

# **Penetrating the Glass Ceiling in Sport Leadership Positions: The Lived Experiences of Women beyond the Ceiling**

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*The sport industry in South Africa is male-dominated with a 'sprinkling' of women in leadership positions. This is perhaps as a result of the glass ceiling which exists in many male-dominated organisations. While the number of females in the workplace has increased dramatically over the past decades, this has not been matched by a corresponding increase of females in leadership positions. The sport industry is one which attracts a diverse representation of employees yet the underrepresentation of females continues to draw research attention. The glass ceiling has been investigated in various contexts in different organisations but limited research evidence exists regarding the glass ceiling in South African sport organisations. Hence the purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of females who have succeeded in penetrating the glass ceiling. A qualitative research approach using an interpretative and descriptive qualitative research method was used. The sample comprised nine (n=9) females who were in leadership positions in sport organisations. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: a) they worked in a male-dominated environment and, b) they worked at a lower position in their current organisation before being promoted to a leadership position. The data collection process involved conducting semi-structured in depth interviews with the participants. This required the development of an interview schedule, getting acquainted with the participants and conducting the interview. Particular attention was placed on participants' ambitions, competencies, their perceptions of opportunities and challenges for promotions within in the organisation and recommendations regarding the phenomenon being investigated. Analysis of the data revealed several consistencies across the interviews. Among the many challenges that the participants had to overcome, were gender stereotyping, support from management, work-life balance and in-group favouritism. Overcoming these challenges required tenacity, focus, determination, planning for success and aggressiveness. The study provided interesting avenues for future research. Despite the numerous challenges that females experience in the workplace, the current study provides evidence that females are able to penetrate the glass ceiling.*

**Keywords:** Glass ceiling, females, leadership, sport industry, stereotyping

**Name of track:** Management- Human Resources Management

## **1. Introduction**

The sport industry in South Africa is male-dominated with a 'sprinkling' of women in leadership positions. This is perhaps as a result of the glass ceiling which exists in many male-dominated organisations. While the number of females in the workplace has increased dramatically over the past decades, this has not been matched by a corresponding increase in women in management positions. Heller and Stepp (2011) commented that despite women representing the majority of graduates in the most of the developed countries globally, they represent only six percent of executives in the largest countries. According to the Catalyst (2012) census reports the 14.7 percent Fortune 500 company board seats women held in 2001 increased to a mere 16.1 percent in 2011. This is reflective of the slow pace at which leadership positions in major corporations grow. The sport industry is one which attracts a diverse

representation of employees, yet the underrepresentation of women continues to draw attention, especially in research.

## **Glass Ceiling**

The “glass ceiling”, a phrase first introduced in the 1980s (Johns, 2013), is a metaphor for the invisible, but very prevalent artificial barriers that limit the upward and onward progression of women and minorities within the corporate ladder to management and executive positions. Other phrases associated with the glass ceiling are the “glass wall” and the “glass cliff”. Galloway (2013) describes the glass wall as the challenge women who have penetrated the glass ceiling face by attempting to move laterally within the organisation or across organisations. It relates to the concept of occupational segregation and encompasses lateral barriers that prevent women from seeking and applying for positions that lead to promotions (Browne & Giampetro-Meyer, 2003). The glass cliff may be referred to a situation in which a woman is promoted to a position which is precarious in the sense that it has a higher propensity for risk and failure (Galloway, 2013). In the context of sport this may be a position such as a marketing executive of women’s sport. As women’s sport does not enjoy the same popularity as men’s sport the likelihood of failure as a marketing executive is greater.

There is, however, a counter argument regarding the existence of a glass ceiling. While many studies have attributed the under-representation of women in management positions to the glass ceiling Eagly and Carli (2007) argue that the notion of glass ceiling is outdated and women face a labyrinth regarding their position in organisations. In this context some of the factors which contribute to the complications associated with their movement up the hierarchy could be that women hold negative attitudes towards advancement and opt out of the corporate environment more often than men. Given the various societal factors associated with women in management positions women encounter greater stress-related health problems which may be debilitating.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The glass ceiling has been investigated in various contexts in different organisations but limited research evidence exists regarding the glass ceiling in South African sport organisations. The sport industry in South Africa has been described as a male-dominated one (Surujlal, 2004). According to Galloway (2013) this appears to discriminate against women thereby preventing their advancement to high level positions. Several researchers (Acosta & Carpenter, 2004; Suggs, 2005; Quarterman, Du Pree & Willis, 2006; Cunneen & Sidwell, 2007) found that the number of women in top-tier positions in sport organisations continues to decrease while the number of positions continues to increase. Despite female athletes being well represented, the majority of female employees occupy the lower positions in the hierarchy. Very little is known regarding why females are under-represented in leadership positions and the challenges they face at their organisations. Hence, the current study examines the lived experiences of women who have succeeded in penetrating the glass ceiling.

### **3. The Study and its Methods**

As this was an exploratory study, a qualitative research approach using an interpretative and descriptive qualitative research method was used. Qualitative research plays an important role in illuminating the meaning of lived experience (Morrissey & Higgs, 2006). A phenomenological approach was used. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on the importance of subjective experience, is the most appropriate method for understanding the phenomenon being researched. Merriam (2009) describes this approach as one in which “the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive”. One of the advantages of this approach is that it enables a researcher to study a social phenomenon through the lived experience of the people who are being studied. It provides an in depth understanding of the phenomenon through the collection of information-rich data (Klenke, 2008; Patton, 2002). Value is added to the study through multiple voices which provide an extensive description of the phenomenon which is researched (Klenke, 2008).

#### **Sample**

Women who were in leadership positions in sport organisations formed the target population of the study. Nine (n=9) participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: a) they worked in a male-dominated environment and, b) they worked at a lower position in their current organisation. It was assumed that participants fulfilling these criteria would be contribute meaningful data on the phenomenon based on their experiences. As this was an exploratory study there was no intention to produce a sample that inferred representation of any specific population or draw generalizations from the data collected (Surujlal & Dhurup, 2011). However, sampling adequacy for this study was achieved at saturation point, that is when no new information was forthcoming.

#### *Instrument and procedures*

The data collection process involved conducting semi-structured in depth interviews with the participants. This required the development of an interview schedule, getting acquainted with the participants and conducting the interviews (David & Sutton, 2004). An interview schedule based on the literature review was thus developed. It was pre-tested with a female academic who was experienced in qualitative research and was familiar with the phenomenon being investigated. Based on her feedback changes were made to the schedule. Questions in the interview schedule were developed in such a way that they enabled a flexible and responsive approach that ensured that the participants were comfortable during the interview (Richie & Lewis, 2003). The questions focused on the lived experiences of the participants in climbing the hierarchy and penetrating the glass ceiling in their organisations. Particular attention was placed on participants’ ambitions, competencies, their perceptions of opportunities and challenges for promotions within in the organisation and recommendations regarding the phenomenon being investigated.

#### *Data analysis*

Initially, the responses of the participants were captured by the researcher during the interviews. Thereafter the captured field notes were read and reread to familiarise

oneself with the data and determine its quality (Holliday, 2007). Content analysis was used to analyse the captured data. As suggested by Srivastava & Hopwood (2009) repetitive reference was made to the data to make meaning from it. The iterative process continued until the researcher was able to make sense of the data. The process continued with similar ideas and related issues being clustered and specific narratives allocated to them. The clusters were then provided a label which identified each of the themes which emerged from the data. Throughout the data analysis the researcher focused on the research questions which were posed to the participants.

### *Credibility*

Rubin and Babbie (2010) posit that the primary concern when evaluating a qualitative study should be the extent to which the study can take steps to maximise objectivity, minimise bias and be trustworthy. Trustworthiness of data implies the findings are credible, transferable, dependable and can be confirmed. In this study this was achieved through peer debriefing and member validation. Peer debriefing allows a peer to review and assess transcripts, emerging categories from those transcripts, and the final report. In addition, a peer acts as a sort of critical detective or auditor. This peer may detect whether or not a researcher has over-emphasized a point, or missed a vital legitimate hypothesis, under-emphasized a point, and in general does a careful reading of the data and the final report. Many writers have suggested that peer debriefing enhances the trustworthiness and credibility of a qualitative research project (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Spillett 2003; Janesick, 2004). Regarding peer debriefing the captured field notes and themes which emerged through the content analysis of the data were made available to an experienced qualitative researcher to examine critically. This was followed by a discussion on the interpretation and analysis between the peer and researcher. This discussion concluded when consensus was reached regarding the emergent themes. Member checks involved providing three participants who were within easy access with the field notes of their interviews and requested to comment on the accuracy of the responses which were captured. Feedback from the participants reflected that the interviews were captured accurately.

### *Ethical considerations*

Prior to the interview each participant was provided with a brief description of the research, the purpose of the study and an approximate duration of the interview. Thereafter their consent to be interviewed was requested. Participants who gave their consent were informed that their participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any stage without fear of victimisation. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any repercussions.

## **4. Results**

The analysis of the data yielded seven important issues related to the experiences of females who penetrated the glass ceiling. These issues, operational definitions and associated narratives are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Issues, Operational Definitions and Narratives**

THEME	DESCRIPTION	NARRATIVES
Ambitions	This refers to females' desire for achievement or recognition in an organisation and their willingness to strive for its attainment	<i>"I wanted to take my team to its highest level"</i> <i>"It was always my wish to prove I was better than the male coaches"</i> <i>"I did not believe I would achieve anything here until I was asked to fill in for the male coach"</i>
Moving up the ladder	This refers to females' experiences of moving up the ladder	<i>"I worked very hard and delivered what was expected of me"</i> <i>"Rather than focusing on moving up the ladder I focused on doing my job"</i>
Opportunity for growth	Refers to strategies the organisation has in place for females to develop and move up the hierarchy	<i>"We need to make our own opportunities"</i> <i>"Most opportunities are for the males"</i> <i>"We are made to believe that there are opportunities – but they are really there for the male coaches"</i> <i>"My manager always went the extra mile to see that I progressed in the organisation"</i>
Challenges	This refers to the difficulties faced by females at sport organisations	<i>"We were not credited for the success the team got"</i> <i>"the male coaches had a superior attitude – they thought they were better than us"</i> <i>"the male coach who coached me when I was a player felt threatened by my success"</i> <i>"we were discriminated against"</i>
Organisational support	This refers to the support that the organisation provides in assisting females to occupy higher positions in an organisation	<i>"my organisation and the staff were always supportive"</i> <i>"not really supportive – unless we fought for it"</i> <i>"the support was there and I grabbed it with both hands"</i>
Recommendations for other females	This refers to the advice that other females wanting to move to higher positions should heed	<i>"Believe in yourself"</i> <i>"stay focused"</i> <i>"choose the right organisation"</i> <i>"know your strengths"</i>
Recommendations for the organisation	This refers to suggestions that successful females have for organisations to assist other females to move up the hierarchy	<i>"develop a plan for female coaches to progress"</i> <i>"treat all coaches equally"</i> <i>"ensure that there is a grievance procedure to report sexual harassment"</i> <i>"provide more resources for female coaches"</i>

## 5. Discussion

### Ambitions

It is interesting that most of the participants did not have ambitions to penetrate the glass ceiling. Rather their focus was on delivering the highest possible outputs. This finding implies that their hard work did not go unnoticed and male exclusionary practices which are found in many bureaucratic organisations are not implemented. This finding also suggests that sport organisations which were once male-dominated (Surujlal, 2004) have evolved to recognise the contributions of females. While most of the participants resigned themselves to the fact that they would not climb up the hierarchy, some of the sport organisations have moved away from such thinking.

### *Moving up the ladder*

Most of the participants attributed their movement up the hierarchy to their hard work and dedication. They delivered on what was expected of them. An important finding was that they focused on their job rather than promotion. This finding may be significant in that by focusing on their job and not on promotion, they did not experience the frustrations of those who were overlooked for promotion. This may

have resulted in their higher productivity levels which were considered when they were promoted.

### *Opportunity for growth*

There were mixed views regarding the opportunities for growth. A small number of participants indicated that there were indeed opportunities for them to grow in their organisation. One participant commented that her manager 'went the extra mile' to help her to develop as a coach. However, the majority of the participants perceived that while there appeared to be opportunities for their growth those opportunities were for the males. This was evident in the 'in-group favouritism' that the participants perceived existed in the organisation.

### *Challenges*

With regard to the challenges experienced by the participants there were also mixed responses. While some females felt accepted and part of the management, some still felt that they were marginalised. They perceived that their work was not recognised and experienced gender stereotyping. They also felt that they were being viewed as inferior to their male counterparts. One participant, in particular, stated that her former coach and mentor felt threatened by her achievements at the organisation. Therefore she had to leave the organisation and get a high position in another organisation.

### *Organisational support*

There were varying views regarding the support that sport organisations provided for females to move up the hierarchy. While some of the participants found their organisations to be highly supportive, others experienced very little support. Those who had the support of their organisation took full advantage of the support and moved faster up the hierarchy than those who did not have the support. Two participants, in particular, stressed that they 'fought' their way up the hierarchy. They adopted an aggressive approach and were relentless in their pursuit of higher positions.

## **6. Strengths and Limitations**

The strength of the study lies in its sample which was purposefully selected. This ensured that data was collected from participants who experienced the phenomenon being researched. A limitation of the study is the small sample size. Therefore generalising the findings to the greater population should be approached with caution.

## **7. Recommendations**

The recommendations for sport organisations and females aspiring towards the highest positions in organisations are based on the responses of the participants in the study. Among the most common recommendations for females was that they should stay focussed, be determined and have self-belief. They should also carefully choose the organisation to work at.

Participants also had recommendations for the organisation. They recommended that organisations should be transparent regarding promotions and that the criteria

should not only favour one gender. All coaches, regardless of gender, should be treated equally. Sport organisations should also have clear grievance procedures in place.

## **8. Conclusion**

The varied responses from the participants indicate that while some sport organisations have evolved to include females in higher positions, some are still stuck in their old ways.

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