, apprentice coach role and got it, but effectively I dropped my permanent pensionable engineering job.

... 11 years, it took to go from the very basic qualification to the highest level [qualification] and it cost me €28,000...it would have cost me less in time and money to qualify as a doctor.

The impossible balance: HP coaching and full-time work

The consequence of working in unpaid or low paid roles in HP coaching meant that for many participants HP coaching was one of two full-time careers. Participants described the stress and frustration of pursuing excellence in their coaching roles, while working in a full-time job or studying full-time at university. Participants coached in the evenings, at weekends and used annual leave in an effort to give the commitment that HP coaching responsibilities required and to pursue their ambition. In sports like athletics, where only voluntary HP coaching roles exist, this remained a barrier regardless of individual success.

taking time off work as well to coach, you know... the barriers to me are huge.

Attendance at camps abroad required taking leave from work for weeks at a time, being absent from family and often doing so in a voluntary capacity. The expectation that coaches should be available for camps and competitions abroad was identified as a significant barrier. Participants believed that coaches who were not regularly available for these camps and events would not progress.

And there are some very good female coaches...they had a lot of athletes coming through, but they have another job, and they are trying to balance this too and they can't commit and we don't have the funding to give them.

5.1.3 Enablers: what helped?

Pathway programmes designed as a direct route to HP coaching gave opportunities to be fully immersed in the high performance setting, working for a significant period of time and gaining enough experience to be well positioned to apply for HP coach role. Structured programmes allowing athletes to be apprenticed to their national HP coaching systems worked when well designed and fully incorporated into the existing high performance coaching team. Examples of this working internationally and nationally were described by participants. Coaches were in the system, working as coaches and provided with a combination of experience and formal education. They were encouraged and coached by the lead coaches. However, it was important that these programmes were part of an integrated strategy to produce HP coaches with a plan to provide employment within that system.

... it was an opportunity that you would not have gotten otherwise...learning...from the senior team, the senior coaches gave us the opportunity to see what we could do.

I think if I'd not started the transition [from athlete to coach] early and really thought about coaching and recognised it was something I really liked, maybe I would have just gone down a different career pathway... it was really a well organised program and then after those two years [in the programme], I actually went into my first professional coaching role.

Direction & Support:

Strong encouragement at club level and in the high performance environment as a retiring athlete helped individuals to identify their own interest in coaching and their potential as a coach. The right support from peers or mentors encouraged women to take opportunities and pursue their career as they faced barriers.

I never really thought about that [applying to a women in sport coaching programme], but then the [HP] coach said I think you'd to be really good at. I think you should apply for it.

I didn't have any strong mentors, but I had a lot of supporters.

There are people hanging on to your legs trying to pull you back down, but the mentors and the people at the level above me gave me a hand to pull me up.

5.2 In the job: The experience of being a High Performance coach

Participants described the barriers faced by women working as high performance coaches in Ireland and abroad. Key challenges were discussed and the impact of these on the sustainability of a career as a HP coach for women.

5.2.1 The System: Environment & Culture

...the environment is so so important ... it's the reason why I stepped out of places and thrived in places... I think I've learned over the years that there is only so much you control yourself and that's why things like culture and environment are so important and proper leadership ...

The most critical factor described as key to the experience of being a female HP coach was the environment and culture. The “system” that produced the environment and culture was described as the leadership from board level to individual club level across sports. The main challenges discussed are outlined below.

Female coaches in a male-dominated environment

Participants emphasized the low numbers of women in HP coaching in Ireland and internationally and the impact of this on the careers of women as HP coaches. Women's experiences were in male-dominated environments and in roles traditionally held by men. The challenges this presented for women included:

- ▶ accessing the same opportunities as men,
- ▶ having a network,
- ▶ having their voices heard in the workplace
- ▶ dealing with bias, particularly as coaches progressed in their careers
- ▶ combining work and family life.

You have to recruit the best people for the job, but with female coaches they have to be in the conversation and my concern has always been that they're too easily dismissed or because they're in such small numbers and maybe they don't get some of those development opportunities.

So, then you're not within the group or the network that already exists in the sport where you have a network of support or somebody who you're learning from or, you know, just somebody who's pulling you up, or somebody who's recommending you.

Progressing in this environment was very challenging and participants argued that this should not be the case. Women described a feeling of being the wrong “fit”, particularly when they were successful in their coaching careers.

*...the higher you go in high performance, the more you are seen as a woman...
I wasn't a threat to anybody [when coaching up to national level] ...I wasn't stepping on anyone's toes, and now I am being boxed as a woman.*

... I think then I was probably at peace with myself that I stepped away from the coaching role because it wasn't that I was a failure I just couldn't get around the culture and I couldn't control that in the role I was in at the time.

Burnout

I think the energy that people give...to their athletes t the best chance like it can be limitless, but it's we don't have infinite energy.

Burnout was frequently part of the experience as a HP coach. Participants discussed why burnout happened and the impact it had on their lives. The voluntary or low paid and insecure nature of HP coaching, meant that participants often worked full-time while coaching. This resulted in high levels of stress and no time off. Even those who were exclusively coaching described a high stress environment where the pressure to produce results in the short term created a culture of working long hours, weekends and very little opportunity to take a holiday. The unsustainable nature of the role meant that some left because of burnout and those who remained described a constant state of stress.

Coaches were often afraid to say no early in their careers when asked to take on responsibility or attend courses. This resulted in a sense of overwhelm and over-committing to a point where it was causing major stress and burnout. Participants also pointed out that the role of HP coach is not always clearly defined. This meant that they had other significant management and administrative responsibilities.

So, we surpassed our targets, but I actually left the role after the Games ...I came home, and I was done... completely burned out.

I think I didn't have a single day off between that time [three months], because we had seven days a week training and I was just wrecked by the end of it

I think I had 19 days off one year and then I realised I'd worked 19 weekends in a row...You just can't work to that level.

Balancing coaching and family life

An ongoing challenge of the environment and culture in HP coaching was combining work and family life. The common experience was that choosing to work in this role meant sacrificing balance with family and leisure time. Participants argued that this uniquely impacted women as the “elephant in the room” was that the coping with the demands of life as a HP coach was often not possible as a mother. This presented unique challenges for coaches who were mothers. Not being available to travel to camps was seen as a disadvantage to progressing as a coach, but travelling to camps was experienced by women as having a negative impact on their family life.

I don't have kids. But if I had kids, I don't know if I could do this job.

I was lucky in that respect that I had that level of family support because not everybody does, some people are further away from their families and it's not so easy. So, I was lucky that I had that level of support because if I didn't, there's no way I could have done it.

5.3 Solutions: Building a better system

And it's just disappointing that, whether it's every decade or every five years we, we have to resurrect the same arguments around validity of females in coaching roles and the whole equity and equality piece.

We just aren't used to seeing high performance female coaches...it's a systems wide approach and it is not one thing that's going to fix any of this.

System change – environment & culture

Participants believed that a fundamental shift in the environment and culture of the high performance system is needed to increase the number of women in high performance coaching in Ireland. They argued that this would require leadership, buy-in and accountability at the highest levels in national governing bodies of sport to ensure equal opportunity for women.

And that is about policy, processes and practice, and it's about building a culture within the sport where you don't differentiate between the qualities of a male coach and the qualities of a female coach.

An inclusive environment in high performance would allow coaches and athletes to benefit.

...a good environment supports men and women coaches, and you have a more sustainable program. A good environment is one where people feel like they can be heard.

How you perform [as an athlete] can directly relate to the environment which is created around that team. So, if there's a positive environment there where people are respected, where you feel you can be open and transparent with the coaches and vice versa...

Participants suggested that the role of HP coach within the HP system could be adapted to allow for more flexibility and better balance with family life. Examples of part-time working, co-coaching, and coaching teams were suggested.

Building the numbers of women in high performance coaching would remove some of the barriers by reducing the impact of being in such a small minority and normalize women in the role.

I think that's probably the natural evolution of the work that's already been done is retention and progression, but also to keep that incentive to keep bringing more females in and create the cycle that way.... also, then you maybe start to diminish the minority feeling and you'll make the environment better naturally by doing that.

Professionalisation of high performance coaching

The voluntary nature of coaching in Ireland and the lack of professionalization of the role meant that it was extremely difficult to establish a sustainable career as a high performance coach. Participants highlighted that a HP coaching career provided no job security, no pension and no flexibility to allow a work-life balance. Coaches risked burnout by combining a paid career with HP coaching and striving to ensure that the performance of athletes would not be negatively affected by this. They emphasized the impact of the lack of professional coaching on high performance success in Irish sport:

I don't think it's viable to the level that professional sport has moved on now, and I think we're kidding ourselves if we think that volunteer coaches have the capacity to do that now without burning out.

There was unanimous agreement that the professionalization of HP coaching would have only positive effects on increasing the number of women coaches in high performance. Participants argued that HP coaching should be a sustainable career path that is paid to reflect the level of expertise and value of the coach. This would remove many of the existing barriers for women and professionalise the environment for the benefit of coaches and athletes. This would also provide an opportunity to retain retiring athletes in the high performance system by providing a sustainable career in professional coaching.

like, it's changing that kind of perception and not just that my parents' generation, but yeah, that it's a career.

.... have an independent professional body for high performance coaches in Ireland... a recognised professional charter.

Participants pointed out that the capacity deficit in full time high performance coaching in Ireland had resulted in many roles being recruited internationally. The impact of this lack of “homegrown” HP coaches was viewed as negative for the long-term development of HP coaching in Ireland. Coaching was viewed as a professional career and “given social esteem and regard” in many other countries, but participants argued that the Irish model of coaching was strongly influenced by the GAA and the culture of volunteer coaching. Participants argued that in order to create a sustainable coaching population in Ireland moving to professionalize the HP coaching role was essential.

I think we have to change the perception, umm, of coaching as a voluntary role. It is to a point. But if you're coaching high performance, it has to be your profession.

As we move into more professionalism, I think you know the opportunity is there where it can become a career for anybody and male or female and that becomes an opportunity for more female coaches.

Redesigning Coach Education

Participants recommended a full “top to toe” rebuilding of a coherent pathway of education to produce candidates for high performance coaching. One of the issues raised was the importance of technical skills at HP level. Current coach education available within many sports was not delivering the level of technical skills required. The criteria of skills and experience required for a high performance coaching role should be established in each sport and a pathway to provide these should be designed. Scholarship and apprentice programmes should be integrated within the existing high performance coaching team and led by a manager responsible for the successful delivery of the programme.

The system of accreditation at the Olympic Games was seen as a significant barrier to retaining coaches and providing them with the experience necessary to progress in HP coaching.

Valuing Women as HP Coaches

There was a strong view that women HP coaches should be valued within HP performance sport equally to their male counterparts. Women spoke of their experiences where they felt they had to prove their skills and expertise throughout their careers in male-dominated sporting environments. In particular, participants emphasised the need for the technical knowledge and skills of female coaches to be highlighted in the same way as male coaches.

...let's just check and challenge how we talk about coaches because I think it's too easy to go back to the generic gender differences...

There was a sense that good coaches were being lost and that addressing the retention of female coaches was essential. Participants suggested that the contribution of women earlier in their coaching careers at club and volunteer level should be valued and supported to ensure that they can progress.

There's a lot of good female coaches in Ireland [at club level], so acknowledge them, acknowledge who they've brought up through the system.

Accountability of NGBs

The accountability of NGBs in relation to their responsibility to increase the number of women in HP coaching was seen as key to shifting the culture and creating real change. Funded programmes should be designed and managed to produce measurable outcomes. Participants argued that engagement and commitment at board level was required. They believed that NGBs would focus on creating an environment to retain female coaches when funding was dependent on measurable outcomes based on how women coaches were progressing.

6. PATHWAY TO PROGRESS: IDENTIFYING NEXT STEPS

Next year history will be made when as the Paris 2024 Olympic Games becomes the first to have full gender equality in terms of athletes. However, at the last Olympic Games held in 2021 only 13% of coaches were women. As highlighted by IOC President Thomas Bach addressing the Gender Equity Seminar in 2022 “No organisation or country can afford to leave the skills of 50 per cent of the population behind” and Ireland is no exception. This report highlights the importance given to achieving gender equality in sport by Government, Sport Ireland and the OFI. The policies and strategies included in section 2 of this report include goals and actions relevant to coaching, high performance and women in sports. The systemic implementation of these existing plans is key to addressing the barriers for women in HP coaching in Ireland and transforming the current environment. The survey of NGBs shows that half have a strategy to increase the number of female HP coaches in their organisation. It shows that the focus of these strategies is to create pathways to high performance coaching for women and retain the women coaches they have. However, the experiences of the participants in this research highlights the need for a whole system approach. From accessing a route to becoming a HP coach, to the sustainability of the career, a wide lens must be used to bring the transformation that is needed to achieve lasting change.

The following observations are based on the findings of this report:

ENVIRONMENT

- ▶ The professionalisation of HP coaching should be recognised as a key measure to change the working environment for women in HP coaching. Policy and strategy to professionalise HP coaching should address the sustainability of HP coaching as a career, including issues such as work-life balance, career development and flexible working.
- ▶ NGBs should use the Sport Ireland Coaching toolkit as it provides a key resource in the planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes to increase the number of women coaches at every level. The toolkit presents an opportunity to drive meaningful and measurable change in the coaching environment for women across sporting organisations. The possibility of requiring NGBs to use the toolkit should be explored by relevant stakeholders.
- ▶ Further research should explore the issue of burnout experienced by female coaches in the HP environment.
- ▶ The Sport Ireland Athlete Welfare Policy is an important step in addressing some of the issues raised by the participants in this research and highlighting the impact of environment on the wellbeing of individuals.

PATHWAYS & EDUCATION

- ▶ The actions of the Sport Ireland High Performance Strategy to achieve ‘World Class Coaching & Support Services’ are supported by the insights provided by the participants of this research. The implementation and funding of these actions has direct relevance to increasing the number of women in HP coaching.
- ▶ There are opportunities to harness existing female talent in the coaching and athlete population and develop sustainable pathways for the future. The development of HP coach education and pathways should include points of entry to the pathway that accelerate the process for retiring HP athletes and coaches identified as having HP potential/experience.

LEADERSHIP

- ▶ The issue of increasing women in high performance coaching requires champions across the key stakeholders leading policy and investment in Irish sport. A coordinated strategic effort is required to build momentum and create buy-in on the opportunity for Ireland to lead on this issue.
- ▶ Increasing the number of women in HP coaching should be central to efforts to address deficit of “homegrown” coaches and lack of capacity in the high performance coaching system in Ireland.
- ▶ The cross-cutting issue of gender in all of the policies and strategies outlined in section 2 should be included in the process of implementation and evaluation.
- ▶ The lessons learned from the success of the efforts by all stakeholders to improve gender balance at board level in NGBs should be explored to identify strategies that could be used to address gender balance in HP coaching.

OFI GENDER COMMISSION STRATEGY

- ▶ The OFI should continue to consult with a process of consultation with Sport Ireland and relevant stakeholders to implement the following action in a collaborative way to achieve common aims: *‘Identify and utilise appropriate IOC support / programmes to deliver funding and educational opportunities to support the development of existing female coaches’.*
- ▶ The OFI should encourage the implementation of the following action and engage relevant stakeholders: *‘In partnership with the Athletes’ Commission support transition opportunities for female elite athletes to become coaches’.*
- ▶ The OFI Gender Commission should examine the recommendations of the European Commission High Level Group on Gender Equality in Sport Towards More Gender Equality in Sport to identify potential opportunities for the Irish HP system.



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