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In the United States, organized competitive sport for girls and women has grown substantially, especially prevalent since the passage of Title IX. Despite tremendous growth in college athletic participation, the percentage of women coaching college athletics has decreased. Prior to Title IX, women coached 90% of women's sport teams. Today this percentage is stagnant at around 40%. Despite 35+ years of research on this issue, the gender gap in sport coaching remains the same. The Ecological-Intersectional Model (EIM) provides a framework to guide research on the experiences of women coaches. The EIM integrates (1) ecological systems theory, (2) intersectionality, and (3) power. Much of the current literature focuses on the barriers women coaches encounter and on singular aspects of the EIM. Scholars argue research needs to shift its focus from barriers to focus on supports. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to examine women sport coaches' experiences of support across the EIM levels using qualitative interview methods from a feminist perspective. Participants included 18 NCAA DIII head women coaches who participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The interview questions centered on the support women coaches have, need, and want across the social-ecological spheres. Once completed, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The guiding analytic approach, reflexive thematic analysis, revealed three levels of patterned meaning: overarching theme, themes, and subthemes. The overarching theme was termed, Paradox of Support. The participants indicated both having support and needing support. All coaches identified at least some support and all coaches identified support they needed and wanted. Numerous ways to better support women in coaching, from their perspectives, were identified. At the individual level, coaches needed support in the form of advocacy, inclusive parental leave

policy, childcare, a flexible workplace, work-life balance strategies, and mental health resources. At the interpersonal level, coaches needed formal and informal networking and mentoring opportunities with coaching colleagues, both within and outside of their athletic department. At the organizational level, coaches needed support from athletic administration in terms of checking-in, a full-time assistant coach, equitable budget, facilities, and salaries, and professional development resources. At the socio-cultural level, coaches wanted support through anti-bias training. Several more supports are discussed in the findings. In sum, the participants offered many ideas for support and by using the EIM as a guiding framework, this study expanded our current understanding of how women coaches currently experience support, how they would like to experience support, and provided guidance to improve their experiences. Findings from this dissertation have the potential to inform future programming, policy, and education to support women sport coaches.

“I DEFINITELY NEED THAT SUPPORT”: EXAMINING SUPPORT FOR WOMEN SPORT  
COACHES

by

Shelby N. Anderson

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Approved by

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## DEDICATION

This one's for me.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, there has been substantial growth in organized competitive sport, from youth sports to professional leagues (Cahn, 2015). This expansion is especially prevalent for girls and women since the passing of Title IX (Cahn, 2015; Staurowsky, 2016). Since Title IX was passed in 1972, girls' participation in high school athletics has increased 990% and women's participation in college athletics has increased 545% (Women's Sport Foundation, 2016). Despite this growth in college athletic participation, the percentage of women coaching college athletics has decreased. Prior to Title IX, women coached 90% of women's sport teams at the collegiate level. Today women coach roughly only 40% of women's sport teams (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Boucher et al., 2021). This decline is disconcerting as many other professions (e.g., law, academia, medicine) have increased the percentage of women in positions of power over time (LaVoi, 2016). It is critical that scholars remedy this because there are many benefits to having women sport coaches. Women sport coaches demonstrate fairness and prioritize collaboration (Kerr & Marshall, 2007), are less likely to sexually abuse athletes (Brackenridge, 2001), and are excellent communicators and more empathetic (Norman, 2013b). Despite 35+ years of research on this issue (Knoppers, 1987), the gender gap in sport coaching remains the same. The Ecological-Intersectional Model (EIM; LaVoi, 2016) provides a framework to guide research on the gender gap and experiences of women coaches.

### **Ecological Intersectional Model**

An ecological systems model was first used to study the experiences of women in sport coaching by LaVoi and Dutove (2012). The authors outlined the interrelationships between a person, their setting, and their developmental trajectory over time (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

Building onto the ecological systems model, LaVoi (2016) adopted the EIM (See Figure 1). The EIM incorporates (1) Ecological Systems Theory, (2) intersectionality, and (3) power.

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) is characterized by four social-ecological spheres (i.e., individual, interpersonal, organizational/structural, and socio-cultural). The individual level (e.g., self-perceptions and personal intersectional identities), interpersonal level (e.g., interpersonal relationships), organizational level (e.g., issues of discrimination, prejudice, organizational practices, and cultures), and socio-cultural level (e.g., stereotyping of leaders and societal influences) all interact and inform one another. The four levels allow researchers to examine the wide range of experiences of women sport coaches from proximal (i.e., the individual) to distal (i.e., sociocultural).

LaVoi (2016) sought a more feminist approach to the model and added two additional components to the original ecological model: intersectionality and power. Intersectionality emphasizes that one's positionalities (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, class, ability, etc.) interact and contribute to systemic social inequality. Black coaches feel like they have to negotiate their identities, feel a lack of support, and face color-blind practices in sport (Borland & Bruening, 2010; Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). Lesbian-identifying coaches have to continually negotiate their sexuality (Griffin, 1992; 1998). Mother-coaches face many additional challenges trying to balance children and coaching (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Women as a group are not monolithic; by including intersectionality the model highlights the complexities and differences that exist within a category like women (LaVoi, 2016).

Finally, power is integrated in the EIM. Power designates the inherent male control of sport. Power is overlaid at every level of the EIM, signifying that power permeates every aspect of social life (McDonald & Birrell, 1999). It is also important to note that by depicting a bi-

directional arrow of power from the individual level to the socio-cultural level, LaVoi (2016) implies that not only should the dominant power structures (i.e., individuals in power, hegemonic ideologies) be changed from the top down, but also individual coaches have agency and power to create change from the bottom up (see the review of literature section for a more detailed description of the EIM). When exploring the decline of women in sport coaching, much of the literature has focused its attention on the barriers that impact women across levels of the EIM (i.e., individual, interpersonal, organizational/structural, and socio-cultural).

### **Barriers**

Numerous scholars have examined the barriers that women sport coaches experience in the sport setting. They face several barriers across all levels of the EIM. At the individual level, all of one's identities affect how they experience the sport setting. Women of color (Abney & Richey, 1991; Borland & Bruening, 2010), lesbians (Griffin, 1992; 1998), and mother-coaches (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007) face far more barriers. Moreover, women's lack of self-belief and motivation can lead to a reluctance to advance their coaching career, ultimately inhibiting their sport coaching opportunities (Norman, 2014). At the interpersonal level, personal lives, relationships, social and family commitments are often sidelined by many women coaches in order to meet the expectations of being a woman and a coach (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2016). This balancing act of career and family at the interpersonal level makes women coaches more likely to experience burnout (Durand-Bush et al., 2012). At the organizational/structural level, women coaches face barriers connected to organizational policies, job opportunities, professional practices, and organizational culture (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kamphoff, 2010; Kubayi et al., 2017). Finally, at the sociocultural level, women coaches face barriers linked to male-dominant traditions, stereotypes about the abilities of women coaches,

negative views of coaching the profession, and gender-typing of tasks (Madsen et al., 2017; Schull, 2016; Theberge, 1990). This literature provides evidence that barriers for women sport coaches occur at all ecological levels.

Intersectionality expands our understanding on the concept of “woman” to include all of ones intersecting identities. The research on women of color (Abney & Richey, 1991; Borland & Bruening, 2010), lesbians (Griffin, 1992; 1998), and mother-coaches (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007) highlights how one’s positionalities play a role in coaches experiences. However, more nuanced approaches to understand how the overlapping nature of how these identities, and others (e.g., age, disability), create barriers for women sport coaches is missing in the literature. Furthermore, power designates the inherent male control of sport. Power signifies associations between leadership, coaching, and men (Mavin, 2009). Women are disadvantaged because to be feminine is to not be a coach (Mavin, 2009). Overall, researchers attribute these barriers that occur across and between socio-ecological levels, intersectionality, and power as reasons for the decline of women sport coaches.

In sum, women coaches face many barriers across all levels of the EIM. While this research is critical to understand and remedy these challenges, the literature has missed a key component – support (LaVoi et al., 2019). For these reasons, scholars call for a shift from a focus on barriers to a focus on supports (LaVoi, 2016; LaVoi et al., 2019).

### **Supports**

In order for research to make this shift to focus on supporting women sport coaches, we much first understand what support is. Social support has been tied to many psychosocial and health outcomes across academic disciplines. However, there is little consensus among scholars on how to conceptualize social support (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984; Veiel & Baumann, 1992).

In seminal research, Shumaker and Brownell (1984) defined social support as “an exchange of resources between two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient” (p. 13). The authors argue it is important to distinguish between its function (i.e., what support is supposed to do for the recipient) and resources (i.e., assistance, guidance, information, services, etc.). Support’s overall function is to enhance the recipient’s well-being, including gratification of affiliative needs, self-identify maintenance and enhancement, and self-esteem enhancement (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). These functions can occur via various resources (i.e., expression of caring, inclusion in group activities, feedback about behaviors, etc.). While research tends to focus on the recipient, the context of social support is also essential to examine. The characteristics of the participants (i.e., personal characteristics, network characteristics) and characteristics of place (i.e., organizational environment, physical environment) also impact social support. Shumaker and Brownell (1984) contend that ecological factors that influence social support must also be considered.

Despite considerable research connecting social support to positive sport outcomes (e.g., performance, well-being) for athletes (e.g., DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Sarison et al., 1990), there is limited literature that has explored social support for sport coaches. In the sport psychology literature, Rees and Hardy (2000) argue that social support comes in the form of emotional support (e.g., feeling cared for by others), esteem support (e.g., bolstering self-confidence or competence), informational support (e.g., advice, education, or guidance), and tangible support (e.g., instrumental assistance or physical resources). The authors found that high performance athletes needed support for sport-specific and non-sport specific functions. Additionally, they found that different types of support were used to achieve the same endpoint; for example, one athlete described that when they are injured they need tangible support in terms of athletic



training treatment, emotional support in terms of sympathy, and esteem support in terms of reassurance (Rees & Hardy, 2000). This formative work on social support in the sport context provides evidence that various forms of support exist, support is needed for sport-specific and non-sport specific functions, and different forms of support can be desired concurrently dependent on the situation (Rees & Hardy, 2000).

To date, limited scholarship has explored social support for sport coaches. Using a social network analysis, Norris et al. (2020) found that male and female coaches found friends, peers, and family to be sources of social support. Coaches in this study most often sought out informational support in the form of advice, while also noting all types of support were sought for various situations. These situations included support for training (i.e., drill ideas), advice about player behaviors, or for organizational issues (i.e., certifications). This study provides indication that coaches are utilizing social support in varying ways. However, the focus was on support at the individual and interpersonal levels. The authors were interested in how coaches experienced support from peers, family, friends. Additionally, the authors did not specifically consider gender or identify support for women sport coaches. The only conclusion they arrived to based on gender was that the majority of coaches who described experiencing emotional support were female, not male (Norris et al., 2020). Research that considers all levels of the EIM and the unique support needs for women sport coaches is necessary.

While the EIM was designed to address barriers and supports for women sport coaches, the literature has predominantly focused on barriers. It seems critical to understand how women sport coaches experience support before programming, policy, and education can be developed and implemented. The central aim of this study was to understand how women sport coaches

experience support. This research explored support across the levels of the EIM and took a feminist approach by putting the experiences of women coaches first.

### **Purpose and Aims**

This project aimed to close the gaps among psychology, sociology, and feminist scholarship. A major critique of psychology is that it often fails to account for the social structures that influence behaviors (Moola et al., 2014), whereas a major critique of sociology is that it often fails to account for individual agency that impacts human behavior (Moola et al., 2014). While feminist studies have made great strides to become more inclusive in its practices, the field tends to focus on power structures without fully considering the organizational, interpersonal, and individual challenges faced by women (Carter, 2019). This study aimed to bridge the gap between these fields of study by exploring the concept of support across ecological levels, intersectional identities, and power structures. Individual agency, social structures, and power are all important aspects of the problem to consider. LaVoi's (2016) EIM was used as a framework to address this gap.

Overall, this investigation aimed to better understand how women sport coaches experience support. Much of the current literature focuses on 1) barriers and 2) singular aspects of the EIM. By using the EIM as a guiding framework, this study expanded our current understanding of how women coaches currently experience support, how they would like to experience support, and provided guidance to improve the experiences of women sport coaches. The purpose of this investigation was to explore how women sport coaches experience support across all levels of the EIM. The guiding research questions for each level were as follows:

1. What support do women coaches currently have?
2. What support do women coaches need?

3. What support would women coaches like to have?

### **Reflexivity Statement**

My interest in this research has been molded by the various experiences I have had from my time as a youth sport participant to today. I played several organized sports throughout my childhood, including softball, soccer, basketball, volleyball, and more. Throughout all of these youth sport experiences, all of my coaches were men. At this young age I never really thought much about it. This might have been because the coaches were usually the dads of my teammates. As I moved into high school, again, all of my coaches were men. Still, I thought nothing of it. As I moved into the recruitment phase of college athletics, I began to recognize that women could be coaches too. I ended up choosing a college where the coaching staff was female. I did not pick the school for this sole reason, rather the school was overall the right fit for me. My experience playing for a female staff was impactful and empowering. I could not have had a better experience as a student-athlete and I attribute a lot of that to my coaches. During this time many of my childhood teammates were having terrible experiences as student-athletes at other colleges and universities. From these experiences I began to realize that coaches have a great impact on sport, and specifically the experiences of athletes. At this point as an undergraduate I was interested in sports as a whole and in helping create a better sport environment. I wanted other student-athletes to have the same experience I had. I wanted student-athletes to be empowered through sport, not discouraged. For these reasons, I went on to pursue a Master's in Sport and Exercise Psychology.

After my undergrad degree I entered a master's program in Sport and Exercise Psychology. I was also a graduate assistant (GA) coach for the softball team, which was a DIII college. This time instead of playing for a female coaching staff, I was now coaching on an all-

female staff. I thoroughly enjoyed my time as a graduate assistant and wanted to learn everything I could about coaching. However, this is also where I first began to notice some of the barriers for women in sport coaching roles. I coached under a woman who had been the head coach for 30 years. Yet, not even this tenure could protect her from the stress and challenges as a woman sport coach. It was also during this time that I was a research assistant for my master's advisor where my role was to do a literature review on the barriers faced by women sport coaches. The more I began to familiarize myself with the literature and experience coaching firsthand as a GA, the more I became interested in supporting women sport coaches.

When I was finishing up my master's degree I was offered two opportunities: 1) pursue a PhD at UNCG or 2) accept the assistant coaching position at my alma mater. This was not an easy decision for me. It was actually a distressing decision for me to make. I wanted to coach, but I thought I could make more of a difference by getting a doctoral degree. Hindsight is 20/20, pursuing a PhD was a better decision for me in the long-run. Yet, I knew I had a desire to help women sport coaches. I know firsthand the impact they have on athletes. This brings me to this investigation.

I initially wanted to provide programming for women sport coaches. I wanted to apply the mental skills training I know to create programming to support them. However, upon further examining the literature and reflecting on my goals, I realized I was jumping ahead. I needed to take a few steps back. How could I create programming when I did not know what support coaches currently have or would even like to have? Before I could develop and implement tailored programming I needed to know the answer to these questions. For these reasons I arrived at the guiding research questions for this study. My hope is that this research will help inform

future policy, programming, and education for women coaches. By interviewing women sport coaches, I hope to give them a voice in what they want and need.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to understand women sport coaches' experiences of support. The study was framed within the EIM (LaVoi, 2016), and informed by recent preliminary work. The EIM investigates the experiences of women across ecological levels, intersectional identities, and power structures (LaVoi, 2016). The guiding research questions for this study across each level were: (1) What support do women coaches currently have? (2) What support do women coaches need? and (3) What support would women coaches like to have? This literature review includes an overview of the existing research on women in sport coaching, examines barriers and supports for women sport coaches, and concludes with information on feminist approaches to research and the Division III (DIII) context.

### **Women in Sport Coaching**

In the United States there has been substantial growth in organized competitive sport across all levels, from youth sports to professional leagues (Cahn, 2015). This expansion is especially prevalent for girls and women since Title IX was passed (Cahn, 2015; Staurowsky, 2016). Since Title IX was passed in 1972, girl's participation in high school athletics has increased 990% and women's participation in college athletics has increased 545% (Women's Sport Foundation, 2016). Not only is participation increasing, fan viewership and corporate sponsorships are also on the rise. For the 2020 season, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) had a large increase in fan viewership, up 68% and 493% respectively (NWSL, 2020; Voepel, 2020). Global interest in women's sports is on the rise (Nielsen, 2020). Corporations have picked up on this global trend; for example, Visa, Coca-Cola, Budweiser, Adidas, and more have committed to sponsor the FIFA Women's World Cup 2023 to decrease the pay gap between the women's teams and men's

teams (FIFA, 2020). Although the data suggests an increase in athletic participation, fan interest, and corporate sponsorships for women athletes, not all positions in sport have seen a rise in status.

Despite an ever-increasing rate of participation, viewership, and sponsorship, women in positions of power within sport are on the decline. More specifically, the percentage of women holding sport coaching positions has decreased since the passage of Title IX (LaVoi, 2016). Prior to Title IX, women held 90% of the coaching positions for women's sports. Today, this percentage is stagnant at around 40% (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Boucher et al., 2021). The decrease of women in these roles has implications for the sport setting. Women coaches are role models for athletes and other women coaches (Allen & Shaw, 2009; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Women coaches are excellent communicators and more empathetic (Norman, 2013b). Women coaches bring a different perspective to situations (LaVoi, 2016). Women coaches are less likely to sexually abuse athletes (Brackenridge, 2001). Women coaches improve the workplace environment (Kanter, 1977a). Overall, the literature suggests there are many upsides to having women sport coaches; yet, women are absent from the majority of sport coaching positions.

Despite women coaches' worth, they are often overlooked in the sport coaching literature. The coaching literature tends to focus on coaching science or coaching education with little emphasis on the unique experiences of women sport coaches (LaVoi, 2016). Therefore, the aim of this section is to provide an overview of the current status of women in coaching, a model for understanding the experiences of women sport coaches, and introduce the existing literature on the barriers faced by women sport coaches.

## **Current Status of Women in Coaching**

The number of women participating in college athletics has drastically increased since the passage of Title IX. Data from the U.S. Department of Education, Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) survey in 2018 shows that 241,735 women participated in college athletics, compared to roughly 30,000 prior to Title IX (EADA, 2020). Despite this increase in college athletic participation, the percentage of women coaching in college athletics has considerably decreased, from 90% prior to 40% currently (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Boucher et al., 2021; EADA, 2020). This decreasing percentage is perplexing as many other professions (e.g., law, academia, medicine) have increased the percentage of women in positions of power over time (LaVoi, 2016). In the 2021 Tucker Center report (data collected between October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020-December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020) on coaches of NCAA DI women's teams, women held 42.7% of head coaching positions of women's sports teams. While there is promise that the percentage is increasing on average +.3% each year over the last nine years, Boucher et al. (2021) make the glaring point that it will take another 22 years to reach 50% and another 143 years to reach pre-Title IX levels.

The Tucker Center report only examined DI coaches of women's sport teams. When including other divisions and teams, the data is even dimmer. When including all colleges and universities across sanctioning bodies (e.g., NCAA DI, DII, DIII; NAIA; NJCAA; NCCAA), sectors (e.g., public/private, 4-year, 2-year) and team coached (e.g., men's teams, women's teams, co-ed teams), only 23.9% of all head coaches are women (EADA, 2020). Less than a quarter of collegiate head coaches are women.

There are other problematic trends for women sport coaches. As the leadership or expectation of the role increases, the percentage of women filling that role decreases. The 2020



Tucker Center report (data collected between October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019-January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020) on coaches of NCAA DI women's teams showed that women held 42.3% of head coaching positions, 46.7% of associate head coach positions, 52.3% of assistant coach positions, and 73.9% of graduate assistant positions (LaVoi et al., 2020). This data illustrates a linear trend, as the leadership of the position increases the percentage of women in the role decreases. Furthermore, over half (55.5%) of women head coaches and over 80% of women assistant coaches are classified as part-time positions, not full-time positions (EADA, 2020). This data suggests that as the leadership, expectation, and time commitment of the position increases there is a decrease in the percentage of women in those roles.

When examining the data from a cross-gender perspective (i.e. women coaching men; men coaching women), it is extremely disproportionate. In 2018, for men's teams across athletic sanctioning bodies and divisions, women held only 0.04% of the available head coaching positions of men's teams (EADA, 2020). Yet, at these same institutions, 58.9% of women's teams were coached by men. At the highest level of college athletics in 2018, NCAA FBS-DI, women held 0.02% of the head coaching positions for men's teams. At this highest level, men coached 54% of women's teams (EADA, 2020). Women are systematically excluded from coaching men's sport teams despite men being afforded ample opportunities to coach women.

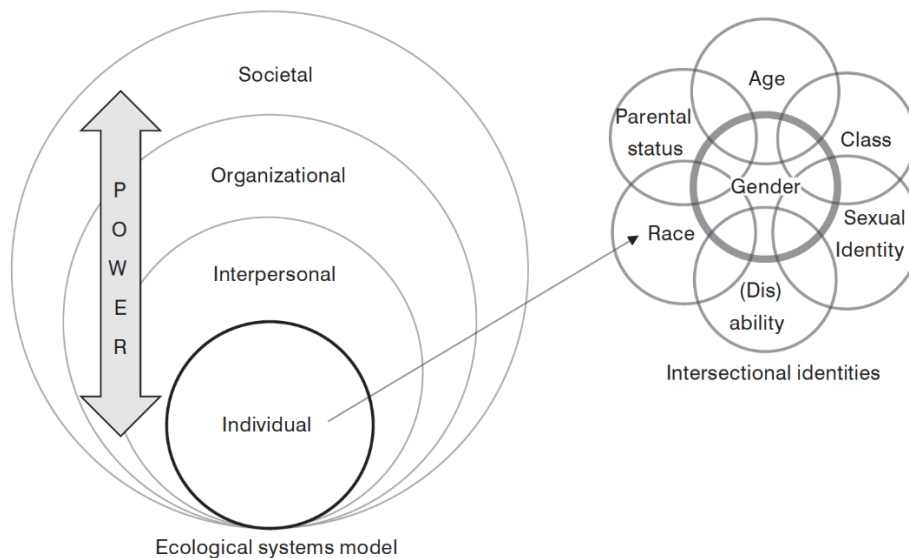
The data is clear that women sport coaches have not been permitted the same opportunities as girl and women athletes have since the passage of Title IX. Many scholars have noted there is much work to be done in realizing the true promise of Title IX for women coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2009; Fisher, 2019). In “*Fitful but undeniable progress’ or just the same old same old?*” Fisher (2019) argues that while great progress has been made for women in sport

coaching, there is still much work to do. The ecological intersectional model (EIM) is a framework to understand the decline of women sport coaches.

### Ecological Intersectional Model

The ecological-intersectional model (EIM) is used to understand and remedy the experiences of women sport coaches (see Figure 1). An ecological systems model was first used to study women in sport coaching by LaVoi and Dutove (2012). The authors chose an ecological systems model because they wanted to outline the interrelationships between a person, their setting, and their developmental trajectory over time (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). A literature search was used to investigate the existing literature on women sport coaches. LaVoi and Dutove (2012) then organized the literature into the ecological model. At the time the authors recognized the model had its limits and urged scholars to critique and extend the model with additional research (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Building onto the ecological systems model, LaVoi (2016) later proposed the EIM. The EIM incorporates (1) Ecological Systems Theory, (2) intersectionality, and (3) power.

**Figure 1. Ecological Intersectional Model**



*Note.* Adapted from *A framework to understand experiences of women coaches around the globe: The Ecological-Intersectional Model*. In N. M. LaVoi (Ed.), *Women in Sport Coaching* (pp. 13-34). Routledge. Copyright 2016 by Routledge.

### ***Ecological Systems Theory***

Ecological Systems Theory was the first component of the EIM. Ecological Systems Theory was initially proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977). Bronfenbrenner was interested in child development and critical of the discipline for only examining the child and their immediate environment. From Bronfenbrenner's viewpoint, the interaction of the larger environment was essential to children's development. For this reason, Bronfenbrenner proposed ecological systems theory. In its earliest form, ecological systems theory included five systems that were interrelated and impacted children's development: microsystem (e.g., school, parents, neighborhood), mesosystem (e.g., interaction between the child's microsystems), exosystem (e.g., government agencies, social services, parent's economic situation), macrosystem (e.g., attitudes and ideologies of the culture), and chronosystem (e.g., changes over the life course). Since its inception the theory has received tremendous scholarly attention across academic disciplines. Bronfenbrenner (1977) now has 12,000+ citations on google scholar.

Since the original theory, scholars have modified ecological systems models to better fit the context in which specific investigations occur. Sallis et al. (2008) revised the ecological systems model for physical activity settings. In this version of an ecological systems model, four levels were described. The four social-ecological spheres are termed individual (e.g., personal, biological, and psychological factors), interpersonal (social-relational influences), organizational/structural (e.g., organizational policies, professional practices), and socio-cultural

(e.g., norms and cultural systems). The four levels allow researchers to examine the wide range of experiences from proximal (i.e., individual) to distal (i.e., sociocultural).

LaVoi and Dutove (2012) utilized the ecological systems model proposed by Sallis et al. (2008) in the physical activity setting to construct an ecological systems model for women sport coaches. LaVoi and Dutove (2012) developed this framework as an organizational tool to understand the experiences of women sport coaches. The individual level (i.e., self-perceptions, experience, personality, stress, burnout, etc.), interpersonal level (e.g., interpersonal relationships, mentoring, colleagues, etc.), organizational level (e.g., issues of discrimination, prejudice, organizational practices, limited mobility, tokenism, etc.), and socio-cultural level (i.e., stereotyping of leaders, homophobia, masculine hegemony, societal influences, etc.) all interact and inform one another. The authors argued this model has limitless potential to (1) help to identify gaps in the literature, (2) help to facilitate partnerships to support women coaches, (3) recognize multiple environments in which coaches operate, (4) help to identify leverage points to support women coaches, and (5) be used as a tool to educate women coaches (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). The ecological systems model allows the blame to be taken from the women coaches and pushes researchers to examine how barriers across levels impact experiences (LaVoi, 2016).

### ***Intersectionality***

The second component integrated into the EIM is intersectionality. Intersectionality is an aspect of critical race theory (CRT; Gillborn, 2015). Before we understand intersectionality, we must first examine critical race theory. CRT is an interdisciplinary approach that places race at the forefront of analysis (Hylton, 2008; 2012). There is no singular definition for critical race theory; however, all definitions include the perspective that race is a social construction and that racial differences are conceived, preserved, and fortified by society (see Crenshaw et al., 1995;

Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Therefore, racism manifests itself differently in various contexts. CRT stresses that racism should be understood within historical, economic, and societal contexts (Gillborn, 2015).

CRT's emphasis on racism shaping society has led scholars to explore how race relations are influenced by other dimensions of ones' identities and social structures. This brings us to intersectionality. Intersectionality was first established by black feminist scholars including Kimberly Crenshaw (1989; 1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) to describe the overlapping forms of oppression faced by women of color. Intersectionality emphasizes that oppressions are not precisely categorized (Bell, 1992). Intersectionality critiques feminist theory for adopting single-axis frameworks that ignore the simultaneous intersections of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality fundamentally challenges discriminatory racialized power, which marginalizes some while advantaging others (Hylton, 2012). More broadly defined, intersectionality emphasizes that one's identities (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, class, ability, etc.) interact and contribute to systemic social inequality. Women as a group are not monolithic.

By including intersectionality the EIM highlights the complexities and differences that exist within a category like women (LaVoi, 2016). Multiple positionalities intersect with gender to influence the experiences of women coaches. The following sections will focus on the three positionalities most explored in the literature: (1) Race and Ethnicity, (2) Sexuality, and (3) Motherhood. While this section only focuses on these three, it is important to point out that all of one's positionalities (e.g., age, class, religion, education, dis(ability), etc.) are likely to influence how women experience the sport setting. Additionally, while breaking apart these axes of oppression that intersect with gender, it is necessary to emphasize that these identities are not isolated. They are interconnected at all times. It is impossible to disconnect these intersectional

identities from one another and from environmental influences. The follow sections explore more in depth the experiences of women coaches with intersectional identities.

**Intersectionality: Race and Ethnicity.** The intersection of gender and race impacts the experiences of women coaches of color. Sport has a longstanding history of excluding racial and ethnic minorities, especially in coaching (Coakley, 2017). Across all NCAA divisions and sports, female racial minorities hold less than 4% of head coaching jobs and 6% of assistant coaching positions (EADA, 2020). Black women hold just 2% of the head coaching positions and just 3% of assistant coaching positions (EADA, 2020). The racial make-up of coaches does not match that of the athletes playing the sport. In NCAA DI women’s basketball, 68% of athletes identify as non-white and 45% of athletes identify as black (NCAA, 2019). However, black women only represent 16% of head coaches of these teams and “other,” or non-white women, only represent another 1% of head coaches of these teams (NCAA, 2019). Furthermore, in the 2019 Racial and Gender Report Card by Lapchick and colleagues, the NCAA earned a B in racial hiring and a C+ in gender hiring. All of this data suggests that the intersection of race and gender impacts the number of women of color in coaching positions.

These low percentages should not be surprising given the experiences of women of color in the sport setting. Black women coaches have highlighted inadequate salaries, lack of support, being a woman, being black, sexism, access discrimination, low expectations, stereotypes, and lack of cultural and social outlets in the community as obstacles during their career development (Abney & Richey, 1991; Borland & Bruening, 2010). At the individual level, women coaches of color feel like they do not meet the expectations of the ‘ideal’ coach/leader and feel vulnerable about their competencies and perceptions (Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). Black women feel as though they have to negotiate and accommodate their identity (Rankin-Wright et al., 2019).

Scholars hypothesize these perceptions are due to the dominant male hegemonic culture in sport (Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). The hegemonic culture of sport can impact how quickly women of color receive head coaching positions. Women, especially women of color, need to put in more years as assistant coaches before receiving their first DI head coaching position compared to men (Larsen & Clayton, 2019). Race and gender both play a role in the pathway for head coaching positions (Larsen & Clayton, 2019).

Scholars have offered several reasons for the continued absence of women of color in coaching. Color-blind practices in sport organizations reinforce inequalities. Rankin-Wright et al. (2016) found that key stakeholders in sport organizations equate diversity as inclusion, fore front meritocracy and individual agency, and frame whiteness, which all serve to normalize and privilege whiteness. Another study interviewed white leadership in sport and found blind spots for race and gender equality in sport coaching in three ways: (1) The marginality of “race” in the equalities agenda (i.e., participants revealed that race and ethnicity concerns were marginal within their organization’s equality agenda), (2) patterns of (in)visibility (i.e., race and gender are addressed as separate stand-alone categories), and (3) whitening equality (i.e., white privilege and hierarchy was not well known by the participants; Rankin-Wright et al., 2020). This research on color-blind attitudes suggests that sport stakeholders privilege whiteness within their organizations (Rankin-Wright et al., 2016; Rankin-Wright et al., 2020). Lapchick and colleagues (2019) argue that the lack of racial minorities as athletic administrators contributes to the lack of racial minorities as coaches. Further, minority athletes cluster to certain sports, which in turn clusters minority coaches to certain sports and limits opportunities for women coaches of color (Abney, 2007). This research suggests that opportunities in the coaching profession are limited for women of color.

Despite racialized and gendered challenges, women of color continue to enter and have success in the coaching profession. Black women coaches emphasize that networking, mentoring, developmental programming, and open dialogue are ways to overcome the racial and gender barriers they face (Borland & Bruening, 2010). Overall, there are few racial minority coaches and of these few, the majority are black. The same can be said for research on women of color. Of the little scholarship on racial minority coaches, it has exclusively focused on black women. More racially diverse coaches are needed and more research on racially diverse coaches will better support all coaches. Scholars call for more extensive research to support organizations, administrators, and coaches together to change policies or practices that inhibit women of color from becoming coaches (Carter-Francique & Olushola, 2016; Kamphoff & Gill, 2012). Overall, the intersection of gender and race impacts how women of color experience the profession.

**Intersectionality: Sexuality.** The intersection of gender and sexuality impacts the experiences of sexual minority women coaches. The marginalization of lesbians in sport has deep historical roots. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “mannish lesbian” was born out of fear that women would reject the traditional gender roles of mothers and wives, thereby usurping men of their athletic, masculine domination (Cahn, 2015; Griffin, 1992). Griffin (1992) argued that the lesbian stereotype and homophobia were used as a political scare tactic for male domination. In influential work, Griffin (1992; 1998) argued that homophobia manifests itself in several ways: (1) women stay in the closet, (2) women deny being a lesbian, (3) women promote femininity and heterosexuality, (4) women explicitly display heterosexual appeal, (5) lesbian women are explicitly prohibited from participating in sport, and (6) there is an increasing preference for male coaches. In the 30+ years since this research, heteronormativity and homophobia are ever-



present in sport today. Calhoun et al. (2011) found that 0.10% of coach biographies made explicit mention to a same-sex partner. In the 2020 Tucker Center report, only 3.40% of DI women coaches of women's teams included a same-sex narrative in their family narrative (LaVoi et al., 2020). This does not indicate the only 3.40% of coaches identify as homosexual, but only 40 coaches out of 1168 coaches felt comfortable enough to include this information in their family narrative. This provides evidence of a heteronormative sport environment.

While there is research on how others (i.e., athletes, parents, administration) perceive lesbian coaches (e.g., Cunningham & Melton, 2012; Thorngren, 1990), very little research pertains to the perspectives or lived experiences of lesbian coaches themselves (Norman, 2016). Krane and Barber (1995) interviewed lesbian coaches and found a continual negotiation between their identities of being a 'coach' and a 'lesbian.' The participants described a culture of homonegativism. The coaches in this study felt they had to continually monitor and manage their sexuality by seeking protection, compartmentalizing their lives, and remaining silent about their sexuality (Krane & Barber, 1995). Women coaches remaining silent about their sexuality is a common finding in the literature (Griffin, 1998; Kamphoff, 2010). Women are leaving coaching because of the pervasive homophobic nature (Kamphoff, 2010). Norman (2012) argues that 'everyday gendered homophobia' culturally and structurally reproduce homophobia in the coaching profession. Problematization, marginalization, and repression of resistance are at the center of lesbian sport coaches' lives (Norman, 2012). Lesbian coaches can be treated as predators, less able leaders, and less knowledgeable compared to men (Norman, 2013a). These destructive experiences provide indication that sport has yet to provide lesbian coaches a space to thrive as themselves.

Some scholars argue that homophobia is the biggest restraint that keeps women from entering the coaching profession (Keats, 2016; Norman, 2016; Thorngren, 1990). Griffin (1992) offers readers several strategies to confront homophobia in women's sports: institutional policy, education, visibility, solidarity, and pressure tactics. Lesbian coaches can disclose their sexuality while simultaneously resisting homophobia through everyday coming out strategies (i.e., visibly phoning partner, pictures of partner in office, inviting partners to social activities; Iannotta & Kane, 2002). Others argue that lesbian coaches should just be themselves (Keats, 2016). Norman (2016) urges scholars to consider how lesbians experience sport at both the individual and the structural levels. Overall, lesbian coaches should be able to decide for themselves how they want to express their sexuality, their sport organization or sport domain as a whole should not decide for them. The intersection of gender and sexuality influences the experiences of sexual minority coaches.

**Intersectionality: Motherhood.** The intersection of gender and motherhood impacts the experiences of mother coaches. Balancing motherhood and careers are a challenge for women across professions (Bruening et al., 2016; Michel et al., 2011). This balancing can be especially hard for mother-coaches because the sport setting is not designed with a family in mind. The long days, late nights, and travel required for practice, games, and recruiting are not structured for families. It is important to understand the experiences of mother-coaches as conflicts between their work and their family can influence their work (i.e., relationships with staff and athletes, team performance), family (i.e., time and relationships with children and partner), and overall life (i.e., exhaustion, balance, perspective; Bruening & Dixon, 2007).

Dixon and Bruening (2005) created a conceptual model to critically analyze experiences of mother-coaches. The model includes analysis across individual, organizational, and socio-

cultural levels. The work hours and travel necessary for the job are main barriers faced by mother-coaches (Dixon & Bruening, 2005). Women coaches place a high value on success in sport and success with family. This high value causes stress and strain (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Stress and strain are exacerbated when coaches have little practical or emotional support from their family, athletic administration, and university as a whole (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Despite coaches describing valuing both coaching and their family, coaches sacrifice their families more than their coaching (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). This may be because mother-coaches feel a pressure to be at the office and have “face-time” or be fired (Dixon & Bruening, 2005). Overall, the strain between coaching and family is a major stressor for mother-coaches.

Mother-coaches need various forms of support. Mother-coaches describe that it is important for their partner to have a flexible job and for athletic directors to be supportive of coaches’ families (Kamphoff et al., 2010). Without the support of athletic administration and the larger university, mother-coaches leave the profession (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Kamphoff et al., 2010). Mother-coaches need more support to thrive in their coaching roles. It is important that these coaches get this support because women coaches benefit in their coaching from their role as mothers and benefit as mothers in their role as coaches (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011; Ryan & Sagas, 2011). Overall, the intersection of gender and motherhood impacts the experiences that mother-coaches face in the sport domain.

The previous sections (intersectionality: race and ethnicity, sexuality, and motherhood) overviewed the existing literature on the intersection of gender and race, sexuality, and motherhood. This research has illuminated the influence sport has on women with intersecting positionalities. However, much more research is needed to enact meaningful change for women

coaches. Research needs to examine how other positionalities (e.g., age, ability) intersect with gender. This research is essential as scholars argue that intersectionality's focus on social justice and anti-racist policies may enable sport stakeholders to enact meaningful change (Rankin-Wright et al., 2020). LaVoi (2016) emphasizes that women coaches have diverse perspectives and experiences that warrant attention by including intersectionality in the EIM.

### *Power*

The final concept included in the EIM is power. By including power, the EIM designates the inherent male control of sport. Power is overlaid at every level of the EIM, signifying that power permeates every aspect of social life (McDonald & Birrell, 1999). Power implies associations between leadership, coaching, and men (Mavin, 2009). Women are disadvantaged because to be feminine is to not be a coach (Mavin, 2009). Some scholars contend power is the reason for the decline of women sport coaches (Knoppers, 1987). Because of the strong connection between power and the decline of women sport coaches, there are several theories that are centered on the concept: hegemonic masculinity, cultural and social capital, role congruity theory, and homologous reproduction. To fully understand the EIM, it is important to explore how power operates in sport. The following sections explore more in depth the theories that utilize power to understand the experiences of women sport coaches.

**Power: Hegemonic Masculinity.** Hegemonic masculinity is used to understand how gender is approached in the sport coaching context. Hegemonic masculinity helps to explain why men hold dominant social roles over women or other perceived feminine gender identifying individuals (Connell, 1987; 2005). This is the idea that a socially constructed dominant form of masculinity exists. In Western society, hegemonic masculinity is reflected through an authoritative, hyper-masculine, and heterosexual image. Hegemonic masculinity is directly

linked to patriarchy. It is important to note the form of masculinity dominant in a given society is always contested (Connell, 1987). Many scholars have used hegemonic masculinity to explain why men maintain dominant roles over women in sport (Alsarve, 2018; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 1992). Connell (2005) argues that the institution of sport serves hegemonic masculinity. The inherent hierarchies, such as competition and the exclusion of women help to define what is masculine (Connell, 2005). Messner (2009) found hegemonic masculinity operating within the youth sport coaching context in what he termed the “sex-category sorting system,” which channels men into coaching roles and women into team parent roles. Furthermore, women who want to move up the ladder in youth sport coaching do so by deploying certain gendered strategies, like aggressive hypercompetitive styles of coaching (Messner, 2009).

Hegemonic masculinity is not only operating at the youth sport level. It has also been used to explain the lack of women coaching men’s college teams (Menaker & Walker, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). The theory has strong support in the literature. Norman (2010) argues that male hegemony is to blame for the inequality women face in sport. As long as society continues to consent to the inferior role of women, women will continue to be excluded from coaching (Norman, 2010). Despite strong support, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is not without critiques (Demetriou, 2001). Stangl (2013) argues that hegemonic masculinity is problematic because it is used as a catch-all framework for analyzing power. Stangl (2013) also argues that it serves to maintain the sex/gender binary, which then maintains the concepts of masculine or feminine. In sum, literature supports the use of hegemonic masculinity to analyze power and gender in the sport coaching context.

**Power: Cultural and Social Capital.** Cultural and social capital are used to understand the lack of women in sport coaching positions. Bourdieu (1986) developed the concept of cultural capital to explain how power in society is transferred and maintained. Cultural capital includes a person's education (i.e., knowledge, skills), which provides an advantage over others (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is the social resources one has, which comes in the form of membership to a group (Bourdieu, 1986). This capital acts like a credential, which gives members of a group access to various opportunities and allows certain people to exert power over others. Overall, the distribution of power in any given setting is closely tied with cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

In coaching, capital may include coaching education or athletic experience. Capital is important for the career pathways of all coaches (Christensen, 2014; Sisjord et al., 2021; Taylor & Garratt, 2010). However, women at all levels of coaching need more capital to break into the profession compared to men (Messner, 2009; Sisjord et al., 2021). In the youth sport coaching context, women need tremendous amounts of capital (e.g., playing professional soccer) to coach (Messner, 2009). At the elite-level, Sisjord et al. (2021) found that more women had competed at an international level and completed formal coach training compared to male coaches. The authors concluded that women coaches, who are not a part of the dominant group in sport, meet more challenges and are likely to experience longer pathways to elite-coaching positions compared to men (Sisjord et al., 2021). Overall, literature supports the use of cultural and social capital to understand power and the underrepresentation of women coaches.

**Power: Role Congruity Theory.** Role congruity theory is used to understand the hiring practices of women sport coaches. Role congruity theory is the perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This incongruity leads to two

forms of prejudice: (1) women are perceived less favorable as candidates for leadership roles, and (2) leadership behaviors are viewed less favorable when women are the ones enacting them (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Role congruity theory postulates that even when men and women perform the exact same behavior, it will be evaluated differently based on gendered stereotypes. Overall, prejudice occurs toward women leaders when the role of a woman is not the same as the role of a leader, while ideas about the role of a man is viewed as similar to that of a leader. For these reasons, men are afforded more agency and are perceived as more qualified for leadership roles compared to women (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Role congruity theory has been used to understand women's experiences with leadership positions in sport (Burton et al., 2011; Whisenant et al., 2015). Madsen et al. (2017) found that athletes rated the head coach as more aligned with masculine traits compared to assistant coaches. Despite positive perceptions about job-fit and abilities, women were less likely to be offered a men's college basketball coaching job compared to men (Walker et al., 2011). Role congruity theory is useful to understand power and the lack of women in sport coaching (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017).

**Power: Homologous Reproduction.** Homologous reproduction is used to understand the hiring practices of coaching positions. Homologous reproduction is a practice where the dominant group systematically reproduces itself through its own image (Kanter, 1977b). Those who do not have the same social or physical characteristics are not likely to be selected for a role or position. The individual in the subordinate or different group must possess extraordinary, or at the very least much better qualifications than their peers who fit the dominant group to be selected (Kanter, 1977b). The institutional and structural power of homologous reproduction is a

theoretical explanation for the decline in women coaches (Knoppers, 1987; Lovett & Lowery, 1994; Stangl & Kane, 1991).

Stangl and Kane (1991) found that significantly more women coaches are hired under women athletic directors compared to women coaches hired under male athletic directors. Female head coaches hire female assistant coaches at higher rates than male head coaches (Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Sagas et al., 2006). Furthermore, Cunningham and Sagas (2005) found homologous reproduction functioning based on the racial makeup of the head coach. Head coaches were more likely to hire assistant coaches who were racially similar to themselves (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005). In a 10-year update to Sagas et al. (2006), Darvin and Sagas (2017) found a positive trend in hiring practices for male head coaches; they are hiring more all-female staffs. This update found an increase in hiring for women assistant coaches, but not an increase in hiring for women head coaches (Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Homologous reproduction has also been used to understand why there are so few women coaching men's teams. Women trying to break into coaching men's sports describe it as an "old boy's network" (Walker & Bopp, 2011). Women coaches feel as though they are not being given an equal opportunity to be hired, despite being qualified and even overly qualified for positions (Walker & Bopp, 2011; Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Overall, there is support for the use of homologous reproduction to understand power and the decline in women sport coaches.

All of these theories postulate that power influences the experiences of women sport coaches in various ways. Hegemonic masculinity, cultural and social capital, role congruity theory, and homologous reproduction all use power to explain the decline of women sport coaches. To fully understand the EIM, it is important to understand how power operates in sport through these theories. Finally, it is also important to note that by depicting a bi-directional



arrow of power from the individual level to the socio-cultural level, LaVoi (2016) implies that not only should the dominant power structures (i.e., individuals in power, hegemonic ideologies) be changed from the top down, but also individual coaches have agency and power to create change from the bottom up.

### ***EIM Conclusions***

In sum, by including intersectional identities and power, paired with Ecological Systems Theory, LaVoi (2016) makes the argument that women coaches have agency and free will to make choices. However, as many sociologists contend (Messner, 2009), individual choice is bound by organizational, institutional, and socio-cultural constraints. In conclusion, LaVoi (2016) argues for the adoption of the EIM within sport research and practice to understand and rectify the experiences of women in sport coaching.

### ***Barriers for Women Sport Coaches***

This section discusses barriers for women sport coaches. Women coaches face numerous barriers across the four social-ecological levels: (1) individual, (2) interpersonal, (3) organizational, and (4) socio-cultural. While these levels are separated into sub-sections here, it is important to note that these levels are interwoven and influence each other bi-directionally (LaVoi, 2016).

**Barriers: Individual Level.** The individual level includes personal, biological, and psychological factors that relate to the person (e.g., beliefs, emotions, personality, expertise, perceptions; LaVoi, 2016). At the heart of the individual level is intersectionality. All of one's intersecting positionalities affect how they experience the sport setting. Women of color face more barriers compared to white women (Abney & Richey, 1991; Borland & Bruening, 2010), lesbians face more barriers compared to heterosexual women (Griffin, 1992; 1998), and mother-

coaches face unique barriers balancing coaching and families (see Intersectionality section above; Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). One's intersectional identities are not the only barrier at this level. Athletes perceive that women coaches are treated differently compared to men. Women athletes were more likely to agree that women coaches were treated differently compared to male coaches (Kamphoff & Gill, 2008). These perceptions partially explain why women do not enter the coaching profession after their athletic career (Kamphoff & Gill, 2008).

Women coaches self-perceptions can also be a barrier to their coaching careers. Many women coaches perceived themselves as “well-accepted” from their athletes, yet many did not feel as accepted in sport environment as a whole (Kentta et al., 2020). This low perception of the sport environment might be a reason women coaches perceive themselves as less confident than male coaches (Cunningham et al., 2003; Cunningham et al., 2007). This lack of confidence may keep them from applying to upper-level positions. Greenhill et al. (2009) found that women would not apply for a higher-level coaching position unless they met all qualifications. These self-perceptions limit women coaches. In an integrative review, Carson et al. (2018) found that the need to prove they are better than other male coaches can greatly impact the stress that women coaches face. Furthermore, coach's self-perceptions can impede their experiences (e.g., lack of assertiveness, inhibition in promotion of accomplishments, and high levels of stress; Kilty, 2003). Women's lack of self-belief and motivation can lead to a reluctance to advance their coaching career (Norman, 2014). However, Norman (2014) argues that this lack of confidence is not their fault. It is due to women's culturally and historically marginal position in sports. All of this literature suggests that individual level barriers (i.e., self-perceptions, self-confidence) may be limiting women coaches' experiences and career opportunities.

**Barriers: Interpersonal Level.** The interpersonal level includes all social relationships (i.e., athletes, colleagues, partner, family, friends; LaVoi, 2016). One aspect of the interpersonal level is relationships with athletic administration. Lack of support from administration is described as a major constraint faced by women coaches (Kubayi et al., 2017). Support from sport administration is often lacking. Interviews were conducted with men in positions of power in sport (i.e., coaches, organizational leaders) to understand how they viewed gender equity. The findings suggest four subject positions: (1) the skeptic (i.e., has doubts about the fairness of gender equity), (2) the cynic (i.e., believes gender equity is unrealistic), (3) the women's rights advocate (i.e., displays a semi-essential support for gender equity), and (4) the constructionist (i.e., see gender as non-essential). Overall, the results indicate that there is not consensus as to what gender equity actually looks like for these male stakeholders (Kempe-Bergman et al., 2020). The authors contend that changes in male stakeholder attitudes and perceptions towards the fundamentals of gender equity is required for future implementation of gender equity practices in sport (Kempe-Bergman et al., 2020).

Included in the interpersonal level is family. Balancing work and family is a challenge for women coaches (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Personal lives, relationships, social and family commitments are sidelined by many women coaches in order to meet the expectations of being a woman and a coach (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2016). This balancing act makes women coaches more likely to experience burnout (Durand-Bush et al., 2012). Overall, interpersonal demands can be barriers for women coaches' opportunities in sport.

**Barriers: Organizational Level.** The organizational/structural level includes all thing related to the sport system (i.e., organizational policies, job opportunities, professional practices, organizational culture; LaVoi, 2016). Knoppers (1987) argues that the male dominated structure

of sport organizations keeps women out of coaching. From women coaches' perspectives, organizational/structural factors are the major constraint they face (Kubayi et al., 2017). Findings from a meta-analysis revealed organizational and occupational constraints limit women coaches' aspirations and intentions to remain in coaching compared to men (Cunningham et al., 2019). Additionally, the meta-analysis revealed women had lower aspirations for advancement and less positive experiences in coaching compared to men (Cunningham et al., 2019). The literature is clear, athletic organizations and departments are major barriers for women sport coaches.

Scholars have termed the challenges that women face when attempting to reach leadership positions as the "leadership labyrinth" (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women are not failing to reach the highest levels of sport. They are becoming head coaches; however, women face many obstacles and challenges along their coaching career path leading many women to leave the profession. Burton and LaVoi (2016) argue that the leadership labyrinth is a good metaphor to understand the barriers faced by women sport coaches at the organization level because it illustrates inherent obstacles, although they are obstacles that can be overcome. One obstacle is the organizational resources women receive. Women coaches do not receive the same resources (i.e., budgets, scholarships, staff) compared to men coaches (Kamphoff, 2010). Furthermore, women coaches leave the profession because of a low salary (Kamphoff, 2010). Another obstacle is the common belief held by male athletic directors that women are not as qualified as men (Hasbrook et al., 1990). The opposite is actually true. Women coaches are more qualified than men when getting the coaching job. Women coaches were more likely to have played in college, to have played at a high level, to have more professional training and experience (e.g., college degree, teaching) and to have been more accomplished as a collegiate player compared to male coaches (Hasbrook et al., 1990; Reade et al., 2009; Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). This

literature suggests the barriers encountered in the “leadership labyrinth” (Eagly & Carli, 2007) lead many women to drop out of coaching.

There are other organizations outside of athletic administration that impact women coaches. Sports media is considered one of these organizations. Although the research is limited, sport media coverage of women coaches typically marginalizes and trivializes women’s accomplishments (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2016). LaVoi (2015) found that head coaches of women’s basketball teams were portrayed differently than men coaches. Headlines for women coaches centered on achievement, deviance, or illness, whereas headlines for men coaches centered only on achievement. In sum, the organizational/structural barriers facing women are numerous and greatly impact the experiences of women coaches.

**Barriers: Socio-Cultural.** The sociocultural level includes societal norms and cultural systems (e.g., male-dominant traditions, stereotypes about the abilities of women coaches, negative views of coaching as a profession in general, gender-typing of tasks; LaVoi, 2016). Sociocultural barriers include sexism, homophobia, and racism, which impact all women coaches. Gender stereotypes about femininity and leadership affect how women coaches are perceived and behave in sport. This includes underlying ideologies that suggest men are more qualified and competent to be sport leaders (Schull, 2016). Schull (2016) examined female athletes’ perceptions of coach leadership and found that athletes’ perceptions and beliefs associated with coach leadership contained gendered meanings. Gendered leadership constructions associated with women coaches included egalitarianism and youth, assistant coach, emotional labor, and “like a friend”; whereas the gendered leadership constructions associated with men coaches included paternalism, authoritarianism, experience as a father, and “father figure.” In another study, NCAA student-athletes were asked what characteristics they would

want in an ideal coach (Madsen et al., 2017). The results indicated that perceptions of characteristics associated with an ideal head coach were rated as more closely aligned with stereotypical masculine traits rather than feminine traits. The authors argue that this can impact women coaches in two ways: (1) when masculine characteristics are more aligned with head coach positions, women are not perceived to have the necessary characteristics of a head coach, and (2) women who internalize feminine gender roles may not pursue a head coaching position because they perceive that role to be inherently masculine (Madsen et al., 2017). These gendered leadership expectations from athletes are problematic for women holding leadership positions if they do not fit this gendered model.

From women coaches' perspectives, they do not hold any power in their coaching and instead describe how the power lies in the sport "structure" (Theberge, 1990). The women coaches in this study believed the only strategy to overcome these socio-cultural barriers was to transcend gender – or to see themselves as coaches, not women coaches. The author argued that the women coaches failed to see how their own understanding of power was only reproducing the dominant ideology of masculinity and male power in sport (Theberge, 1990). Barriers at the socio-cultural levels are happening across levels of sport. Clarkson et al. (2019) interviewed women across developmental levels of English football and found that gender stereotyping at the youth level, marginalization at the talent development level, and tokenism and undercuts of sexism at the elite level negatively impact women's coaching careers. Furthermore, women coaches described that coping with the stereotypical male culture (i.e., lack of role models, macho culture, no equality) is a challenge that impacts sustainability in their career and well-being (Kentta et al., 2020). Overall, the sociocultural barriers women coaches face inhibits their coaching experiences and career.

## **Conclusions**

This section has given an overview of the current status of women in coaching, the EIM (LaVoi, 2016), and barriers faced by women sport coaches. The percentage of women sport coaches has drastically declined since Title IX was passed, despite a great increase in collegiate athletic participation for women. Sport scholars have used the EIM to study this trend. The EIM includes ecological systems theory, intersectionality, and power to analyze the experiences of women sport coaches. Barriers across the four social-ecological levels greatly detract from women coaches' experiences and lead many to leave the profession. The literature is clear, the barriers women coaches face are numerous. Therefore, it is essential that scholars turn towards supporting women sport coaches.

### **Social Support**

Social support has been tied to many psychosocial and health outcomes across academic disciplines. However, there is little consensus among scholars on how to conceptualize social support (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984; Veiel & Baumann, 1992; Williams et al., 2004). Williams et al. (2004) conducted a literature review on the term 'social support' and found a splintered and clouded concept. At the time of this review 30+ definitions for social support existed in the academic literature (Williams et al., 2004). The authors identified numerous categories included in the varying definitions: (1) time (e.g., short vs long-term); (2) timing (e.g., when); (3) relationships and social ties (e.g., structure, strength, type, nature); (4) resources (e.g., material, skill, time, cognition, informational); (5) intentionality or impact (e.g., positive or negative); (6) recognition of support needs; (7) perception of support, (8) actual support, (9) satisfaction with support; (10) characteristics of recipient; and (11) characteristics of provider. Overall, the literature defines and conceptualizes social support in varying ways. For these reasons, Williams

et al. (2004) argues that researchers must define support in a contextually specific way when studying the concept.

### **Theory of Support**

In seminal research, Shumaker and Brownell (1984) defined social support as “an exchange of resources between two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient” (p. 13). The authors argue it is important to distinguish between its function (i.e., what support is supposed to do for the recipient) and resources (i.e., assistance, guidance, information, services, etc.). Support’s overall function is to enhance the recipient’s well-being, including gratification of affiliative needs, self-identity maintenance and enhancement, and self-esteem enhancement (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). These functions can occur via various resources (i.e., expression of caring, inclusion in group activities, feedback about behaviors, etc.). While research tends to focus on the recipient, the context of social support is also essential to examine. The characteristics of the participants (i.e., personal characteristics, network characteristics) and characteristics of place (i.e., organizational environment, physical environment) also impact social support. Shumaker and Brownell (1984) contend that ecological factors that influence social support must also be considered. This definition of social support fits within the context of the EIM because of its focus on not only individual and interpersonal factors, but also organizational and societal aspects of support.

### **Support in Sport**

The concept of social support has been well-studied in the sport psychology literature. Rees and Hardy (2000) assert that social support comes in the form of emotional support (e.g., feeling cared for by others), esteem support (e.g., bolstering self-confidence or competence), informational support (e.g., advice, education, or guidance), and tangible support (e.g.,



instrumental assistance or physical resources). The authors found that high performance athletes needed support for sport-specific and non-sport specific functions. Additionally, they found that different types of support were used to achieve the same endpoint; for example, one athlete described that when they are injured they need tangible support in terms of athletic training treatment, emotional support in terms of sympathy, and esteem support in terms of reassurance (Rees & Hardy, 2000). This formative work on social support in the sport context provides evidence that various forms of support exist, support is need for sport-specific and non-sport specific functions, and the different forms of support can be needed concurrently dependent on the situation (Rees & Hardy, 2000). Despite considerable research connecting social support to positive sport outcomes (e.g., performance, well-being) for athletes (e.g., DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Sarison et al., 1990), there is scant literature that has explored social support for sport coaches.

To date, limited scholarship has focused on social support for sport coaches. Much of the existing literature on social support in coaches explores how social support relates to stress using quantitative methods (see Hudson et al., 2013; Kelly, 1994; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016). In a systematic review, findings revealed coaches used a variety of coping strategies to deal with the stressors of the job (Norris et al., 2017). Findings revealed social support was essential to coaches' well-being and psychological needs satisfaction (Norris et al., 2017). In another study, male Olympic coaches reported that friends outside of their sport were integral to a work-life balance (Olusoga et al., 2010). However, support was not the chief focus of these studies. Only one study to date has focused its attention on social support for sport coaches. Norris et al. (2020) found that friends, peers, and family were sources of support for both male and female coaches. Coaches in this study most often sought out informational support in the form of advice,

while also noting all types of support were sought for various situations. These situations included support for training (i.e., drill ideas), advice about player behaviors, or for organizational issues (i.e., certifications; Norris et al., 2020). This study provides evidence that coaches are utilizing social support in varying ways. However, the focus was on support at the individual and interpersonal levels. The authors were interested in how coaches experienced support from peers, family, friends. The only conclusion they arrived to based on gender was that the majority of coaches who described experiencing emotional support were female, not male (Norris et al., 2020). In sum, the literature examining support for sport coaches is limited.

Overall, this literature suggests that coaches utilize support in various ways to deal with the demands of the job. However, these studies did not specifically consider gender or identify support for women sport coaches. The literature is clear that women sport coaches face unique barriers (LaVoi, 2016). A better understanding of the support they need to overcome these barriers is warranted. Research that considers all levels of the EIM and the unique support needs for women sport coaches is the next step.

### **Support for Women Sport Coaches**

This section discusses support for women sport coaches. While the research is limited, women coaches have support across the four social-ecological levels: (1) individual, (2) interpersonal, (3) organizational, and (4) socio-cultural. While these levels are separated into sub-sections here, it is important to keep in mind that these levels are interwoven and influence each other bi-directionally (LaVoi, 2016).

#### ***Supports: Individual Level***

Most of the support that comes from the individual level comes in the form of programming. Machida and Feltz (2013) proposed a model for women's career advancement in

coaching that puts leader self-efficacy at the center. The authors argue programming should target self-efficacy (Machida & Feltz, 2013). Allen and Reid (2019) put women coaches' needs at the front of their programming. Women coaches were asked what they wanted in their development. The participants described four things: (1) favorable conditions (i.e., supports and barriers), (2) developmental opportunities (i.e., coach education, workshops, etc.), (3) personal support (i.e., practical assistance with coaching activities), and (4) constraints and challenges (life priorities, coaching role expectations, etc.). From these themes, the authors implemented an evidence-based and scaffolding approach to coach development, which allowed the women coaches to learn and be supported in formal, non-formal, informal, and mediated and unmediated ways. Overall, the women coaches in the program described an increase in their confidence and quality of coaching (Allen & Reid, 2019). In addition to programming, individual level strategies can help women coaches prevent stress and burnout. Durand-Bush et al. (2012) found that women coaches' ability to self-regulate behaviors, thoughts, and emotions help to minimize stress and burnout. Overall, there is limited support at the individual level for women sport coaches and of the support that does exist, much of it targets self-efficacy.

### ***Supports: Interpersonal Level***

There is support for women coaches at the interpersonal level. Support from family, partners, athletes, and other coaches have all been found to be beneficial for women sport coaches (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Mentorship for women in coaching is widely supported in the literature. In one study, 96% of female coaches found mentorship helpful for career development and 76% believed that mentorship will help achieve gender equity in sport coaching (Banwell et al., 2019). Women coaches who participated in a mentorship program indicated that the program helped with career support and psychosocial support (Banwell et al., 2019). Mentorship is not the

only interpersonal support. Having a role-model impacts women's decision to enter the coaching profession (Wasend & LaVoi, 2019). The authors provide evidence that same-sex coaching role models for female athletes can influence whether they enter and stay in the coaching profession (Wasend & LaVoi, 2019). In another study, authors suggest that coach education should focus on ensuring that coaches feel like they genuinely belong (Vinson et al., 2016). Overall, mentorship and role-models can be interpersonal supports for women sport coaches.

### ***Supports: Organizational Level***

There is limited support for women at the organizational level. The best way to support women at the organizational level is through policy. Spoor and Hoye (2014) were interested in what organizational factors affected women's likelihood of remaining with their sport organization. The results indicated that top management support for gender equity is a strong predictor of retention of women (Spoor & Hoye, 2014). Women feel isolated when organizations take a "hands off" approach to coaching development (Allen & Shaw, 2013). When organizations foster open communication and development for women coaches, women coaches feel positively about their coach development (Allen & Shaw, 2013). However, policy at the highest levels (i.e., Canadian national/federal sport policies) often fail to mention any mentorship, sponsorship, programming to support more women in high-performance sport coaching positions (Krahn, 2019). Overall, there is inadequate support for women coaches at the organizational level.

### ***Supports: Socio-Cultural Level***

There is very limited support at the socio-cultural level. The only support at this level is a perception that women coaches are better equipped to coach at the youth sport level because they are more nurturing and caring (Messner, 2009). However, this only applies to the youngest levels

of youth sport coaching. If women wish to move up to older age groups, they must display hyper-masculine, overaggressive coaching styles (Messner, 2009). Overall, supports at the socio-cultural level are almost non-existent. This is most likely due to the nature of this level. It is difficult to change pervasive perceptions and stereotypes facing women in society broadly and women in sport more narrowly.

## **Conclusions**

This section has provided an overview of support, the literature that exists on support in sport, and the limited support women coaches have been provided. The term social support has been hard to define and scholars call for researchers to use contextually specific definitions when exploring the topic (Williams et al., 2004). Shumaker and Brownell (1984) provide a definition that includes the ecological spheres, which track well within the context of the EIM. Sport psychology scholars have studied social support in the context of athletes; however, more limited research has explored social support for sport coaches. The research that has explore social support for sport coaches, is limited in its attention to the specific needs of women coaches. While the literature provides evidence that women sport coaches need support, it has failed to get the perspective of women sport coaches themselves across the levels of the EIM. It is important that we provide women coaches the opportunity to describe what support they want and need. This is why a feminist approach to research will be taken.

## **Feminist Approaches to Research**

Feminist research can take on many forms because of the multiple definitions of feminism (Roper & Fisher, 2019). Most feminist research has three components: (1) the objective is not only construction of new knowledge, but also the production of social change, (2) the tenants of feminism are brought through the entire research process, and (3) research is

interdisciplinary in order to understand multiple oppressions (Olivier & Tremblay, 2000).

Overall, feminist research aims to provide results that address inequities and amplifies the voices of marginalized people (Bredemeier, 2001). There are areas of research that are important to feminist scholars. For one, research is not neutral. A researcher's own biases beliefs can influence how they might pose questions, interpret results, and the general process of research (Tibbets, 2019). It is important for feminist researchers to consider the why (i.e., why they ask the question they do), how (i.e., how they ask them), and what (i.e., what they ascribe for the causes of their findings) in their research practices (Tibbets, 2019). Reflexivity is a common suggestion for feminist research. Researchers should consider how their own biases impact how they conduct and interpret research. An important component of feminist research is praxis. Praxis is a process of using information for application (Bredemeier, 2001). Feminist researchers do not simply do research to understand a question, they do it to apply that knowledge for the benefit of others. Specifically, feminist scholars use research to empower groups, create awareness of experiences of marginalized individuals, and amplify the voices of others (Tibbets, 2019). Furthermore, the research process is laden with inherent power structures. Feminist researchers carefully consider how they work with all who are a part of the research process (i.e., participants, students, research assistant, co-investigators). In sum, feminist research provides critical lens to view power relations in sport (Roper & Fisher, 2019).

Scholars have provided several recommendations for feminist research. First, feminist researchers should engage in reflexive practice before and during research. Reflexive practice in research can include journaling, writing a bias statement, dialogue with colleagues, questioning motives for the research, and exploring one's own story (Carter, 2019; Tibbetts, 2019). Second, feminist researchers consider the practical application of the research (Peters & Peterson, 2019;

Tibbets, 2019). How will it benefit your participants or contribute to an understanding of injustices? Third, feminist researchers consider the power structures inherent in the research process. Ask what the participants, research assistants, and all others involved what they hope to get out of the process (Tibbets, 2019). Fourth, feminist researchers move from a narrow focus on elite performance to a broader focus on women and girls across marginalized groups (Gill, 2001; 2019). Fifth, feminist researchers continue to engage with FSP literature and self-education (i.e., reading, attending conferences, podcasts, etc.; Carter, 2019; Tibbets, 2019). Finally, feminist researchers recognize the intersection of oppressions (Carter, 2019; Norwood, 2019; Smith et al., 2019). There are several other recommendations that could be included here. The most important aspect of feminist research is that it addresses inequities and amplifies the voices of marginalized groups.

This research will embrace a feminist approach to support women coaches. Scholarship that is not informed by a feminist approach looks very different to scholarship that is informed by a feminist approach. Scholarship that is not informed by a feminist approach has a discourse of autonomy and choice, which places the blame of the decline in women coaches on women coaches themselves, without considering the organizational, structural, and cultural factors that are at play. LaVoi (2016) deconstructs three damaging narratives about women in coaching: (1) “blame-the-women” narrative (e.g., women don’t apply for open positions; women aren’t as interested in coaching as men), (2) essentialist and gender difference narratives (e.g., soft essentialism), and (3) double-standards narrative (e.g., investigates female coaches differently from male coaches). These narratives are examples of what an approach looks like that is not informed by feminism. These lines of thinking, which focuses in on women’s perceptions only, fail to recognize the power structures and male dominance inherent in the coaching profession.

These structures influence women coaches' perceptions. Overall, scholarship with women coaches should embrace a feminist perspective to amplify their voices and address inequities.

### **NCAA DIII Context**

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) division three (DIII) context is different from other divisions (e.g., DI, DII) and governing bodies (e.g., NAIA). DIII is the largest division in the NCAA. This division includes 440-member institutions and roughly 195,000 student athletes (NCAA, 2021b). Comparatively, DI includes 380-member institutions and roughly 170,000 athletes (NCAA, 2021b). There are 28 sponsored championships at this level. DIII has the potential to provide women coaches ample opportunities in the profession. The main difference between DIII and other divisions is that member schools do not offer athletic scholarships at this level. The emphasis at this level is “a well-rounded collegiate experience that involves a balance of rigorous academics, competitive athletics and the opportunity to pursue a multitude of other co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities” (NCAA, 2021a). Being that the athletic experience is different at the various NCAA levels, the experiences of coaches may also differ. There is no research to my knowledge that focuses on DIII women coaches. Much of the literature that exists on women sport coaches is at the NCAA DI level or elite levels (e.g., professional) in other countries. There is a gap in scholarly understanding of DIII women coaches' experiences.

### **Conclusions**

While girls' and women's participation in athletics since Title IX has considerably increased (Staurowsky, 2016), there is ample evidence of the decline of women sport coaches over time (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Bouchar et al., 2021). It is clear that there are dynamic and complex factors that have and continue to impact women in coaching. The problem is historical,



empirically supported, and continuous (Fisher, 2019; LaVoi, 2016; Stangl, 2013). This literature review has outlined the status of women in coaching, the EIM, barriers, supports, feminist approaches, and the DIII context. The sum of this research suggests that women in sport face far more barriers than supports. These barriers are dependent on one's intersectional positionalities and across all of the social-ecological spheres. For these reasons, this study will provide women a space to describe the support they have, want, and need across the EIM levels. Only from their perspective can we understand support. This understanding is needed to create equitable, practical, and sustainable sport spaces for women sport coaches.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

The purpose of this study was to understand women sport coaches' experiences of support. The study was framed within the EIM (LaVoi, 2016), and informed by recent preliminary work.

### **Preliminary Study**

The purpose of the preliminary study was to examine the barriers and supports for women in coaching and inform this current investigation. DIII head women coaches ( $N = 293$ ) completed an online survey via Qualtrics. The coaches represented 31 different sports, had been in their current position for seven years ( $M = 7.39, SD = 7.75$ ), and had been in coaching for 13 years ( $M = 13.21, SD = 8.77$ ). When asked about the top challenges they face in an open-ended format, coaches identified challenges across the social-ecological levels: individual (e.g., "*Stress and anxiety of trying to win and qualify to Nationals*"), interpersonal (e.g., "*The fear of getting pregnant and what that will mean for how I am able to commit to my team and my family*"), organizational (e.g., "*My AD shows little interest in our program, and puts off any conversations surrounding upgrading our program or creating a full-time coaching position.*"), and socio-cultural (e.g., "*job security, one unhappy player with the expectation of me to be "nurturing" could end my career*"). When asked about support, coaches identified a little informational support ( $M = 1.79, SD = .85$ ) and tangible support ( $M = 1.76, SD = .98$ ) and moderate amounts of emotional support ( $M = 2.65, SD = .93$ ) and esteem support ( $M = 2.32, SD = .83$ ). The participants were then asked what could athletic departments do to better support women in coaching in an open-ended format. The participants described various needs for support including mentorship, professional development, salary equity, equal resources, childcare, flexible work hours, counseling/therapy, and support groups. Lastly, coaches were asked if there

was anything else they would like to add about support for women in coaching in an open-ended format. One coach shared, *“I fear that if administrators do not seriously look to support women coaches in the next 1-5 years there will be few women coaches left coaching women’s sports at the collegiate level.”* Another coach simply said, *“ASK the women in the department what they need for support.”* This led to the purpose of this current investigation. The findings from this preliminary study supported this current investigation in multiple ways. The findings supported utilizing the EIM as a guiding framework and highlighted the need for a more nuanced understanding of support for women in coaching, specifically from their perspective.

### **Current Investigation**

The current investigation expanded on the preliminary study by exploring support within the context of the EIM. The EIM investigates the experiences of women across social-ecological levels, intersectional identities, and power structures (LaVoi, 2016). The guiding research questions for this study across each level were: (1) What support do women coaches currently have? (2) What support do women coaches need? and (3) What support would women coaches like to have? In order to understand experiences of support in the context of the EIM, it is necessary to employ methodologies that assess depth and meaning. For these reasons, a qualitative approach was used for this investigation. Specifically, this study used a feminist approach to inquiry paired with reflexive thematic analysis for methods (Braun et al., 2016; Braun & Clark, 2006) to examine experiences of support.

### **Approach to Inquiry**

A feminist research approach was used throughout the entirety of this study. Feminist research takes on many forms because of the multiple definitions of feminism (Roper & Fisher, 2019). Most feminist research has three components: (1) the objective is not only construction of

new knowledge, but also the production of social change, (2) the tenants of feminism are brought through the entire research process, and (3) research is interdisciplinary in order to understand multiple oppressions (Olivier & Tremblay, 2000). Most importantly, feminist research takes a critical look at power and gendered relationships in sport (Roper & Fisher, 2016).

A feminist approach starts with the researcher. Feminist researchers should engage in reflexive practice before and during research (Roper & Fisher, 2016; Tibbetts, 2019). For this reason, I wrote a reflexivity statement at the onset of the study (see Reflexivity Section in Introduction) and journaled throughout the entire research process. Another important component of feminist research is praxis. Praxis is the process of using information for application (Bredemeier, 2001). Feminist researchers do not simply do research to understand a question, they investigate questions to apply that knowledge for the benefit of others. Specifically, feminist approaches use research to empower groups, create awareness of experiences of marginalized individuals, and amplify the voices of others (Roper & Fisher, 2016; Tibbetts, 2019).

This project engaged in a feminist approach by emphasizing practical application of the research for women sport coaches. The overall goal of feminist research is to amplify the voices of marginalized people (Roper & Fisher, 2016; Bredemeier, 2001). This project aimed to be a collaborative project “with” female coaches rather than “on” female coaches. There is no singular feminist method, epistemology, or methodology (Roper & Fisher, 2016). Fonow and Cook (2005) argue that feminist scholars work across epistemologies and even combine differing perspectives. Overall, this study took a feminist research approach to inquiry.

## Participants

There are no agreed upon guidelines for sample size in qualitative research. While some scholars argue to collect until ‘data saturation’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), recently others have argued against using data saturation to determine sample size (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Instead, the sample size should be dependent on the investigation and how information-rich each data set is (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Patton, 2002). Braun et al. (2016) suggest six participants as a minimum in order to identify themes across data sets. Additionally, Braun and Clark (2021) recommend that projects with larger aims, exploratory approaches, and novice researchers should include larger sample sizes. For these reasons, I set out to recruit 12-15 participants for this study. However, I noted that this number was not fixed and that the number could increase or decrease depending on the depth of each interview (Patton, 2002). Researcher memos helped to determine when data collection could be concluded by reflecting on how information-rich each interview was (Patton, 2002). The final sample consisted of 18 participants.

Participants included 18 DIII head coaches who identified as female. Demographic information (e.g., age, race, sexuality) and coaching experience (e.g., years in coaching, sport coached) were gathered prior to the interviews via Qualtrics. The majority of participants identified as white ( $n = 17, 94.5\%$ ) and one participant identified as Hispanic, Latino or Spanish Origin. Participants identified as heterosexual ( $n = 12, 66.7\%$ ), gay or lesbian ( $n = 5, 27.8\%$ ), and bisexual ( $n = 1, 5.6\%$ ) and as being married or in a long-term partnership ( $n = 12, 66.7\%$ ), single ( $n = 5, 27.8\%$ ), and divorced ( $n = 1, 5.6\%$ ). In addition, the majority of coaches did not have children ( $n = 14, 77.8\%$ ).

Participants represented coaches at various stages of their career: age ( $M = 38.0, SD = 11.28, \text{range } 26\text{-}59$ ), years in their current coaching position ( $M = 6.61, SD = 7.66, \text{range } 1\text{-}29$ ),

and total years in coaching ( $M = 13.39$ ,  $SD = 11.35$ , range 3-37). The participants coached several different NCAA sports: softball ( $n = 5$ , 27.8%), lacrosse ( $n = 3$ , 16.7%), swimming & diving ( $n = 2$ , 11.1%), basketball ( $n = 2$ , 11.1%), cross country/track & field ( $n = 2$ , 11.1%), volleyball ( $n = 2$ , 11.1%), cheer ( $n = 1$ , 5.6%), and beach volleyball ( $n = 1$ , 5.6%). The majority of coaches identified roles at their college or university in addition to their head coach position: athletic administration ( $n = 6$ , 33.4%), faculty/teaching ( $n = 4$ , 22.2%), and other roles ( $n = 8$ , 44.4%).

### Procedures

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval, coaches were recruited via personal networks and from the interest survey in the preliminary study. I corresponded with interested participants via email to schedule individual interviews. Semi-structured interviews are considered a feminist method (Fonow & Cook, 2005). Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information and coaching experience via a Qualtrics survey (see Appendix A for Demographics and Experience Survey). The semi-structured interviews occurred via Zoom. Using a virtual platform allowed me to interview coaches from a variety of geographical regions (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). In order to protect participant identities, the Zoom meetings were password-protected and waiting rooms were enabled so only those expected to be at the meeting could enter the meeting room. The semi-structured interviews lasted around 60 minutes in total. They included questions centered on the support women coaches have (i.e., *What support do you currently have as a coach?*), support women coaches need (i.e., *What support do you need?*), and what support women coaches would like to have (i.e., *What support would you like to have?*). Each question was explored across the social-ecological spheres (see Appendix B for the Interview Guide).

The interview guide was piloted with one coach who was excluded from analysis. Following the pilot interview a few semantic changes were made to the interview guide to enhance clarity and flow. The probing question exploring intersectionality was changed from “*How has your identities influenced the support you currently have?*” to “*What support do you have that might be different from other women coaches? Or what support do other women coaches have that differ from you? For example, coaches with children, coaches who have maybe been in coaching for shorter/longer, coaches from different racial/ethnic groups?*” In addition, the question asking about what support coaches would like to have was changed from “*What support would you like to have?*” to “*In the perfect or ideal world, what support would you like to have?*” These changes enhanced the clarity of the questions asked.

The interview followed a responsive interview format where the interviewer and interviewee acted as conversational partners (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview guide served as a starting point, which allowed me to follow up with questions to clarify participants’ experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Throughout the interviews I asked follow-up questions, probing questions, and offered reflections to check my understanding of participant experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). At the end of each interview I provided a final summary of the main ideas of the conversation. Participants were then allowed to agree, suggest revisions, or add to the final summary. After each interview I wrote a memo reflecting on the conversation (Patton, 2002).

At the conclusion of the interviews, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using Temi transcription services. I then went through each individual transcript to check for accuracy. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts and participants were given ID numbers to protect participant identities. The transcripts were then uploaded to ATLAS.ti

(Version 9, Mac) for data analysis, which is a computer program that helps to manage qualitative data in a systematic way.

## **Data Analysis**

The research questions were centered on how women sport coaches experience support. For this reason, reflexive thematic analysis was the guiding analytic approach used (Braun & Clark, 2020). I engaged in analytic memos throughout data collection, transcription, and analysis to facilitate reflexivity throughout the research process (Braun et al., 2016; Patton, 2002). Utilizing reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2006; 2012; 2013; 2019; 2021) allowed me to develop an overarching theme, themes, and subthemes. The six phases of reflexive thematic analysis include familiarization, coding, theme development, theme refinement, theme naming, and writing up. Before describing the phases in more detail, it is important to note that the progression from each phase to the next was not linear, rather the process was recursive. I moved forwards and backwards in the analytic process as the analysis necessitated (Braun et al., 2016). Additionally, the process of analysis was continuously ongoing throughout data collection, analysis, and synthesis (Braun et al., 2016).

### **Phase 1: Data Familiarization**

The first phase of reflexive thematic analysis is data familiarization (Braun & Clark, 2006). Familiarization is the process of immersing oneself in the data. This can occur through several processes. I started by reading through all of the transcripts analytically. Familiarization is about fully engaging with the data. Questions that I considered during the analytic engagement were, “Why might they be making sense of things in *this* way (and not *that* way)?; What *assumptions* underpin the data?; What *implications* might this account have?” (p. 196; Braun et al., 2016). While reading the transcripts and considering these questions I took informal notes,



being careful not to restrict the scope of coding (Braun et al., 2016). The formal analysis began in the next stage – coding.

## **Phase 2: Coding**

The second phase of reflexive thematic analysis is coding (Braun & Clark, 2006). I coded using Atlas.ti (Version 9, Mac) to help with data management. Coding is a systematic and formal process that moves beyond obvious meanings (Braun & Clark, 2006). A code identifies a piece of information in the data that is of interest. The coding process was flexible in that codes were created, deleted, tweaked, collapsed, or expanded throughout the analysis. While there is no definitive ‘stop’ point for coding, Braun et al. (2016) recommends each transcript be reviewed twice during this stage to ensure a robust set of codes. Reviewing each transcript twice during this phase enabled me to develop more latent codes.

Typically, qualitative researchers take either/or approaches to coding: deductive (theory-driven) or inductive (data-driven); latent (underlying, implicit) or semantic (overt, explicit). Braun and Clark (2019; 2021) argue that reflexive thematic analysis coding should fit the investigation. This allows researchers to move between approaches throughout the analytic process. This study was framed in the context of the EIM, thus, codes were identified on a deductive and latent level. However, due to the novel nature of the research questions, codes were also identified on inductive and semantic levels. Overall, codes were determined on a context or theory driven level (deductive) and a data driven level (inductive). The aim of coding was to be inclusive for the next phase – theme development.

## **Phase 3: Theme Development**

The third phase of reflexive thematic analysis is theme development (Braun & Clark, 2006). In this phase the codes are clustered together and a coherent theme is created. I developed

themes by clustering codes into ‘higher level’ patterns. I started with all of the codes and began clustering them by meanings or concepts they shared (Braun & Clark, 2013). These themes were broader than the codes and captured more than one idea. This process moved beyond simple summarizing and describing to commentary on the implications and importance of the data (Braun et al., 2016). Once I had initial themes I moved into the next phase – theme refinement.

#### **Phase 4: Theme Refinement**

The fourth phase of reflexive thematic analysis is theme refinement (Braun & Clark, 2006). Theme refinement involves revisiting the codes and whole data set. During this phase I checked two things: (1) whether the data analysis ‘fit’ with the data itself and (2) whether the story that had come out of the analysis addressed the research questions (Braun et al., 2016). I considered a few factors suggested by Braun et al. (2016): Does each theme have a central organizing concept?; Is the central organizing concept of each theme distinct?; What are the relationship between themes?; Do the themes tell a coherent story that address the research question? Once I had confidence that the analysis captured the data and addressed the research questions I moved onto the next phase – theme naming.

#### **Phase 5: Theme Naming**

The fifth phase of reflexive thematic analysis is theme naming (Braun & Clark, 2006). During this phase I built the analytic narrative or the interpretive commentary for the themes. Here I provided evidence for the quoted data, why it was analytically important, and how it addressed the research questions (Braun & Clark, 2013). This phase allowed for depth and detail to the analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013). I wrote theme definitions to capture the essence, scope, and boundary of each theme (Braun et al., 2016). Lastly, the name of each theme was finalized

during this stage. Once the theme names were finalized, I moved into the final phase – writing it up.

### **Phase 6: Writing it up**

The sixth phase of reflexive thematic analysis is writing up (Braun & Clark, 2006). Although writing is placed at the end of the process, writing occurred throughout the analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013). The purpose of this final phase was to compile, develop, and edit the existing writing into a coherent report (Braun et al., 2016). Two important elements at this stage were data extracts and analytic commentary. I aimed for a 50:50 ration between data extracts and analytic commentary, as suggested by Braun et al. (2016).

### **Qualitative Quality**

There are several noteworthy papers that reflect various ways of thinking on qualitative quality. In influential work, Lincoln and Guba (1985) focused on the ‘trustworthiness’ of data by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Other scholars have since created qualitative quality checklists. For example, Elliot et al. (1999) recommended guidelines for publishing qualitative research including owing one’s perspective, situating the sample, grounding in examples, providing credibility check, coherence, accomplish general vs specific tasks, and resonating with readers. More recently, the American Psychological Association (APA) released updated reporting standards (Levitt et al., 2018). This report provides a comprehensive overview for all steps of the qualitative research process (Levitt et al., 2018). Moreover, Braun and Clark (2006) provided a 15-point checklist for thematic analysis. The points encompass the stages of the research process including transcription, coding, analysis, overall, and the written report. Of importance, the checklist promotes the active role of the researcher (Braun & Clark, 2006). Finally, Tracy (2010) recommends eight criteria for excellent

qualitative inquiry: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence. The author argues this criteria-based list provides researchers methodological and practical flexibility in how each is carried out (Tracy 2010). There are many other criteria or checklists that exist (e.g., Yardley, 2008); however, it is also important to note that not all scholars agree that qualitative quality should emphasize pre-conceived criteriology. Sparkes and Smith (2009) argue that the quality of qualitative inquiry should not be established on criterion-based metrics. Rather, scholars should view criteria as traits of qualitative research that should be open to reinterpretation as the research process is ever evolving (Sparks & Smith, 2009).

Upon reflecting on the various and sometimes contrasting ways to ‘measure’ qualitative quality, I utilized the 15-point ‘checklist’ for good reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) and the eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research (Tracy, 2010) for this investigation. These two were chosen because of the flexibility they offer and they both fit within a reflexive thematic analysis inquiry.

### **Worthy Topic**

The criteria, worthy topic, refers to the relevance, timeliness, significance, and interest of the topic (Tracy, 2010). I believe this investigation was deemed a worthy topic. The focus on barriers for women sport coaches in the literature, rather than support, made this investigation relevant and of interest. Furthermore, the decline in women sport coaches since Title IX and the research that has occurred over the past 35+ years on this topic made it timeless. The point of this study was not to confirm already existing knowledge, but rather explore a new concept as it relates to women sport coaches. Overall, this study was deemed a worthy topic.

## **Rich Rigor**

The criteria, rich rigor, refers to appropriate and complex theoretical constructs, data, samples, context, collection, and analysis processes (Tracy, 2010). This investigation should be considered rigorous on many fronts. This project was framed by the EIM, which has been utilized in much of the research that has been done studying the experiences of women sport coaches (LaVoi, 2016). I considered the number of participants needed for rich data and made the final determination based on the breadth and depth of each interview (Braun & Clark, 2021; Patton, 2002). Rigor is also associated with data analysis. The analysis outlined in the above *Data Analysis* section provides detailed evidence for rigor (Braun & Clark, 2006).

## **Sincerity**

The criteria, sincerity, refers to the self-reflexivity of the researcher and transparency throughout the research process (Tracy, 2010). This project aimed to be sincere through self-reflection and transparency. I included a reflexivity statement in Chapter I under the section titled, *Reflexivity Statement*. This statement outlined my journey to this investigation and what I hope to do with this research. I reflected throughout the research process through journaling and memos at each stage of the investigation (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, I was transparent throughout the study by following the analysis outlined in the above *Data Analysis* section.

## **Credibility**

The criteria, credibility, refers to thick description, triangulation, multivocality, and member reflections (Tracy, 2010). Investigations that are credible make the reader trust that the reality seems true (Tracy, 2010). Individual interviews allowed participants to provide their perspective on the topic at hand, thus providing the opportunity for thick descriptions of experiences. Multivocality includes multiple and various voices in analysis and reporting. Taking

a feminist approach allowed me to seek out participant voices and viewpoints. Finally, I included “member reflections,” which allowed participants to have a voice in the study’s findings. At the end of each interview I provided a final summary of the main ideas of the conversation. Participants were allowed to agree, suggest revisions, or add to the final summary. Additionally, once I had preliminary themes I sent them out to participants for feedback. This provided opportunity for collaboration and elaboration on the study’s findings (Tracy, 2010).

### **Resonance**

The criteria, resonance, refers to evocative representations, naturalistic generalizations, and transferable findings (Tracy, 2010). I aimed to provide evocative representations from the participants to allow readers to feel as though the account overlaps with their own experiences. It was important to me that this research was applied in order to support women sport coaches. Through evocative representations I hoped to provide the reader with vicarious experiences and to allow readers to make choices in how to better support women sport coaches moving forward (Tracy, 2010).

### **Significant Contribution**

The criteria, significant contribution, refers to the research providing significant contributions theoretically, practically, morally, methodologically, and heuristically (Tracy, 2010). This study made a significant contribution by extending knowledge, improving practice, generating research, and empowering women sport coaches. This research built onto the theoretical EIM by examining support for women sport coaches. This study also had heuristic and practical significance by influencing a variety of audiences (e.g., program developers, policy makers, curriculum developers) and provided useful knowledge for participants.

## **Ethical**

The criteria, ethical, refers to procedural ethics, situational and cultural ethics, relational ethics, and exiting ethics (Tracy, 2010). Procedural ethics were adhered to by gaining IRB approval before data collection began. Additionally, I followed the above procedures and made every attempt to protect participant identities. By taking a feminist approach to this research I aimed to do research ‘with’ women coaches rather than ‘on’ women coaches. The aim of feminist research is to empower groups, create awareness of experiences of marginalized individuals, and amplify the voices of others (Tibbets, 2019). This study valued respect, dignity, and connectedness between the participants and the researcher (Tracy, 2010).

## **Meaningful Coherence**

The criteria, meaningful coherence, means the study achieved what it purports to, uses methods that fit its goals, and meaningfully interconnect all aspects of the study (i.e., literature, research questions, findings, and interpretations; Tracy, 2010). This study answered the stated research questions. The procedures and data analysis outlined above were appropriate for the investigation. Interviews are considered a feminist research method (Fonow & Cook, 2005). Furthermore, all aspects of the study were connected to the literature (See Chapter II).

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine women sport coaches' experiences of support. The study was framed within the EIM (LaVoi, 2016) and data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; 2012; 2013; 2019; 2021). Due to the novel nature of the research questions, summary tables of the main findings are presented before a more in-depth discussion of the themes. The summary tables are not a result of reflexive thematic analysis, rather they are a summary of the content to provide context for the findings and answer the research questions.

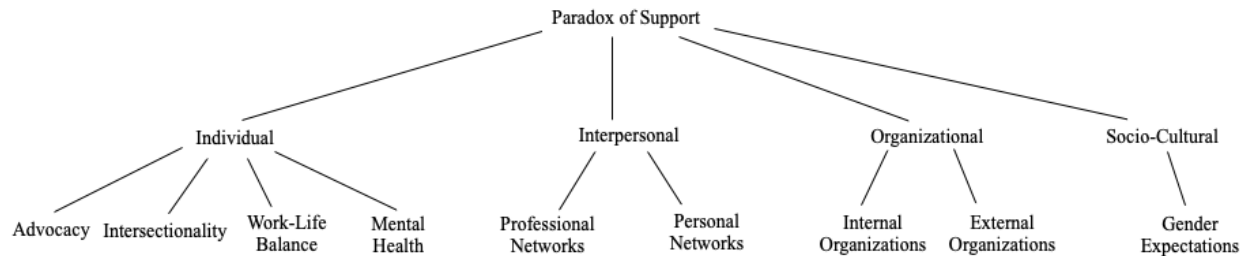
The reflexive thematic analysis revealed three levels of patterned meaning: overarching theme, themes, and subthemes. The overarching theme for this analysis was termed "Paradox of Support." Paradox is defined as "something that is made up of two opposite things that seems impossible but is actually true or possible" (Merriam-Webster, 2022). The participants indicated both having support and needing support. While a few coaches felt fully supported, they still identified ways they could be better supported. Additionally, while a few coaches felt not supported at all, they still identified ways they were supported. In sum, all coaches identified at least some support and all coaches identified ways they could be better supported. The overarching theme runs through the themes and subthemes.

At inception, this study was framed within the EIM. The analysis included both inductive and deductive components to coding and the themes and subthemes were developed using a code-driven approach rather than pre-determined categories (Braun & Clark, 2006). However, the resulting themes have a clear relationship to the EIM framework. The four themes in this study are: (1) Individual, (2) Interpersonal, (3) Organizational, (4) Socio-cultural. Each theme has numerous subthemes. As with the EIM, the themes and subthemes are interwoven and



influence each other bi-directionally. Each subtheme will be described and framed by the overarching theme “paradox of support.” See Figure 2 for thematic mapping.

**Figure 2. Thematic Mapping**



The first summary table is what the coaches described as a current support or a support they have had in the past (see Table 1). The table is organized by the EIM levels.

**Table 1. Support Coaches Have or Have Had in the Past**

Support	Direct Quote from Participant
<i><b>Individual</b></i>	
Advocacy	“Over the years we had women administrators and women in coaching who fought to get things level.” – P3
Counselor Outside of Athletics	“I do have a therapist that I work with, just for my own like non-coaching life.” – P1
Hobbies Outside of Sport	“I was pretty like intentional about being like, okay, I’m into CrossFit. There’s a CrossFit box right by campus so I’ll join this. And like that worked out well.” – P10
Mental Health Resources on Campus	“I think mental health support, you know, the benefits that we have, any of that is available to us.” – P3
Religion	“I have really strong support from my church. That’s been really huge.” – P3
<i><b>Interpersonal</b></i>	
Assistant Coaches	“As I’ve gone through my career, I’ve hired assistants as what I felt like I really needed... to support me.” – P13
Coaches Circle	“We do like a coaches circle once a month where we can throw out topics and we meet as a head coaching staff just to talk about whatever the topic is... which is helpful in getting to know other members of the coaching staff.” – P9
Coaching Colleagues at College/ University	“I feel like my coworkers who are head coaches are a really great support system.” – P2
Coaching Networks Outside of College/ University	“When I’m out on the road recruiting I have a network of coaches who I feel like, you know, if I walk up to a field and I see a familiar face, like I’ll go hang out and stand next to them.” – P16
Family	“Family is a big support and I’m very fortunate to have that cause I know some people don’t. But they have backed me since day one, of what do you need?” – P14

Female Mentorship	“The female coaching mentor for that first year really helped. Just to know that like other people are going through the same stuff.” – P4
Friends Outside of Sport	“My like non-coaching friends. Definitely. I would put as a support.” – P6
“Old Gals League”	“We used to have the OGL, which is the old gals league. Where we would play at lunchtime, like basketball, or we go outside and play football or ultimate frisbee. It was so much fun and it was very competitive. And so that was just a form of support. Just being able to exercise and hang.” – P12
Parents of Student-Athletes	“Our parents have been really, really good here. You know, I think I've probably dealt with two parents in 16 years here at this place. So, you know, they've been very, very supportive.” – P3
Partner	“My husband has been huge. My husband is 100% my biggest supporter.” – P5
Student-Athletes	“I would say my girls [student-athletes] do give me a lot of support.” – P5
<b><i>Organizational</i></b>	
Assistant Coach Position	“I do have a full-time assistant. That's a big, important nut to crack.” – P17
Athletic Director/ Athletic Administration	“Athletic administration, they're amazing. [AD] and [Assistant AD] are your major support systems for me. I feel like I can go to them with anything.” – P15
Athletic Facilities	“We have great support with our facilities. I don't have to worry about getting the field lined or dragged before games.” – P9
Athletic Trainer	“We have a [athletic] trainer with us all the time...he's great support for us.” – P13
Childcare	“Back in the day they actually provided student workers for me and for other female coaches that would take our kids during practice. And that was super helpful.” – P3
Child-Friendly Athletic Department	“I think for us feeling like our department seems to be very, I don't know how to call it, like child positive, I guess. Where you can bring your kids around.” – P16
Collaborative Office Space	“I think just like the way our offices are set up. Where it's like a circle and like they're all close together, so we can always like walk across and talk to each other if we have any issues.” – P18
College/ University Perks	“I should say another piece of the support question is we can eat in the dining halls on occasion, mostly with students. So we get a good chance to get to know our students really well in an off the field setting, but that also means we sometimes can sit up there with coaching colleagues and just talk about what's going on.” – P17
Equipment Manager	“This is the first school I've been at where I've had an equipment manager... So that's huge.” – P9
Finance Manager	“The other support I have is our finance person who deals with all of our budgets... So anything financial, I can just go to her.” – P9
Flexible Work Hours	“We're not micromanaged. So I like that. We're not punching a time clock.” – P12
Graduate Education	“We started a master's in coaching leadership program this year... So because I work at the school I get to do that and it's fully paid for.” – P11
Professional Development Funds	“I think definitely continuing education funds are really helpful.” – P18
Recruiting Budget	“We have a pretty good size recruiting budget and we get to ask for the amount of money for recruiting as well. So that's something that our athletic director really supports us getting out on the road and recruiting.” – P16

Sport Organizations	“The IWLCA [Intercollegiate Women’s Lacrosse Coaches Association] has been huge. I would not be really half of the coach that I am without them.” – P8
University Leadership	“I mean even little things like the president and the deans and folks come to games.” – P3
Wider College/ University Departments	“I get a lot of support from a lot of like professors from different departments, admissions, financial aid, campus police, our maintenance, our grounds people, our housekeepers, like there's such a wide range of individuals that I've built relationships with here.” – P7
<b><i>Socio-Cultural</i></b>	
Call out Sexism	“I've tried to correct people a lot on any of those [sexist] terms.” – P10
Being One’s Authentic Self	“It's this balance of like what a coach should be versus who I actually am. And knowing that like I show up better if I'm authentic.” – P6

The second summary table includes the supports the participants described as needing or wanting (see Table 2). The table is organized by the EIM levels.

**Table 2. Support Coaches Need and Want**

<b>Support</b>	<b>Direct Quote from Participant</b>
<b><i>Individual</i></b>	
Mental Health Resources	“I think having a counselor for coaches to talk to would be huge.” – P14
Psychological Safety	“I mean, I think you need what every human needs. Like psychological safety and ability to feel like you can show up each day and not, and make mistakes and not lose your job or lose face or I think that's what people need.” – P17
Salary Negotiation Skills	“How to have negotiating skills when it comes to pay.” – P8
Sport Psychology Resources	“So there's obviously like a lot of sports psychology around players and getting players to play at their, at their peak level. But I would love resources on how coaches can coach at their peak level.” – P1
Tactical Coaching Knowledge	“I definitely need that support of kind of thinking about the game, and learning about the game, and how to coach my players.” – P1
Work-life Balance Strategies	“I think if somebody could teach us how to, that it's okay that we don't do everything or don't do everything perfect. Help us with that. Finding our balance for our own mental health. That would be great.” – P13
<b><i>Interpersonal</i></b>	
Diverse Role-Models	“Having role models, diverse role models is huge. It's hard enough to go into a field, but if you've never seen someone that looks like you... If you've never seen it, you're not going to keep going.” – P5
Family	“I think right now the support that I need is actually from my family.” – P1
Mentor Program	“A mentor program would be nice though.” – P15
Networking	“I do think that women coaches need somewhere to talk about like, what experience do you have? What do you do when you deal with a situation like this?” – P11

Spouse	“I also think it makes a big difference. Having a spouse that's supportive.” – P4
<b><i>Organizational</i></b>	
Anti-Bigotry Policy	“Like you could be like, if you say something racist or sexist again, then like you are suspended from the next game that you coach. Like I feel like there could be consequences beyond a talking to.” – P10
Athletic Director	“I mean [more support from] my athletic director. I hate to say that because I don't really like to throw people under the bus. Especially people that like pay me.” – P11
Behaviors Over Words	“Not just ask the question to say, that's a great idea, but actually commit to seeing those through.” – P3
Budget	“Financial, like how do you advocate for money for your program?” – P16
Childcare	“Paid daycare for kids?” – P8
Collaborative Departmental Meetings	“I would like in-person department meetings that have space for like a little bit more casual interaction.” – P6
College/ University Scheduling	“Having an academic schedule where there is some sort of break where there are no classes... I think would be beneficial to us as coaches in terms of our mental health and not having to be on campus till nine o'clock at night or be on campus at five o'clock in the morning.” – P9
Continuing Education/ Professional Development	“I would like to have the ability to continue with professional development. Not only in my specific sport, but as a professional, because I do view our career field as a profession.” – P7
Department Meeting Agenda	“An agenda for department meetings. So you walk in and you know what to expect... So some structure.” -P6
Department Mentorship	“I think it'd be cool if the SWA had like meetings with the female coaches and we could just kind of collaborate ideas on things or the situations we're going through.” – P4
Equitable Hiring Practices	“I just think people aren't working very hard to hire qualified women. Cause there are a lot of qualified women out there.” – P3
Flexible Off-Season	“It'd be great to have a little bit more flexibility. I don't think I need more time, but a little bit more flexibility on when I get to work with my players.” – P17
Full-Time Assistant Coach	“Support would be a full-time assistant. That would be my number one thing that I think is needed.” – P12
Housing Support	“I went on a job interview and the AD at that school said to me, like, if you're worried about the cost of living here, don't worry about it. Like we know all the realtors and we know the people that do the mortgages. Like we can make sure that you can afford to live here.” – P2
Institutionalize Coaching	“I would love to have like an athletic director, or second tier, like director of coaching, right? Coach of coaches.” – P17
Onboarding Processes	“I would feel better if someone at like a department level had been like, Hey, you're new. Make this guy your resource.” – P6
On-Campus Facilities	“Having our own field would make a big difference because then I can plan the practice times that I want instead of being at the discretion of 10 other people or entities.” – P2
Parental Leave Policy Updates	“I've been having really awkward conversations with people like, what's your maternity leave policy, but I'm not the one giving birth, so is it really maternity leave? And I think sometimes again, we're really stuck in the binary of maternity

	and paternity leave because technically I would have paternity leave, but I'm not the paternal parent?" – P8
Regular Check-Ins with Athletic Administration	"I think it would be helpful, like to have one-on-one meetings scheduled regularly with [AD] or [Assistant AD], or like just someone in administration." – P18
Require Salary in Job Postings	"If people are gonna post a job posting on their website, I think they should require the actual salary. I think it would be good for the industry too." – P2
Salary Increase	"If I made a little bit more money I'd be a lot less stressed about, do I stay here or do I try to find something that's going to pay me more?" – P2
Transportation	"Support would include, you know, buses to all of my matches." – P12
Wider College/ University	"I could use more support from people in campus that are not part of athletics." – P9
<b><i>Socio-Cultural</i></b>	
Anti-Bias Training	"If we could make people not have these biases." – P4
Change the System	"I think that like we've tried for years to be like, how can we, like let's get together as women and like complain and survive and talk about how we can move forward. You know, like coach within this system that's already here, but I'm like fuck that, like let's make a new system." – P10

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## **Individual**

The individual theme pertains to anything related to the coaches' individual selves. Four subthemes were identified at this level: (1) Advocacy: "I feel really responsible in that way"; (2) Intersectionality: "It's the hardest thing I've ever done"; (3) Work-life Balance: "healthy balance would be phenomenal"; and (4) Mental Health: "it's okay to get help." Each subtheme is discussed under the overarching theme, Paradox of Support.

### ***Advocacy: "I feel really responsible in that way"***

Since this study is rooted in feminist research, I wanted to start with the subtheme advocacy. Participants recognized the importance of being advocated for and being advocates themselves. Coaches described the significance of the women advocates that came before them. Early women coaches and administrators fought for women to have equal access to competition gyms. P3 shared:

I mean, certainly you go back in history. We have a gym across campus. It was built in the fifties. That was the women's gym. Small little gym, no seating, it's a great practice

facility. And then we have the facility I'm in right now which is a competition facility. And this was the men's gym. And over the years we had women administrators and women in coaching who fought to get things level. And we had administration on the higher level, the president and so forth that listened to that. – P3

Having equitable sport facility access was just one of the battles that was fought early on. These early advocates helped women in coaching have access and opportunities to coaching positions. One participant shared how the senior women's administrator (SWA) demanded that the athletic director open a head coach position for a women's team to all applicants, rather than give it to a current football coach:

The reason I'm the head softball coach is our senior women's administrator stepped in... he [athletic director] just hired one of the assistant football coaches who was a retired administrator to just take over the softball program without even opening the job or consulting her. And I really appreciate her for stepping in and saying, no, this is not what we're going to do. – P13

These early advocates for women in coaching set an example for the participants in this study, fueling them to take on advocacy roles themselves. P3 shared, “*So the women that were here that really pushed the change, they were mentors for me. I feel really responsible now in that same way.*” The women in this study were now stepping into their own advocacy roles. P7 aimed to use her new role as SWA to advocate for other coaches in her department:

She [athletic director] asked me if I would like to become the senior woman administrator, which I accepted... I'm trying to not only embrace what that role entails, but also use it as like a platform to maybe expand not only my own professional development here in our campus community, but from an athletic standpoint. Like if I can help be a sounding board for other women coaches, or maybe not even just women coaches, but maybe other coaches that are feeling marginalized or maybe feeling like they're not getting the equity or the resources that they need. If I can help be a part of the next, I guess, generation of senior women administrators that can make that happen, then that's kind of the role that I'm taking. – P7

In this description, P7 recognized how in her new role as SWA she can be an advocate for all coaches. Another advocacy effort was focused on childcare. P3 shared how when she was a mother-coach she proposed that student-workers be used as childcare for coaches, “*I mean, there*

*was a real intentional, they wanted to keep women in coaching and I approached them with that, with a proposal [for childcare]. Just said, if that's really your goal, then some of these kinds of things can happen to facilitate that. And they were very open to it.”* Through her advocacy efforts and with the support of administration, coaches were offered childcare at her college. P3 explained how this was a major support for her to stay in coaching as a mother-coach.

Other coaches described advocacy efforts in different ways. One participant implemented policy aimed at reducing bigotry on her co-ed swimming and diving team. However, this coach recognized that she cannot do the advocacy work on their own:

So in my own team now I've created an anti-bigotry policy. So if somebody does say something like that, I'm like, I can suspend you for a meet. I just put like, all instances of bigotry will be subject to discipline in my team handbook. But like we don't have a department policy like that. So if a coach, like if I say that another coach said something like that to me, there's really not much I can do about it besides just speak up. – P10

The coaches described how they needed departmental support for their advocacy efforts.

Specifically, the coaches recognized the importance of behaviors over words, *“it's asking the kinds of questions you've asked me... Administrators, that will ask those questions. And then not just ask the question to say, that's a great idea, but actually commit to seeing those through. –*

P3” Overall, the women coaches in this study described being advocated for, being advocates themselves, and the need for more advocacy for women in coaching.

### ***Intersectionality: “It's the hardest thing I've ever done”***

The participants centered their intersecting positionalities in the conversations. Coaches described how sexuality and motherhood impacted their experiences in coaching. Fortunately for coaches in this study, they mostly felt supported by their players and athletic department. P16 shared, *“as a queer white woman in our department, I actually feel like I fit in. That's kind of more of the norm, which is so fortunate. I feel very grateful for that because I know that is not*

*typically the case. So I feel supported in that.*” A part of that support system was intentionally created by the coaches themselves. P8 shared how she helped to create a community for queer coaches in her athletic department, *“I definitely like built a network there, of being a gay coach and how to kind of like navigate those waters... But yeah, that's definitely a support system that is important to me.”* This coach took it upon herself to create this queer coach community that supported herself and other sexual-minority coaches.

Despite feeling mostly supported, lesbian-identifying coaches did share a few challenges. Coaches with marginalized sexual identities faced more challenges than their straight counterparts. P8 explained, *“I do think that we face different challenges than our straight coaches.”* These challenging experiences were centered on negotiating one’s sexuality to co-workers, student-athletes, and recruits. P8 described how in conversations with other queer coaches, they discussed whether or not they should be open about their sexuality with recruits:

You're talking with recruits and they ask questions and, you know, things come up about your spouse, your partner, whatever it is. We've had conversations like in that moment, like every single time you have to decide, am I going to say partner? Am I going to say wife? Am I going to say spouse? Am I going to leave it vague? – P8

It is not one coming out experience, it is multiple coming out experiences for coaches with marginalized sexual identities. P8 shared, *“When I took this job I thought to myself, like how long am I going to wait until I come out to the department or my team?”* The way coaches were supporting themselves through this challenge was to just be themselves. P8 went on to explain:

I took the plunge from the start. In my interview, referring to my wife as my wife. I think in my initial team meeting, talking about my wife so that like, they know that I'm open about it and I'm going to talk about her. I'm not going to hide a part of my identity. – P8

This coach felt that it was important to be open with her sexuality to her department and student-athletes.



The sexual minority coaches in this study not only experienced challenges in regard to expressing their sexuality, but also when entering motherhood:

Also as a female who my wife and I are kind of going through the process of having a kid and trying to figure out like who's going to carry... as the person who's potentially not going to carry. You know, I've been having really awkward conversations with people like, what's your maternity leave policy, but I'm not the one giving birth, so is it really maternity leave? And I think sometimes again, we're really stuck in the binary of maternity and paternity leave because technically I would have paternity leave, but I'm not the paternal parent? – P8

This coach provided an example of another barrier queer coaches have to navigate in regards to parental leave. The policy at her institution was not clear on parental leave if she was not the parent giving birth. For this coach, changing the parental leave policy to be more inclusive would be a support. Another coach who identified as a lesbian expressed a similar concern about entering motherhood because her and her partner were both coaches:

My partner is also a coach at [school]. And so we have two coaches who are both women and want to have a family. And so thinking about how are societal expectations going to play into how we also balance our work and life. So while it's not a challenge I have faced yet, it is a challenge that I have been thinking about a lot. – P16

P16 was concerned about the challenges and support her and her partner would receive once having a child because they were both female coaches.

One other lesbian identifying coach actually expressed that she was currently pregnant, *“So I'm actually pregnant super early. I've told my assistant coaches, but I've not told my administration yet. My administration knows I've been going through IVF, but they don't know that it's been successful yet. So [I] have to have that conversation. – P9”* While this coach thought her administration would be supportive, she had yet to tell them and expressed other concerns about having a child and running a team, *“like who's going to take over recruiting? Am I going to take a full maternity leave? – P9”* This coach was concerned about recruiting and managing her team during pregnancy. This coach described that she could be better supported

during pregnancy and motherhood if she had a full-time assistant coach to help ease the coaching burden.

Queer coaches were not the only coaches to express worries about motherhood. Several participants in this study, who did not currently have children or expecting children, were concerned about how hard they perceived being a mother-coach would be. P4 shared, *“I don't know how people do it with kids. I think that would be hard. I'm not in that predicament... But I can't imagine having children.”* Another coach expressed a similar concern about this challenge, *“I think it's just hard because I've been trying to figure out how to rest well and like how to do it regularly. And even right now, when I don't have any kids, like, it's still difficult with my job. – P18”* These coaches felt like they would need a lot more support than they currently have to be able to coach and have children.

A few coaches in this study were not sure if they would be able to continue their coaching careers once having children. P5 explained, *“As a parent in coaching, so many people just simply, they get out of coaching once they have kids. It's such a battle. And I would love to say that won't happen to me, but I would also say I know what's realistic.”* P14 had the same worry about continuing her coaching career with children:

I want to be there for my kids, raising them. But once they enter school, I think would probably be the time of trying to figure out how to work things differently. Whether that meant whatever my husband's job is, if it's manageable for me to still stay in coaching or whether I'd have to get out... I don't want to miss out on their lives because I'm so busy with mine kind of thing. And I'm not saying to put mine on hold, but I want to be there to support my kids. And that might mean doing something different... those are definite thoughts for future of what it would look like if I still stay with college coaching or not.  
– P14

This coach does not want to miss out on her future children's lives because of coaching. She described how she would need a supportive husband to feel like she could balance the two.

Another coach felt like she could not even consider having kids until she had a full-time assistant

coach, *“It is definitely really scary. Especially not having an assistant. Plus having a child. I don't think I could do both at the same time. Like I think I would have to have an assistant first, that's like a full-time assistant. – P18”* This coach was pushing off having children until she had full-time assistant coach help.

Coaches who are not yet mothers were not the only one's facing this pressure. The coaches in this study who already had children described it as a major challenge and were concerned about being able to stay in coaching:

*It's the hardest thing I've ever done. Honestly, I never anticipated. I was always like if I have a kid I'm not giving up what I love. Like I'm doing it, you know? I've never had that mindset of like, no, that's not fair... I've never considered not coaching more than probably this year. It's been very difficult. I just love what I do and I can't imagine not doing it. – P15*

This coach was concerned about staying in coaching because of the demands of being a mom and a coach. However, she was determined to do so because coaching is what she loves. She later described how the support of her family was one reason she has been able to continue coaching with a child.

Despite all of these challenges, coaches recognized ways they have been and can be supported during motherhood. One way to support mother-coaches is to provide childcare. P3 explained, *“Here, where I'm at now at [school], back in the day they actually provided student workers for me and for other female coaches. That would take our kids during practice. And that was super helpful.”* Several other coaches recognized that childcare within the athletic department or wider university would be a support for them. Another coach described how her athletic department was supporting coaches who were parents by pushing their department meetings back so parents could get their children on buses, *“They knew they had to get them on the bus and now we can't start at 9:00. Like a staff meeting would have to be at like 9:30 or*

10:00. So I'm glad that they kind of figured those things out. – P12” Moving department meetings back was one simple way to support coaches who had children. In addition, another coach described how her department was child friendly, “*Our department seems to be very, I don't know how to call it, like child positive, I guess. Where you can bring your kids around. Like we can have our kids. I feel like, I anticipate having the kids around the field and having the kids be around the department a little bit.* – P16” These coaches recognized how their athletic department supported them in motherhood through childcare and flexibility.

Outside of athletic department and family support, the coaches acknowledged that another support during motherhood was their student-athletes. P12 shared, “*Part of it was fun because the kids would be here running around. My team would play with them.*” Other coaches who did not yet have children recognized that their players could be a support. P18 said, “*From the coaches I've seen, like their kids just become like part of the team and they have like these cool people to look up to. Which I think that would be a really cool part of it.*” The coaches recognized how their student-athletes could be role models for their children, “*I would say something that like I would look forward to is eventually having kids that then have your students to look up to.* – P5” These coaches described how their student-athletes were and could be a support to their children.

Overall, the coaches in this study centered their intersecting positionalities when describing their experiences of support. The lesbian identifying coaches felt supported by their athletic department and were intentional in creating queer friendly spaces for themselves. However, navigating everyday coming out experiences were a challenge. The lesbian coaches were supporting themselves by being themselves, or being open with their athletic department and athletes. The support these coaches needed was for their workplace to provide inclusive

parental leave policy. Additionally, motherhood was a topic that was brought up by coaches with and without children. Coaches who were not yet mothers and had the desire to be in the future were worried about the balance of work and motherhood. The coaches who already had children noted that balancing their children and career was one of the hardest things they had to do. Despite these challenges, mother-coaches were supported by their athletic departments by offering childcare, flexible work hours and scheduling. Only one coach described receiving childcare and its benefits, while all coaches explained how having this option would be a support for their career. The coaches also recognized how their student-athletes were, and could be, a support during motherhood by providing their children role-models as they were growing up. In sum, coaches with intersecting positionalities both had support and needed more support.

***Work-life Balance: “healthy balance would be phenomenal”***

Work-life balance was mentioned frequently when asked about support. The participants in this study described several supports for their work-life balance. The coaches described being very intentional and prioritizing a work-life balance. P1 shared, “what I've been really intentional about over the last two years is really like respecting my boundaries and timeline around when I am doing work things and when I'm doing home things.” Other coaches have been intentional in using rest and exercise to balance their work and life:

I took a lot of time just thinking about trying to build in like rest. And like figuring out how to rest and building that into like everyday life. But I like walking in the morning. I've found that I need that. Just like be outside and be with my thoughts and like be in nature and talk to myself and, you know, pray and do whatever. That's been really helpful for me just like having that morning time. And kickboxing also. Like I've just learned that I need lots of exercise. – P18

It was important for this coach to prioritize time for herself in the mornings. Additionally, P4 explained how she prioritizes exercise for her well-being, “*I'm still a runner. And so everyone knows that I'm going to prioritize time... Big believer that you need that, you know, we need that*

*for physical, but mental health as well.*” These coaches were very intentional in creating boundaries between their work and life.

Along with intentional strategies by the coaches themselves, they explained how the athletic administration they worked for also provided support for their work-life balance. P2 shared, *“It's partly also being afforded by my boss. You know, like he understands that during season we work six days a week, every week. So if we come in at 10, that's fine during off-season. He's not micromanaging, which makes it great.”* Another coach had a similar experience, *“that's another great thing that our athletic director does. It's like the work will be here tomorrow. Like go home. – P4”* The support from athletic administration for flexible work hours supported coaches work-life balance. The findings from this study revealed that coaches work-life balance was supported many ways. However, many coaches still described numerous challenges to this balance that could be alleviated through more support.

Coaches explained how having a work-life balance is a major challenge to their coaching career. P13 was candid in that her lack of work-life balance potentially played a role in her divorce:

I'm just going to admit to you that I'm horrible with it [work-life balance]. I'm absolutely horrible with it. And I've tried to in the last few years to be better of putting things away. In season it's so hard and I just feel like there's not enough time in the day. There's always a recruiting call to make, or there's always film to watch or there's, you know, we basketball people are crazy with film and scouting reports, and preps, and stuff... that's one thing that I probably have failed at through the years. And honestly it's probably effected my marriage some. But there's a lot of people that stayed married coaching and other things happened too. But that is something I have to get better at, is that work-life balance. That's one of the biggest challenges for me. Cause I just don't know when to shut it down sometimes. – P13

The coaches in this study expressed concerns about their work-life balance. They felt like there were ways they could have better been supported throughout their careers. When asked what

support she needed P18 shared, *“I think definitely work life balance strategies. Like real things you can do like day-to-day. I think that would be really helpful.”* Additionally, P7 shared:

How as a female coach, how to have work-life balance. Because our society still has this stigma that as the woman, it's your job to take care of the house, take care of the kids, to be a homeroom mom, all these things. And then, oh, by the way, if you're going to have a career too, you better not let that interfere. So I think that would be a huge component if there was some way to help women in athletics learn how to have both of those things and a healthy balance would be phenomenal. – P7

These coaches desired education or information on strategies they could practice to improve their work-life balance.

There were several coaches who noted that COVID had dramatically changed their perspectives on work-life balance. P5 shared how she was burnt out and almost left coaching prior to COVID. She explained how COVID helped her recognize that coaching is something she does, not who she is:

The first couple of years I was very, very overwhelmed, overworked and it was exhausting. Like I was burnt out after three years. I almost quit after three years. I was like, I am exhausted. How do I keep doing this? And I realized I was just doing it wrong. I think for me, COVID really stepped in and was like, whoa, whoa, whoa, pause. You're a human being that has needs, and you are not meeting those needs. And therefore you are not going to be able to meet the needs of your job, of your family, of your relationships. And so for me, as difficult as this season has been, as many difficult things have come out of this season, you know, the losses and the heartbreak. For me, it also told me this job isn't everything. It's something, and it's very important to you and that's great, but it's not everything. And that was something I personally needed a reminder of. And I've talked to other coaches that felt the same way. For some people COVID convinced them this wasn't the career for them. For me, it convinced me I can really do this job, but I have to set boundaries. – P5

This coach described how COVID has pushed some coaches out of the profession, while it has helped her recognize what is important to the sustainability of her career. P16 shared a similar sentiment, *“I would say COVID gave me a really different perspective of like what is important to me. And like what long-term is going to be important to my life, to staying in coaching. Like I want to stay in coaching and I want to make this work. But it can be so exhausting.”* – P16”

Another coach shared how quarantine highlighted how much of her daughter's life that she has missed. She promised herself to have more of a balance and make it to more of her daughter's events:

When I started here as the head coach 10 years ago, my daughter was six years old. So clearly she's 16 now. And I will be the first person to tell you, I have no idea what the last 10 years of her life have been like. I mean, clearly she's my daughter and she lives in my house, but I've missed most of her soccer games. I probably can count on one hand the number of school events that I've been to in the last 10 years. I mean, it's difficult. And it was by my own doing... I throw myself 100% into whatever I'm doing. And I threw myself into my work and not into being a mom. So now in hindsight, and I will tell you that quarantine really smacked me upside the head and kind of was a reality check for me. And that realization that that's what I allowed to happen. I told myself that once things started back up that I was going to do a better job of working towards a work-life balance... I want the next 10 years to be more balanced. – P7

These coaches recognized how prior to COVID they did not have a good balance. COVID has given them a different outlook on their coaching careers, with balance being at the center.

In sum, the coaches in this study had varying experiences related to work-life balance. Some coaches felt supported by themselves through prioritizing it and by athletic administration through flexible work hours. However, some noted that their work-life balance still needed a lot of support. Coaches felt like education or information on strategies they could utilize would be a helpful support. Additionally, several coaches noted that COVID had changed their perspectives on work-life balance, helping them devote more time for themselves and their families. Overall, coaches felt like their work-life balance was supported, and could be better supported through targeted strategies, prioritizing it, and flexible work hours.

### ***Mental Health: "it's okay to get help"***

Mental health was mentioned by almost every coach when asked about support. The participants in this study recognized the immediate importance of having mental health resources



for their student-athletes. This support for student-athletes was especially important because coaches are not trained in mental health counseling. P11 described:

Now we are fortunate in that we have a really great counseling center on campus.. When my kids come to me with any crises. Like I've had this week, I've had five kids in my office with crises. Five at least, maybe six in my office with like real, like heavy things. And I can talk them through with it, but I'm not a trained counselor. But I know that the counseling center will talk to them and help them and give them some of the support that they need. – P11

This coach described how many of her student-athletes come to her in crisis mode and that she trusts the counseling center on her campus. Coaches reported that despite having great campus-wide mental health resources, they were still completely overwhelmed. P17 shared, *“I mean, [school] probably has, does have as much resources as anybody. We probably have the highest number of mental health professionals per capita on our campus. And we are in crisis mode. We cannot even come close to serving what people need. So it's a problem.”* With counseling centers in crisis mode for the wider student body, coaches thought having sport psychology specific resources would be valuable. P15 shared, *“I do think that, especially these days, I do think it would be vital for all programs to have a like sports psychologist on staff.”* Coaches recognized that the mental health of their student-athletes was paramount. However, student-athletes are not the only individuals who need mental health support.

Coaches also described needing mental health resources for themselves. One coach described how she recently started therapy and how this has been instrumental to her well-being. P18 said, *“I started going to counseling this past summer. And that was really helpful. Just to talk through like figuring out how to rest and ways to do it.”* This was sought outside of the context of the athletic department or college/university. One coach described that she had access to mental health support through her college, *“I think mental health support, you know, any of that is available to us. – P3”* However, most coaches shared that they felt like they are often

overlooked when it comes to resources for their own mental health from the college or university they work at. P14 shared, *“We try and problem solve a lot for our athletes, but I think sometimes the help for coaches gets a little lost... I'm not saying stop helping these athletes, but maybe we need to look in the mirror and see what kind of help we can get for ourselves too.”* Another participant explained how she would really value sport psychology resources, *“So there's obviously like a lot of sports psychology around players and getting players to play at their peak level. But I would love resources on how coaches can coach at their peak level. – P1”* The concept of having mental health resources directed for themselves was so novel that one participant pondered what this might look like, *“I'm curious what it would be like if there was a counselor almost for coaches to talk to. – P14”* Overall, the women coaches in this study described needing mental health support for their own well-being.

While mental health resources directed for coaches was sought after by the participants, one coach shared how they first have to be vulnerable to admit when they need help:

You know, just have it be a thing to get help. Right?... It's a hard thing to be a coach. So it's okay to like ask for help and to be able to show some more vulnerability. There's like obviously tons of research on how that's healthy. So having that be more of a thing. Which is tied to masculinity I think. Which is where sports came from. So it's all related.  
– P17

This coach recognizes that yes, coaches need mental health resources, but they also have to be willing to admit when they need help.

In sum, the coaches in this study described having mental health support for their athletes, but really needing more mental health support for their selves. The findings revealed that having on-campus mental health support would be valuable to women in coaching. However, coaches must first be willing to admit when they need help. Overall, the coaches

described both having and needing mental health resources for their student-athletes and for their selves.

## **Interpersonal**

The interpersonal theme pertains to anything related to social relationships. Two subthemes were identified at this level: (1) Professional Networks: “I would like to hear everyone's experiences” and (2) Personal Networks: “they have backed me since day one” Each subtheme is discussed under the overarching theme, Paradox of Support.

### ***Professional Networks: “I would like to hear everyone's experiences”***

On one hand, coach’s professional networks were described as a support by many of the coaches in this study, and on the other hand the coaches provided ideas for the ways their professional networks could better support them. These professional networks consisted of coaching colleagues at their current institution, networking or mentoring outside of their athletic department, and their student-athletes.

The importance of support from coaching colleagues at one’s current institution was highlighted by P15. She shared, *“I think something I've learned big time is, what matters most is the people you work with. And it's not about a salary and it's not about big time. You know, it's about the people you work with and going to work every day and loving the people that you're with. – P15”* The coaches recognized how their coaching colleagues supported them in formal and informal ways. Coaches were supported in formal ways through organized coaches’ meetings, which were structured to allow coaches to get to know one another. P9 gave an example of how this looked for her, *“We do like a coaches circle once a month where we can throw out topics and we meet as a head coaching staff just to talk about whatever the topic is... So we do that as a coaching staff, which is helpful in getting to know other members of the*

*coaching staff.”* In addition, the participants in this study appreciated the flexibility from their coaching colleagues, *“I feel like my coworkers who are head coaches are a really great support system... like if I really need to have practice one day, my coworkers are always willing to switch with me and we support each other that way. So they're really supportive. – P2”* These coaches appreciated how their coaching colleagues supported them.

The women coaches in this study described how their coaching colleagues also supported them in informal ways. This informal support could be as simple as just asking about one’s games, *“I would say like when the baseball coach stops me in the hallway and is like, ‘oh man, I thought you guys had it.’ Just being interested in each other's programs doesn't cost anything, but that's a measure of support, professionally. – P12”* Checking in and providing support in this way was also appreciated by P8 who had just recently started a new head coaching position. She said, *“Truthfully all of the coaches have been fantastic, but specifically the women coaches. I've asked them 1,001 questions, and they'll pop in every now and then like, how are you doing? How's first day of fall ball? How are things going? How can we help you? So that's been really, really great. – P8”* These simple acts of checking in was tremendously appreciated by the coaches.

These supportive relationships do not just happen, coaches have been intentional in developing relationships with their colleagues. P12 described the OGL or “old gals league” where her and other women coaches would engage in physical activity through sports during the lunch hour. She explained:

We used to have the OGL, which is the old gals league. Where we would play at lunchtime, like basketball, or we go outside and play football or ultimate frisbee... it was so much fun and it was very competitive. And so that was just a form of support. Just being able to exercise and hang and do stuff like that. – P12

The ability to just hang out and get to know coaches in a more informal way through physical activity was valued by this coach. Another coach had recently suffered an injury and was immobile for several weeks. She described how her coaching colleagues were supporting her with tasks like going to the grocery store and mowing her grass:

There are two or three female coaches who are like, Hey, what do you need? Like tell me your grocery list, the whole nine. And then three males who are the same exact way. I mean, one of them ended up sending a schedule out for signing up and helping me do stuff just as simple as mowing my lawn. But like [AD] volunteered for week two. Like those kinds of things of going above and beyond truthfully. Like no one has to do that. It's not expected. It's very warmly welcomed. But at the same time it's not expected kind of thing. I don't know how many people can say like their bosses or coworkers would be like, Hey, you need help. What can we do? – P14

P14 felt genuinely supported by her colleagues, who she considers friends. They did not only ask what they could do to help, but were following through with actions.

Although many coaches described how their colleagues were supportive in formal and informal ways, other coaches felt that there could be ways for all coaches to better support one another. Some coaches felt like there was no real or intentional effort for coaching colleagues to get to know one another. P5 explained, *“I also think building relationships within your staff is important. We just kind of all do our own thing and we are all on good terms. There's never really any drama here, which is nice, but there's also limited support within coach, to coach, to coach.”* Much of the discussion from coaches was centered on providing opportunities in department meetings to get to know one another on a more personal level:

Instead of our meetings being kind of administrative of like, oh, here's an update on this, update on that. You know update on your season, which that part's great... It could maybe be a little bit more of let's really get to know each other as people... to have a little bit more of like a group open forum to discuss things. And to be able to just kind of have honest sessions like that. Where we try to make each other better. I think could be helpful. – P15

Another coach who just started her position felt like these more informal department meetings would also be helpful as a newer head coach at the institution, “*Some sort of, I don't know, every other week, once a month, some sort of connection with the coaches in the department... That kind of more casual support.* – P6” Other coaches felt similar that more space could be provided to get to know one’s coaching colleagues. P14 suggested that smaller support groups of coaches could help colleagues have deeper conversations about the challenges they are facing:

I mean having someone to kind of talk to just in regards to struggles that you have. Whether it be with your current students, with struggles you're having for recruiting. I think support groups would be great. Cause kind of sometimes, it's not all the time, but in staff meetings when we open up with our athletic department, it's like a aha moment of, Wow! Why have none of us talked about this previously? Since clearly all of us are struggling with it. So maybe having smaller groups would be nice. – P14

P14 felt that smaller groups would allow coaches to have more meaningful conversations outside of a large group, full department meeting.

P4 described how it can be challenging to only work with men, “*I work with all men and so that's another challenge. I could go a whole week where the only women I really interact with are my women's team.*” This coach suggested that the SWA provide a space for the women coaches to collaborate, “*I think it'd be cool if the SWA had like meetings with the female coaches and we could just kind of collaborate ideas on things or the situations we're going through. Cause like I said, there aren't many of us.* – P4” A support for this coach would be regular meetings with other female coaches in the department. Overall, the coaches felt both supported and needed more support from their coaching colleagues within their athletic department. Coaching colleagues at their current institution were not the only source of support coaches mentioned.

The coaches in this study relied on their coaching network outside of their college or university for support. Several participants explained that coaches within their sport community were a support, whether it be coaches in their conference or beyond:

The nice thing about the volleyball community is it's a pretty tight knit community and there's a lot of exchange of ideas. And so we have like a group chat and just throw a question out there. What should we do? My bench culture isn't good. What ideas do you have? And we're all in different conferences or some of us are in the same conference, you know, and just that free exchange of ideas. – P12

The coaches formed these networks in various formal and informal ways. P16 described how her graduate program in coaching helped her create a really important network of coaches across sports, *“the [school] graduate program, because it's in coaching, there's this whole network of people who've come through it... who I feel like I could text and talk about coaching or life or whatever. So I think the grad program really launched me into a really positive network of people.”* Other coaches described how their sport coaching organizations supported coaches in the same sport to connect with one another. P8 explained, *“So the IWLCA [Intercollegiate Women's Lacrosse Coaches Association] does a really good job at providing us, if we want, providing us with mentors or like a mentorship like cohort. So the IWLCA has been huge. I would not be really half of the coach that I am without them.”* The coaches have developed coaching networks through formal graduate programs and sport coaching organizations.

Coaches have also formed these networks in more informal ways. When coaches are out recruiting or working camps they are able to connect with other coaches. P16 shared:

Like when I'm out on the road recruiting I have a network of coaches who I feel like if I walk up to a field and I see a familiar face, like I'll go hang out and stand next to them. And they're kind of spread all over the country, different types of people. I meet a lot of them through the camps that I work and then we become friends and can interact outside of that. So it's nice to have that. – P16

This coach found a lot of value in her coaching network outside of her university. Another coach described how her and a coaching colleague became accountability buddies. These coaches formed a bond that supported one another through weekly check-ins:

I have another female coach who we're accountability buddies. So every Thursday we do a 30 minute FaceTime. It's like not supposed to be longer than that. Just kind of like, here's what's going on in my life and kind of, here's what I'm trying to accomplish. And here's what I'm trying to get done in the next week. Being able to, you know, sometimes like the answer to what support you need is like, I need you to text me tomorrow night to make sure that I got this thing done. – P6

These coaches described their networks of coaching colleagues outside of their university as invaluable. In addition, coaches also described ways they could be better supported through these networks.

Some participants described how it is challenging to establish coaching networks. P7 explained, *“finding another female in athletics to kind of be my mentor has been very challenging to me. I've had to seek them out and even after 10 years, I wouldn't say I really have anyone specific that I feel like I can go to.”* This coach desired a female coaching colleague for support. Building up this coaching network is especially challenging as a young coach, *“So it took a while for me to build up my network in that regard of having people that I could talk to and ask those questions to and actually get experienced good feedback from.”* – P14” Coaches provided ways they could be supported in establishing these coaching networks outside of their college or university.

The coaches felt like a more formal mentor program would be valuable, *“A mentor program would be nice though.”* – P15” Another coach shared, *“Having someone that you can talk to that can relate and give advice kind of like that mentorship. I think that would be huge.”* – P14” The coaches really wanted a space where they could simply talk to and learn from other women in the profession, *“I think I would just like to hear everyone's experiences. Like you go*



*and you think that you're alone in this, and then you realize you're not.* – P15” The coaches felt that having a space to discuss ideas and experiences would help them feel like they were not alone.

It was also important to the coaches to have mentors and networks that shared their experiences. P18 desired a mentor who was in her sport and someone who she felt she could be vulnerable with:

I would say I probably need like more mentors that are like in the same specific sport. Like having a female beach volleyball coach mentor, who I already know really well and I can just like be completely honest with. I have some that are like mentors. I'll ask them questions, but I can't be like completely honest and open about like what's happening because you still want to, like I don't know you super well so I can't really share like all these details. So I think having like a really trusted mentor. Who's also in the same sport and the same gender would be really helpful. – P18

Not only the same sport was important. P5 shared how she wanted support from other coaches who represented her:

I think having role models, diverse role models is huge. It's hard enough to go into a field, but if you've never seen someone that looks like you, is from your state, is from your background, is from your religious background. If you've never seen it, you're not going to keep going. So I think that would be huge, tons of representation, and highly qualified. I think sometimes we settle. As women we settle in general and that's another whole conversation. But we tend to settle with role models that don't embody everything we want to be. And don't actually embody where we want to go. They just were the only ones available and I would much rather have role models that are actually the direction I want to go in. – P5

These coaches described the value in having someone who represents them. Overall, some coaches felt like they had a lot of support from coaching networks outside of their institution, while others described the need for more networking and mentoring as a support. In addition to coaching colleagues inside and outside their athletic department, coaches described their student-athletes as a support.

Lastly, the coaches described how their student-athletes were supportive. A newer head coach said, *“I would say like a couple of my athletes have been really supportive, like from the beginning. – P18”* This coach described how student-athlete support was vital at the beginning of her coaching career. Another coach described the support she had, *“I have amazing kids. I mean kids that are super dedicated to being a student athlete. To their studies for sure and to being a student athlete. – P17”* In addition, P5 highlighted just how important it has been to have the support of her student-athletes. She described how they are a reason she has stayed in the profession, *“I would say my girls do give me a lot of support... they've been a huge driving force as I've stayed in this field. You know, not just staying for them, but because of them.”* While these coaches described their student-athletes as supportive, others explained that there were also challenges associated with their student-athletes.

Coaches who did not have a full-time assistant coach struggled to find the balance of wanting their student-athletes to feel open to coming to them and also having to be the person to make the tough decisions:

Trying to have that balance of like, okay, I have to kind of act like an assistant to a certain extent, but also like I've got to make the tough decisions too. So I have to be open and available for them. Like I want them to still come to me and talk to me and not be afraid to like develop that relationship with me, but also know that I got to make the tough calls. So it was a weird balance of it all. – P15

Other coaches explained how they felt guilty that they could not give enough individualized attention to their student-athletes. P11 shared that she put a lot of pressure on herself to be there for her student-athletes and felt guilty when she could not, *“I frequently find myself really stressed out and just, like I don't think I can do it. I'm like, I don't feel like I have enough time for them. I don't feel like I'm giving them what they need. I don't feel like I'm offering them what they*

*need and I blame myself for it.*” P15 had a similar experience in that she felt like she could not give her student-athletes everything they needed:

It's been very difficult and it's an interesting feeling of no matter where I'm at, I feel like I'm not able to give all of myself. So if I'm with my son and my husband, I feel like I'm not able to be there for my girls like I should be. Or not able to give them a hundred percent of me. I always feel torn. If I'm with them in practice or if they need me and I end up having to stay an hour longer after practice because they need something, I feel guilty. Cause now I've missed my son's bedtime. You know? But I don't want to tell them that, like they're important to me too. So I'm always struggling to find those boundaries I think. And that balance of still being there for them like I want to be, but also making sure my family is number one as well. – P15

None of the coaches described that they needed more support from their student-athletes, however they recognized how having more support in terms of a full-time assistant coach could help alleviate some of the challenges they faced with their student-athletes.

In conclusion, the participants in this study recognized how their professional networks played a role in the longevity of their careers. These professional networks consisted of coaching colleagues at their current institution, networking or mentoring outside of their athletic department, and their student-athletes. The coaches wanted support to connect on a more personal level with their coaching colleagues through informal coach meetings or smaller support groups. The coaches were also interested in more formal networking or mentoring programming to connect with coaches outside of their institution. In addition, student-athletes were described as a support for the participants. Overall, the coaches recognized both support and the need for more support from their professional networks.

***Personal Networks: “they have backed me since day one”***

The coaches in this study overwhelmingly described their personal networks as a support to their coaching careers. This network included family (i.e., parents, siblings, extended family), partners, and friends. Many coaches discussed how their family supported them in several

different ways. P14 shared, *“Family is a big support and I'm very fortunate to have that cause I know some people don't. But they have backed me since day one, of what do you need? Like, can we help you with things? To the fact of just the constant encouragement of you've got this.”*

Another coach shared how her and her husband were both head coaches for the same sport at different institutions. She would not be able to stay in coaching without the support of her mom and mother-in-law for childcare:

If we want to talk support. We can't do regular daycare. I mean, it's not normal, our job is not normal hours. I mean, my day starts later and ends at 8:00 PM because of practice. You know, it's a lot, it's just a lot different. So, you know, and my husband having the same job, doing the same thing... so if it weren't for mom and mom-in-law, I don't know how we'd do it honestly. So I'm thankful for family like that. – P15

These coaches described how family provided emotional support in terms of checking in and tangible support in terms of childcare, all of which supported them in their role as coaches.

While the majority of participants described family as a major support, a few coaches described how their family could better support them. P5 acknowledged how her coaching friends had family support, which was great, and that she also wished she had that same support:

I know for some of my friends that have come from big sports families, like their families are their biggest support system and I love that. I think that's a beautiful thing. My dad hates sports. So he was like, so you play uh field hockey? And I was like, no, no, no, no, lacrosse actually, for like 10 years now. So love him to death, but my family was never big into that. – P5

This coach's family was not actively supportive of her career. In another example, P6 explained how her mom was worried about her being able to coach and have a family when she first started her career:

I think my parents have like slowly come around to like, oh, this is like, actually what you're doing. Like, my mom has stopped kind of being like, so do you want to be a teacher yet? Like, this is where I am. And not that they've been like maybe actively unsupportive, but I like sort of saw just to flip in my mom's tone on all of it once I became a head coach. Like somehow that made it more legitimate in her mind. – P6

Once getting a head coaching position P6 felt more support from her parents. P1 described how her family did not understand the time commitment that it takes to be a coach. Her parents did not understand that she did not work a nine to five and have her weekends free. She explained, “*I think the support that I need going forward is from my family in understanding what my job actually entails.* – P1” These coaches desired more support from their family in understanding and valuing their coaching careers.

In addition to family support, coaches also discussed partner support. A supportive partner was discussed as a key support for the women coaches in this study. P12 argued that “*you can't do this job without a supportive spouse.*” Many coaches echoed this sentiment, “*I mean obviously my wife is a huge support.* – P8” and “*I feel like my husband is my biggest support.* – P11” The coaches listed their partners as one of their biggest sources of support. Another coach recognized from past experiences how important it was for her partner to be supportive in her coaching role, “*I have a great boyfriend who lives with me. Who's very supportive of everything I do. And I've also had not supportive boyfriends in the past. So I can tell you that having someone who is really bought in and like enjoys going to softball games... that's been really great as well.* – P2” This coach valued that her boyfriend enjoyed coming and supporting at games. Even little things like making one’s lunch was appreciated as a support, “*Even this morning, like she [wife] put together a lunch for me knowing that like coaching hours are crazy. Sometimes I just literally forget to eat a meal because I'm like going, going, going. And so like, even just like little things like that.* – P1” The coaches in this study valued support from their partners. No coaches mentioned needing more support from their partners.

In addition to family and partner support, coaches appreciated support from their friends outside of coaching. P6 shared, “*My like non-coaching friends. Definitely. I would put as a*

*support.*” Friends outside of sport was especially important to P16. Her and her partner were intentional about spending time with friends outside of athletics. She shared, “*Social time with friends. I mean, I like being able to just spend time with people who I care about. That's something that energizes me. So I really make a conscious effort to do that.* – P16” It was important for these coaches to have support from friends outside of the context of athletics. They described how they were intentional in cultivating these friendships outside of sport. No coaches described needing more support from their friends.

In sum, personal networks were described as a critical support for the coaches in this study. Family, partners, and friends were cherished by the coaches for the various ways they supported them in their coaching career. The support that the coaches valued ranged from just simply checking in to helping provide childcare support. While the majority of coaches described a lot of support from their family, a few felt like their family could be more supportive of their career by better understanding and valuing the coaching profession. No coaches described needing more support from their partners or friends outside of sport.

### **Organizational**

The organizational theme pertains to anything related to organizational practices or policy. Two subthemes were identified at this level: (1) Internal Organizations: “*I could not only do this job, but do this job really damn well*”; and (2) External Organizations: “*they have been an amazing resource.*” Each subtheme is discussed under the overarching theme, Paradox of Support.

#### ***Internal Organizations: “I could not only do this job, but do this job really damn well”***

Internal organizations refer to anything associated with the college or university that the coaches worked for. Coaches described both having support and needing support from internal

organizations. The various matters the coaches talked about in terms of support was athletic administration, full-time assistant coach, budget, facilities, professional development, salary, equitable hiring practice, and the wider college or university outside of the athletic department.

When asked about support, every coach brought up athletic administration. Coaches in this study recognized how important it was to have supportive athletic administration. P9 captured this thought, *“I think you have to have an administration that's supportive. I think that's huge... I think is really imperative.”* Some coaches felt like they had really supportive athletic administration and described several different ways they were supported. P15 shared how it was helpful to just have someone to chat with about different challenges, *“Athletic administration, they're amazing. You know, [AD] and [Assistant AD] are your major support systems for me. I feel like I can go to them with anything... I feel like we're good at like being able to bounce things off of each other, which is super, super helpful.”* Another coach felt similar about her athletic director:

I mean, it goes from anywhere of sometimes just walking down the hall, popping her head in the office. Checking in saying like, Hey, how's it going? Actually sitting on the couch and being like, what do you need help with? Like open up kind of thing. To coming out to a practice. – P14

This coach appreciated when her athletic director just stopped by to chat or came out to a practice to show support. Showing up was mentioned by other coaches as a support from athletic administration. P16 explained how her athletic director coming out to games was a support, *“Our athletic director pretty much shows up to every game, like every home game. So from the emotional support, like she really invests a lot of time.”* These coaches appreciated when their athletic administration simply listened and showed up.

The importance of having supportive athletic administration was highlighted by coaches who were intentional in seeking out a supportive administration in the job search. P1 described how she sought out a supportive athletic director:

So I feel very fortunate because I do have the full support of my athletic director. And that was something that I was really intentional about in the hiring process, you know, knowing that I'm a young female coach just starting out in my career. I wanted to make sure that my athletic director was somebody who would have my back in certain situations and kind of help mentor me. – P1

Another coach felt similar and made effort to talk to other women coaches in the athletic department before being hired. P8 said, *“When I was interviewing for this position, I wanted to meet with the female head coaches and know like, how are they supported? Are they supported? Is the AD real or is he being fake? Like, those are the things I want to know.”* These coaches were intentional in finding supportive athletic administration.

Although several coaches in this study described athletic administration as a support, others described an unsupportive athletic administration. P7 was candid in how not having support from athletic administration wore on her, *“There were days where it just beat me down. I did not understand why he [athletic director] didn't support me. I felt like I had more than proved myself, that I could not only do this job, but do this job really damn well. And he still would not acknowledge me.”* P7 needed more support from athletic administration. P11 also needed more support from athletic administration. She described her athletic director as unsupportive:

I will take challenges to my athletic director, but a lot of times I really don't get a straight answer. I kind of get a like, okay, like maybe we can do this. And then when I ask about it later, like, oh, did you talk to that person? Or do we have any forward progress? Like, it doesn't really seem to happen. – P11

These coaches were highly critical of their athletic administration and they were not alone in this.



P5 also had struggles with athletic administration, “*Administratively is something we struggle with... he is wonderful in the sense that you can always go and talk to him. But it's not even within his scope of ability to offer some of the financial support or some of the social support that honestly coaches probably need. He's just trying to survive.*” This coach recognizes that her athletic director is just trying to survive, let alone be able to provide support. Another coach described how her athletic director in the hiring process asked her references if she was able to recruit men since she would be coaching a co-ed team. Knowing this now, this coach feels a lot of pressure to recruit men. She explained:

I know in the athletic director's conversations with some of my references, he was asking like, can she recruit men?... I can't help like kick that thought out of my head, like when I'm on the phone with a male recruit and they're seeming not engaged. I'll have this moment where I'm like, I don't know, maybe I can't recruit men? Like, no. Have you ever tried to talk to a 16-year-old boy about college? Like this is the way the conversation goes, but that's still kicking around as the opposite of a support. Cause I'm like, he might still have that doubt about me. Like this men's recruiting class, I need to like prove I can recruit men. – P6

This coach did not feel supported by her athletic administration because she thought the AD did not trust her to get the job done. Coaches mostly wanted athletic administration to show support in easy ways – come to games, stop by practice, give a phone call when a coach gets a recruit, interact with athletes and recruits, and other little ways of showing support:

I want my athletic director to drive by a practice. You don't need to stay for a whole practice, but I want you to come stand on my sideline. You know, see what I'm doing. Come interact with my players for half an hour. That I think goes a long way. Also support is, you see we have a recruit on campus. Just saying, hi, you know, stopping for two minutes, asking where they're from, what they're interested in. You know, and saying like a simple, like we've got a great coach. You know, you'd be lucky to play for her or something like that. – P8

Overall, the coaches in this study felt supported by and wanted more support from athletic administration. Coaches recognized how their athletic administration played a role in making sure they had a full-time assistant coach.

All of the coaches recognized the importance of having a full-time assistant coach. Coaches who did have a full-time assistant coach described how this support was invaluable. P17 shared, *“I do have a full-time assistant. That's a big, important nut to crack.”* Most of the coaches did not have a full-time assistant coach. Many had a stipend position with exceptionally low pay, *“I have a stipend assistant position. But it's like \$1,500 I think for like the whole season. So it's basically a volunteer position. – P18”* Some coaches did not even have a stipend position. P12 explained how she requested \$2,000 for a stipend assistant coach position in her annual budget and it was denied, *“I asked for \$2,000 for an assistant coach... I was told that I did not get that. – P11”* Coaches without full-time assistant coach help described how it was challenging to be responsible for everything. Their job was not just on-field coaching, it was so much more as P2 described it, *“Planning, travel, fundraising, class schedules, all that. I do everything.”* In addition, P7 argued that having a full-time assistant coach could have helped with her work-life balance. She reflected on how if she had an assistant coach they could have ran a practice so she could have made some of her daughter’s soccer games, *“If I had some assistant coaches then maybe they could have run practices and I could have gone to games. – P7”*

Many coaches who did not have full-time assistant coach help described this as the biggest item they needed for support, *“Support would be, for me, would be a full-time assistant... That would be my number one thing that I think is needed. – P12”* Even coaches who did have a full-time assistant coach described how they could really benefit from having another full-time assistant coach position for support, *“Would I love to have another assistant? Sure. With basketball and what we do now, if I had another assistant, I think it would make things a lot easier on all of us. – P13”* Overall, the coaches argued that in order to do their jobs to their

fullest, they needed a full-time assistant coach as a support. One of the reasons coaches did not have a full-time assistant coach came down to budgets.

Having a respectable budget was a vital support for the coaches in this study. A few coaches felt like they had an acceptable budget. P12 said, “*Our budgets really are not horrible.*” P2 felt the same way. She thought her budget was good in comparison to other coaches she had spoken to, although she would always like it to be bigger:

I think my budget is bigger than a lot of people's budgets. Would I like it to be bigger? Yes. (Laughter). It comes up, you know, like, oh, we had to fundraise for nets or whatever. And I'm like, you had to fundraise for like a safety thing? So I think I do have a pretty significant budget compared to a lot of people. – P2

Another coach discussed how it was important to her to get buses instead of vans into her yearly budget. P12 explained just how big of a budgetary support this was:

For years I drove vans and that really sucks. And so I've been getting more buses and which obviously is more safe.... It doesn't sound like a big deal, but it is a big deal. And so that is awesome. Like for us I didn't really even ask. I just threw buses in for most of our transportation because I'm just a little sick and tired of some things. – P12

The majority of other coaches argued that they needed a bigger budget to better support their program. P1 plainly said, “*We do not have a big budget whatsoever.*” P9 echoed a similar sentiment, “*Just financially having a bigger commitment from the university in terms of our budget is something I think as a coach I personally need.*” Having a bigger budget would allow coaches to do what is expected of the job. P12 explained how she needs a bigger budget to do her job:

I would say like we all would love budgetary support to be able to best run like our programs. Obviously it's a catch 22. If we're bringing in 25% of the student body they need us to do our jobs. And then the catch 22 is we overwork ourselves because we don't want to not have a good team. And so we'll work as hard as we can to get those recruits, even though we don't have the same support. And then if they see that we can do it without proper support, then why would they give us the support? It's like a catch 22. I'm not saying they're thinking that, but in my head, that's one of the things I'm thinking. So budgetary support is what I think is super important. – P12

This coach recognized a catch 22 that exists. She gets the job done without the proper budgetary support, so why would they then give her the proper budgetary support? These coaches needed a larger budget for support.

A part of budgetary support is facilities. The coaches described how those working in facilities are a great support. P9 said, *“We have great support with our facilities. I don't have to worry about getting the field lined or dragged before games.”* Despite great support from the facilities employees, coaches did not feel supported with the facilities themselves. P9 shared how her softball field was not NCAA regulation, limiting their potential to host NCAA tournaments:

We are in desperate need of a new field. Like our field is not regulation. So we could never host a regional because our distance is not correct. And we can't just move the fence back because there's a train track behind there. So there's been this like three-year process of trying to get funding for a new field. And it's definitely a Title IX issue. And everyone knows about it, but the support to get a donor or to have the university fund the field has been very slow. – P9

Another coach described how her softball program desperately needed a new tarp. Instead of softball getting a new tarp, baseball got the new tarp and softball received baseball's old one, *“never forget we needed a tarp for the field out there. Well we got the old baseball tarp and baseball got a new tarp. – P13”* In addition, there were a few coaches who did not have on-campus practice or competition facilities. P2 explained how her program practiced and played at a local high school softball field. Having her own field would be a huge support, *“Having my own field would be great. Cause then I could practice when I want, where I want, and not have to lug all of our equipment back and forth. – P2”* Another coach who did not have on-campus facilities explained how being on-campus would allow her program to feel more a part of the campus community. She said, *“It's different when you have facilities on campus because more*

*people come to games and you feel like more, you're like part of the school. – P18*” Overall, the coaches described needing more support for their facilities.

The coaches described opportunities for professional development and continuing education as a support. P18 said, *“I think definitely continuing education funds are really helpful.”* Many of the coaches described that they use their professional development funds to go to their sport coaching organization’s national convention, *“We get professional development. And we get to request what amount we want for that. So typically I request enough to go to our convention every year... I do feel supported in that. – P16”* The importance of professional development funds was highlighted by P8 who said she made sure she would be provided the funds to go to her sport coaching organization’s convention immediately after being hired for a new job, *“That was kind of one of the conversations I had with my athletic director when I was hired. Like, this is something that I go to, it's something I will continue to go to. Do you have the funds to support me? – P8”*

While the majority of coaches used professional development funds for their sport coaching organization’s national convention, others recognized the need for broader support for professional development. P7 described how she would like more professional development opportunities for women in coaching:

As a female coach, I would like to have the ability to continue with professional development. Not only in my specific sport, but as a professional, because I do view our career field as a profession. So that athletics isn't looked at as like a bunch of, you know, people just run around blowing whistles and keeping score of things, right? Like we are a profession and I would love to have the resources to be able to grow in the professionalism part of it. You know, people say, oh, well, then you need to get out of coaching and get into administration. And that's kinda my point right there. I do look at my job as a coach as a professional position. So how can we, how can we support not only coaches, but specifically female coaches because they are the minority in the numbers. How can we develop that more and make it more legitimate? So that we have equal opportunities and we have the resources that we all need for our programs to thrive.  
– P7

P7 had a desire to continue to grow in her professionalism through professional development. She wanted to legitimize sport coaching as a profession for women.

Other coaches wanted continuing education opportunities that were not sport skills specific. P14 wanted more training in how to recognize mental health struggles. She suggested, *“I think those things [mental health education] would be huge for us to get some assistance on. Whether recognizing it in a peer, coworker, or your athlete, or in yourself.”* P5 shared a similar sentiment on the need for continuing education. She argued that continuing education is paramount for coaches in today’s coaching climate:

Continuing education I think is huge... Especially when we are living in a world, like we just went through two years of COVID. Two years of huge discussions on racial equity. You know, right now we're having huge discussions on the autonomy of women's bodies. Like all of these conversations are huge ones that are impacting us and our kids. And if we, as staff, aren't learning constantly, we're gonna struggle to have those conversations intelligently with our students. And I think that's something that we desperately need. – P5

This coach took a much broader perspective to continuing education. She thought coaches needed continuing education outside of sport specific skills.

A few coaches in the study described their salary as a support. P9 said, *“I'm really fortunate to work at a school that has a great benefits package and pays a pretty decent salary.”* Another coach felt similar, *“I'm paid well. I have a stable job at an amazing institution. – P17”* While these coaches felt like they were making a fair wage, others felt differently. P5 explained, *“I do think most women coaches need equity in their salary, but that's another whole huge hurdle.”* In addition P7 thought, *“I do think that there is a large divide in what female coaches are paid.”* These coaches felt like their salary, and other women coaches’ salaries, were not what they should be.

Several coaches highlighted how having a higher salary would be supportive. P2 explained, *“I would love to be paid more... Cause I am involved in like different committees and stuff on campus too. Like I think I'm a pretty valuable resource for the school as a whole, not just the athletic department. So obviously being paid more would be great.”* P8 stated plainly that her low salary was a reason she left her previous head coaching job, *“At my former institution I was a head coach for three years. Had taken on several other roles and never received any sort of raise. I mean that was really difficult. I will be pretty transparent with you... It's a reason I left.”* Other coaches were already contemplating leaving their current job because of the low pay, *“If I made a little bit more money I'd be a lot less stressed about, do I stay here or do I try to find something that's going to pay me more? – P2”* These coaches needed more money from their employer to feel supported.

In addition to simply paying coaches more, a support would include resources on salary negotiation. P16 explained how she recently had a conversation with her AD about a raise and did not feel like the conversations went well. She described how she wished she had more support to have that conversation, *“I didn't feel entirely prepared going into that conversation, which I wish in hindsight that I would've known a better support. – P16”* This coach later goes on to explain that coaches should be more respected and one way to do this is to pay them a fair salary. She argued:

I feel like as a woman in coaching, like the number of times that I've heard, like, oh, you have such a cool job, like this sense that we should just appreciate what we do because we get to coach and be out on the field... I do it because I love it, but that doesn't mean that I shouldn't get paid and get appreciated in the same way. – P16

The point this coach made was that coaches do it because they love it and they should be paid fairly for doing so.

Coaches also discussed hiring practices when describing the support women in coaching need. P3, who had been in coaching for 37 years, explained that for a long-time only men were hired for coaching positions. She thinks that this hiring practice should be reversed, “*At this point after this history of collegiate women's basketball, there's no reason to have male coaches coaching.* – P3” She then went on to argue that the athletic administration is key to reversing this trend. She said:

I just think people aren't working very hard to hire qualified women. Cause there are a lot of qualified women out there. And so a commitment by the administrators to say, you know what we're going to put women in those coaching positions. That's our commitment. – P3

Athletic administration is a key piece to solving this issue. Women coaching men or co-ed teams have this problem exacerbated. P4 explained how she was the first female head coach hired to coach men by her athletic director. She also described an instance where her athletic director, who she felt was very supportive, was called by another athletic director to ask how she was doing coaching men. P4 explained:

Well another athletic director was interested in hiring a female coach, for a similar position, where they're coaching a men's team as well. And called up our athletic director and asked how I was doing. Because they had never hired a female to coach a men's team. And it's like, that's not happening on the other side. You know? You're not having athletic directors call up other athletic directors and wondering about if this guy can coach the women's basketball team. Like that's not happening. And so had I not been doing good job, obviously he praised me and said, heck yeah like, she's doing a great job, but had I not been, well now this other female doesn't have that opportunity to do that. – P4

This coach felt a lot of pressure to perform well as a coach or else other women coaches would not get the same opportunities. Coaches in this study recognized how current hiring practices were limiting women’s opportunities in coaching. They felt like the change had to start with athletic administration supporting women by hiring women. In addition to support from their athletic department, coaches recognized support they needed from the wider institution.



When describing their experiences of support, coaches recognized how wider university departments played a role in supporting them. Several coaches felt supported by larger college departments. These departments included admissions, financial aid, campus police, facilities, housekeeping, counseling, and many more. One that coaches highlighted as a support was admissions. P6 said, “*I mean admissions liaison. I love her to death. She's super supportive of like trying to help our program do what it needs to succeed.*” The coaches in this study were intentional in cultivating relationships with people in these departments. P7 shared just how important all of these departments were to her success as a coach:

The other thing that I did, very early on when I became the head coach is I also got involved in different committees throughout the campus because I wanted to build relationships with as many people as I could, because I understand that collectively the way that we do things is because we help each other, not because we're in silos. Right? And so I'll be honest with you. Like, I get a lot of support from a lot of like professors from different departments, admissions, financial aid, campus police, our maintenance, our grounds people, our housekeepers, like there's such a wide range of individuals that I've built relationships with here. That really, honestly, I couldn't do the job that I do if I didn't have either their verbal support and sometimes even their emotional support, their physical support. Like I'm very grateful for that. And I think that that support is what really keeps me going on a day to day basis. Especially on the days where it's really challenging, but you know, on the days where there is something great that happens, these are individuals that have either helped me get to that or they celebrate with us in that. – P7

This coach was forthright in that the support from many of these people is a reason she had stayed in coaching.

A few coaches did describe a need for more support from wider college departments. P5 explained how interdepartmental communication is non-existent at her college, “*Communication is extremely poor. I've said it since my first week here, and I realized that I had a girl visit and no one communicated to me that she was physically here when she got to admissions.*” This coach needed more support from other departments in terms of communication. Another coach

explained how coaches are encouraged not to form relationships with other departments on campus. She said:

There's some things, like coaches aren't allowed to go to the registrar. Like I have to go to the registrar through an administrative assistant. Which like is fine, but it's like the same way with like ResLife. Whereas ResLife is an office that I think it would be a lot more helpful if I could walk in there and introduce myself. Just so we're like on the same page, but we're kind of told not to do that. – P6

P6 wanted to have the opportunity to form relationships with wider college departments to better support her program.

In addition to support from the wider college departments, coaches described support from university leadership outside of athletics. Coaches felt supported when the college president and other university leaders came to games, *“I mean even little things like the president and the deans and folks come to games. – P3”* Another coach echoed that they appreciated the support from the college president. P13 shared, *“I've been blessed to have great support. Our president who just retired. He and his wife were strong athletic supporters.”* Other university leaders were highlighted for their support. P9 shared how the VP of student-affairs was supportive of athletics:

Our athletic director's boss, who's the VP of student affairs. He's very supportive in terms of like coming to games and being a presence. He's met with all the coaches and he can be, he is super supportive, but at the end of the day, like he needs to get other people on board for it to make a financial impact on us. So we need the support of the CEO and the president to allocate more resources to athletics. Even though our direct report is really supportive of all students and really sees the bigger picture in athletics, unless he can get people above him on board, like we're not going to get some of the resources, mostly financially that we need. – P9

This coach recognized that while the support from the VP of student affairs is great, they needed more support from other university leaders.

Other coaches also described how they needed more support from college leaders. P5 wanted university leaders to have the same conversations she has. She said, *“I think really*

*understanding what your students need and having those conversations. Like I have those conversations every single day, but I need the president to have those conversations. I need trustees to have those conversations. What are the hurdles your students are facing? – P5”* This same coach went on to say:

There's still good people that you can reach out to, but it's disheartening to reach out to people that have no power. That can't help you change things. You know, you can reach out as many times as you want to your best friend, but they can't change the way your job works. That's what it comes down to. And I think this was the same way actually at the last institution I was at. The people with power weren't reachable or communicating. – P5

This coach felt like those in power were not accessible. She wanted more support from college leadership in terms of communication.

In sum, coaches described both having support and needing support from their institution. When asked about support, coaches brought up athletic administration, full-time assistant coach, budget, facilities, professional development, salary, hiring practices, and the wider college or university outside of the athletic department. All coaches described the need for a supportive athletic administration. There were mixed experiences for athletic administration; some coaches felt like they were supportive, while other felt very little support. Coaches appreciated when their athletic administration would check-in and come to games. The coaches also harped on the importance of having a full-time assistant coach. Having an assistant coach would allow them to have more of a work-life balance. In addition, coaches needed more support in terms of budget, facilities, professional development or continuing education funds, salary, and equitable hiring practices. Coaches also recognized how departments on campus outside of athletics were a support. Coaches wanted more support from university leadership for athletics as a whole. Overall, internal organizations had a major impact on the experiences of the women sport coaches in this study.

***External Organizations: “they have been an amazing resource”***

The coaches in this study described external organizations as a form of support and recommended ways organizations outside of their college or university could better support them. Specifically, the coaches described how their sport coaching organizations and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) were important to their success in coaching.

Many coaches noted how their respective sport coaching organization supported them through a national convention and other resources. P4 explained how she appreciated that USA Track & Field (USATF) had a women in coaching seminar at the national convention, *“So every year there's a coach's convention and like the USATF, track and field cross country association, and so they'll have a women in coaching seminar because it is so, it's not common. And so like we all get together and talk and I've actually learned a lot through that.”* She found this seminar extremely helpful in her newer role as head coach.

Outside of a national convention, several of these sport coaching organizations provided resources and education for coaches. When asked about support, P1 immediately brought up the National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA). She explained how they supported her in getting a fair salary for her current position:

So I really appreciate the NFCA, the national fastpitch coaches association. That is a huge support that I have and want to continue to have, and absolutely will take advantage of going forward. They do a lot of great educational resources. There's also, you know, my membership also gets me access to a lawyer. So, for example, over the summer when I was being hired for this current position, the salary that I was offered looked a little bit different than what I could find of other positions. And so I had access through the NFCA to our lawyer who kind of helped me figure out and, you know, support me in that way. – P1

This coach valued the support she received from the NFCA not only for the lawyer, but also for the educational resources. Other coaches also appreciated their sport coaching organization for the educational resources. P5 explained how the Intercollegiate Women’s Lacrosse Coaches

Association (IWLCA) helped her with education on sport specific knowledge and also diversity and equity resources:

I would say that something I utilize heavily personally is the IWLCA, they're our coaches association. And so they're throughout women's lacrosse and they have been an amazing resource. After George Floyd's murder they were having regular discussions on diversity and equity. Educational resources on diversity and equity. How can I make sure my team feels safe? How can I make sure that I'm educated? That I am, I know my terminology? That I'm an advocate? And they've done it for the LGBTQ community. They've done it for talking about mental health resources for us as coaches. And I would say that is something I don't think I would've made it five years here if I didn't have those resources of other coaches saying, I'm going through the same thing, this is freaking hard, and how do we get through this together? – P5

This coach appreciated the resources provided by the IWLCA and also the relationships she has been able to cultivate through the organization.

There were a few coaches who felt that their sport coaching organizations could be doing a better job on support. When discussing the mentorship program provided by the NFCA, P9 said it was a hit or miss on whether or not it was supportive, *“It really just depends on the mentor you get whether or not it's beneficial.”* This coach felt like the mentor program could be a better support if it was geared more for DIII coaches. In addition to changes to the mentorship program, another coach suggested that sport coaching organizations should require employers to list the salary in job postings, *“I think one thing the NFCA should do is if people are gonna post a job posting on their website, I think they should require the actual salary. I think it would be good for the industry too. – P2”* The argument here was that talking about salary should not be faux pas and that coaches should all be making at least a livable wage. Requiring employers to list the salary on job postings would be a support. The majority of coaches felt supported by their sport coaching organization; however, they also noted a few ways they could be better supported.

Another organization that was mentioned by coaches was the NCAA. Coaches argued that policy changes at this level would be a support. One recommendation was to change the

policy on when coaches are allowed to give their athletes feedback. A few coaches wanted to be able to provide their athletes with feedback during the offseason. P2 explained:

DIII as a whole, the not being able to talk about softball during the summer or during that phase where I can't lead a practice. Like I'm fine with not being able to lead a practice for two or three months, but I would love for them to be able to come and ask me and say like, Hey, my curve ball is not working. Here's a video. What can I work on? That would be a big help. – P2

This coach wanted more flexibility from the NCAA and others felt the same, *“In division three in general, it'd be great to have a little bit more flexibility. I don't think I need more time, but a little bit more flexibility on when I get to work with my players would be something.”* – P17”

Allowing coaches to have more flexibility when practice happens and how they can give feedback to student-athletes was desired by coaches.

In addition to more flexibility in terms of practice and off-season, coaches felt like the NCAA should revise the policy on recruiting. Recruiting was described as a challenge for many of the coaches in this study. P15 described this challenge, *“the pressure of recruiting and all of that. Where it's like, okay, well if I don't contact her today, what if somebody else is?”* Other coaches were also worried about constantly having to be recruiting, *“we don't have any downtime recruiting. You can be out recruiting year-round. And so for me, it's been hard because I've always been driven that...if I'm not working, somebody else is out there outworking me.”* – P13” This coach offered a recommendation that other coaches also expressed, *“I wish that there was some kind of, and this might have to come from the NCAA, I don't know downtime? Like division two has times that they can't be out playing and they can't be recruiting. And I think that would be wonderful for division three.”* – P13” The coaches felt that if there was some downtime in recruiting they would actually be able to take a break and not worry about if they

were working enough or if someone else was outworking them. Change in NCAA policy was a needed support for these coaches.

In sum, organizations outside of the college or university coaches worked at were described by coaches as a support. Coaches recognized how their sport coaching organizations supported them through programming and education. They also described ways they could be better supported by creating programming for DIII coaches and requiring employers to list salaries in job postings. In addition, coaches described how NCAA policy change could support them. Coaches mentioned how they always felt like they had to be recruiting. Coaches wanted a policy change that incorporates a dead period for recruiting, so that they can actually take a break from their jobs. Overall, the coaches in this study provided ways for external organizations to provide more support.

### **Socio-Cultural**

The socio-cultural theme pertains to anything related to societal influence. One subtheme was identified at this level: (1) Gendered Expectations: “let's make a new system.” This subtheme is discussed under the overarching theme, Paradox of Support.

#### ***Gendered Expectations: “let's make a new system”***

The participants in this study described the ways that gendered expectations impacted their coaching careers. The coaches described numerous challenges because of gendered expectations, ways they are trying to move past gendered expectations, and what we should be doing to better support women in coaching to overcome gendered expectations.

Every women coach in this study described at least one challenge related to gendered expectations. Many coaches identified continuous microaggressions. P10 described her experience of people always being surprised by her confidence:

Gender related [challenges], I feel like are just a lot of like off-handed comments and microaggressions and things. Like, I definitely have like gone on interviews and people have been like, oh, you're so confident for a young woman... Not even necessarily too confident, just surprised by my confidence. So that is always kind of annoying because I just think if it was even a young man, they wouldn't, nobody would say that. They wouldn't be like, you're so confident for a young man. – P10

This coach argued that nobody would have a similar reaction if she were male. Other coaches also felt like they could not be too confident or assertive. P11 described the impossible balance of being not too assertive, but also assertive enough during athletic department meetings where there were very few females present, *“like if you're assertive, you come off not well. And if you're not assertive, then they'll steamroll you.”* Many coaches echoed this sentiment that it was difficult to balance asking for what they needed with being perceived as needy. P7 shared:

The other part that I've really struggled with and try to talk to other females in our career field, is that it was like, because I was asking for something that was not unreasonable, all of a sudden I was being a bitch about it. Or I was being like, oh, she's so sensitive. You know? And it was like, no, this is not about like traits of a female. This is about like equal opportunities or equal resources. And not just because I'm vocalizing that these are the needs that I'm recognizing for my program, or even for the athletics department as a whole, doesn't make me a whiny or complaining bitch. Like, I don't really understand where that comes from. – P7

This coach was frustrated that she was perceived as a bitch for simply asking for the things she needed. P4 recognized that the perceptions of female and male coaches' behaviors are different, *“If you're the direct one, you kind of come off as, let's say like a bitch. And it's just like, if I was a guy doing these things, it wouldn't make a difference.”* These gendered expectations also affect student-athletes, which in turn effect women coaches.

P15 described an example of how these unconscious gendered expectations influenced student-athletes. She and her husband were assistant coaches for the same team at the same time. She explained how their former players would always ask him, rather than her, for reference letters, *“A lot of our former players, we have the same relationship with them and yet they go to*



*him for references. Cause he's a man. And, you know, it's one of those things it's like, they probably don't even think twice about it. – P15*” This same coach was frustrated about being asked if she would stay in coaching once getting pregnant. Her husband was doing the exact same job and nobody was asking him if he would still coach. She explained, *“I got very pissed off because I'm pregnant and everyone's asking me, are you still planning to coach? Not a single person asked my husband that question. You know? And we do the same job. – P15*” Other coaches recognized how family expectations were different for female and male coaches. P13 shared:

I think we as women get pulled so many different directions. I never could have kids, but I had a husband I had to go home and take care of and you know, was I doing enough there? But was I also doing enough to take care of my job and my student athletes? And I think sometimes, and I've talked to other females here in the office and through my years, and I think we as females still have to carry that extra load while being coaches and stuff where sometimes some of the men it's not expected. – P13

The coaches felt that these gendered expectations were limiting women’s coaching careers. In addition to how others view gendered expectations, coaches themselves recognized that their own gendered perceptions were impacted by societal norms.

Coaches recognized how their own perceptions were influenced by societal and cultural norms. P12 was currently in an athletic department that had mostly female leadership. She described how the patriarchy had influenced her thought processes about the all-female leadership, *“It's strange because I was like raised in a patriarchal society and then I'm thinking, we have all these females [in leadership] is that bad? Can the guys relate? But looking back, do you think any of the guys ever cared that there was no females there to relate? – P12*” This was not the only coach who reflected on how their own thinking could be upholding these expectations. P17 thought that women may be holding themselves back when commenting on the patriarchy and how it has impacted her coaching career:

I think that's [patriarchy] been a problem for however many thousands of years we think that people have been around... I would say at the beginning of my coaching career, I was probably more on the other side of the train. Like I wasn't necessarily battling against the sexism. I was just like, yeah, that's a thing. And like, I'm going to be one of the guys and be good at coaching instead of being like, huh, seems like we should value women in a different way. So that's not a point in my favor. But I think being more aware of how generally our world is geared towards privileging men is just something that I've become more aware of as recent times. I think it's both a historical moment thing and an aging thing... I think also women are like, yeah, we can do more with less and that's okay. So are we right? And are we being held back by holding ourselves back? Like I think there's a lot of interesting questions there. – P17

Despite the many challenging gendered expectations experienced by the women coaches in this study, there were ways that some coaches were trying to move beyond these expectations.

One coach's perspective has changed throughout her long career:

When I was younger, that was the motivator. You know, just proving all the time. And I see it in my own daughter who's at the division one level. She just feels the need to work that much harder than some guy out there. It's gotta be better than that person over there because, you don't necessarily come out and say because I'm a woman, but because I'm a woman there's a standard that I have to hit. And thankfully as I've gotten older, I think I've kind of made my peace with that a little bit more. But I think that's hard for younger coaches and younger people in any profession, any profession where a woman is there. – P3

While this coach has changed her perspective, she recognized how other coaches may still have this pressure to outwork male coaches in order to be accepted. One participant in this study provided evidence of this, *“I have come to the conclusion, and I don't know that this is necessarily a good thing, but if they're not gonna respect me because I'm a female, then I feel like I have to work, let's say 10 times harder to prove that my work is worthy of being acknowledged. – P7”* This coach felt like she had to work harder to be valued the same way her male colleagues were, although she recognized this might not be the most effective strategy.

Coaches have used other strategies to overcome some of the gendered challenges they face. One of these is to not focus so much on gender. One coach described how she

simultaneously tried to think little about gender and have the hard conversations about gender within her co-ed team. P10 explained:

I try and think pretty little about gender in the hopes of certainly not ignoring all the issues because like I know they exist and like ignoring them doesn't help. But just in the fact of like, you know, gender is not a binary and like some people identify all along a spectrum. And so I think that I've tried to talk about issues with society that society has with gender so that we [team] continue to be leaders like on campus in eliminating them.  
– P10

This coach recognized that coaches have to talk about the issues that society has with gender to help eliminate them. This same coach thought it was important to call out instances of sexism when they happened. She gave one example of calling out a male coach for calling a male student-athlete a sexist trope:

I've tried to correct people a lot on any of those [sexist] terms. [At an event] one of the other head coaches said, because we had a male athlete scratch an event. And he was like, he scratched because he's such a pussy. And I was like, no, if he had a pussy he'd be behind the blocks cause women don't scratch our events. And he was actually to his credit, he was like, that's actually really true. I was like, yes. I was like, you shouldn't use that as like a derogatory term or anything like that. – P10

Another coach described that it is important for her to be her authentic self in her coaching, even if this is not what the prototypical masculine coach looks like. P6 said, “*This idea of like authenticity and trying to be my authentic self as a coach. It's this balance of like what a coach should be versus who I actually am. And knowing that like I show up better if I'm authentic.*”

These coaches were using small strategies like having conversations, calling out sexism, and being one's authentic self as a coach to overcome gendered expectations.

In addition to what coaches were already doing, coaches described various ideas they thought might help decrease the gendered expectations for women in coaching. One idea that coaches talked about was more training. P4 argued that she has a better awareness of her biases because of training. She thought anti-bias training may be helpful for other coaches:

If we could make people not have these biases. You know, because I do think it's unconscious. It's not like they're sitting there saying like, 'oh this female.' But it's just like, you're just not treated the same. And I just think people are really unaware and we have training for stuff like that, but I think some people don't take it seriously because they, they've never been through it. So like now, like I'm more aware of my unconscious biases towards people because I see them. I see people's unconscious bias about me. So if you've never had that, then I can see how it's just like, oh this is whatever. I think that training is good, but I mean, you can't force people to take it seriously. – P4

She recognized that you cannot make people take training seriously, but that this could be one step to help. Another coach had a similar suggestion for training. This coach thought training on emotional intelligence might be helpful because her emotions help her as a coach. She said, *“Like my emotions can help me as a coach. And if I have the support to understand my emotions, if I have the support for my coaching staff to know how I'm feeling on a given day and to be educated in that area, educated in emotional intelligence it's hugely helpful. – P5”* These coaches argued that the only way to overcome gendered expectations is through education.

In a radical or not so radical opinion, one coach suggested we just burn it all down. P10 argued, *“I think that like we've tried for years to be like let's get together as women and like complain and survive and talk about how we can move forward. You know, like coach within this system that's already here, but I'm like fuck that, like let's make a new system.”* This coach felt strongly that we needed to try something new. Another coach explained a different perspective:

I think I would say remain patient if it's moving in the forward direction. If it's moving along, keep being patient, cause it's never moving at the pace we want. But if it's not moving, then the patience goes out the window and that's the time to challenge the system. And that's what I've shared with other people too. You know, don't minimize the progress that's happening. But at the same time if it pauses, be the person that pushes it to get it going again. – P3

Overall, the participants discussed many challenges because of gendered expectations, ways they are trying to move past gendered expectations, and what we should be doing to better support women in coaching overcome gendered expectations. Coaches were trying to move past

gendered expectations by having conversations about gender, calling out sexism, and being one's authentic self as a coach. Coaches also thought that the only way to move beyond gendered expectations is through education and training. One coach had the radical suggestion that in order to move beyond gendered expectations we should just create a new system. Overall, coaches identified a few ways they could be better supported at the socio-cultural level.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to examine women sport coaches' experiences of support. The study was framed within the EIM (LaVoi, 2016) and data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; 2012; 2013; 2019; 2021). The results revealed three levels of patterned meaning: overarching theme, themes, and subthemes. This chapter will situate the findings of this study with existing literature and offer various ways to better support women in coaching. First, there is a discussion on how this research has expanded our current understanding of women coaches' experiences. Next, the overarching theme, Paradox of Support, is discussed with more nuance. Here, I expand on the findings by providing my interpretation of the results. I then provide the next steps that I can engage in as a sport psychology practitioner and scholar to support women sport coaches. Finally, implications, limitations, and future directions are offered.

This study expands the current literature in several ways. The findings support the use of the ecological intersectional model (EIM; LaVoi, 2016) as a guiding framework to understand women coaches' experiences. Previous literature is clear, women coaches face many barriers across all levels of the EIM (LaVoi, 2016). Scholars have called for a shift from focusing on barriers to focusing on supports (LaVoi, 2016; LaVoi et al., 2019). There has been little research that has examined the support sport coaches need (Norris et al., 2020), and none that has examined the specific needs of women sport coaches. This study has expanded our current understanding of support for women sport coaches. In addition, this study utilized a feminist approach to research. Feminist research aims to provide results that address inequities and amplifies the voices of marginalized people (Bredemeier, 2001). Scholarship that is not informed by a feminist approach has a discourse of autonomy and choice, which places the blame of the

decline in women coaches on women coaches themselves, without considering the organizational, structural, and cultural factors that are at play. Through its feminist lens, the present study has extended scholarship by amplifying the voices of women sport coaches. Lastly, the experiences of DIII women coaches has not been represented in the literature. Much of the literature that exists on women sport coaches is at the NCAA DI level or elite levels (e.g., professional) in other countries (e.g., Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Kamphoff et al., 2010; Norman, 2014; Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). DIII is the largest division in the NCAA, including 440-member institutions compared to 380-member institutions at the DI level (NCAA, 2021b). This division houses the majority of opportunities for women in coaching to enter the profession. Research should amplify the voices of all women coaches, regardless of level. This research helped to close the gap in scholarly understanding of DIII women coaches' experiences. Overall, this study has expanded the current literature by providing support for the EIM (LaVoi, 2016), examining support rather than barriers, utilizing a feminist approach to research, and amplifying the voices of women coaches and the DIII context.

### **Paradox of Support**

The overarching theme for this analysis was termed, Paradox of Support. Paradox is defined as “something that is made up of two opposite things that seems impossible but is actually true or possible” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). In other words, a paradox is the notion that two contrasting ideas can exist. In sport the female/athlete paradox is the idea that being athletic is in contrast to being feminine. Previous research has documented this paradox and its effects on female athletes (Krane et al., 2004). A paradox also exists for women in coaching; there are more women athletes participating in sport, yet there are fewer women in coaching (LaVoi, 2016). Paradoxes exist for women who enter sport spaces across all levels. It should come as no surprise

that a paradox exists for support. The paradox in this study was that the women coaches identified numerous support needs; yet, these coaches were still coaching. This section of the discussion will describe this paradox with more nuance through my analysis of the participants' experiences.

The findings from the present study revealed that all coaches designated numerous support needs across the EIM levels. P12 contended, "*Clearly all coaches need support and women coaches need more support... Just based on the patriarchal, misogynistic, white supremacist culture that we find ourselves in and have found ourselves in.*" At the individual level, coaches needed support in the form of advocacy, inclusive parental leave policy, childcare, a flexible workplace, work-life balance strategies, and mental health resources. At the interpersonal level, coaches needed formal and informal networking and mentoring opportunities with coaching colleagues, both within and outside of their athletic department. At the organizational level, coaches needed support from athletic administration in terms of checking-in, a full-time assistant coach, equitable budget, facilities, salaries, and professional development resources. At the socio-cultural level, coaches needed support through anti-bias training. There were many more support needs identified by the coaches in this study (See Table 2). Despite all of these clearly identified support needs, these coaches were still coaching. Herein lies the paradox of support. The coaches described various support needs, yet they were still in the coaching profession.

The participants with children were concerned about being able to continue their coaching careers. This is not surprising as balancing motherhood and coaching is cited as one of the main challenges for women in the coaching profession (Dixon & Bruening, 2005; Bruening & Dixon, 2007). P15 described this challenge, "*It's [motherhood] the hardest thing I've ever*



*done. Honestly, I never anticipated. I was always like, if I have a kid I'm not giving up what I love. Like I'm doing it.*" This coach described how she had never considered giving up coaching more than this past year. She described a lot of support from her partner, family, and athletic administration. Yet, the challenges associated with motherhood were wearing on her. She needed more support in the form of childcare and not feeling so much pressure to be there for her family and student-athletes. This coach was still in coaching despite needing support, but questioned how long she will be able to stay in the profession, *"I've never considered not coaching more than probably this year. It's been very difficult. – P15"* I'm left pondering the same question for her and for other women coaches.

Other mother-coaches in this study shared this experience. Despite identifying several support needs, they were still in coaching. P7 shared:

When I started here as the head coach 10 years ago, my daughter was six years old. So clearly she's 16 now. And I will be the first person to tell you, I have no idea what the last 10 years of her life have been like. I mean, clearly she's my daughter and she lives in my house, but I've missed most of her soccer games. I probably can count on one hand the number of school events that I've been to in the last 10 years. I mean, it's difficult. And it was by my own doing... I throw myself 100% into whatever I'm doing. And I threw myself into my work and not into being a mom. So now in hindsight, and I will tell you that quarantine really smacked me upside the head and kind of was a reality check for me. And that realization that that's what I allowed to happen. I told myself that once things started back up that I was going to do a better job of working towards a work-life balance... I want the next 10 years to be more balanced. – P7

The paradox here is that this coach lost 10 years of her daughter's life; yet, she was still coaching. P7 went on to explain that having a full-time assistant coach could have allowed her to be more present in her daughter's life because the assistant could have run a practice while she went to her daughter's soccer games. However, she takes full responsibility for missing out on her daughter's life. She felt guilty for her absence and she was still in coaching. Overall, these mother-coaches identified support needs (i.e., workplace childcare opportunities, child-friendly

and flexible workplaces, full-time assistant coaches). Yet, they were still coaching. Additional coaches identified support needs for mother-coaches.

Even coaches without children were concerned about entering motherhood. P5 explained, *“As a parent in coaching, so many people just simply, they get out of coaching once they have kids. It's such a battle. And I would love to say that won't happen to me, but I would also say I know what's realistic.”* This coach was pragmatic in that she was not sure she would be able to stay in coaching long-term because of the challenges associated with motherhood, without even being a mother herself. Several coaches in this study were concerned about being able to continue their coaching careers once having children. The paradox here is that coaches without children were discussing motherhood. Despite not yet having children, the coaches in this study were describing the support they would need once entering motherhood. One coach plainly said that she would not even consider having children until she had a full-time assistant coach as a support, *“I think I would have to have an assistant first. – P18”* It was clear from the analysis that the coaches in this study without children were worried about being able to continue their coaching careers once having children. They needed more support to even consider having children. Yet, they were still coaching. The coaches in this study needed more support in other areas outside of motherhood.

The coaches in the present study described how they needed much more support and felt like nothing was really changing. One coach described how those in power understood her support needs. Yet, nothing was changing, *“They're fully aware of what my needs are. It's just very slow in going from recognition to application. – P7”* This coach went on to share the paradox she was facing. When she asked for a salary increase was told that in order for her to get an increase she needed to recruit more student-athletes. She then asked to have a full-time

assistant coach to help increase her recruiting numbers and was told the same thing, she can get a full-time assistant once her recruiting numbers increase. She made the glaring point, how are her recruiting numbers supposed to increase if she doesn't have the support (e.g., recruiting budget, full-time assistant coach) she needs? P7 explained:

I think I'm one of the lowest paid, if not the lowest paid head coach here in our athletics department. And when I've asked for a raise I'm told, well, until your numbers increase... So that's like the answer for everything, I need a full-time assistant coach, well your numbers need to go up. Well, how are my numbers going to go up if I don't have help? – P7

This coach was not being provided the support she needed, yet she was still in coaching. I'm still left to ponder the same question from above, how long will she be able to continue in the coaching profession? She went on to share her thoughts on how the lack of support was influencing her decisions about her career, *“At some point do I have to say, if y'all aren't going to do this [provide support], then you just need to find someone else? Like, I don't know like where my line is. – P7”* She had begun to question where her line was for leaving coaching. Despite noting various support needs and not receiving them, this coach was still coaching.

The coaches in this study needed more support on many different levels; yet, they were still in coaching. It became evident through the analysis that one way the women coaches were trying to overcome the lack of support was to just work harder. P7 shared, *“I have come to the conclusion, and I don't know that this is necessarily a good thing, but if they're not gonna respect me because I'm a female, then I feel like I have to work, let's say 10 times harder to prove that my work is worthy of being acknowledged.”* This coach described how her solution to the lack of support and respect was to just work harder to prove her worth. Another coach described a similar experience, *“When I was younger, that was the motivator. Just proving all the time... It's gotta be better than that person over there because, you don't necessarily come out and say*

*because I'm a woman, but because I'm a woman there's a standard that I have to hit. – P3*” The women coaches described how working harder would get them the respect they deserved. Yet, they were still in coaching. I then began to question, is just outworking others or working harder the solution to no support?

Coaches considered this thought in our conversations. P12 described the catch 22 that her and other women in coaching are in when it comes to working harder:

It's a catch 22. If we're bringing in 25% of the student body, they need us to do our jobs. And then the catch 22 is we overwork ourselves because we don't want to not have a good team. And so we'll work as hard as we can to get those recruits, even though we don't have the same support. And then if they see that we can do it without proper support, then why would they give us the support? It's like a catch 22.” – P12

The coaches are getting their jobs done without the proper support, so why would they be given the appropriate support? The coaches were doing more with less, but is this a good thing? One coach pondered whether this notion of working harder was helpful, *“I think also women are like, yeah, we can do more with less and that's okay. So are we right? And are we being held back by holding ourselves back? – P17”* This coach asked an interesting question, are women coaches holding themselves back by doing more with less? It became evident in the analysis that the women coaches in this study were doing more with less because they did not have the support they needed. The paradox that exists was that coaches did not have the support they needed, were doing more with less, and yet they were still coaching.

One might logically ask next, why would these women stay in coaching without the proper support? It became evident through the analysis that one of the reasons these coaches were still doing it because they loved it:

I'm really passionate about it [coaching]. Really, really love it. – P5

The very first day I came to the university to work with the team I fell in love with it [coaching]. Like immediately. It was the weirdest. It was almost like, where have you been my whole life? – P7

A big part of my passion is my work. – P14

I fell in love with it [coaching]. I thought it was so cool. – P16

The coaches in this study were still in coaching because they loved it, despite needing a lot of support. However, I do not think that simply loving your job is enough. Yes, coaches loved their jobs, but that does not mean they should not get the support that they need. P16 argued:

I feel like as a woman in coaching, like the number of times that I've heard, like, oh, you have such a cool job, like this sense that we should just appreciate what we do because we get to coach and be out on the field. People are always asking like, oh, what do you do when you're not in season as if it's not a full-time job? This sense that like all of what we do, like it's year-round, like our job is year-round and I do it because I love it, but that doesn't mean that I shouldn't get paid and get appreciated in the same way... I want to be respected and paid for my time and acknowledged for the time that we put in. Like what we do is legitimate and it's a lot of work and it's non-stop and I love it. And I want to get paid. I want to be respected for what we do. – P16

This coach is arguing that she is in coaching because she loves it. However, that does not mean she should not be supported and appreciated in the profession. The findings from this study revealed that women coaches are doing more with less. They were coaching because they loved it, yet they clearly needed more support. I agree with P16, just because women coaches love what they do, does not mean they should not be provided the support they need. Overall, the findings revealed numerous support needs across the EIM levels. From the present study we have a better understanding of the support women coaches want and need. The next step is to determine how to get them this support.

Two coaches provided thoughts about our current sport coaching system. One coach thought we should burn the system down. P10 explained, *“I think that like we've tried for years to be like let's get together as women and like complain and survive and talk about how we can*

*move forward. You know, like coach within this system that's already here, but I'm like fuck that, like let's make a new system.*” Her thought was that instead of women getting together and complaining and trying to operate within the masculine sport system that exists, we should burn it down and create a new one. Another coach had a differing outlook. She thought we should remain patient if we are moving in the right direction. P3 argued:

I think I would say remain patient if it's moving in the forward direction. If it's moving along, keep being patient, cause it's never moving at the pace we want. But if it's not moving, then the patience goes out the window and that's the time to challenge the system. And that's what I've shared with other people too. You know, don't minimize the progress that's happening. But at the same time if it pauses, be the person that pushes it to get it going again. – P3

When considering the paradox of support for women in coaching, where women coaches need many supports, yet still continue to coach, I’m left to contemplate whether we change the system as P10 argued or remain patient as P3 argued. What would a sport system look like where women coaches are fully supported? How many more women would enter and thrive in the profession if these various supports were provided? What would sport look like if women coaches did not feel like they had to just work harder to get support? This idea is not altogether new. Sport scholars have called for a ‘re-norming’ of the toxic sport culture that perpetuates sexism, racism, and homophobia for girls and women (Breger et al., 2019).

After much reflection, I believe the findings from this study provide evidence that we need both perspectives. I do not think we need to burn it down as suggested by P10 and I also do not think we can remain patient as described by P7. Burning it down would suggest that there are not good people already doing important work. If we burn it down, who’s there to build it back up? I also do not think we can remain patient. It has been almost 50 years since the passage of Title IX, yet the percentage of women in coaching remains stagnant (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Boucher et al., 2021). We know the numerous barriers women coaches face (LaVoi, 2016). From

this study, we now have a better understanding of support women coaches have, want, and need. I think we can find a middle ground between P10's and P7's ideas.

I'll provide a metaphor for my thoughts; I do think some drastic things need to change in order for women coaches to be fully supported in sport spaces. In that sense, the fire does need to be lit. However, I think we need to have our fire hose ready because the entire system does not need to burn down. Coaches did describe support in this study. There are people who are doing good work to support women in coaching. Not everything needs to change and saying so would discount the important work that is already being done. To sum this idea up, we do need to make critical changes AND we need to build onto what we have. I do not pretend to have the answers for how we change and/or push the sport system forward at this point in time. This is a question that other sport scholars and myself should continue to ask. I hope to challenge scholars and practitioners to consider how they can support all who participate in sport, especially women in coaching, within their individual settings and the broader sport context. I take on this challenge myself in the next section.

### **Next Steps**

As an applied sport psychology practitioner and scholar there are ways that I can begin to implement the findings from the present study across the EIM levels. At the individual level, I can work with coaches on mental performance skills. In applied sport psychology, the practitioner's primary goal is to facilitate optimal involvement, performance, and enjoyment in sport and exercise (AASP, 2022). While coaches are listed as target clients for many sport psychology organizations around the world (i.e., AASP, ISSP, FEPSAC), much of the research with coaches has focused on using the coach as a facilitator of sport psychology skills for athletes (Longshore & Sachs, 2015; Martens, 1987), rather than applying sport psychology skills

for their own performance and well-being. There is evidence that working with sport psychology practitioners and sport psychology education has benefits for coaches (Sheehy et al., 2019; Zakrajsek & Zizzi, 2008). The women coaches in the present study were interested in mental performance skills for their own performance as coaches. One way I can support women in coaching is to utilize my training as a sport psychology practitioner to support coaches through mental performance skills (e.g., stress management techniques). In addition, the coaches in this study were struggling to manage their work-life balance and wanted support through strategies they could apply to create more balance. Strategies may be useful because previous literature has shown that women coaches' ability to self-regulate behaviors, thoughts, and emotions can help to minimize stress and burnout (Durand-Bush et al., 2012). One strategy that could be applied to promote work-life balance is mindfulness practice (Michel et al., 2014). Overall, I can support women coaches' well-being with my background in applied sport psychology through targeted mental performance skills and work-life balance strategies.

In addition, the women coaches in the present study recognized the importance of mental health for their athletes and for themselves. Much of the current literature focuses on how coaches can support athlete mental health (Henriksen et al., 2019) and the coaches in this study described how supporting their athlete's mental health was important. However, they argued that their own mental health should not be overlooked. The participants gave strategies to better support their mental health including having a counselor or therapist on-campus, or even embedded in athletics. The main message from the participants was that coaches should have access to mental health resources too. I can support coach's mental health through education and advocating for mental health resources. It is important to make the distinction that I am not a mental health practitioner; however, I can support women in coaching by advocating for access



and encouraging help-seeking for mental health resources. In conclusion, there are many ways that I can support women in coaching at the individual level, including mental performance skills, work-life balance tools, and mental health advocacy.

I can also provide support at the interpersonal level. The coaches in this study described needing support from their interpersonal networks. These interpersonal networks consisted of coaching colleagues at their current institution and networking or mentoring outside of their athletic department. Despite having some support, the coaches also described how they needed more support from their coaching colleagues. Previous literature highlights that support from other coaches is beneficial for women in coaching (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Coaches wanted more informal space in department meetings to get to know one another on a more personal level. Other coaches thought smaller support group type meetings would be helpful. One coach wished her Senior Women Administrator would have regular meetings with the female coaches in the department to discuss female specific challenges. In my role as a sport psychology practitioner I can encourage athletic departments to create space, and hold space myself, for coaches to connect on a more personal level through coach meetings or smaller support groups. This connection is important because previous literature provides evidence that coaches want to feel like they genuinely belong (Vinson et al., 2016).

In addition to coaching colleagues within their athletic department, the coaches in this study identified their coaching network outside of their college or university as a necessary interpersonal support. Previous literature supports that mentoring or networking is beneficial for career development for women coaches (Banwell et al., 2019). Despite the recognized importance of networking and mentoring, some coaches described a lack of peer interpersonal relationships outside of their athletic department. These participants shared how it was

challenging to establish coaching networks or find coaching mentors. The coaches designated ways they could be supported in establishing these interpersonal peer relationships. A formal mentoring program was desired by several coaches. In my role as a sport psychology practitioner and scholar I can help to create programming that supports networking and mentorship for women in coaching. This would be a beneficial support because mentorship has been shown to help with career and psychosocial support for women in coaching (Banwell et al., 2019; Banwell et al., 2021). In addition to a formal mentor program, coaches wanted a space where coaches could connect and trouble-shoot issues in a small group format. One example a coach provided was a ‘coffee with coaches,’ where coaches could share their experiences and share advice with each other. I can work with sport coaching organizations (e.g., Intercollegiate Women’s Lacrosse Coaches Association, National Fastpitch Coaches Association) and women coaching organizations (e.g., WeCoach) to provide more informal spaces for coaches to connect with one another. This would be important because programming to support women in coaching can have benefits (Allen & Reid, 2019; Kraft et al., 2020). Overall, in my role as a sport psychology practitioner and scholar I can provide support at the interpersonal level through networking and mentoring programming, within and outside of coaches’ athletic departments.

Lastly, I can support women in coaching at the organizational and socio-cultural levels. The Association for Applied Sport Psychology and American Psychological Association call on professionals to advocate for everyone they work with (AASP, 2011; APA, 2017). Sport psychology, through emerging literature on cultural sport psychology (Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009) and feminist sport psychology (Carter, 2019), acknowledges the importance of recognizing how all of one’s positionalities impact performance and well-being. Practitioners who engage in cultural or feminist sport psychology support clients in caring for themselves and

their mental and physical well-being (Tibbetts, 2019). This includes empowering clients to speak up when they need help, helping clients to develop multiple identities, and engaging in social justice beyond the practitioner-client level (Hacker & Mann, 2017). SPPs should question, and assist their clients who question, organizational, institutional, and societal practices that are oppressive (Hacker & Mann, 2017). As a sport psychology practitioner and scholar who engages in CSP and FSP, I can support women coaches by assisting their support needs. The findings from this study reveal that women coaches want various forms of support (e.g., esteem, emotional, tangible, informational) at the organizational and socio-cultural levels. I can play a role in questioning and helping clients to question oppressive practices in sport. Overall, as a sport psychology practitioner and scholar I have a role to play in supporting women coaches across all levels of the ecological intersectional model (EIM).

### **Implications**

This study has implications for numerous individuals and organizations who influence the collegiate sport context. The findings from this study offer important applied information for athletic administration, sport coaching organizations and the NCAA, sport psychology practitioners, sport scholars, and women sport coaches. The women coaches in this study needed support and these individuals and organizations have an opportunity to provide it. This section describes how individuals and organizations can support women in coaching, from the perspectives of the women coaches in this study and supported by previous literature.

The coaches in this study highlighted the importance of supportive athletic administration (Spoor & Hoye, 2014; Snyder, 1990). The findings from this study provide evidence that athletic administrators should offer support by checking-in on coaches through simple acts: stopping by coaches' offices to say hello, texts to see how the start of a new season is going, calls when

coaches receive a big recruit, stopping by practice/games, and interacting with athletes and recruits. Athletic administrators should also support women coaches in more structured ways: (1) support women coaches in their advocacy efforts; (2) create anti-bigotry policy to protect women coaches from sexism; (3) hire full-time assistant coaches; (4) provide women coaches with equitable budgets, facilities, salaries, hiring practices, and professional development funds (Allen & Shaw, 2013; Lewis et al., 2018; Madsen et al., 2017); (5) provide work-life balance and mental health initiatives (Goodman et al., 2015; Kentta et al., 2020); (6) create inclusive parental leave policies for sexual-minority coaches (Titlestad & Robinson, 2019); and (7) offer childcare, child-friendly workplace, and flexible work hours for mother-coaches (Chung & Lippe, 2020; Piszczek, 2020). University leadership should support athletic administration in providing these supports for women in coaching.

There are also opportunities for sport coaching organizations and the NCAA to support women in coaching. Sport coaching organizations should consider how to make their mentor programming more applicable to DIII women coaches. Sport coaching organizations should consider how all of their programming is relevant for not only the DI context, but also the DIII context. In addition, sport coaching organizations should require salaries in job postings. This transparency would hold employers more accountable for equitable pay. The NCAA can also support women in coaching. The coaches desired a more flexible off season. Having more flexibility when they could work with their athletes would allow coaches to have a better work-life balance. In addition, at the DIII level there is no dead period for recruiting. Coaches described a pressure to always be recruiting. The NCAA can support DIII women coaches by establishing a dead period for recruiting, like they have at other divisions. This would allow

coaches time to turn it off and facilitate more work-life balance. Sport coaching organizations and the NCAA should implement these practices to better support women in coaching.

Sport psychology practitioners can play a role in supporting women coaches too. The coaches described needing mental health support. Sport psychology practitioners should not only prioritize athlete mental health (Henriksen et al., 2019), they should also prioritize coach mental health (Kentta et al., 2020). This includes being advocates for coaches on one's campus by ensuring that coaches have equal access to mental health resources. Coaches were also interested in learning mental skills for coaching. Sport psychology practitioners should use mental skills training to help coaches perform at their best (Sheehy et al., 2019; Zakrajsek & Zizzi, 2008). In addition, coaches wanted work-life balance strategies, pay negotiations strategies, mentoring opportunities, and other forms of programming. Sport psychology practitioners can support coaches through targeted programming addressing their support needs (Longshore & Sachs, 2015).

There are implications for sport scholars who seek to support women in coaching. The findings from this study further supported the use of the EIM (LaVoi, 2016) as a guiding framework to understand the experiences of women in coaching. The coaches described supports across the social-ecological levels. Additionally, this study has helped to shift the literature's focus from the barriers that women in coaching face to the supports that can be provided. Findings from this study extend our current understanding of support for women in coaching. Scholarship should continue to focus on support rather than barriers (LaVoi et al., 2019). The participants provided numerous avenues for support. Sport scholars should begin exploring how to implement and study the support suggested by the women coaches in this study.

Lastly, an important component of feminist research is praxis, or active application. It was important for this study to have implications for the participants of this research. This study has important implications for women sport coaches themselves. The beginning of the findings started with advocacy. Women coaches should start by being their own advocates and advocating for other women coaches around them (Kilty, 2003). Scholars argue that, although difficult to do, instances of sexism in sport must be called out (Fink, 2016; LaVoi et al., 2019). This study can inform women coaches of the support that other coaches are receiving and enable coaches to begin advocating for those supports in their own settings. Women coaches should hold their athletic departments and institutions accountable for support. However, it is important to note that it should not be all on women coaches to do this work. Others who work in the sport setting must support women in coaching through targeted strategies, programming, and resources so that all women are empowered in the profession.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study has limitations with the sample. The sample was recruited via personal networks and from the interest survey in the preliminary study, limiting the reach of racially diverse participants. Seventeen of the 18 participants identified as white, with one participant identifying as Hispanic, Latino or Spanish Origin. This severely limits the findings related to intersectionality, a component of the EIM. Previous research has highlighted how intersectional oppressions create far more barriers for Black women coaches compared to their white counterparts (Borland & Bruening, 2010; Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). It is likely that black women and other racial minority coaches also experience support differently. This study is limited in that it cannot draw conclusions on support for racial minority coaches. Future research should focus on how specific intersectional positionalities influence the support coaches have,

need, and want. Studies that intentionally recruit specific groups (e.g., Black women, lesbian women) is needed. This will allow for a more nuanced understanding of support for all women in coaching – not just white women. Further, coaches in this study were currently coaching at the DIII level. Future research should explore support for women in coaching across NCAA division levels, high school, and professional settings. The support coaches need at the DIII level may differ from coaches at other NCAA division levels and coaching contexts. Lastly, this study only provides ideas for support that the participants described, not the actual application of these ideas. Future research should begin to implement some of these strategies to determine the best ways to support women in coaching. However, it is essential that future research includes the voices of women coaches themselves.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to examine women sport coaches' experiences of support. Before scholars, practitioners, and others who work in sport can create programming, education, and/or policy to support women in coaching, we first needed to understand the support that women coaches have, need, and want. The findings indicated that women in coaching both have support and need support. All coaches identified at least some support and all coaches identified support needs and wants. The findings revealed a paradox of support. Coaches described numerous support needs; yet, they were still coaching. Coaches provided various needs for support across the social-ecological levels, supporting the utility of the ecological intersectional model (LaVoi, 2016) as a guiding framework to understand the experiences of women coaches. Implications for athletic administration, sport coaching organizations and the NCAA, sport psychology practitioners, sport scholars, and women sport coaches were described. Overall, the

findings from this study can inform future programming, policy, and education to support women sport coaches.



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## APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC AND EXPERIENCE SURVEY

What is your gender identity?

- Female
- Male
- Other, please specify
- Prefer not to say

What is your sexual orientation?

- Bisexual
- Gay or lesbian
- Heterosexual or straight
- Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

What is your age in years?

- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50+

Which categories describe you? Select all that apply to you:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic, Latino or Spanish Origin
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other race, ethnicity, or origin, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

- Prefer not to say

What is your current marital status?

- Married or long-term partnership
- Single
- Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

Do you have any children?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

What is the primary or main sport(s) you coach?

(Drop down list of all DIII sports)

Are you a head coach for any additional sports?

- No
- Yes, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

Are you an assistant coach for any additional sports?

- No
- Yes, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any other roles or responsibility at your college or university?

- Athletic Administration
- Athletic Training
- Faculty/Teaching
- Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- None

How many years have you been in your current coaching position?

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How many total years have you been in college coaching?

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## APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hello!

I'm Shelby Anderson and I am a PhD student studying sport and exercise psychology at UNC Greensboro. It's nice to meet you. I really appreciate your willingness to take the time to talk with me today. Before we begin, I want to take a few minutes to provide some background information and the purpose of this research. My overall purpose for doing this research is to understand your experiences as a woman coach. In better understanding your experience, we hope to develop programming and/or policy to better support women coach's needs. Specifically, I will be asking you some questions today about barriers or challenges to your coaching and the support you currently have and would like to have.

The information I gather will be used for research purposes and may potentially help provide improved programming for women sport coaches. Anything that you say will be kept strictly confidential. That is, we will transcribe this conversation and then remove identifying information such as your name and place of employment. Therefore, please feel free to respond candidly and honestly. The interview should take no longer than 60 minutes.

I also want you to know that your participation in this interview is entirely optional. You don't have to participate and there will be no penalty for not participating. If you decide you would like to start and then part of the way through change your mind, it is okay to stop at any time. During the interview you may see me taking notes –these notes help keep me on track and ensure I don't repeat questions that I would like to ask. We are also recording this conversation. If you say something during the interview and decide later that you do not want us to use it, we can remove it from the transcript.

Does everything sound alright? [wait for response] Is it okay to begin? [wait for response] Do you have any questions about the interview or any of the other information I have given to you before we begin? [wait for response] Okay, then let's begin.

[Begin Recording]

### **Icebreaker**

- Please tell me how you got started in coaching.

### **Section 1 – Barriers in coaching**

- What are the main challenges or barriers that you face as a coach?
- What are the ways you deal with these challenges?

Thank you for sharing some of the challenges you have faced. Now that we've discussed some challenges, let's talk about support for dealing with some of these challenges. We define support as an exchange of resources between two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient. This can come in many forms, from someone providing emotional assistance to someone providing information or help in some way. When thinking about support I want you to think broadly – anything or anyone that supports you as a coach.

### **Section 2 – Supports for coaching**

- What support do you currently have as a coach?
  - *Probing questions:*
    - (Individual) How do you currently support yourself?
    - (Interpersonal) Are there any specific individuals who currently support you?



- (Organizational) Are there any policies or programs from your sport organization, athletic department, or institution that currently provide support?
- (Socio-cultural/Power) What support do you currently have from those holding positions of power- for example administrators, senior colleagues, governmental agencies, or larger society?
- (Intersectionality) What support do you have that might be different from other women coaches? What support do other women coaches have that differ from you? For example, coaches with children, coaches who have maybe been in coaching for shorter/longer, coaches from different racial/ethnic groups?
- What support do you need?
  - *Probing questions:*
    - (Individual) What do you need to better support yourself?
    - (Interpersonal) Are there any specific individuals who you need more support from?
    - (Organizational) Are there any policies or programs from your sport organization, athletic department, or institution that you need for support?

- (Socio-cultural/Power) What support do you need from those holding positions of power - for example administrators, senior colleagues, governmental agencies, or larger society?
- (Intersectionality) What support do you need that might be different from other women coaches?
- In the perfect or ideal world, what support would you like to have?
  - *Probing questions:*
    - (Individual) What could you do in order to better support yourself?
    - (Interpersonal) How could other people better support you?
    - (Organizational) Are there any policies or programs from your sport organization, athletic department, or institution that you would like to have? Or policies or programs that could be revised or dropped to better support you?
    - (Socio-cultural) What support would you like to have from those holding positions of power - for example administrators, senior colleagues, governmental agencies, or larger society?
    - (Intersectionality) What support do you want that might be different from other women coaches?

### **Section 3 - Wrap-up**

- If a program could be developed specifically to support women coaches, what would be most useful?
- Knowing that I am interested in supporting women coaches, is there anything else you would like me to know as a researcher?
- (I will provide summary of main points from conversation). Do you agree or have suggestions or revisions to add to this final summary?

### **Conclusions**

That's about all the time we have today. Thank you so much for being so candid with me today about your experiences as a coach. My goal is to accurately represent your experiences. Once I have some preliminary findings I will be emailing you and other participants with a summary of the findings. All I would ask is that you read them and offer any feedback or suggestions on their accuracy. Would it be ok if I email you a summary of my findings? (wait for reply)

If yes - Great, I will be in touch and best of luck in your upcoming/current season!

If no – No problem at all. Thanks again and best of luck in your upcoming/current season!