

Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching

Online

Navigating a Minefield: Allyship in Women's Coaching

© 2018 Coaching Association of Canada, ISSN 1496-1539

July 2021, Vol. 21, No. 3

Allyship is an Oxford University Word of the Year 2020 yet its roots date back to 2003 and the scholarly writing of author, educator, and researcher Christopher Earley. Put simply, it is the “ability to connect with people from different backgrounds”. Some call it “active support for the rights of a minority or marginalized group without being a member of it.” As recently as February 2021, an article in the *Harvard Business Review* described allyship as “a *strategic* mechanism used by individuals to become *collaborators, accomplices, and co-conspirators* who fight injustice and promote equity in the workplace through supportive personal relationships and public acts of sponsorship and advocacy ([Male Allyship Is About Paying Attention \(hbr.org\)](https://hbr.org).”

Whether the preferred definition of the allyship ideology is simple or complex, because it applies to those who are marginalized, allyship is particularly relevant within the sport context as it applies to women in the coaching profession. As author Amanda Schweinbenz articulates, women coaches must have allies if they are ever to break through the barriers, visible and invisible, that impede their progression in the profession. Her article is a timely and pertinent contribution to this perennial discussion. – Sheila Robertson, *Journal* editor

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By Amanda N. Schweinbenz

Introduction

Research indicates that women are underrepresented in the field of coaching. Of those registered with the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP), only 34% are women. At the post-secondary level, women represent 3% of head coaches for men's teams, 26% of head coaches for women's teams, and 18% of head coaches for mixed teams. At the international level, women coaches accounted for 20% of the coaching staff at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games and 10% at the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games. At the 2018 Paralympic Games, Canada had only one woman coach.

While there has been some attempt to improve the representation of women in coaching, including through mentorship initiatives and grants, little has changed. Yet, despite their lack of influence within the sport system, women are often blamed for their underrepresentation with the claim being made that the choices they make render them less desirable than men for coaching positions. Barriers continue to exist for women in accessing coaching positions across Canada; marginalized populations face even greater barriers including, but not limited to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism.

Women need allies who break down existing barriers to create equitable opportunities in sport. Allies have been described as individuals who work for social justice from a position of authority and/or dominance. Members of the dominant social groups, including male, white, cisgender, and able-bodied, benefit from unearned privileges that come in the form of unearned entitlements, which are things everyone should have, and conferred dominance, things no one should have. For example, white men are considered authority figures in sport regardless of their experiences or abilities. Further, men are hired to coach women's teams despite having never played a women's game. This unearned privilege is the result of the inequitable systems that award privilege to some and not to others based on their social group membership. Such privilege is not granted as a result of merit, hard work, talent, or accomplishment; it is the result for someone who is born to a standard that is deemed to be normal.

Many allies engage in social justice efforts to reform or dismantle existing systems of oppression and work to ensure that the distribution of access and resources is equitable to all members of society. This re-envisioned system focuses on the importance of all members, especially the marginalized, feeling physically and psychologically safe and secure. Allies must understand the unearned privileges they have, how they benefit from them, and how these advantages systematically disadvantage the marginalized. Allies must actively engage in the practices of allyship, one that is a continuous and reflexive practice of proactivity that disrupts the status quo. Essential to this is the willingness to accept feedback and guidance from people within the non-dominant groups.

Dr. Keith Edwards has noted that not everyone who identifies as an ally is anti-oppression; some who genuinely aspire to support change can actually act in harmful ways. He has outlined a model that identified three types of allies and the challenges they face:

- ally for self-interest
- ally for altruism
- ally for social justice

These allies are present in sport, and all play an important role. However, for there to be true change and for existing systemic inequalities to be addressed, more men need to be allies for social justice.

Ally for Self-Interest

The ally for self-interest works to support those with whom they have a personal relationship, such as a child, spouse, or family member rather than a group or a specific issue. They seek to be the protector who intervenes on behalf of a specific person, often without consultation. Their actions related to gender equity, while well intended, often perpetuate the stereotype that women require help or need to be "saved" by men. This ally often lacks awareness of systematic oppression and how their actions can be complicit. They see themselves as a good person who can identify specific acts as discriminatory, but they often have difficulty seeing or understanding the underlying systems of oppression or their position of privilege.

An example is the adamant father who wants every opportunity for his daughter to play sports. He may demand the option for her to play on a boys' team because of her athletic abilities. This action can be positive as it provides the girl with access to sport. However, if he calls women coaches "girls", looks to male coaches because he believes they have authority denied the women coaches, or berates a woman referee using sexist language, he is not interested in making sport more equitable for all women; he is only interested in his daughter. We also see this type of ally in the form of panels of all-male coaches at conferences, often called manels, who speak about women's sport and inclusivity. While they promote women's sport and inclusion, they are unaware that the absence of any women on the panel reinforces systemic sexism.

Ally for Altruism

The ally for altruism is aware of their privilege as a member of the dominant group and often seeks to cope with an underlying sense of guilt or shame. This ally wants to be seen as "one of the good guys" amidst the sea of perpetrators of oppression and fails to recognize their own contribution to oppression. However, guilt or shame cannot be the sole motivator in affecting change, as these alone do nothing to challenge the institutionalization of privilege to some and oppression to others.

These allies may want to be perceived as selfless heroes and as such, become defensive when confronted with their own oppressive behaviours. For example, an ally who is called out for sexist language may defend themselves by listing their resumé of pro-women efforts as justification, rationalization, or explanation. They may also become defensive when told that their language is sexist or hurtful and blame those who have been offended for not understanding their intentions or their pro-women credentials. Because of their need to be perceived as the hero, the ally for altruism leaves little room for the non-dominant group to take control of their own situations. This ally is trying to help rather than empower women; they desire to maintain credit for their efforts. When looking for opportunities to empower women or even an individual woman, they desire to maintain credit and some control over the empowering rather than listening to and working with non-dominant groups.

This occurs when administrators hire women coaches and self-promote their desire to see women in leadership positions but undermine their authority with the team and in the media. At conferences or meetings, men frequently speak about the difficulties women face in coaching but seldom allow the women in the room to articulate their own everyday experiences. This can unconsciously feed the ally's own sense of power and privilege as they speak for rather than with the marginalized. Such a paternalistic way of approaching allyship may lead to positive gains in the short term; however, it ultimately perpetuates the system of oppression that continues to prevent women from gaining equal access.

A paternalistic approach to allyship does not challenge the systems of dominance and reinforces a deficit model, which posits that women are less capable than their male counterparts. As Edwards has indicated, it perpetuates the system of oppression with the ally as the helper and women coaches becoming the objects of humanitarian endeavours. This is an act of "false charity", and it is essential to shift from saving people to transforming systems of oppression. Without a change in the system of oppression, there can be no true movement to improve access for everyone.

Ally for Social Justice

The ally for social justice identifies the relationship of oppressive structures and works in partnership with marginalized persons to build a coalition for change. Rather than individual acts, the goal is to change the oppressive processes and systems through collaborative work that benefits all people in society. The ally recognizes that multiple forms of oppression are interconnected and that addressing only one in isolation is limiting; rather, they seek to address intersecting forms of oppression. This is specifically important when addressing the intersectionality of gender, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, and age.

The intersectionality of these factors creates new barriers for women in sport. While women are underrepresented in head and assistant coaching positions across the country, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) women represent only a fraction of those coaches. This is largely because the system was created by white men for white men and as such, they continue to hire those who look and sound like them. When a woman does ascend the ladder and is accepted into the male-dominated world of coaching, she is typically white. This gives the false impression that the environment is inclusive and that women are welcome; in actuality, only certain women are welcome.

Through the desire to dismantle the systems of oppression, the ally for social justice is open to feedback and is able to reflect on their own privileges. This ally recognizes that they may make mistakes but accept this without defensiveness. Arguably, this helps to increase consciousness and, as such, is less likely to result in unintentional replication of hierarchical power structures of the system of oppression. In order to construct an informed notion of allyship, it is essential to listen intently to the perspectives of marginalized persons.

Key Behaviours and Strategies of Allies

How to identify the type of allies who might be around you and who are committed allies for social justice? Initially, some people may appear to be allies for social justice but in fact are not. Some behaviours and strategies of male allies that women see as most beneficial for support include:

- Developmental relationships
- Recognition
- Human resource processes
- Leadership/professional development
- Challenging gender discrimination and treating women as equals

Developmental relationships mean having an ally who genuinely works to connect women through networking. Connections gained with the support of male allies help women to access influencers in their sport as well as potential clients or employers. These actions can take place at coaching conferences or meetings and are often useful during social gatherings. They can also take the form of introductions via email that create an opportunity for open dialogue between the contact and the woman coach.

These allies also provide honest, specific, and timely feedback. To be clear, this feedback is constructive and intended to support and not be used as a tool to belittle or assert dominance. Constructive feedback addresses an action, not an individual's personality. For example, a developing assistant woman coach running a practice drill for the first time does not achieve the intended goal. Rather than raising their voice or cause the developing coach to feel incompetent, a strong ally coach explains why the drill was unsuccessful and talks with, not at, through steps to improve the drill.

Recognition is an important aspect of allyship. It has been argued that women experience social and economic backlash when they self-promote by highlighting their achievements or successes.

Consequently, their work often goes unrecognized or worse, they fail to get promotions or jobs because they do not want to appear to be bragging. A strong ally openly celebrates women coaches' accomplishments in meetings and on social media platforms and nominate them for awards.

The *Harvard Business Review* has indicated that women receive less credit for ideas when they work in groups with men. For example, a woman coach provides an option for a rule change that could benefit the league. The men in the room ignore or challenge the validity of the rule change. Moments later, a man makes the same suggestion, and the room responds positively. Men must learn to actively listen to women's voices and not appropriate women's ideas for their own. An ally actively acknowledges and highlights a woman's ideas in private and, more importantly, in public.

Addressing **human resource processes** is an important part of allyship because, as stated previously, men hold the majority of decision-making positions in sport. Athletic directors, boards, and hiring committees must actively seek qualified women candidates and create processes for the development and mentorship of future women coaches. It is not enough to say "no qualified woman applied for the position", as we know that systemic barriers prevent women from applying for jobs and achieving qualification standards equal to their male counterparts. The current pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women as they have lost their jobs at higher rates than men and many have had to take leaves-of-absence because of childcare issues. Coaching is not a 9-5 career and accommodations need to be made for women with young families, with a family member with a disability, and caring for older adults. By creating childcare options, addressing transportation issues and work-life balance, coaching can be a better profession not only for women, but for everyone.

Leadership/professional development is intertwined with HR processes. Young coaches need professional development opportunities to hone their skills. A leader must have opportunities to lead, and a strong ally can help to create these in a safe environment. Without the ability to learn from one's mistakes, how can we grow? Sponsorship programs for women athletes looking to enter coaching after their sporting careers can help to develop coaching skills.

Finally, **challenging gender discrimination and treating women as equals** requires men to actively engage in the dismantling of systemic sexism. This can include publicly calling out microaggressions and sexual harassment, addressing situations as they arise, and supporting women. Male coaches and administrators need to see women as ideal candidates for coaching and move away from the status quo of an all-male coaching staff.

Men who are gender allies can take cues from these behaviours and strategies and can ask women how to be an ally. One of the best ways to support a developing woman coach is to ask how to help. Avoid assumptions of what you think women coaches need and support them as they develop the path forward. Laughing at inappropriate jokes, failing to acknowledge a woman's contribution, making sexist, homophobic, and racist comments, or actively creating barriers for women to access coaching roles can reveal that the person is not an ally. When a woman calls out language as problematic, sexist, or hurtful, a social justice ally reacts by listening and critically reflecting on these comments. The man who becomes defensive and/or blames a woman for overreacting to a joke or a comment is not an ally.

Remember: women must be allies for women. cisgender white women have unearned privileges and access that women of colour and members of the LGBTQ2+ community cannot access. As such, cisgender white women must actively engage in allyship to create a better environment for marginalized populations. Once access is gained to a position of authority, women need to cast the net to bring more women in. Women must take every opportunity to raise their voices and celebrate other women.

Women need to create their own support group, what soccer great Abby Wambach calls “your wolf pack” ([Wolfpack - Abby Wambach](#)). Find a group of women who work together to be each other’s advocates and sounding boards and provide valuable feedback. Pledge to lift up each other’s voices and the voices of other women, especially the voices of the marginalized. Make the mission to be an inclusive pack. Women need to work together to identify allies, those who can be trusted to work to dismantle the system of oppression that prevents women from gaining access to coaching positions in sport.

About the Author

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References Available Upon Request