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GENDER INEQUALITY IN SPORTS COACHING: COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM THE U.S. AND ISRAEL

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Gender Inequality in Sports Coaching: Comparative Insights from the U.S. and Israel

Liat KUFFLER-BAKALO¹, Dan CHIRIBUCĂ²

Abstract

This study examines the persistent underrepresentation of women in sports coaching despite a substantial increase in female athletic participation and the expansion of gender equality policies. Through a comparative analysis of the United States and Israel, it draws on a structured review of 58 peer-reviewed studies and policy reports. The analysis applies the concept of homologous reproduction to explain how recruitment practices and career pathways contribute to the continued dominance of men in coaching positions. The findings indicate that legal frameworks such as Title IX in the United States and the Equal Rights of Women Law in Israel have increased opportunities for participation but have not produced comparable gains in coaching positions. This gap is associated with informal hiring networks, gendered organizational cultures, and limited accountability in recruitment processes. By examining these dynamics across two distinct national contexts, the article shows how similar patterns of exclusion persist despite differences in policy design and governance structures. The study contributes to debates on gender equity in sport by highlighting the limitations of participation-centered approaches and emphasizing the need for institutional reforms that address the organizational processes shaping leadership access.

Keywords: athletic directors; female sports coaching underrepresentation; gender disparities; homologous reproduction; recruitment practices; women's sports coaching.

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Introduction

Gender inequality in sports leadership remains a global concern, particularly in coaching, where women continue to be underrepresented despite substantial gains in athletic participation. Over the past five decades, policies such as Title IX in the United States and the Equal Rights of Women Law in Israel have expanded opportunities for women in sport, contributing to significant increases in participation rates. However, advances in participation have not been accompanied by commensurate progress in leadership representation. Women now account for a substantial proportion of athletes—exceeding 40% in U.S. collegiate sports—yet they are significantly underrepresented in head coaching positions. In the United States, the proportion of women coaching women’s teams declined from more than 90% in the early 1970s to approximately 43% in recent years (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Boucher *et al.*, 2021; NCAA, 2024). Comparable disparities are evident in Israel, where women constitute a small minority of licensed coaches and remain largely absent from elite coaching roles despite formal commitments to gender equality (Sharvit, 2024). The pattern extends beyond these two contexts. At the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, women represented only 13% of coaches despite near parity among athletes (International Olympic Committee, 2021). Together, these trends point to a persistent disconnect between expanded access to sport and access to leadership within sport organizations. One of the most influential explanations for these patterns is the concept of homologous reproduction. Although homologous reproduction has been widely examined in sport management research, most studies focus on single-country contexts, particularly the United States. This article addresses that gap through a comparative analysis of the United States and Israel, two countries with distinct legal frameworks, governance structures, and cultural dynamics in sport. By examining these cases side by side, the study explores how similar outcomes emerge through comparable processes, aiming to provide a more nuanced explanation of why policy reforms have led to modest improvements in leadership representation.

Literature review

The coexistence of rising female participation and limited representation in coaching reflects broader inequalities within sport systems. Research consistently identifies structural barriers -including unequal access to resources, lower salaries, and restricted opportunities for advancement -that disproportionately affect women pursuing coaching careers (Kane, 2017; Schull, 2017). These constraints operate across multiple levels, from individual career trajectories to institutional practices, contributing to what has been described as a “leaky pipeline” in sports leadership (Hancock & Hums, 2016). The limited visibility of women in coaching perpetuates underrepresentation. When decision-making positions are overwhelmingly

occupied by men, aspiring female coaches may be less likely to perceive the profession as attainable or welcoming. The presence of female role models has been shown to influence career aspirations by signaling legitimacy and opportunity within traditionally male-dominated environments (LaVoi, 2016; Lockwood, 2006). Consequently, increased participation alone does not ensure equitable opportunities for coaching positions, highlighting the importance of examining the processes through which coaches are recruited and promoted.

Homologous reproduction helps explain the persistence of these disparities. It describes the tendency of individuals in positions of authority to select and advance others who share similar characteristics, thereby reproducing existing power structures (Kanter, 1977; Regan & Cunningham, 2012). In sports organizations, where leadership is predominantly male, this mechanism tends to favor male candidates and reinforce established gender hierarchies. Empirical studies demonstrate that male athletic directors and head coaches are more likely to appoint men to coaching positions, whereas female leaders show a greater tendency to recruit women (Boucher & LaVoi, 2023; Darvin & Lubke, 2020; Sagas *et al.*, 2006). Such patterns contribute to the continuity of male-dominated structures and restrict opportunities for women to enter and advance within coaching careers.

These dynamics are strengthened by recruitment practices that rely heavily on subjective assessments of organizational “fit.” Because women often have less access to established professional networks, they may be disadvantaged even when formal hiring procedures exist (Kane & LaVoi, 2018; LaVoi & Wasend, 2018). The influence of these informal processes is frequently associated with the “good old boys’ club,” where social connections and accumulated social capital condition career opportunities. As a result, coaching selection is not determined solely by qualifications or experience but is also influenced by network membership and organizational familiarity. This suggests that homologous reproduction operates through both formal decision-making and informal practices, making exclusion resilient.

Beyond recruitment processes, organizational cultures play a role in sustaining gender inequalities. Coaching continues to be associated with attributes such as authority, competitiveness, and constant availability - qualities historically linked to masculine leadership ideals (Burton, 2015; Norman *et al.*, 2018). These assumptions influence perceptions of competence and leadership potential, often placing women at a disadvantage regardless of their qualifications or experience (Burton *et al.*, 2011; Schull *et al.*, 2013). Such expectations may also discourage women from entering the profession, particularly when coaching is perceived as incompatible with prevailing gender norms. Consequently, inequalities are reproduced not only through hiring decisions but also through the broader cultural environment that shapes professional opportunities.

The gendered nature of sports organizations is also reflected in workplace experiences. Women coaches frequently report discrimination and exclusion from

key decision-making processes (Barnes & Adams, 2021; Bryan *et al.*, 2021; Fittes, 2021). These experiences contribute to higher attrition rates and can discourage long-term career commitment. The demands associated with coaching -including irregular schedules, extensive travel, and expectations of uninterrupted career dedication - often intersect with societal expectations that women assume primary caregiving responsibilities (Heinze *et al.*, 2017). Together, organizational and societal pressures create additional obstacles to entry and advancement, particularly in elite coaching roles.

Access to mentorship and development opportunities represents another important dimension of inequality. Mentorship provides professional guidance and supports career progression (Bower, 2009). However, the underrepresentation of women in senior positions limits the availability of same-gender mentors and role models, weakening pathways into leadership (Darvin & Sagas, 2017). At the same time, influential professional networks may function as gatekeeping mechanisms that restrict access to informal opportunities for advancement (Walker & Bopp, 2011). Because recruitment and promotion decisions frequently emerge from these relationships, unequal access to networks can reinforce existing disparities. Evidence suggests that greater female representation in senior positions can positively influence hiring outcomes, as women in decision-making roles are more likely to appoint female coaches (Regan & Cunningham, 2012).

Policy interventions have played a central role in efforts to promote gender equality in sport. In the United States, Title IX significantly expanded women's participation by prohibiting sex-based discrimination in federally funded educational programs (Adams *et al.*, 2016; Staurowsky *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, Israel's legal framework has sought to advance gender equality through anti-discrimination provisions and measures designed to improve representation (Nevo, 2024). Despite these advances, progress on coaching representation has been limited. In the United States, the expansion of women's sport following Title IX created new coaching opportunities, but many of these positions were filled by men, contributing to a decline in the proportion of female coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2000; Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Lanser, 2016). In Israel, legislative reforms have improved women's representation within governance structures but have not translated into significant gains in coaching roles (Sharvit, 2024). Existing policies have generally focused on participation and access rather than leadership, overlooking the structural factors that condition career progression in sports organizations.

Examining two different national contexts provides an opportunity to identify both common and context-specific dynamics in the reproduction of gender inequality in sports coaching. The United States and Israel offer a particularly valuable comparison. Both countries have implemented formal commitments to gender equality, but are different in governance structures, policy approaches, and cultural contexts. Both also exhibit persistent gender disparities in coaching,

as structural and cultural mechanisms, such as homologous reproduction and gendered organizational norms, operate across contexts (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative Policy and Institutional Frameworks for Gender Equality in Sport in the U.S. and Israel

Dimension	United States	Israel
Legal Framework	Title IX (1972) prohibits sex discrimination in federally funded educational programs	Equal Rights of Women Law and subsequent amendments promoting gender equality and representation
Governance model	Decentralized enforcement through educational institutions, OCR oversight, and litigation.	Centralized oversight through government ministries and national sport bodies.
Primary policy focus	Equal access and participation opportunities.	Equal representation and anti-discrimination measures.
Main implementation mechanisms	Compliance reporting, investigations, legal enforcement	Representation requirements, governmental supervision, targeted initiatives
Impact on participation	Significant increase in female sport participation	Moderate increase in female participation and governance representation
Key limitation identified in the literature	Weak influence on hiring and leadership pipelines	Weak influence on hiring and leadership pipelines
Observed outcome in coaching representation	Persistent underrepresentation despite participation gains	Persistent underrepresentation despite governance reforms

Methodology

This study employs a comparative case study design based on a structured literature review informed by PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) principles. To ensure broad coverage of relevant scholarship, searches were conducted in Web of Science, Scopus, SPORTDiscus, and Google Scholar between January and March 2025. These databases were selected to capture research across sport management, sociology, gender studies, and public policy. A combination of keywords and Boolean operators was used to identify relevant publications. Core search terms included: “women coaches” OR “female coaches” AND sport*; “gender inequality” OR “gender disparity”

AND (“sports coaching” OR “athletic leadership”); “homologous reproduction” AND (sport* OR coaching); “Title IX” AND (coaching OR leadership OR gender equality); and “Israel” AND (sport* AND gender AND coaching). Search strings were adapted as necessary to accommodate database-specific indexing requirements. The review included peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and policy documents addressing gender inequality in sports coaching or leadership. Both empirical (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods) and conceptual studies were considered. To ensure relevance to the comparative framework, eligible publications focused on the United States, Israel, or comparable sport systems and were published in English or Hebrew. Non-scholarly sources, studies not directly related to coaching or leadership, duplicate records, and publications lacking sufficient methodological transparency were excluded. The selection process is summarized in Figure 1.

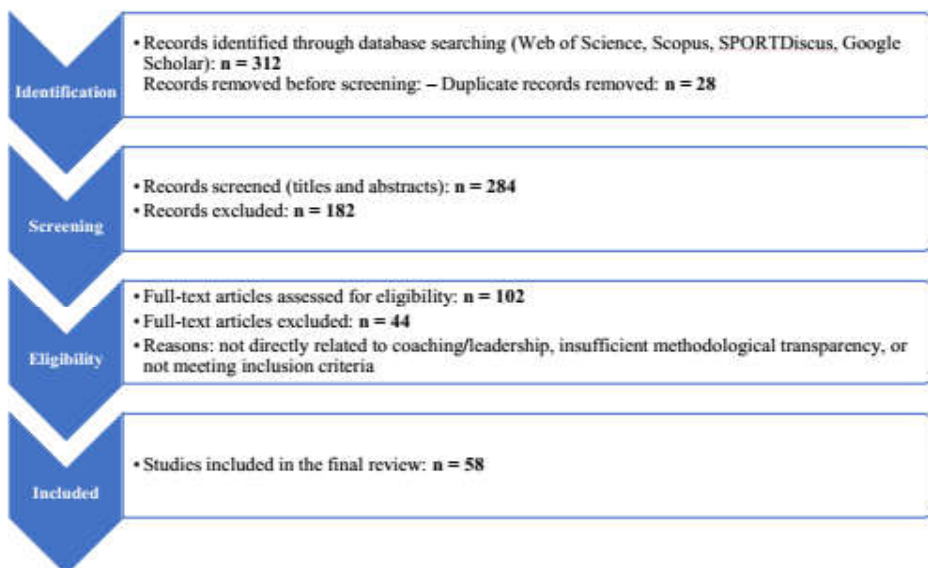


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

Initial database searches yielded 312 records. After removing 28 duplicates, 284 titles and abstracts were screened. Of these, 182 records were excluded during the screening stage. Full-text assessment was conducted for 102 publications, resulting in the exclusion of 44 studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria. The final sample consisted of 58 studies. The selected literature was analyzed through four dimensions derived from the theoretical framework and research objectives: (1) hiring and recruitment practices; (2) organizational and leadership structures; (3) cultural and social barriers; and (4) policy frameworks and implementation gaps. These analytical categories provided the basis for the comparative examination

of the United States and Israel and for identifying recurring patterns in the reproduction of gender inequality in sports coaching.

Comparative analysis

The United States and Israel have adopted distinct approaches to promoting gender equality in sport. In the United States, Title IX established a decentralized system based on institutional compliance and federal oversight. In contrast, Israel's Equal Rights of Women Law and subsequent amendments rely on more centralized oversight through government ministries and national sport bodies. Despite these institutional differences, both frameworks reflect strong formal commitments to gender equality while offering limited direct intervention in coaching recruitment and career progression. Consequently, both countries display substantial disparities in coaching representation. Evidence from the United States illustrates the limits of participation-focused reforms. Although Title IX expanded opportunities for female athletes, the integration of women's and men's athletic departments contributed to the displacement of women from leadership positions previously occupied by them (Rhode & Walker, 2008). As a result, gains in participation were not matched by comparable gains in decision-making positions. Women continue to encounter barriers within male-dominated environments, contributing to higher turnover rates and reducing the availability of female leaders and mentors (Midgley *et al.*, 2021; Tucker Center, 2022). Developments in Israel reveal a somewhat different trajectory. Recent initiatives within the Israeli Olympic Committee (IOC), particularly during Yael Arad's presidency, have contributed to notable increases in female representation at the governance level, with women comprising 59% of board members (Israel Olympic Committee, 2024). Additional efforts - including the IOC's strategic program (2020–2024) and governmental initiatives led by the Ministry of Science and Sports - have sought to reduce gender disparities through leadership development programs, professional training, and gender-balance guidelines (European Olympic Committees, 2022). These measures have coincided with a reported increase in women serving as CEOs and senior sport administrators (Sharvit, 2024), suggesting that targeted interventions can expand women's presence in senior organizational roles.

Beyond institutional reforms, the Israeli case highlights the importance of broader sociocultural influences in shaping leadership opportunities in sport. Unlike the United States, where discussions of gender inequality in coaching often focus on organizational practices and labor market dynamics, Israel presents a more complex interaction between formal equality policies and enduring social norms. Although women have achieved significant advances in professional employment and public leadership, traditional expectations regarding family responsibilities and gender roles remain influential across segments of Israeli society. These expectations may affect both the number of women pursuing coaching careers and the ways leadership potential is evaluated within sports organizations. Formal

commitments to equality operate within a social environment that does not always support equivalent transformations in organizational structures. The Israeli context is also characterized by a distinctive cultural association between leadership and traditionally masculine forms of authority. Specifically, military service occupies a central place in the construction of leadership and citizenship, contributing to the persistence of masculine norms even in institutions formally committed to gender equality (Sasson-Levy, 2011). While women increasingly participate in military and public institutions, leadership continues to be associated with characteristics linked to masculine identities. Similar expectations are embedded within sport, where coaching is frequently viewed as requiring decisiveness, authority, and extensive professional commitment. As a result, women seeking coaching positions may encounter barriers that extend beyond formal recruitment procedures, reflecting broader cultural assumptions about who is perceived as a legitimate leader. These dynamics help explain a notable paradox within Israeli sport. Recent years have witnessed substantial progress in female representation within governance structures, alongside the growing visibility of successful female athletes and prominent sport leaders. Yet these developments have not generated comparable advances in coaching representation. At the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, female coaches were still scarce within the Israeli delegation, particularly in individual sports (Israel Olympic Committee, 2024). Similar patterns are evident in domestic competitions, where only six of the twenty-five teams competing in the top two Israeli women's basketball leagues are led by female head coaches (Safsal, 2025). The contrast suggests that governance and coaching may follow partially distinct institutional pathways. While board appointments can be influenced through formal representation policies and targeted initiatives, coaching careers are more dependent on informal recruitment processes. The Israeli case therefore illustrates how improvements in one domain of sport leadership do not necessarily diffuse across the broader sport system. Although the United States demonstrates somewhat stronger representation in selected settings - including the WNBA and Olympic team sports - women are far from achieving parity in coaching (Basketball Reference, 2025; United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee, 2024). Women remain underrepresented in elite coaching positions across both contexts.

At the organizational level, the two countries exhibit similar dynamics. In the United States, the scale and commercialization of collegiate sport intensify competition for coaching positions, often favoring candidates embedded within established professional networks. While Israel operates within a smaller and more centralized system, opportunities for advancement likewise remain concentrated among men. These patterns support recent arguments that sport organizations reproduce inequality through routine practices rather than through explicit exclusion alone (Knoppers *et al.*, 2024). Access to mentorship and professional development opportunities is shaped by these same structures, limiting women's ability to accumulate the social capital necessary for advancement. Although mentorship programs can provide valuable support and networking opportunities (Bower,

2009), their effectiveness is constrained when access to influential networks is unequal. Male-dominated professional circles frequently function as gatekeeping mechanisms, restricting access to relationships that facilitate recruitment and promotion (Walker & Bopp, 2011). In response, initiatives such as the Global Sports Mentoring Program and Women Leaders in College Sports have attempted to expand opportunities for emerging female leaders by creating structured mentoring and networking pathways (Global Sports Mentoring Program, n.d.; Women Leaders in College Sports, 2022).

Cultural expectations further reinforce these barriers. In both countries, coaching is associated with masculine attributes. Research on elite women coaches demonstrates how these norms shape expectations and require women to navigate sport environments that privilege masculine models of authority (Knoppers *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, caregiving expectations disproportionately affect women's ability to pursue demanding coaching careers (Heinze *et al.*, 2017). Together, these factors influence both entry into the profession and opportunities for advancement.

The comparison reveals that differences in governance structures and policy design have produced only limited divergence in coaching outcomes. Across both contexts, entrenched organizational practices condition access to coaching positions. While the United States has achieved greater progress in participation and selected areas of leadership representation, and Israel has implemented more centralized equality initiatives, both countries continue to experience substantial gender imbalances in coaching. These findings suggest that formal commitments to equality are insufficient when the processes governing recruitment and promotion remain largely unchanged.

Discussion

The findings indicate that gender inequality in sports coaching remains a structurally embedded feature of sport organizations rather than a temporary consequence of unequal participation rates. Across both the United States and Israel, the underrepresentation of women in coaching cannot be adequately explained by differences in athletic participation or by the presence of formal equality policies alone. Instead, the evidence points to the enduring influence of processes that shape access to leadership positions. In both contexts, recruitment practices and prevailing norms reproduce existing gender hierarchies. These findings extend previous applications of *homologous reproduction* by demonstrating its persistence across distinct institutional settings. Despite important differences in governance arrangements, legal frameworks, and policy implementation, similar patterns emerge in both countries. Coaching appointments continue to be conditioned by male-dominated practices and informal assessments of organizational "fit".

The comparative evidence strengthens the argument that gender inequality in coaching is sustained through self-reinforcing organizational processes that are resilient to formal policy change. The comparison also highlights the limits of policy-centered approaches to gender equality. Both Title IX and the Equal Rights of Women Law have contributed to important advances in participation and representation. Yet neither has fundamentally improved access to coaching. If similar outcomes emerge despite substantial differences in policy design and implementation, then institutional architecture alone cannot explain the continued exclusion of women from coaching positions. Rather, the findings suggest that organizational practices mediate the impact of formal policies, often limiting their ability to transform career pathways.

The Israeli case offers additional insight into the relationship between policy and organizational change. While recent initiatives have contributed to notable gains in governance representation, progress in women's access to coaching has remained considerably more limited. This divergence suggests that leadership positions within sport do not constitute a single pathway governed by identical selection mechanisms. Board appointments and governance roles may be more responsive to formal representation policies and targeted interventions. Coaching careers, by contrast, remain more dependent on subjective assessments of legitimacy. As a result, improvements in one domain of sport leadership do not necessarily produce equivalent change in another.

The findings further underscore the importance of cultural context in shaping organizational outcomes. In both countries, coaching is associated with characteristics historically linked to masculine identities. These gendered expectations influence recruitment decisions as well as career aspirations. The Israeli case illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly, as formal commitments to equality coexist with broader social norms that shape perceptions of leadership and gender roles. Rather than operating independently, cultural expectations and organizational practices appear to reinforce one another, contributing to the durability of gendered leadership structures.

The analysis also invites a more critical assessment of mentorship as a strategy for promoting gender equality. In contexts where women are underrepresented in senior roles, opportunities for mentorship are themselves shaped by existing inequalities. Consequently, mentorship is only a component of a broader strategy aimed at transforming leadership pipelines and expanding women's access to decision-making positions.

Several implications emerge from these findings. Theoretically, the study suggests that *homologous reproduction* remains a powerful explanatory framework but gains additional analytical value when examined alongside governance

structures and national contexts. The comparative perspective reveals that formal equality measures may alter participation without necessarily transforming the processes through which leadership positions are allocated. Practically, the findings point to the need for interventions that extend beyond participation-focused policies. Transparent recruitment procedures, accountability mechanisms, advancement pathways, and systematic monitoring of hiring outcomes may be more effective in addressing the organizational foundations of inequality.

Ultimately, the persistence of gender disparities across two distinct sport systems suggests that the central challenge is access to power within sport. While legal and policy reforms have expanded opportunities for women to participate as athletes and, increasingly, as administrators, they have been less successful in transforming the organizational structures that shape coaching careers. Without addressing these underlying mechanisms, progress in participation is unlikely to produce equivalent gains in leadership representation.

Conclusion

This study highlights a paradox: despite the expansion of women's participation in sport under legal frameworks in both the United States and Israel, gender disparities in coaching remain largely unchanged. The findings point to the failure of what can be conceptualized as *political symbolism*—policy interventions that generate formal compliance but fall short of producing substantive change. Existing legal frameworks serve primarily as symbolic instruments; they regulate access to sport but do not effectively intervene in the processes that govern promotion. As a result, the core mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced remain intact. Addressing this limitation requires institutional reforms that move beyond individualized solutions such as mentorship. Meaningful progress depends on embedding transparency and oversight within recruitment processes, establishing measurable diversity benchmarks, and holding decision-makers accountable for hiring outcomes. Without such institutional safeguards, efforts to promote gender equality are unable to disrupt entrenched practices. A broader implication is that advancing gender equality in sports coaching requires a reorientation—from policy commitments to structural transformation. This entails a reconfiguration of the decision-making processes that define merit and legitimacy. Without interventions at the level of the organizational dynamics, existing forms of underrepresentation are likely to be perpetuated, irrespective of continued progress in women's participation in sport. Consequently, the central challenge still remains to ensure equitable access to the positions through which sport is governed and reproduced.

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