Breaking barriers: case study of women leaders in physical education and sports management and leadership

Rompiendo barreras: estudio de caso de mujeres líderes en la gestión y el liderazgo de la educación física y el deporte

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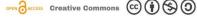https://doi.org/10.17979/sportis.2025.11.4.12312

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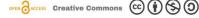
Abstract

Global reports indicate underrepresentation of women in physical education and sports leadership. Yet, a Physical Education department in one of the premier universities in the Philippines stands out with a history of successful women leaders. This case study explores the experiences and challenges of women leaders in physical education and sports – a men-dominated environment. The study utilized qualitative case study design to explore certain phenomena. Data were gathered using a semi-structured interviews with four (4) women who served as unit head of the department. These leaders were purposively selected using set of criteria. The analysis of this study is guided by Mores' (1994) stage of analysis, revealed key themes in their leadership journey. The study found out that women leaders experienced overwhelming transitions when appointed as head of the department, requiring them to increase significant awareness and adjustments to new roles. They also experienced certain challenges such as unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and addressing grapevine communication within the workplace. Moreover, these leaders demonstrated exceptional qualities that brought the department to greater heights such as being organized, collaborative, and conflict aversive. Their leadership approaches were characterized by being pro-active and a sense of strong servant leadership. Valuable lessons were learned by these women leaders which include teamwork and the development of patience in dealing with diverse situations and people. The study's findings highlight the role and contribution of women leaders in Physical Education and Sports, offering insights into their challenges and qualities that drive their success.

Keywords: physical education, sports, leadership, women leader, case study

Resumen

Informes globales indican una baja representación femenina en el liderazgo de la educación física y el deporte. Sin embargo, un departamento de Educación Física de una de las principales universidades de Filipinas destaca por su trayectoria de mujeres líderes exitosas. Este estudio de caso explora las experiencias y los desafíos de las mujeres líderes en la educación física y el deporte, en un entorno dominado por los hombres. El estudio utilizó un diseño de estudio de caso cualitativo para explorar ciertos fenómenos. Los datos se recopilaron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas con cuatro (4) mujeres que se desempeñaban como jefas de departamento. Estas líderes fueron seleccionadas intencionalmente mediante un conjunto de criterios. El análisis de este estudio se basa en la etapa de análisis de Mores (1994), que reveló temas clave en su trayectoria de liderazgo. El estudio reveló que las mujeres líderes experimentaron transiciones abrumadoras al ser nombradas jefas de departamento, lo que les obligó a aumentar significativamente la concienciación y adaptarse a nuevos roles. También experimentaron ciertos desafíos, como la pandemia sin precedentes de COVID-19 y la gestión de la comunicación indirecta en el lugar de trabajo. Además, estas líderes demostraron cualidades excepcionales que impulsaron el departamento a un nivel superior, como la organización, la colaboración y la aversión al conflicto. Sus enfoques de liderazgo se caracterizaron por la proactividad y un fuerte sentido de liderazgo de servicio. Estas mujeres líderes aprendieron valiosas lecciones, como el trabajo en equipo y el desarrollo de la paciencia para afrontar diversas situaciones y personas. Los hallazgos del estudio destacan el rol y

la contribución de las mujeres líderes en Educación Física y Deportes, ofreciendo perspectivas sobre sus desafíos y las cualidades que impulsan su éxito.

Palabras clave: educación física; deportes; liderazgo; mujeres líderes, estudio de caso.

Introduction

Physical education and sports are professions that cannot progress without quality and striving leaders. Quality and empowered leaders are essential in these areas, enabling them to lead and manage the teams they oversee (Guretia, 2017). Gazali et al. (2022) highlighted that the role of leadership is paramount in shaping the Physical Education and Sports landscape to contribute to positive and holistic development, as well as academic achievement.

Moreover, there is a growing consensus that countries with a higher proportion of women in leadership positions perform better in terms of human development. One indicator of SDG Goal 5 is to ensure equal opportunities for women's full and effective participation in leadership roles across all political, economic, and public decision-making levels (UN, n.d.). However, gender inequality persists in various fields, including education, business, politics, and particularly in physical education and sports management (Cookey et al., 2021; Leabeater et al., 2023).

In sports management, 60 executives work for the NBA league, yet only 13 are women (Playing at the Pro Level: Our Management Team, 2011). The Sports Integrity Global Alliance's survey revealed that among the 31 International Sports Federation, only three are being led by women. Of these federations, among 545 members of the executive committee, only 147 (26.9%) are women (SIGA, 2023).

In the Philippines, the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum revealed that 41% of those hired for leadership positions are women. While this data may seem promising, a similar report revealed that 26% of men are likelier to be promoted into leadership roles than women (Piad, 2022). In the Eastern Visayas region in the Philippines, among the sports directors of the eleven (11) SUCs (States, Universities, and Colleges), only three are (3) women, and eight (8) of which are men.
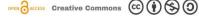
Burton (2015) reviewed research and generated various themes that explain the underrepresentation of women in sports leadership, including sports leadership as masculine, organizational demography, hegemonic masculinity, the influence of power, stakeholder influence, institutionalized discrimination, organizational culture, stereotypes, access and discrimination, human and social capital, and self-limiting behaviors.

However, evidence suggests that more equitable and diverse workplaces in physical education and sports organizations can have a positive impact on these organizations (Perez-Rivases et al., 2017). However, despite numerous research initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in the workplace (Evans & Pfister, 2020), a consistent bias persists in favor of leadership positions among women despite their ability to succeed in various fields (Burton, 2015). Hence, Adamu (2023) highlighted the need for policy and organizational strategies that promote female participation, action, and commitment from stakeholders and officials to implement them in their schools and communities.

Through the years, women have fought for their position in the society. Feminism is a movement that advocates for equality and justice for women, challenging sexist oppression and exploitation. It aims to address gendered power relations and promote gender equality at all levels of society (Wilany, 2017). Feminist agendas have been successful in some global issue areas, but they have also faced resistance and attacks, often labeled as "gender ideology." Feminism has evolved beyond a binary understanding of male-female hierarchies to address intersectional forms of discrimination and heteronormativity. Education plays a crucial role in achieving gender equality, as highlighted by various waves of feminism. Thus, feminism seeks to challenge and transform societal norms and structures to create a more equitable and just world for all genders.

Various literatures reveal the underrepresentation of women in physical education and sports management (Anderson et al., 2023; Burton, 2015). Yet, a sporadic case occurred in a Physical Education department in one of the premier universities in the Philippines. The unit was established almost half a century ago. Over the years, the unit has designated three (3) heads and six (6) directors, of which five (5) were women. These leaders have spearheaded the conduct of various regional athletic events. The longest-

serving director of the department was a woman and currently holds one of the highest positions in the university. Interestingly, these women leaders have served the department from different generations. The department's growth and success over the past half-decade can be attributed to its leaders' collective efforts and excellent management. These only highlight that the department had already been breaking stereotypes regarding gender by leading a physical education unit and managing sports activities over the years.

This case study aimed to investigate and explore the experiences of women leaders who have served as department heads or institute directors in the Physical Education department at one of the universities in the Philippines. The study does not aim to provide generalization of women leader's experiences. However, it only focuses on the lived experiences of women leaders in sports and physical education in a specific institution. Given the evident cases of gender inequality in the workplace and sports management, it is essential to understand how women leaders have successfully navigated the challenges of leading a complex and dynamic unit. This will be helpful for other institutions and women leaders in various fields to benchmark their leadership and managerial skills.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study employed a descriptive case study. A case study is a research methodology used in social and life sciences to conduct an intensive investigation of a person, group, community, or unit (Baxter & Jack, 2010). Descriptive case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003). It aims to gather in-depth data on several variables and generalize findings over multiple units. Case studies are used to examine complex phenomena in their natural setting, allowing for a better understanding of them (Priya, 2020).

Research Environment

The study was conducted at in one of the premier universities in Leyte, Philippines.

Research Participants

Four (4) women leaders participated in this study, who served as department heads and or institute directors. The researcher utilized purposive sampling to select the participants (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). In purposive sampling, the researcher specifies the characteristics of a population of interest and then tries to locate individuals with those characteristics (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p.268).

Research Instrument

The main data-gathering instrument in this study was a semi-structured interview questionnaire. This type of instrument helped the researcher facilitate the efficiency and productivity of the data gathering. The questions were anchored on the research problems of the study. To ensure its validity, the interview questionnaire underwent thorough validation by experts before gathering the data (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected through one-on-one interviews using a semi-structured interview guide with the respective chosen participants. The interview is one of the most essential qualitative data-gathering and has been widely employed in field qualitative research (Jamshed, 2014). The interview questionnaire served as a guide during the interview. The interview was an intimate communication that encouraged open-ended answers rather than a set of checklists with fixed answers. Thus, the researcher was able to ask the participants follow-up questions (Myers & Newman, 2007).

Data Analysis

In this phase, the researcher utilized Mores' (1994) stages of analysis to analyze collected data. The framework consists of four (4) stages: 1) comprehending, 2) synthesizing, 3) theorizing, and 4) developing a proposition.

Comprehending. It happened even during data collection (Mores, 1994), which involves understanding the situation that enables the researcher to write a comprehensive and detailed study description. This stage involves initial, broad coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Broad coding aims to uncover and identify, as well as expand, notions by opening up the text and exposing its thoughts, ideas, and significance.

Synthesizing. The process involves organizing and coding the data, which can be done in pattern coding (Mores, 1994). This stage identifies patterns in the data and

reassembles the fractured data identified during the initial or broad coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Theorizing. This phase involves developing a comprehensive account and examining the relationships between the identified codes. Miles and Huberman (1994) highlighted that theorizing in this context does not focus on theory development but rather on building a clearer understanding of the study's events. This process also includes distilling, ordering, and testing executive summary statements.

Recontextualizing. This process involves creating propositions that can be applied to various situations and groups. The elegance of these concepts makes qualitative research transportable (Ayres et al., 2003). Moreover, during this phase, the researcher can compare and contrast the study's findings with existing literature that will undoubtedly contribute to the body of knowledge.

Results and Discussion

This section contains comprehensive presentation, interpretation, and discussion of the study's results. The case study's findings do not provide generalizability of the women leaders' experiences, but rather it focuses on in-depth exploration of their unique experiences in managing sports and physical education units.

Results

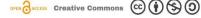### Theme 1. Navigating Leadership Transition in a Dynamic Academic Environment

The experiences of the women leaders varied depending on the situations they faced. Each of their experiences constitutes to their growth as individuals.

Subtheme 1.1 Overwhelming

Being appointed as the head of an academic unit can be overwhelming. The unit manages and organizes some of the most significant events in the university, specifically on sports, recreation, wellness programs, and culture and the arts. The informants explained that activities can be overwhelming, especially for those new to the unit who are still trying to navigate the work and the environment.

Transcript #102, line 17-25, informant VIS-02

Like, for example, in 2023, we had our five major events that we organized and participated in...

Subtheme 1.2 Self-awareness and Adjustment to the Position

Leadership is a whole different world. From being a simple classroom teacher to becoming the head of an academic department can be a challenging journey. Hence, more self-aware leaders are better at adapting to change and managing challenges, which is crucial for navigating the complexities of a new leadership role and understanding one's strengths, weaknesses, values, and personality traits.

Transcript #101, line 20-26, informant VIS-01

I never dreamed of becoming a leader. I am happy teaching in the classroom. I just want to become a plain teacher because I believe I can give so much while teaching. It is expected when you become a leader in a department, you will have less time in teaching since you focus more on administrative and managerial tasks and responsibilities.

Some of the informants came from different institutions before they were employed in the department. They explained that they need to find their niche and navigate their strengths when working with new people and those with more experience in the field. The informants acknowledged that upon their designation, they must prove that they deserve the position, regardless of whether they are prepared for it or not. Every experience is a whole new experience. Their experiences from their previous institution helped them to
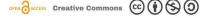
Transcript #103, line 45-52, informant VIS-03

And I was new here, so I had to find my niche. Where do I belong? And then knowing who you really are. What are you good at? What are my strengths? Where am I weak and need support? Where I am strong, I share.

Transcript #102, line 60-67, informant VIS-03

I don't have the experience. How can you, how can you lead your, and I don't have that one during that time, no experience in the department I know they organize intramurals so on and so forth, but I have not worked with them.

Theme 2. Leader-Invigorating Challenges

Subtheme 2.1 Dealing with People

An organization is a complex system comprising diverse individuals with distinct personalities. Informants have explained that working with people can be one of the most challenging aspects of leadership. Navigating and bringing them close together would require trust and effective leadership. Informants have expressed that misunderstandings among members are typical in an organization. Thus, leaders need to respect and acknowledge individual differences and diversity in the workplace while assuring checks and balances within the organization.

Transcript #103, line 150-154, informant VIS-03

> In human resource management, dealing with difficult people is indeed one of the most challenging aspects. You cannot please everyone, and you must consider various factors. They may not listen.

Subtheme 2.2 Emotional Challenges in Leadership

The journey and experiences of women leaders in sports management and physical education were not easy. Dealing with the overwhelming amount of stress at work has led to emotional challenges for them. Informants recognized that the nature of the work in the department requires physical, mental, and emotional strength in organizing various athletic competitions and providing health and wellness services to support the well-being of the university's students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders.
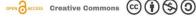
Transcript #102, line 370-385, informant VIS-02

> And then during that time, I was tired… I had no time to rest and breathe. Plus, I was still adjusting and reading a lot.

Subtheme 2.3 Leadership during the Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on various industries, particularly in sports and education as a whole. It is the nature of physical education to conduct performance-based activities. Thus, the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous classes became the most significant challenge among PE teachers.

Transitioning practical, performance-based physical education (PE) classes to an online environment proved challenging.

Moreover, the pandemic's disruptions to some of the department's primary activities were significant. This also challenged sports leaders to ensure that physical activities and sports remain relevant despite these changes. Informants expressed the challenge of becoming visible in the university even during a pandemic. Hence, these leaders paved the way for creating various programs, such as screen break exercises, *padyak,* online fun runs, and other activities that addressed the needs and welfare of the people in the university during those trying times. The pandemic led to the cancellation of sports events and disrupted the seasons.

Transcript #102, line 167-173, informant VIS-02

During my time, it was the time of the pandemic. So half, almost, I think almost half or half really, almost half of my experience as head was during the time that we were in the pandemic. And the department was very different during the pandemic because of course our usual functions or activities were disrupted.

Due to the pandemic, onsite reporting was strictly prohibited, especially during the early months of the outbreak. The informants expressed that it became a challenge since only those who had administrative tasks were required to report to the office. Faculty members and students at the university were required to conduct both synchronous and asynchronous classes.

Transcript #102, line 202-210, informant VIS-02

Imagine you work in the office, then you only have your staff, no faculty members. Because the faculty members are not allowed to be in the office. You have to do almost all the work. Because the faculty members only send accomplishment reports. Even the printing of accomplishment reports will be the one to print the accomplishment reports, compile the accomplishment reports, and do other things. So there was really a time they're not allowed to be in the university.

Subtheme 2.4 Grapevine communication

Grapevine communication is widespread in the workplace. It is an informal or unofficial form of communication that involves rumors, gossip, and misinformation. Informants explained that this activity becomes a problem because it creates commotion and misunderstandings among the organization's people. They also emphasized that as professionals, people in the workplace should employ proper methods for channeling communication.

Theme 3. Quality of Women Leaders

Subtheme 3.1 Organized

The informants perceived that the majority of the leaders in their department were women because they were more organized than the men. Leadership requires organization skills and it is something that women naturally possess. Mainly since the department organizes sports activities and implements the university's academic programs, an organized leader will help ensure the smooth implementation of these activities.

Transcript #102, line 450-460, informant VIS-02

> It's not about stereotyping, but there is a notion that women are more organized. In department, it's not just a department that handles sports development programs. We offer tertiary PE and now we also offer cultural and arts education. We have degree programs as well. So, it requires thorough organization of activities and events. Some say that women are more organized compared to men.

Subtheme 3.2 Collaborative

The success of any organization's endeavors and plans is closely tied to the collective effort of its people. Informants expressed that leaders should acknowledge that they cannot do all the activities alone. It will not make them less of a leader to ask for help and collaboration with others in and outside the department. They also emphasized that leaders must learn how to listen to others' suggestions. The leader does not have a

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monopoly on knowledge and skills. Anybody in the organization has something to share that can contribute to the success of the organization's activities.

Transcript #101, line 45-47, informant VIS-01

> I firmly believe that two is always better than one. Sometimes I think my suggestion is best, but when I hear other people's suggestions, they are better than mine.
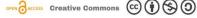
Informants also explained why various committees, consisting of people from different industries and institutions, would help them conduct various activities. Being a collaborative leader is a common trait among the informants. Collaborating with others is a healthy practice that strengthens the relationship between the organization's people and its support officials. Informants shared that organizing a sporting event, such as the SCUAA (State Colleges and Universities Athletic Association), requires a large amount of workforce. They would tap medical personnel, security officials, sports officiating officials, support officials, students, and faculty members. Informants also expressed that people may perceive activities like this as easy and simple, but the preparation and implementation of such endeavors are not straightforward.

Transcript #102, line 503-512, informant VIS-02

> I always believe in shared decision-making. Most of the time, when I need to make decisions, I always consult the majority. Majority rule. When making decisions, especially concerning faculty matters, I call for meetings with the committee to help me decide. It's not that I don't trust my judgment and intuition, but I believe that when decisions are made by the majority, they will also have ownership of the decision.

Transcript #103, line 305-314, informant VIS-03

> Working with committees is crucial. You have the steering committee and then you have the working committees. You communicate with them about the program, their tasks, their functions, everything. It's like you're the power steering, guiding the wheel. You set the direction. Next is distributing the programs, the schedule, and everything else needed.

Subtheme 3.3 Conflict-Aversive

Leaders are prone to conflict and disagreements. They are in a position that should pacify the people in the organization, especially if conflicts and disagreements arise. Conflict-aversiveness is a common trait among informants. They tend to focus on the more essential things. They do not add fuel to the heat of the people when misunderstandings and disagreements occur. In leadership, it can be a positive trait. It does not mean ignoring complaints and problems; it is about maintaining composure or controlling one's temper in a challenging situation.

Transcript #102, line 361-380, informant VIS-02

> I really don't like confronting faculty members because they are professionals. Most of the time, if I have issues with the faculty, I call them and talk about my concerns.

Theme 4. Approaches to Leadership

Subtheme 4.1 Proactive Approach

One informant expressed that one thing she had learned from her mentor was to be reminded that leadership positions are not forever. These are just temporary positions. Thus, she has to make out of it. One's position should not be carried on its head because leadership is to take action on what is given to you.

Transcript #103, line 515-517, informant VIS-03

> The name is there, but you do something with it. You can't just tell people you do it while you're sitting there. Not at all. You assume the initiative. After guiding them, you converse with them.

Subtheme 4.2 Skill-based approach

Informants explained that when they assign tasks to their team members, it is not based on gender; instead, it is always based on the person's competency and skills. Gender was never an issue in terms of task distribution. For an organization to succeed in its activities, leaders must assign tasks based on an individual's efficiency and effectiveness in accomplishing them.

Transcript #102, line 570-573, informant VIS-02

However, I don't really base it on gender when I assign. Who is skilled at this, or who lacks experience so they can also get experience, is what I consider most.

Subtheme 4.3 Servant Leadership

The informants explained that leadership is also a process. Becoming a leader requires experience and the ability to connect to people. Servant leadership is a common practice and trait of these women leaders. They focus primarily on the growth and well-being of their people. They perceived that for one leader to be long-lasting in their position, connecting, understanding, and, most especially, serving their people is an essential key to it. These leaders have learned to prioritize the welfare and well-being of their constituents.

Transcript #103, line 590-602, informant VIS-03

I see myself more as a servant leader. Servant-leadership is how I would describe my leadership style. It's like the Christ-life, you know? I prefer to be close to the people I lead.

Theme 5. Valuable Lessons Gained and Skills Developed
Subtheme 5.1 Teamwork

The experiences of the women leaders in this study, combined with research findings on teamwork, underscore the importance of collaboration in achieving success. By prioritizing teamwork and fostering a supportive environment, leaders can unleash the collective potential of their teams and drive positive organizational outcomes.

Through everything these women leaders have experienced in their leadership roles, they have learned the value of teamwork. Teamwork played a significant role in the success of various activities and initiatives that these leaders accomplished. The informants explained that the collective effort of all members would enable the group to rise to the occasion.

Transcript #103, line 602-604, informant VIS-03

> The strength of the team is the strength of the individual in an organization. We're all here, what brought us here? It's like that, right? Okay, let's do it. So, it really is teamwork.

Subtheme 5.2 Patience

Working with diverse people would test one's patience. Hence, leadership is a test of patience. Informants explained that, in their leadership roles as unit heads, they have learned to control their emotions when conflict arises and be patient in dealing with diverse people and challenging situations. They also expressed that leadership is a learning process. Over time, they developed patience, especially in handling people with high tempers, those who are unresponsive, and those who are negligent in their duties.

Transcript #102, line 731-735, informants VIS-02

> My patience has grown even more. And as I mentioned earlier, I've become more assertive this time. But I'm still working on becoming even more assertive. However, I can assert myself now compared to when I was first a head or leader of the department.
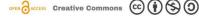
Discussion

Theme 1. Navigating Leadership Transition in a Dynamic Academic Environment

Subtheme 1.1 Overwhelming

Transition from one leader to another is common especially in education. Medform and Brown (2022) identified several challenges that new leaders encounter as they learn the ropes of the position, establish relationships with stakeholders, and navigate the existing organizational structures. These roles often involve managing large budgets, overseeing complex events, and dealing with various stakeholders. The reported challenges of workload and time management can translate to the head of the department (Green & Jones, 2005).

Subtheme 1.2 Self-awareness and Adjustment to the Position

For a new leader, this might involve recognizing the leadership style (e.g., directive, participative) and preferred communication methods (Yukl, 2012). By understanding and developing self-awareness, new leaders can effectively navigate the

transition period, build strong relationships, and lead any organization toward success (Liden et al., 2025; Da Fonseca et al., 2022; Aviolo et al., 2019).

Theme 2. Leader-Invigorating Challenges

Subtheme 2.1 Dealing with People

Understanding the diverse traits of people within an organization and how they manifest in different individuals can help leaders tailor their communication styles and approaches to manage diverse personalities within the team better (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023). However, Cheng et al. (2023) discussed that empowered and transformational leaders can bridge the gaps in navigating and dealing diverse people, which in turn leads to a more genuine and emotional display and reduces the need for emotional and surface acting in the workplace (Stanescu et al., 2020).

Subtheme 2.2 Emotional Challenges in Leadership

Leading and organizing athletic events and managing the well-being of a diverse group can be a stressful experience, leading to anxiety, burnout, and emotional depletion (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). Also, balancing demanding leadership roles with personal lives can be particularly challenging for women (Sandahl & Von Knorring, 2023). Thus, having a network of mentors, colleagues, and friends who understand the unique challenges faced by women leaders can be a source of strength and emotional support (Eagly et al., 2003).

Subtheme 2.3 Leadership during the Pandemic

Adapting the curriculum and developing practical online assessments for physical activity became a major hurdle (Eagly et al., 2023). Sallis et al. (2020) concluded that not all students have access to reliable internet or suitable technology to participate fully in online physical education (PE) classes. This creates equity concerns and challenges in ensuring all students have equal opportunities.

Moreover, sports leaders also had to find ways to keep athletes motivated and maintain the relevance of sports programs (Varmus, 2024). Sports leaders have been required to quickly pivot and develop new initiatives to promote physical activity and

well-being among individuals, such as online fitness classes, virtual sports events, and other creative solutions (Arumugan et al., 2021).

Subtheme 2.4 Grapevine communication

Saeed et al. (2024) found that grapevine communication is a pervasive phenomenon in organizations. It can spread information quickly and reach areas that formal communication channels might miss (Michelson & Mouly, 2000). Mueller However, Greenslade-Yeats et al. (2023) concluded that it can lead to confusion, distrust, and decreased morale among employees. Grapevine communication can be distracting and lead to decreased productivity if employees spend time discussing rumors and gossip (Şanliöz et al., 2022; Prestia, 2020).
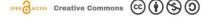
Theme 3. Quality of Women Leaders

Subtheme 3.1 Organized

Leaders who are organized can effectively manage time, prioritize tasks, and ensure the smooth implementation of plans (Yukl, 2012). However, research on leadership skills does not provide definitive evidence that women are inherently more organized leaders Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2024). Heilman (2012) emphasize that organization is a crucial skill for effective leadership, regardless of gender.

Subtheme 3.2 Collaborative

Inter-team collaboration is crucial within professional sports franchises. Carron et al. (2002) highlighted how collaboration between departments, such as the coaching staff, front office, and marketing, can lead to improved performance. Teamwork, open communication, and shared decision-making fostered a more collaborative environment within the organization (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005). These collaborative environments led to increased employee satisfaction, improved team communication, and better overall performance (Binnewies & Wörnlein, 2010).

Furthermore, Han et al. (2021) highlight the value of partnerships between sports teams and community organizations. These collaborations benefit both parties by

promoting social responsibility, supporting youth development, and fostering community engagement.

Subtheme 3.3 Conflict-Aversive

It is easy for leaders to lose their temper, given the weight of their responsibilities, but these women leaders can remain composed in challenging situations (John-Eke & Akintokunbo, 2020). The perception of these informants suggests that conflict-averse leadership can have a positive impact. However, research on leadership and conflict presents a more nuanced picture (Hanelt et al., 2020). Tabassi et al. (2024) emphasized that effective leadership entails managing conflict constructively rather than simply avoiding it. Unresolved issues that can fester and escalate later can lead to employee dissatisfaction (Odieli & Okeke, 2025).
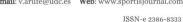
Theme 4. Approaches to Leadership

Subtheme 4.1 Proactive Approach

Proactive leaders anticipate challenges, take initiative, and create positive change rather than passively reacting to situations (Satwika et al., 2025). They also empower and delegate tasks to team members, fostering a sense of ownership and encouraging initiative-taking at all levels within the organization (Makwetta et al., 2021). By anticipating future needs and trends, proactive leaders can foster a culture of innovation, encouraging the exploration of new ideas and solutions (Gong & Canwal, 2025).

Subtheme 4.2 Skill-based approach

A skill-based approach promotes diversity and inclusion by focusing on qualifications over demographics. This allows individuals from all backgrounds to contribute their unique talents (Lee et al., 2018). By placing individuals in roles that match their skill sets, organizations can achieve tasks more efficiently and effectively (Matsuo et al., 2024). When employees feel their skills and strengths are valued and utilized, they tend to be more engaged and motivated (Mueller et al., 2018).

Subtheme 4.3 Servant Leadership

Servant leaders prioritize the needs and well-being of their followers, fostering their growth and development and demonstrating empathy and compassion by understanding the challenges and aspirations of their followers (Jiang & Wei, 2024). Research suggests that servant leadership can lead to improved employee performance and organizational outcomes (Canavesi, 2021). Additionally, by empowering employees and fostering a supportive environment, servant leadership can cultivate innovation and creativity within the organization (Alipio et al., 2023). Some studies suggest that women leaders may be more likely to exhibit servant leadership behaviors (Wang et al., 2022). However, effective leadership is not solely a gender-based concept, and servant leadership can be practiced by individuals of all genders (Xiu, 2025).

Theme 5. Valuable Lessons Gained and Skills Developed

Subtheme 5.1 Teamwork

A positive relationship is essential for a group to work effectively together. Gonda et al. (2024) highlighted that effective teamwork still requires a shared vision and well-defined goals that unite team members and guide their collaborative efforts. A clear vision provides direction and motivates team members to work towards a common objective. Van Dun et al (2022) demonstrated how diverse perspectives and collaborative brainstorming contribute to more creative and effective problem-solving. This reflects the value the informants placed on teamwork for accomplishing various activities and initiatives. Garzón-Lasso et al. (2024) highlighted the positive impact of trust, respect, and open communication on team collaboration and productivity. This aligns with the informants' belief in the importance of positive relationships within the group. A supportive and positive team environment fosters creativity, engagement, and a sense of belonging (Joo et al., 2022).

Subtheme 5.2 Patience

Over time, they developed patience, especially in handling people with high tempers, those who are unresponsive, and those who are negligent in their duties. (Satwika et al., 2025) emphasized that leaders must be sensitive to diverse communication

styles, work preferences, and cultural backgrounds. Leaders who display patience create a more positive and supportive work environment, fostering employee motivation and engagement (Rupprecht et al., 2019). Patience allows leaders to think clearly and avoid making rash decisions, especially in challenging situations (Khalisah, 2023). Leaders can develop patience through self-reflection, mindfulness practices, and actively seeking feedback (Rupprecht et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This study highlights the valuable contributions of women leaders in the sports management field. It provides insights into the challenges they face and the qualities that contribute to their success. By understanding these experiences, we can create more supportive environments for women in leadership roles and encourage their continued growth in the field of sports management.
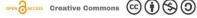
The qualitative results indicate that women leaders in physical education and sports administration have diverse leadership experiences, which collectively contribute to their personal development. Leadership positions in academic institutions, such as those in a Physical Education department, can be demanding, requiring self-awareness and effective adaptation to one's position. Women leaders in the field often encounter stimulating challenges, such as managing grapevine communication, leading during the pandemic, dealing with difficult individuals, and facing emotional challenges.

The collaborative leadership style and organizational prowess of women executives further emphasize their quality. The notion that women are more collaborative and organized workers than men is considered a factor in the success of the organization's initiatives. Regardless of gender, cooperation and organizing skills are essential for successful leadership.

Overall, the results highlight the complexity and challenges that women leaders in physical education and sports administration face, underscoring the importance of resilience, adaptability, self-awareness, and strong organizational and collaborative skills. Women leaders can maintain their notable influence within their organizations and promote success in their respective fields by addressing the various experiences and obstacles they encounter.

Recommendations

This study also suggests the following:

Address Grapevine Communication. Create plans to address grapevine communication in the workplace, including encouraging open lines of communication, outlining clear rules for information sharing, and promptly correcting misinformation.

Support Emotional Well-Being. Provide women leaders with tools and support to manage stress and emotional challenges, such as counseling services, stress-reduction plans, and opportunities for self-care and other wellness activities.

Further Research. Conduct further research to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of female leaders in physical education and sports management. You should investigate specific challenges, opportunities, and best practices that can inform the development of targeted interventions and support systems for these leaders' career advancement.

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