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Gender Manoeuvring in Sports Leadership: A Postfeminist Analysis

Taking into account the changing gender norms surrounding leadership, we examine the discursive constitution of sports leadership identities in Finland. Drawing on a sample of 49 interviews with men and women senior elite sports leaders and using postfeminism as a critical concept we examine how these high-ranking leaders involve themselves in gender manoeuvring when calibrating masculinity and femininity in the discursive constitution of their leadership identity. While there are a small number of studies which utilise postfeminism as an analytic device to interrogate and understand women's leadership, there are no comparative studies of women and men leaders which draw on postfeminism. Based on a discourse analysis, we identified three different gender manoeuvring discursive practices that both women and men engaged with themselves. The discursive practices were 1) Women demanding – men repelling, 2) Women choosing to retreat home to care for children, and 3) Women and men are different, and men are more passionate. Taken together, we discuss the complexity and challenges faced when women and men are called to take up the contradictory gender-marked attributes and behaviors in sports leadership.

Keywords: leadership, leadership identity, sport, postfeminism, gender, gender maneuvering

Introduction

Mobilising postfeminism as an analytic device, we investigate the discursive constitution of leadership identities by senior sports leaders. Sport, and particularly leadership positions in elite sport, can be considered as a “male and masculine preserve,” and the sports field has a long history of the formal, cultural, and symbolic exclusion of women not only from sport itself, but also from the top leadership posts in sport (Williams, 2013). As a field, sport imprints the specific features of masculinity including competitiveness, a focus on results, and the overt demonstration of physical power (Micelotta *et al.*, 2018; Day *et al.*, 2012) on leadership and often these attributes become the basic principles for leading and organising in sports organisations (Martin, 2003; Adriaanse and Claringbould, 2016). Critics of sports leadership have argued that women’s absence is normalised by the masculinity of leadership which not only manifests in terms of the numerical dominance of men – it is often able-bodied white men who make decisions that have an impact on sport and wider society – but is also expressed through the cultural association of the characteristics and behaviours of leadership with masculinity (Burton and Leberman, 2017; Burton, 2015; Ford, 2006; Lewis and Benschop, 2022).

Nevertheless, alongside the exposure of the way in which masculine cultural norms saturate sports leadership impacting on women’s inclusion at all levels in the sports arena (Ryan and Dickson, 2018), leadership in sport is not immune to the emergence of new ways of leading characterised as relational and aligned with the feminine attributes of nurture and care (Fletcher, 2004). As such, in sports leadership as in leadership in general, there is now a co-existence of masculinised and feminised forms of leading. According to Lewis and Benschop (2022) ‘good’ leadership is ever more likely to be understood in terms of achieving ‘gender-

balance’ between masculine marked leadership practices alongside feminine denoted leadership behaviours. However, questions remain as to who can be recognised as successfully able to bring leadership behaviours discursively coded as masculine into dialogue with feminine leadership practices. Recent research in Australia suggested that ‘...only men are able to perform both masculinized and feminized attributes, despite the theoretical assertion that post-heroic leadership can be performed by both men and women’ (Khan *et al.*, 2022: 321).

Taking into account the changing gender norms surrounding leadership, we examine the discursive constitution of sports leadership identities in Finland. Drawing on a sample of 49 interviews with men and women senior elite sports leaders and using postfeminism as a critical concept we examine how these high-ranking leaders constitute their leadership identity through the calibration of masculine and feminine norms. As argued by Lewis and Benschop (2022) postfeminism has produced the cultural conditions that have enabled the reframing of leadership as contradictorily gendered. Yet the complications of this calibration, particularly in terms of who can perform it have not been fully explored. Finland provides an interesting context for our investigation as it holds many of the top positions in gender equality ratings and as such may be labelled ‘postfeminist’ in that gender *inequality* appears to be a thing of the past. Nevertheless, while Finland is characterized as a context of high equality (OECD 2018; Gender Equality in Finland 2021), several gender equality problems persist and the tenacity of unequal circumstances is also connected to postfeminism. In particular in the field of sport, the proportion of women decreases the higher up you go in sports organizations (e.g., Aalto-Nevalainen 2018; Turpeinen and Hakamäki, 2018; Mikkonen *et al.*, 2021). Officially many Finnish sport organisations have adopted gender equality as an espoused value, yet there are enduring inequalities and sport as an arena seems to remain as a last bastion of male and masculine privilege (Hoeber, 2007). While Finland may be depicted as ‘gender equal’ the

reality on the ground, particularly in the area of sports can significantly diverge from this positive image (Saari, 2013). We know from previous studies in the field of sport, that women receive a lower share of operating budgets, women are paid less than men, women are promoted less often to top positions, and they have less access to networks (see for example Turpeinen and Hakamäki, 2018; Alsarve, 2022). Thus, the tenaciousness of gender inequality in sport leaves a paradox between the ‘gender we think’ and the ‘gender we do’ (Gherardi, 1994: 591). We add to this research on persistent inequality in sport by responding to the call by Lewis and Benschop (2022: 2) to examine ‘...the way in which postfeminist incitements such as the need to calibrate masculine and feminine behaviours are lived and negotiated at the level of subjectivity...’ Accordingly, we conceptualise Finland as a postfeminist gender regime and ask the following: how do senior sports leaders manoeuvre gender to calibrate masculinity and femininity when discursively constituting their leadership identities and what differences in gender manoeuvring can we observe between men and women sports leaders? Our study is underpinned by poststructuralist principles whereby genders, persons and identities are seen as neither natural nor stable (Lewis and Benschop, 2022). Rather, they are understood to be fluid, fragmented, contradictory and “performatively constituted within norms and through interaction” (Tassabehji *et al.*, 2021: 1301). Thus, we illuminate how the gender norms circulating around leadership in elite sport may be constraining for the identities of the sports leaders.

Our contribution is twofold: first, we make visible the gender manoeuvring involved in calibrating masculine and feminine attributes when discursively constituting a leadership identity in the elite sports arena of Finland. To date, no studies have explored this issue for women and men leaders in the complex environment of sport. In doing this we make visible the differences in how men and women sports leaders manoeuvre gender when discursively

constituting a leadership identity. Second, we draw out the impact of this differential gender manoeuvring and argue that while normative constraints around leadership are shifting, differences in the way men and women leaders calibrate masculinity and femininity can act to uphold rather than diminish gendered inequalities in sports leadership. The article is structured as follows: we begin by depicting the critical concept of postfeminism and its relationship to gender manoeuvring. Second, we present details of the study followed by presentation of the empirical sections. Finally, we conclude by considering the implications of our study for sport in Finland.

Postfeminism

Postfeminism was developed within the discipline of media and cultural studies (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009) and was introduced into the gender and organisation studies field as a critical concept over the past decade (e.g., Adamson, 2017; Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Lewis, 2014; Lewis *et al*, 2017; Lewis *et al*, 2022). As a concept it has been defined in multiple ways but within gender and organisation studies it is mainly treated as a discursive formation made up of interrelated themes attached to a complex set of discourses around gender, feminism and femininity (Dean, 2010; Lewis, 2014). Used as a critical concept, postfeminism reveals the continuation and endurance of traditional gender norms alongside the acceptance and celebration of the liberal feminist doctrine of equality and the empowerment of women. Liberal feminism and traditional femininity are brought together within a postfeminist gender regime through the interpellation of women (and men) to pursue a career, develop their ambitions and strive for senior organisational positions while at the same time ensuring that they engage in a balanced family life of home, care for children, and commitment to partner.

What emerges from this juxtaposition is a complex co-existence of gender equality norms with conventional gender norms which have contributed to the complex reconfiguration of women's and men's subjectivities which act as the foundation for women's and men's inclusion in contemporary organisations. As Lewis et al (2018: 8) argue in the '...construction of postfeminist subjectivities, there is an interdependence between postfeminist masculinities and postfeminist femininities, with the important caveat that the discursive processes for constituting each may vary and that it is not a single act of constitution which brings a subject into being'. In other words, the reconfiguration of modes of femininity and masculinity requires the constant manipulation of gender performances through complex gender manoeuvring to facilitate the compulsory interlocking of feminine attributes and behaviours with norms as well as social realms marked by masculinity (Carlson, 2011; Lewis, 2014).

Gender manoeuvring can be understood as an effort to *retain* or *transform* the gender relations in a particular setting, but it is also a part of gender structuration within the larger gender order of male dominance (Schippers, 2002; Finley, 2010). An empirical focus on gender manoeuvring within a postfeminist gender regime can highlight how sport leaders discursively negotiate gender relations by making sense of leadership attributes and behaviours in sports organisations when discursively constituting their leadership identity. While constructions of gender orders are negotiations within specified contexts, local settings are not completely independent of the wider socio-cultural conditions in which they exist (West and Zimmerman, 2009). The postfeminist call to be more than 'just' a woman or a man is thereby fulfilled as individuals seek to establish, disrupt or change the relationship between and among masculinities and femininities (Lewis and Benschop, 2022; Schippers, 2002).

Within postfeminist culture, gender manoeuvring between the masculine and feminine and the demand for the fusion of masculine and feminine behaviours, presents as a range of features. This includes individualism, empowerment, and self-optimisation, a focus on permanent self-transformation, the importance placed on ‘natural’ distinctions between femininity and masculinity, female and male; the importance given to femininity as a psychological and bodily property and the emphasis given to retreating home as a matter of *choice* not obligation (Gill, 2007; Lewis, 2014; Negra, 2009). As a cultural phenomenon, postfeminism is heavily involved in the constitution of the contemporary individualised subjectivities women and men are interpellated to take up. As such we draw on it as a critical concept to examine the ways in which men and women involve themselves in gender manoeuvres when calibrating masculinity and femininity in the discursive constitution of their leadership identity. While there are a small number of studies which utilise postfeminism as an analytic device to interrogate and understand women’s leadership, there are no comparative studies of women and men leaders which draw on postfeminism to probe women *and* men’s leadership. As Lewis and Benschop (2022: 4) argue drawing on the lens of postfeminism we can complicate our understanding of the “feminine leader” *and* the “masculine leader”, not as leadership figures created solely around insulated traditional femininity and masculinity ‘...but rather as hybrid configuration(s) discursively constituted with respect to the dialectic coexistence of feminine *and* masculine norms and behaviours’. Through examination of the gender manoeuvring which this calibration entails, and as leadership discourses act to seize and constrict women and men in terms of what can be said about leadership, engaging a postfeminist lens we can make visible the gender manoeuvring of women and men sports leader as they seek to constitute their leadership identity and with what effect on general equality within Finnish elite sport.

Methodology

Discourse analysis is a methodology for analysing social phenomena that is qualitative, interpretive, and constructionist. We apply here discourse analysis to analyse the meaning of language in and through social practices related to gender and leadership identities in sport organisations (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). We start from a position which understands that the meaning discourse(s) create, support, and contest, emerge through the production, dissemination and consumption of texts. Such meaning emanates from interactions between social groups and the complex societal structures in which discourses are embedded. (Hardy, 2001: 28). Discourse analysis is not only a set of techniques for conducting structured, qualitative investigations of texts, but also a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language (Burman and Parker, 2016).

Our interest here is to study the talk and meaning making about leadership by leaders, working either in an organizational leadership position or alternatively as an honorary member in the field of elite sport in Finland. It is seen that discourses not only describe and construct social reality, but they also act as a powerful force in organisational life to serve ends – to promote change, maintain the status quo or create stagnation. Its emphasis is on how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created and are held in place (Hardy *et al.*, 2004). We follow Weedon (1987) in the understanding that discourses hold out subject positions that individuals assume, the take-up of which is a discursive practice. Although discursive practices are activated by individual agency, people are “subjected to the power and regulation of discourse” (Weedon, 1987: 119). To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents, we introduce them into the study in terms of background (position, employed, honorary, gender age), the details of which are presented in Table One below.

Title	Work status	Gender (age)
Cultural Affairs Counsellor	Employed	Woman (51)
CEO	Employed	Woman (62)
Sport manager (recently retired)	Honorary	Woman (66)
Director	Employed	Woman (49)
Manager, Communications and business and society relations	Employed	Woman (44)
Group leader, sport	Employed	Man (59)
General secretary	Employed	Woman (50)
Chairman of the board	Honorary	Man (59)
Board member, General secretary	Employed	Man (51)
Chairman of the board	Honorary	Woman (62)
Vice manager	Employed	Woman (50)
Psychologist	Honorary	Woman (37)
Member of the board	Honorary	Woman (50)
Financial director	Employed	Woman (No information available)
Director	Employed	Man (54)
CEO	Employed	Man (46)
Chief inspector	Employed	Man (62)
Vice-chairman	Honorary	Man (66)
Chairman of the board	Honorary	Man (47)
Executive director	Employed	Man (53)
Executive director	Employed	Man (34)
Executive director	Employed	Man (51)
Financial director	Employed	Man (36)
Head of inspection	Employed	Woman (33)
Group leader, sport	Employed	Man (51)
Top sport manager	Employed	Woman (37)
Financial director	Employed	Man (36)
Financial manager	Employed	Woman (51)
Chairman	Honorary	Woman (44)
Technical manager	Employed	Man (46)
CEO	Employed	Man (44)
Chairman of the board	Honorary	Man (49)
Chairman of the competition	Honorary	Man (54)
Team manager	Employed	Woman (34)
CEO	Employed	Man (51)
CEO	Employed	Man (47)
Commercial director	Employed	Man (46)
CEO	Employed	Man (56)
Chairman of the board	Honorary	Man (50)
General secretary	Honorary	Man (50)
General secretary	Honorary	Man (51)

Director	Employed	Man (59)
Rector	Employed	Man (56)
Head of coaching	Employed	Man (54)
CEO	Employed	Man (62)
CEO	Employed	Man (36)
Financial director	Employed	Man (54)
Project lead, leading the national team	Employed	Woman (51)
Group leader, sport	Employed	Man (51)

Table 1. Research participants

Qualitative interviews were conducted with forty-nine top sport leaders. The selected interviewees worked at several federations and organisations, primarily public organisations, or NGOs but some private organisations as well. The data included seventeen women and 32 men from 33 to 66 years of age, with a mean age of 49.8. Each interview lasted between 55 and 110 minutes. All the interviews were face to face interviews conducted in 2017 in the organisations of the respondents or in a quiet place which facilitated interviewing. In the data gathering we utilized a stimulus-based interview (Törrönen, 2002). In the interview guide sixteen stimulus were used, and each of these contained a photo or a recently made claim about the sports community and leadership. Topics covered during the interviews were based on stimuluses such as sport as a community, good/poor leadership, ethics of leadership, structural and economics issues of sport organizing. The interviews always followed the same pattern. By elite sport, we mean both professional sport organisations (e.g., organisations in national and international leagues) and organisations that are a part of the Olympic committee's network. Although the respondents were aware that men and women in leadership positions were being interviewed, only two stimuluses out of 16 were directly about gender, and in other stimuluses the leadership was touched upon in general in terms of their understanding, motivation, and experiences on leading the sport. In the sport context, it was not unusual for the conversation to turn to the issue of gender in relation to leadership. All respondents agreed

to the interviews being digitally recorded and these were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company offering services for academic research projects.

In practice, the data analysis proceeded as follows . First, we identified the talk around sport leadership, and by focusing on the attributes of leaders of today in the sporting scene and with the postfeminist reading of the identities of sport leaders we started to problematise the contemporary understanding of sport leadership. Specifically, we questioned that for women sports leadership means ensuring a compatibility between feminine leading practices and masculine leadership behaviours, and for men the maintenance of the existing masculine norm. We looked more thoroughly at both feminine and masculine attributes associated with the hybridization of femininities and masculinities of the sport leaders. In the analysis, an iterative process for coding/analysing transcripts was executed. This meant that we went back and forth between the data and the literature, simultaneously looking for (mis)linkages with theory, and continually talking through our impressions. It was not a matter of uncovering pre-existing meanings waiting to be discovered, but of coming to an agreement about the meaning of what could be interpreted from the text.

Our second step entailed combing the attributes and traces of moving within postfeminist discourses, which involved going back and forth between the empirical data and the postfeminist literature. Third, the gender maneuvering and what kind of discursive practices were used in the accounts of respondents were analyzed. We explored how they drew on postfeminist discourses to constitute both femininities and masculinities associated with leadership identity for both genders. Based on our data we identified three different gender manoeuvring discursive practices which illustrate moving between the femininities and masculinities by the top leaders of sport. The gender manoeuvring discursive practices

identified from the data are (1) women demanding-men repelling, (2) women choosing to retreat home to care for children and (3) women are men are different and men are more passionate. The analytical framework is illustrated in the table 2. Next, in our results section we will explain the feminine and masculine attributes of leadership and the gender manoeuvring discursive practices in a more detail.

Illustrations from the data	Postfeminist discourses	Gender manoeuvring discursive practices
‘I’m kind of a slapdash person, so I go and maybe I don’t take it so personally in a certain way and I dare.’ (Woman, age 34) ‘Women not only as creators, but also as leaders in many things in voluntary work and trust organisations, women are the ones who do it. And they have a sense of responsibility.’ (Man, age 51)	Individualism, choice and empowerment	<i>Women demanding – men repelling</i>
‘Well, yes, of course, it is a kind of everyday responsibility for the family and children, and at least when families with children are growing up, so it is a kind of mechanical limitation at that stage. And if then, in a way, it is a certain kind of career development in it breaks so even after the children are big and would be time, so there is no way then no longer come from behind. Perhaps it is this kind of more so, when I say that it is not a conscious choice, that this is our way of life has drifted.’ (Man, Age 62)	Retreat to home as a matter of choice	<i>Women choosing to retreat home to care for children</i>
‘But I think it’s more about the nature that men have, the leadership, the management of people and the experience of sport as an important thing. It’s just a larger percentage of men who then want to go into it, into that field. And perhaps more men also have the natural tendencies to lead, so is higher.’ (Woman, Age 37)	‘Natural’ sexual differences	<i>Women and men are different, and men are more passionate</i>
‘If you think about this sort of thing in our organisation, whether there are as many women as men who are as passionate about it, it can be a challenge for us.’ (Man, Age 36)	Passion	

Table. 2 Analytical framework

Findings

Women demanding – men repelling

In a postfeminist context taking a subject position of a victim in a masculine ‘sporting’ scene is not an option for women. Women reject a leadership identity based on self-pity, an insufficient personal drive and a lack of taking responsibility for one’s own career (Baker, 2010). Instead they emphasis, indeed demand, that they should have an equal place at the top sports table alongside their male colleagues. This is also evident from our data as the first discursive practice to manoeuvre the gender is done both by women and men in the data, but is only a must for women in these positions. Women ‘do’ masculinity through making strong assertions about the need for their leadership. This means that gender manoeuvring discursive practice is made by hybridising the femininities and masculinities, and that manoeuvring is a constant movement and calibration between these two.

Even the starting point for this discursive practice is that as the sport leadership itself is considered masculine meaning ‘sporting’ masculinities such as being a passionate, successful, performing, yet determined, impressive, strong and powerful need to be hybridised with the ‘feminine’ attributes of leadership such as being open, moral, honest, participatory, interactive, easy to approach and talkative. Leadership behaviours like taking a coaching and mentoring approach to leadership in which the decisions and actions are done together are linked to the femininities. The emphasis is placed on change-seeking collaboration and acting in an ethical way as an individual choice provided for women in sport leadership. This discursively mobilizes behaviors that are exceptionally marked as ‘feminine’ when leading in sport. From this vantage point, an important part of the leadership identities of the women leaders derives

from the emphasis they place on building connections and relationships with the people they lead.

Through this gender maneuvering discursive practice where the blending of femininities and masculinities exclaims women to engage in individualist masculine behaviors of ambition and self-actualisation, it has implications how women are called to take up the leadership identities (Lewis and Benschop, 2022). From the data illustration below, we can see how she displays masculine leadership attributes by engaging in feminine behaviors that she feel valuable to her. She says: *“Both sport itself and leadership, it's true that men's sport is more valued and somehow it's linked to the myth that sport is somehow a kind of strength and power and that it's linked to men and masculinity, but women certainly have to work much harder and be much better, so that they can get ahead as sports leaders.”* (Sport psychologist, woman, age 37).

The discourse builds on the idea that the femininity means also that women are more equipped to being ‘equal’, or at least more equal than men, and the leadership of women is centred with high people management skills. Even it is apparent from the data that being a feminine sport leader means to handle the expectation of the ‘wanted’ change for sport leadership, but this is questioned in several ways. An example from the data demonstrates that when a male manager starts to manoeuvre with feminine leadership behaviours as priority, yet ends up blaming the same preferred attributes against the feminine leader. Gender as fluid, and changing means that we can highlight the hybrid configuration which respondents discursively articulate in relation to the coexistence of masculine and feminine norms in sport leadership. These gender norms are interdependent forces that interact to produce adjustments between them with change in one directly affecting the other, which often produces tension and conflicts (Collinson, 2020).

A discursive move from an interview with a man manager points this out: *“She is a shining example of a fine, intelligent woman who brings a little bit of perhaps a more, I might say, civilised, softer leadership. But she is not now, she could very well be our number one leader here, a trustee, but she hasn’t, hasn’t achieved anything like that. Maybe that’s the reason.”* (A director, man, age 54). This extract shows that the leader identity is much built on an individual character, the ‘shiny star’ that never makes it (to the top positions). Gender is manoeuvred so that the preferred types of femininities do not by themselves produce anything new or added value but requires the strength of masculine character to make the change. Interestingly, the ‘change’ talk in the data is always referred to in terms of the ‘feminine’, which is preferred, but it does not tend to assert itself in assessments of good leadership (Ryan and Dickson, 2018).

Women choosing to retreat home to care for children

The second gender manoeuvring discursive practice builds on a gender essentialism perspective. Here, a discourse of ‘natural’ sexual difference calls women and men to take different life paths. Throughout the interviews differences between men and women tended to be ascribed to essential predispositions articulated through a discourse of sexual difference, re-legitimizing ‘natural’ differences in careers (Rennison, 2014: 43). This means that women were often viewed as not suited for particular posts such as the masculine-typed leadership roles of sport (Ryan and Dickson, 2018; Alsarve, 2022). This was evident also from our data, as often elderly men constructed women’s leadership identities discursively as impacted by their role as primary carer of the children, and that women are the ones who give birth. The gender is manoeuvred in a way that femininities are invited to sport leadership, but women are ‘choosing’ to retreat home, thus they are not invited to lead in a same masculine way as men.

The following example in our data illustrates how women are identified as appropriate for certain types of leadership roles, and are more keen on building the community. It is stated that women leaders in sport prefer a work-life balance over striving for a high sport leadership position and are often 'naturalised' to have career interruptions which are constructed as a choice for not taking on leadership positions. An illustration from the data highlights the tension: *"A woman is typically the chair of a women's board, so for her, it is enough that she likes to hang out with those same-sex people and organize fun events out there on the course, that she has time to do that around the normal day-to-day. But they hate to sit in boring meetings where they talk about administration and money and all that kind of stuff, which leads to the fact that it never occurred to them that they would be interested, as only exceptional individuals, in even offering to be a councillor."* (A president, man, age 59).

Below this discourse lies an assumption that combining family and a leadership career is unfeasible for women. In a postfeminist reading a modern, gender-equal society such as Finland, combining family and career should be possible and for both genders. Interestingly, the men in our data do not construct work-family balance as a topic worth mentioning for them. It is evident that the sports leader discursively constituted in our data, is a figure who has less active involvement with family life or parenting of children. Yet women can unsettle this representation by combining family and career. Nevertheless, it is important to note that they too still place significant importance on active parenting as in the data the type of femininity presented does not apologize for exhibiting traditional feminine behaviours in family; it does not apologize for being the "a mother". A woman manager says: *"But I certainly would not have given up on the fact that we have three children. And I would not have given up the fact that I've really been with them, and I don't have to regret it. At least I do not have to say in any 50-year-old interview that I have no regrets other than the fact that I wasn't with my children."*

Well, I have no regrets when I have really been with them (children). ” (A director, woman, age 49).

Gender is also manoeuvred “strategically” by naturalising the preferred attributes in leadership positions by diminishing and belittling the gender by saying that gender has no impact on leadership, and that even having a gender perspective in sport leadership can mean negative consequences for women. In the data it is argued that if gender is taken into account women start trying to transcend the masculine leadership norm. An illustration from the data shows this: *“I don't think it's a gender issue that we need qualified people. In our Federation, the first woman was elected to the board for a long time. It's not a gender issue, I don't like this kind of gender discussion. The best people should be given playing positions, and then we just have these quotas for women and so on, and they are made larger than life. We have such a problem that the women who get in, they have such a terrible need to be stressed out and do better (than men). They often then start to behave more masculine than men themselves and that's not good either. Welcome all qualified people, I have nothing else to say (laughs).”* (A chairman of the board, man, age 50).

Women and men are different, and men are more passionate

The contextual features of sport which is disproportionately dominated by men and where men control resources means that it is hard to build alternative (feminine) leadership identities that do not reproduce male dominance (Finley, 2010). This was evident also in the third gender maneuvering discursive practice in which gender is manoeuvred by circulating the differences of femininities and masculinities, yet the femininities of leadership in a sport context is never seem be the ‘right kind’ and the gender differences do not seem to meet masculine norms of leadership in sport. In this discourse it is evident that men set the rules, establish the boundaries

of participation, control admittance, and construct the images and structure of the sport organizations, and produce their own social networks with the that women cannot flourish in leadership roles. This difference is legitimised as men are constructed as inherently more passionate about sport.

The discourse builds on the love and passion for sport, and it is one of the key proxies for being a successful leader in a sport. Postfeminist discourse in this setting on passion is profoundly built on the love of sport. Often the word 'love' for sport was emphasized and the masculinities in the data was constructed by referring to the masculine identity of leadership by using words such as '*a hell of a sportsman(ager)... lover*'. Simultaneously, it is evident in our data that the feminine sport leader identity cannot be achieved by being passionate. The leader behaviour is constructed as straight and impulsive in which there is a clear categorization of in-group and out-group members and clearly this type of leadership identity needs strong social networks or 'pack up' groups which are also characterised as masculine. These type of networking legitimise also the unethical behaviours. An illustration from Football shows how the wrong ethical behaviours of men are normalised through making money: "*Of course, there is also corruption and all that sort of thing. I see it as something like this, that the pace of commercialisation has been so tremendous that even in the IOC, the strings have not stayed in the hands. Such organizing, so there have been too many places to play wrong, when the pace has been so great. It is likely that you could probably find other examples in society that when someone's hand explodes, money comes through the windows and doors, then abuse begins*". (A board member, man, age 51).

Respondents left untouched the notion that a 'corrupted' masculine leader was constructed as acceptable, but space for the subject position of a 'corrupted' feminine leader is not articulated

as possible nor acceptable. This notion was achieved by calling women into the position of ethical leader who cherished equal opportunities, sustainability and non-corrupt behaviour. Notably, what is interesting about this discursive differentiation between masculine and feminine rules or invitation is that all the respondents – those who understood themselves as leaders in sport – articulated this type of distinction and read the subjectivity of the ‘change-seeking and ethical leader’ as positive, but not related to the sport passion that was seen as transcendent. Reading the research material with a postfeminist lens it becomes obvious that to be recognised as a ‘real’ or authentic sports leader, you need to be passionate about sport and that passion is perceived as a masculine attribute of ‘good’ sports leadership. An illustration from the data makes this visible: *“Often it is the passion that drives you. And then in a way, if you think about this kind of our organisation, so whether there are as many women who are as passionate about this as men, so it can be a challenge for us”*. (A secretary general, man, age 36).

Discursively quotas tended to be constituted as problematic. This meant that if quotas were used in the recruitment process, masculine standards were mobilized as a means to challenge them. This is a typical, in a postfeminist regime that the quota thinking is considered as a hostile climate and a debilitating effect on both genders arguing that quotas are not needed, and considered as bad. Quota systems seems to shake also the preference of ‘masculine’, and the responsibility of the recruitment decision-making transfers from the individual to those who organize recruitment processes. Interestingly, the majority of our research participants both women and men tried to actively distance themselves from such practices. Also in the sporting context, the repudiation of quotas can be seen as a postfeminist reaction, because it is a typical example of a response to what is seen as the excesses of feminism (Lewis *et al.*, 2017).

Discussion

This article investigated the discursive constitution of leadership identities by women and men leaders within the postfeminist gender regime of Finland. In doing this, we contributed to the small number of studies which examine leadership using postfeminism as an analytic device, allowing us to draw out the complexity of leadership identities in the environment of sport. Our contribution was twofold: first we made visible the discursive, and dialectical calibration of feminine and masculine behaviours which was first and foremost expected from women in senior leader positions in sport and the multifaceted form this takes. We acknowledge that there is existing research which demonstrate that leadership identities require a constant moving between femininities and masculinities, and particularly we showed how leaders both women and men involved in calibrating masculine and feminine attributes when discursively constituting a leadership identity in the elite sports arena of Finland. Our study showed how both women and men are called to take up – at certain times fragmented and contradictory, and others connected and convergent – calibration of masculinities and femininities that characterize the sports leadership identities. Based on our results for women it seems to be more of a requirement, than a wish to engage with gender manoeuvring discursive practices where leadership attributes discursively coded as masculine are pulled into a dialogue with feminine leadership practices. Men leaders could also do this, but it was not ‘required’ to be in the leadership position. Our results also showed how the postfeminist gender regime works within the discourses around sports leadership discourses. We follow Ryan and Dickson (2018) by saying that studying sport and leadership together allows a more nuanced understanding of what is normalised when it comes to men and the masculine subtext of leadership, and the masculine cultural ideal of sport that promotes a certain type of masculine leader, whilst women

remain marginalized, and are expected to calibrate masculine and feminine leadership behaviours (Burton and Leberman, 2017; Lewis and Benchop, 2022).

This highlights how women are placed with a range of gendered discursive claims driven by the needs promoted in a sporting context to build their leadership identities. Moreover, based on our data it seems that the sports leaders seem to be constructed as authentic, when the leader was a passionate about sports but that such ‘passion’ was only seen as possible for men. This meaning making however positions women and men in different places as the attributes of ‘feminine’ never seem to fit to this ideal of being passionate. It would be worthwhile to investigate how the masculine type of constructing passion impacts on sports leadership, and there seems to be no space for women to attain nor meet the expectations about ‘masculine’ sport passion. As a leadership attribute, passion was monopolized by men and may be interpreted as the need for men leaders to be perceived as more trustworthy and more committed. Interestingly, it would be worthwhile in the future to study the leadership careers in a sporting context, and whether the path of women leaders coming from an athlete background to enter the leadership position has an impact to this ‘being’ passionate on sports and whether it shifts this meaning making.

Using postfeminism as a critical concept provides the opportunity to draw out the complexity and challenges faced when called to take up contradictory gender-marked behaviors as normative conduct (Lewis and Benschop, 2022; Murray *et al.*, 2022). More specifically, this offered a theoretical basis for analysing the subjectivities of men and women sports leaders in relation to language, other cultural practices connected to sport and the material conditions of their lives in a Finnish context. In doing this we made visible the differences in how men and women sports leaders manoeuvre gender which can act to uphold rather than diminish gendered

inequalities in sports leadership. The complex interrelations between discourse, gender and identity dynamics are often not only difficult to reach but also underexplored in a high performing environment such as sport (Costa and Miragaia, 2022; Evans and Pfister, 2021). Thus, we may need more understanding on gender and sports leadership from an ethical point of view for understanding why the discourses are enacted as such and how they may vary in different contexts (Clegg et al., 2007). Accordingly, the impact of the discursive organization of gender for example on decision-making processes and moral judgements that label leadership behavior and consequences in terms of their ethicality would be interesting for future explorations in a sporting context, in Finland and elsewhere.

This study is not without its limitations. Following the discourse analytical lens the meanings were understood as part of a particular context (Burman and Parker, 2016), and the interviewee and researcher all played a role. There is no way to separate meaning from context and any attempt to count must deal with the precarious nature of meaning (Hardy et al., 2004). Moreover, as academic gender scholars we have a mindset and research training that likely shaped our interpretations. A different team of scholars may have crafted different interpretations of the data. This is inevitable with qualitative research and highlights the importance of rigor and transparency of process and execution from the researchers. It maybe then asked how discourses are enacted through sport and for example does ‘heroic’ stories in sports impacts on leadership identities? But also, that the ‘idealized’ gender discourses around sport should be subject to evaluation: why the ‘traditional’ discourses dominate the debate about sports leadership, and how the sports leadership regenerates or remains in place in and through these.

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