

WOMEN AND SPORT LEADERSHIP: PERCEPTIONS OF MALAWI WOMEN EDUCATED IN SPORT BUSINESS LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Traditional beliefs, cultural expectations and attitudes regarding the position of women in society still exist in the sub-Saharan African patrimonial society. Gender inequality in Africa's regional and national sport organisations and governance structures is a reality and empirical work on women in sport leadership is lacking. This qualitative investigation is embedded in social constructivism as conceptual framework, which attempted to explore the perceived effect of a sport leadership education program in Malawi. The effect of leadership education is contextually perceived and although the challenge to integrate African leadership and traditional western leadership models is recognised, it was not the aim of this study. The study aimed to understand the leadership experiences of females in a Malawi sport context and sought to reveal if sport leadership development initiatives like this are expected to be merely opportunities to transfer knowledge or if it could affect the self-worth and "voice" of female sport leaders in Malawi. Findings suggest that completing the sport leadership education programme positively affected not only individual self-worth but also the collective voice of female sport leaders. It is proposed that similar courses are expanded and introduced to other sub-Saharan African countries and to research the perceived effect.

Key words: Sport leadership education; Gender inequality; Sub-Saharan Africa.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A depressing picture of leadership in Africa is often presented in extant scholarly literature (Kiamba, 2008; Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Muchiri, 2011; Ngambi, 2011; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2011). Researchers (Mboup, 2008; Bolden & Kirk 2009; Haruna 2009; Kuada, 2010; Muchiri, 2011), recognise that much of the discourse and research on leadership in sub-Saharan Africa focuses on leader characteristics, skills, styles and behaviour from a western perspective, while the contextual realities of sub-Saharan African leadership are often negated. Leadership does not occur in a vacuum, and the above researchers strongly argue for leadership approaches that develop Africa's social and human capital.

Understanding the dynamics and characteristics of leadership in Africa and the status of women in this context are at the heart of this study. Women constitute a significant part of the social and human capital of Africa. In Africa, and specifically sub-Saharan Africa, patriarchal

structures dominate the lives of individuals, governance and political systems (De la Rey, 2005; Pandor, 2006; Kiamba, 2008), and influence the way in which people, especially women in Africa, have access and opportunity to leadership positions. Although a number of sub-Saharan African countries have adopted progressive constitutions resulting in policies and quotas on gender equality, prejudice against women in leadership positions persists (Aubrey, 2001; Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009; Kuada, 2010; Dibie & Dibie, 2012), creating a gap between intention and implementation. Scholars (Kiamba, 2008; Kuada, 2010; Dibie & Dibie, 2012), agree that gender inequality in Africa is defined and driven by traditional cultures and patriarchal ideology. This reality is also observed in sport leadership as an area of public life.

Sadie (cited in Kiamba, 2008) isolated various factors limiting aspirations to positions of leadership for women in sub-Saharan Africa. The patriarchal system, where decision-making power resides in the hands of males, seems to be a fundamental constraint. Traditional beliefs, cultural expectations and attitudes regarding the position of women in society still exist on the African context. Many African women aspiring to leadership positions in sport are reluctant to distance themselves from tradition and culture out of fear of social exclusion. In general, the traditional roles of women are seen as homemakers and domestic caretakers.

Decision-making and leadership capabilities are typically limited to the domestic sphere. Decision-making and visibility in public life, such as sport organisations, are frowned upon as it implies women have to juggle cultural expectations with their cultural leadership roles. In her study on experiences of women in sport leadership in Kenya, M'Mbaha (2012) pointed out that despite women's sport policy resolutions of the International Olympic Committee, women in Africa tend not to offer themselves for leadership positions due to a fear of social exclusion. Globally, only 12.4% women had been recruited to serve on national Olympic committees. In Kenya (15%) and Malawi (3%) of women are underrepresented in sport governance structures across management levels.

The role of the media, socialisation of the girl child and stereotyping are also highlighted by Sadie (cited in Kiamba, 2008), as contributing factors to leadership equality in Africa. Lack of media coverage of women in sport leadership positions contributes to creating a void in female role models. Tamir and Galily (2010) postulate that inadequate media coverage makes women in African sport invisible. This obviously does not benefit the agenda of women in sport, as it relates to equal access. M'Mbaha (2012) reports that women in Kenya often prefer to avoid the media. An unintended consequence of this is the lack of recognition of female sport leaders in the media and the further marginalisation of women in sport leadership. The socialisation of the girl child also contributes to gender inequalities in leadership. Girls are not nurtured for leadership positions in society through rites and rituals on the same level as a boy child. Emmet (cited in Kiamba, 2008) attributes this to some religious practices that tend to cement cultural norms and practices and, consequently, disempower women and girls.

Gender stereotyping seems to be another major cause of persistent under-representation of women in leadership positions. Socio-cultural practices and traditions render women and girls as jural minors falling under the guardianship, first of their fathers and later of their husbands and discourage women to seek leadership positions in society (Sudarkasa, 1986). A consequence of this is a lack of leadership networks and recognition of ability and visibility

in society needed for leadership advancement. Marital status, social background and family responsibilities contribute to the social cost of the decision to get involved in leadership positions in Africa. For some women, this social cost is often too high to contemplate.

Gender and leadership inequality is evident throughout the history of Malawi. Its peak was under the leadership of President Hastings Kumusu Banda from independence to the early 1990s. According to Tiessen (2008:201), Banda had a special relationship with Malawian women as he referred to them as “his women” which cemented their subservience in society. One of the roles expected from Malawian women under the leadership of Banda was compulsory traditional singing, dancing and praising the ruling political party. Banda described himself as the male leader of the women in Malawi, thereby institutionalising traditional leadership roles and limiting decision-making authority of women (Tiessen, 2008). In her research, Tiessen (2008) echoed the concerns of Kiamba (2008) about attitudes and barriers towards women in leadership positions in sub-Saharan Africa. The concern of women being their own enemies in leadership advancement in Malawi emerged as a common theme in the work of Tiessen (2008). She argued that barriers to leadership advancement, capacity building and equality are not solely contributed to a lack of support of men; women also prevent other women from reaching and succeeding in leadership positions.

The 1994 referendum ended one-party rule in Malawi and a new constitution in which gender equality for women with men and the rights of women emerged. The Constitution guarantees full participation in all spheres of society in Malawi [including sport], and states that all customs and practices that discriminate against women in work and public affairs are eliminated. Under the current Constitution, all citizens of Malawi are offered greater access to higher learning and continuing education (Constitution of the Republic of Malawi, 2006). Despite the above fundamental principles of the Constitution of Malawi, female participation rates in sport are relatively low compared to that of males. It is estimated that around 30% of the women take part in sport over their lifespan, while less than 3% of females are involved in sport leadership structures in Malawi (Malawi National Sports Council, 2014). These relatively low participation figures could be contributed to the strong influence of societal practices and customs, despite the underlying gender equality opportunities articulated in the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi.

Strategies of the Malawi National Sports Council (MNSC) to provide access and opportunity to education advancement and leadership and public decision-making spaces for Malawian women through sport business management and leadership courses and appointment of female sport officials in representative positions in Malawi sport do, however, reflect congruence with the principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi. The significance of empowering women in African society with education, technical skills, enhanced self-worth and economic independence that could lead toward equality and full-participation in society is in line with the findings of Dibie and Dibie (2012) on leadership development for women in Africa. Efforts like this, however, must go hand in hand with changes in the attitude towards gender equality in sport leadership as public space. The results of this study could contribute towards an understanding of gender inequality in Malawian sport management and leadership.

The significance and need for women to be involved in decision-making and leadership in Africa were debated extensively in an online discussion (United Nations, 2007), organised by the Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. What emerged from this discussion was the importance of the involvement of women in societal decision-making. Contributors emphasised that without the active involvement of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels and spheres of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. Women in leadership roles are more likely to represent the needs and interests of other women and act as role models to the next generations of girls and boys in African society.

Gender inequality in Africa's regional and national sport organisations and governance structures is a reality. Females remain marginal in decision-making in sport contexts despite ratio guidelines from international sport governing bodies and governments. Gender inequality in sport leadership is, however, not uniquely African. It is a global phenomenon that continuously receives attention on global and regional platforms. Hargreaves (1997) reported on the general absence of women in decision-making positions in South African sport. She ascribes this to deep-seated power imbalances between men and women in South African sport. She argues that as there is very little willingness among men to strive towards and institutionalise gender equality in social institutions, this tendency is likely to continue. Pelak (2010) reports a similar trend of gender inequality in South African soccer from 1970 to 2010. Pelak (2005) does, however, state that the growth of women's soccer in South Africa, and especially in the Western Province region, provides a challenge to gender exclusionary practices in soccer. This has contributed to the tenacity of female soccer players and their supporters. Elsewhere in Africa the trend of gender equality in sport is also reflected in the scope of media coverage of sport in Nigeria (Ajibua *et al.*, 2013).

According to Ajibua *et al.* (2013), the quality and quantity of media coverage of female sport in Nigeria is not an accurate reflection of the level of achievement in Nigerian sport and attributes the reality in Nigeria to a lack of women in decision-making positions in the sport media profession. In addition, structures such as UNESCO, the International Olympic Committee, the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women, the International Council of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport and Dance, the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education, MINEPS, European Union, Sports Association of Arab Women, Supreme Council of Sport in Africa, Asian Women and Sport Group, USA Women's Sport Foundation and the International Women's Group, continuously advocate for gender equality in sport (Kluka, 2008).

In her research, Kluka (2008) reported that for decades women have been disadvantaged by being afforded relatively limited access to active participation in sport at all levels. Women have also been absent in decision-making roles due to a lack of gender mainstreaming policies, development initiatives and education programmes aimed at facilitating women's participation in global sport. Kluka (2008) pointed out that although global and regional policies and declarations on gender inequality span several decades from the United Nations' universal declaration on human rights (United Nations, 1948), to the 2013 Cuba declaration on Moving Girls and Women Forward Towards a Better World (International Association of Physical Education for Girls and Women, 2013), gender inequality in sport still persists on a

global scale. Education and development of the leadership potential of women to increase self-worth and skills profiles are central concepts in the majority of declarations and policy documents on women and sport.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study draws on the theory of social constructivism. According to Vygotski (1978), the founder of social constructivism as a departure from the cognitive constructivism views of Piaget, all of the cognitive functions, for example, learning, decision-making and leadership behaviour originate in collaborative, human social interactions and must, therefore, be explained as products of social interactions. New knowledge and social behaviour are not simply assimilated through cognitive memory but also by being integrated into a community where the individual creates subjective meaning of their experiences and model behaviour through collaborative human interaction in communities. The cultural context within which human interaction takes place is fundamental. According to the social constructivism theory, behaviour and choices of the individual in life are determined by collaborative customs and knowledge.

According to Coakley (2007), sport is a social construction. As such the paradigms and significance societies attribute to sport are influenced by cultural ideology. Ideologies reflect ways in which people give meaning to gender equality and the position of women in sport. When leadership in Africa is thus approached through the lens of social constructivism, as well as cultural ideology, the influence of the patriarchal cultural system becomes evident and cultural beliefs that define gender positions in sport are accepted as normal practice. In the patriarchal system traditional beliefs, cultural expectations and attitudes regarding the position of women in society dominate and model social human interaction. The aspirations to leadership positions in sport governance structures of female sport leaders are, therefore, competing with cultural customs, norms and values regarding female leadership across and between societal spheres despite the principles of the Malawi Constitution.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This investigation explored the context of a sport leadership education program in the sub-Saharan African country of Malawi. The researchers were especially interested in understanding the leadership experiences of females in Malawi sport. The researchers also sought to reveal if sport leadership development initiatives like this are expected to be merely opportunities to transfer knowledge or if it could contribute to the self-worth and “voice” of female sport leaders in Malawi. The researchers acknowledge that a sport leadership course is merely an educational event and do not claim that a single event could eradicate deep-rooted social inequality in Malawian society. The results of this study, however, could provide insights to investigate themes for future assessments of sustainable social impact. The reality of inequality in sport in Malawi became imminent from the profile of the first two cohorts of a Certificate and Advanced Certificate in Sport Business Management. Only nine females (N=9) were recruited in the first two cohorts (N=56) of a Certificate and Advanced Certificate in Sport Business Management development programmes funded by the Malawi National Sports Council (MNSC). The population of nine female participants served as the purposive sample.

The two sport leadership programmes were presented to a cohort of 56 participants in Malawi by a team of facilitators with teaching experience in Africa from a South African and an American university. The sport leadership development programmes involved in-country application and recruitment, in-country launch and in-country teaching programmes comprising five modules for each certificate over 12 months with a five-day contact session in Malawi after the second module. Module content was developed in consultation with the MNSC to reflect the social demands and parameters of sport in Malawi. Based on the contextual requirements of sport in Malawi and the brief from the MNSC, the Certificate for Sport Business Management modules were developed for fundamental sport management, sport facility and event management, sport marketing, sport leadership and governance and sport development.

Modules for the Advanced Certificate in Sport Business Management included Visionary management in sport, Sport finances, Human resource management in sport, Contemporary business processes in sport, Legal and political processes in sport and Managing sport science and coaching science issues in sport. Comprehensive course manuals were compiled and provided to enrolled candidates founded on the guiding principles of continuing and distance education, adult and interactive learning. A feature of this particular sport leadership development programme was interactive individual and group assignment activities requiring candidates to engage with sport governance structures, sport events and sport facilities to apply theoretical knowledge and experience leadership dynamics in the socio-economic context of Malawi.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research had a qualitative, narrative approach to gain insight into the perceived effect on female sport leaders attending the particular sport business management and leadership courses. This qualitative research relied on a range of data collections that enabled an inductive understanding and interpretation of ways in which females experience their involvement in sport leadership and the perceived effect on their self-worth, personal enrichment and influence in the Malawi sportscape. In this study data were collected from female respondents in the following ways:

1. *Online semi-structured questionnaire* administered to all female candidates (N=9) in the first two cohorts of the Certificate and Advanced Certificate in Sport Business Management programmes. Respondents were invited to share their written narrative experiences as females in Malawi sport and reflect upon their personal history of participation and leadership in sport, narratives on their lived experiences and challenges in sport leadership, their perceptions on the potential role of women as change agents in Malawi sport and the perceived effect the leadership courses had on them.
2. *Follow-up semi-structured personal interviews* with respondents to explore their narratives, as well as their lived-experiences in the Malawi sportscape after completing the Sport Business Management development programmes. Interviews were recorded with the informed consent of the respondents. Time available for collecting data through these personal interviews was limited to a scheduled one-week contact session in Malawi.

3. *Community visits and respondent observation* where respondents were observed during their engagement with sport clubs in the community and at sport events and facilities after completion of the courses. Observation focused on indications of assertiveness in meetings, interaction with male counterparts, willingness to speak out in task groups and meetings, knowledgeable and assertive debating of contentious issues, willingness to take leadership in sport events and facility contexts, positively questioning proposals and decisions in meetings and willingness to support other females in meetings. Personal observations were geographically limited to areas surrounding the cities of Lilongwe and Blantyre, although respondents represented the total geographical area of Malawi. Field notes were taken independently during the observation of respondents in meetings and sport leadership contexts.

Collected data were analysed and interpreted through the theoretical lens of social constructivism. An inductive approach was implemented where the researchers first intensively analysed and interpreted narratives independently to maintain trustworthiness of collected data. Key themes, issues and emerging patterns were identified, coded, reflected upon and interpreted independently followed by a mutual process of verification and consolidation. The qualitative software programme *Atlas ti* was applied to code the data. Triangulation of data took place by comparing the data collected through narratives and semi-structured personal interviews with observations. Analysis of secondary sources provided insight into the theoretical framework of women in leadership in sub-Saharan Africa. Although both researchers were white and female, they were known to respondents as both have been involved in the development and delivery of the sport management and leadership courses since its inception in Malawi.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the following section the main issues relating to the experiences of females in Malawi sport are presented. As the research took a narrative approach, it provided a safe space for respondents to share their perceptions, expectations and experiences in sport leadership in Malawi, as well as to reflect on the perceived quality of the sport business management leadership courses and the potential effect of these courses on self-worth. Following the initial independent analysis of the narratives by the researchers, the following broad themes were induced: (1) status and value of women in sport leadership in Malawi; (2) barriers and challenges for women to enact sport leadership in Malawi; (3) effect of the leadership education courses on their voice/influence in sport; (4) effect on networking abilities and opportunities in Malawi sport; (5) women's role as social change agents through sport in Malawi; and (6) effect of the sport leadership courses on self-worth and career vision. Triangulation of themes through follow-up personal semi-structured interviews and observation of women enacting sport leadership in Malawi added three additional themes: (7) strategies to improve women's voices in Malawi sport; (8) involvement in and passion for sport; and (9) perceived shifts in leadership perceptions and experiences of female sport leaders in Malawi.

Status and value of women in sport leadership in Malawi

The status and value attached to women in sport leadership greatly mirrored the status and value of women in Malawi society and greater sub-Saharan Africa. There was unanimous

agreement among respondents that, in general, women are not valued in sport leadership, and are under-represented in sport governance structures. This finding mirrors the Malawi reality of less than 3% women being involved in leadership positions in sport governance structures. According to the MNSC, this seems to be a trend across Malawi sport structures. Specific figures of female leadership involvement across sporting codes were not available due to a lack of research and knowledge management systems of individual sporting codes. This trend, however, is in line with findings reported by M'Mbaha (2012) on female sport leadership in Kenya. Women aspire to positions, but men monopolise positions even in sport governing bodies for girls and women, such as netball. In terms of the theory of social constructivism Malawian society follows a patriarchal structure.

Despite gender equality advocated in the Constitution of Malawi, leadership roles are to a great extent taken up by males across public social spheres. The findings of Muchiri (2011) that highlight the influence of social constructivism factors constraining leadership opportunities in African society, are also supported by the results of the present study. Access to education opportunities was identified by Dibie and Dibie (2012), as contributing to gender equality in sub-Saharan Africa. In their narratives, a number of respondents contributed the low value and status of women in sport leadership to a lack of formal education opportunities in sport management and leadership in Malawi, thus, reiterating the findings of Dibie and Dibie (2012) on the significance of access to education opportunities. These findings were anticipated against the context of Malawi's male-dominant society where women are regarded as subservient to males in public spaces such as sport. The perceived gap between the intention of Malawi's constitution on gender equality and implementation and acceptance in society is reinforced by these findings.

Barriers and challenges for women to enact sport leadership in Malawi

Social barriers against women in leadership in the broader society of Malawi correspond with findings in the research of Kiamba (2008) and Tiessen (2008), and is reinforced by the results of this study. Three sub-themes emerged from the narratives: women being their own enemies; cultural barriers; and societal perceptions. The concern of women being their own enemies in leadership advancement in Malawi emerged as a common theme in the work of Tiessen (2008). A similar concern was voiced by the respondents in the current study. One respondent referred to this as the "*PhD syndrome*" ("Pull her Down"), prevalent among women in sport leadership positions.

In the analysis of the narratives it was not clear if this behaviour is mimicking the behaviour of male sport leaders or if it is gender related. Concepts, such as jealousy, gossiping, lack of support for and recognition of other women, and self-centredness surfaced in the narratives. If women strive to achieve a critical mass in sport leadership in order to institutionalise the voices of women in sport and act as role models to the aspirations of a younger generation of women and girls, this tendency is clearly counter-productive to the advancement of women in sport leadership.

As the context of leadership in sport represents a sub-set of the context of leadership in Malawi society, it was expected that the narratives would be filtered through with the dominant patriarchal cultural norms and values. The value of sport in Malawi is highly

appreciated and recognised, but at the same time claimed as the male domain. Although respondents were unanimous in their convictions that women's leadership in sport can add value and dimension to sport governance structures, they were very reluctant to articulate views against cultural norms and values. Some respondents stated that although covertly they do not agree, they do not want to overtly challenge men's traditional authority not only in society, but also in sport as a public space of leadership as it would reflect badly on them as women, wives and mothers. The physical nature of sport participation and sport apparel worn present barriers from a religious perspective, particularly in the Muslim community of Malawi. Women and girls wearing shorts are sometimes perceived as prostitutes, an activity considered illegal in the social context of Malawi. In rural areas particularly, parents are not willing to release their female children from household chores and duties to participate in sport, as the survival of the family depends upon those household duties of cooking, nurturing children and fetching water.

The majority of girls, therefore, have no history of involvement in sport participation, which is regarded as a platform for aspiration to sport leadership positions in later life. Women do not only have to contend with men's antagonism, dominance and sexism within sport leadership structures, but also with perceptions of the broader society. Narratives emphasised society's perceptions of sexual connotations attributed to women in sport leadership. Society perceives women serving in sport leadership positions as opportunists labelling them as only interested in men; that they are there for the pleasure of men and are described as "loose" women. Respondents referred to these as follows:

Married women serving in sport governance boards are not favoured by men serving on the same boards, as it limits their [women's] sexual availability.

I served on the committee of a sport club as ex-officio member and the men on the committee made fun of my inputs and made indecent propositions to me, which was very funny to them.

At the same time, married women among the respondents of this study indicated that they are reluctant to serve on sport governing boards, as it could jeopardise their marriages and social status in the community. Narrative comments in this regard state:

Although I love netball, I do not want to get involved in sport club management as my husband and family say I should spend more time at home taking care of him and our household.

The contextual influence of leadership hierarchies constraining the efficacy of female leadership, as debated by Muchiri (2011), is mirrored in the narratives of respondents. Suggestions on how to address these barriers came from some respondents:

We have to collectively stand strong against the sexual suggestions of men in committees.

If women stand together we can show them we want to improve the sport and not go to bed with them.

Effect of sport leadership education courses on the collective voice/influence of women in Malawi Sport

The notion of a collective voice is echoed in this theme. Although women identified barriers they also agreed that they feel more empowered after completing the courses. The positive and empowering shifts experienced in self and career vision perceived by the respondents

elevated the collective voice of women in Malawi sport. Respondents not only reported increased involvement and influence in decision-making in their immediate personal environment, but also in the wider Malawi sport community. In the words of one respondent:

I have been asked many times now to represent Malawi on women's issues in our region (Africa) and was appointed as [national representative] for the 2012 London Olympic Games, as I can now act from a position of authority due to my increased knowledge. I also influenced associations to allow women and girls to participate in regional competitions to showcase women's potential. I played a crucial role in influencing sport development in my local community and the entire community.

The perceived value of increased knowledge through education is reflected in the above narration. This reiterates the findings of Dibie and Dibie (2012) on the power of leadership education for women in Africa. Another respondent expressed her perceptions in this regard as follows:

I was a lonely voice in my area. I did not always feel confident to debate issues as I felt I did not know enough. At regional events I now feel more confident to speak because I know I have other women to support me.

The above statement suggests that respondents perceive their potential influence in Malawi sport not limited to their immediate environment, but also transferable to a broader context.

Effect on networking abilities and opportunities in Malawi sport

In order to influence and change the perceptions of society in Malawi on the status and position of women and girls in sport, social change agents [women in sport] need to network. Respondents reported positively on the impact of the sport leadership courses on their networking abilities and opportunities. Two primary reasons were cited: (1) improved concept of self; and (2) the nature of the course and assignments. Recruitment for the sport leadership courses was done publicly at the national level in Malawi resulting in successful candidates representing different levels of management in Malawi sport. Selected candidates met with each other for the first time during the scheduled contact lecture weeks. The delivery strategy and course methodology focused strongly on personal interaction and group work to complete assignments.

The profile of the candidates brought people from diverse sporting backgrounds, governance levels and opinions together and provided opportunity to network with government officials, sport organisations and influential male individuals in Malawi sport. Candidates were required to attend sport governing board meetings, interview sport managers, sport personalities and sport participants to complete some of the assignments. Their increased levels of confidence gained from the safe learning environment of the course allowed them to develop networks, become visible, and earn recognition in a broader community context for their contributions. One respondent expressed her feelings on networking as follows:

During the course I was in a discussion group with officials from the Ministry [of Youth and Sport] and national sport organisations. That provided me with the chance to communicate face-to-face with them. It was the first time I had the opportunity to approach them directly and discuss issues. It opened new communication channels.

These narratives demonstrate the element of walking together in Kirk's (2005) model of system leadership development. Networking creates safe spaces for women to connect

and reach out to others, thus, progressing together towards the goal of becoming more visible within the Malawi sportscape.

Perceived effect on women's roles as social change agents through sport in Malawi

Bolden and Kirk (2006) postulated, based upon the theory of social constructivism, that how people think of leadership affects how social systems operate, which consequently affects the well-being of the social system and the people in it. From their narratives, it was clear that respondents understood the influence of patriarchal leadership on society's [negative] perceptions on women in sport. Society endorses the leadership views on gender equality although it contradicts the Malawi Constitution. It also became evident that respondents were convinced that through strong bridging social capital networking between diverse individuals, sporting codes and leadership levels, role modelling, advocacy and dialogue, they could leverage the impact of sport to collectively influence social perceptions of women in Malawi sport. This particular finding aligns with the elements of Kirk's (2005) model of system leadership development that facilitates social change in communities through seeing together (role modelling and mentorship), walking together (networking and advocacy) and talking together (dialogue). Respondents intuitively proposed and embraced a communal view of leadership whereby the collective empowerment of women and girls in rural areas through sport could bring about a chain reaction regarding patriarchal views on women in sport.

A fundamental starting point in Kirk's (2005) model is the notion of an improved self, which was a requirement respondents reported on positively through their narratives. They, however, did not perceive the effect of the sport leadership program only as individual skills development, but transferred their newly acquired skills set to the collective cause of raising awareness for women in sport. Higher perceptions of self-confidence and self-worth of respondents provided them with the courage and tools to share and exchange ideas on women in sport in a broader community context. Bolden and Kirk (2006) reported similar findings through their InterAction leadership program in a Pan-African context.

Effect of the sport management and leadership courses on self and career vision

Without exception, in their narratives and follow-up interviews respondents reported a significant perceived positive impact and influence on self and their career vision. A definite pattern of developed self-confidence, increased feelings of self-worth, assertiveness, influence and authority, based on improved sport leadership competencies and capabilities was voiced in the narratives. In this regard, the results of the current study support the contention of Dibie and Dibie (2012) that empowering women in African society with education could lead to enhanced self-worth and fuller participation in society. It also falls in line with the argument of Ngambi (2011) that increased feelings of self-awareness and the ability to pro-actively develop personal strengths and weaknesses are significant elements of building leadership capacity.

Respondents reported acquiring good solid sport leadership skills that enabled them to act as excellent role models to the female sport sorority in Malawi. Respondents experienced increased feelings of self-worth in that their acquired knowledge and skills enabled them to now act from positions of authority. A number of respondents commented on their initial apprehension of perceiving not to have the intellectual ability to complete the courses

successfully as, according to society norms and expectations, women's roles and capabilities were limited to the family household. Being able to successfully complete the courses made them feel empowered as women. Respondents acknowledged a sharp focus in their career vision. The possibility of a full-time career in sport leadership and management became viable options as they perceived and understood their collective voices and influence as role models for gender equality in women's sport in Malawi. One respondent worded the influence on her career vision as follows:

I completed the certificates despite my initial feelings of doubt. I can see that I can follow this path to more education.

Strategies to raise collective awareness of women in Malawi sport

The power of a collective voice was hinted at by respondents in their narratives on barriers hindering full equitable participation in Malawi sport. Their new vision of and belief in their influence in the male-dominated Malawi society was reflected in strategies proposed by them to strengthen their collective voice in sport. Proposed strategies could be categorised into three focus areas: Mentorship and role modelling; access; and opportunity to sport leadership education and advocacy. Respondents expressed strong feelings about women in sport being role models to others and being able to speak out on behalf of the voiceless. Through mentorship between women, who successfully completed the sport leadership education course, and aspiring female sport leaders in Malawi, the value of sport for women and girls might be institutionalised in rural areas to create a critical mass influencing patriarchal social expectations of women and girls in sport. Respondents voiced realistic opinions on access and opportunity to sport leadership education.

The significance of involvement in local sport governance structures as platform for regional and national involvement was emphasised. Women and girls could be educated as coaches and referees on local level to build self-confidence and assertiveness. Without exception, respondents underlined the necessity to deploy participants, who successfully completed the sport management and leadership courses, in government sport structures to reinforce role modelling. Sport as a vehicle to advocate for implementation of the 50-50 principle (gender equality) as imbedded in the Malawi Constitution, was stressed by respondents.

Involvement and passion for sport

All respondents had completed high school education (Grade 12) and the majority (62.1%) had higher education qualifications as teachers in areas other than sport. As the Malawi higher education system does not offer any formal qualification in the areas of sport science, respondents kept their passion for sport alive through volunteerism in sport. They volunteered as administrators, assistants to male coaches and referees on lower levels of sport. Without exception, respondents emphasised the importance of involvement in sport participation from an early age but limited to the sports of soccer and netball. Motivation for participation in sport was both intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is reflected in a narrative stating:

I love doing sport. I love the movement, it makes me feel good.

The extrinsic influence of female teachers and mothers as role models, motivators and mentors was evident as one respondent reported:

I was raised by my mother to believe that I have the potential to be the best I can be.

Continued involvement and performance in sport participation and volunteer leadership increased their visibility in sport and created a desire to aspire for institutionalised leadership positions in Malawi sport governance on local, regional and national level. Nominations to be elected to sport governance structures again provided external motivators. None of the respondents, however, referred to intrinsic motivators, such as self-confidence, leadership skills profile, self-worth or personal goals pulling them towards possible governance positions in Malawi sport.

Perceived shifts in leadership perceptions and experiences of female sport leaders in Malawi

Observing respondents in sport leadership contexts after completion of the leadership programmes, it became evident that they presented themselves confidently and assertively. Respondents attributed this to their exposure to the leadership courses.

TABLE 1. PERCEIVED SHIFTS IN LEADERSHIP PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE SPORT LEADERS IN MALAWI

From...	To...
Non-recognition and under-representation and marginalisation in sport governance structures	Recognition and inclusion albeit still marginal
Exclusion from sport leadership education opportunities	Access and opportunity to sport leadership education
No platform for aspiring to sport leadership opportunities	Platform provided to support sport leadership aspirations
Feelings of low self-worth	Increased feelings of self-worth and self-confidence
Lack of career vision in sport	Clearer and improved career vision in sport
Lack of intellectual capacity to succeed	Intellectual empowerment
Limited understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses	Pro-actively developing personal strengths and weaknesses
Isolated influence in sport	Elevated collective voice & role models in Malawi sport
Marginal and localised decision-making influence in Malawi sport governing contexts	Increased influence in decision-making in broader Malawi sport governing contexts
Limited identity as sport leaders in Malawi sport	Reconstructed identities as mentors and role models in Malawi sport
Limited tools and competence to share and exchange ideas on women in sport	Realistic and relevant skills and tools to debate the issue of women in sport in Malawi
Localised networking opportunities and skills	National and increased networking abilities and opportunities
Almost invisible in Malawi sport governing structures	Increased visibility and influence in Malawi sport governing structures

Observations focused on indications of assertiveness in meetings, willingness to speak out in task groups and meetings, knowledgeable and assertive debating of contentious issues, the willingness to take leadership in event organising meetings, positively questioning proposals

and decisions, and willingness to support other females in meetings. Observed behaviour corresponded with narrative statements of respondents in terms of the perceived influence the sport leadership courses had on them.

Bolden and Kirk (2009) in their investigation on new understandings of African leadership concluded that the willingness of females to take up leadership positions and their ultimate active leadership involvement are shaped and influenced by traditional views informed by cultural and religious norms. Leadership roles of females are acted out within a community context. As such, female sport leaders in Malawi need to find a balance between personal aspirations and values and societal values. Access and opportunity to the sport leadership development programs presented in Malawi seemed to contribute to a shift in perceptions of the respondents, understanding and appreciation of their personal leadership competency and their collective voice in Malawi sport. An overview of this perceived shift as interpreted from the collected data can be found in Table 1.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative investigation provided an opportunity to explore leadership perceptions of female candidates in the first two cohorts of a sport leadership development program in Malawi. Results confirmed the powerful influence of societal contexts in sub-Saharan Africa on the status and role of women in sport leadership. Findings on barriers and challenges experienced by the respondents in a sport context were certainly not new and in line with extant research on leadership in Africa, yet they remain appropriate considering the persistent gender inequality in sport as a microcosm of a broader Malawi society. The positive empowering impact on respondents reported in this research could be transferable to other spheres of society and could provide a significant environment for collective advocacy on the position of girls and women through sport.

The complexity and diversity of sub-Saharan Africa erase the possibility of generic strategies on how to increase access and opportunity for women in sport leadership, so often advocated by international organisations through global declarations, policies and quota systems. The researchers propose that sport leadership education opportunities for females are expanded and introduced to other sub-Saharan African countries through the Supreme Council of Sport in Africa to investigate perceptions of the effect thereof in other cultural contexts. Future research could also explore the compatibility of generic global declarations on women and sport with non-western cultural contexts.

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