

# HOW UNDER-REPRESENTED ARE WOMEN IN SPORTS COACHING? AN INTERVIEW WITH EMILY HANDYSIDE



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**Val Craft talks with Emily Handyside, coaching lead at UK Coaching, about why women lack power in the world of sport. Although recent research shows an almost even division of the sexes in sport coaching - 44% female and 46% male, a majority of men work with adults in club and competitive environments, while the women are mostly in schools or with younger children. Emily discusses ways to improve this situation.**

## INTRODUCTION

I met Emily Handyside last year at the International Women's Day Conference of the Football Association (FA) at St George's Park. I really enjoyed hearing her talk about the research she's been involved in via UK Coaching. In particular, I was interested in what she had to say about the under-representation of women in sports coaching. At the grass roots level, it seems to be a more even playing field than it is within elite sport or within S&C. UK Sport reported that 20% of Team GB's coaches for the 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games

were women.<sup>7</sup> (It's important to note that this percentage relates not to the number of women coaches actually at the games, but rather the percentage of women coaches coaching the athletes leading up to the Games.)

At the UKSCA AGM in 2023, women coaches made up 9.7% of the membership. However, UK Coaching's surveys in recent years have shown a trend of a representation of about 45% of women in coaching. The surveys report on coaches who were active in the last 12 months at various levels of coaching within the UK. The stats over the last six years show that women made up 44% in 2022,<sup>6</sup> 43% in 2019,<sup>5</sup> and 45% in 2017.<sup>4</sup> However, as Emily discusses in this interview, there is a disparity in the levels at which women coach.



Emily Handyside Coaching lead at UK Coaching

## A MASCULINISED ENVIRONMENT?

Sport is largely a masculinised environment owing to historical notions that women should not partake. In 1896, the then president of the International Olympic Committee, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, said: 'no matter how toughened a sportswoman may be, her organism is not cut out to sustain certain shocks'. This was enough to exclude women from the first modern Olympic Games. The first gender-equitable Games in terms of athletes only took place at the Paris Olympic Games in 2024, showing that it has taken over 100 years for this to come about.

Unfortunately, S&C has a further ingrained masculine culture, which I believe stems from the discipline being born of strength training and the weight room. Women are still less likely to train with free-weights than men in the gym environment,<sup>2,8</sup> and within football pathways, a survey showed that S&C programmes were less likely to involve girls in training with free weights.<sup>1</sup> A culture of male bias has therefore become the norm within S&C and this could well be hindering women coaches from entering and remaining within the field. In their current studies, Szedlak et al witnessed a culture of what they called orthodox masculinity, where sexist and misogynistic behaviours and attitudes were observed towards women coaches.<sup>3</sup> This was deemed acceptable; there were even comments made to the effect that women should know this is the environment they are entering and therefore be able to accept it.

Such a culture not only harms women, but it harms men too. It is imperative that we begin to recognise the negative barriers harming our discipline and sport at large and work in ways to ensure women know and feel that coaching is a viable career path for them.

Emily Handyside Coaching lead at UK Coaching



## INTERVIEW WITH EMILY HANDYSIDE

### Q. What is your job role and what is it that you do?

I'm coaching lead at UK Coaching, essentially delivering learning and development for coaches across all sports.

### Q. I understand that UK Coaching undertakes surveys on coaching in the UK: can you tell us more about that?

Every year we do a UK Coaching population survey. It's a YouGov survey and we have about 30,000 respondents, giving us data on the number and make-up of coaches, showing things like age, demographic, qualifications and where they are coaching. This data gives us some really useful insight: I am particularly interested in the data around women in coaching.

### Q. What is it about the data on women in coaching that got your interest?

Interestingly, I think the perception is that there are a lot less women coaches than there are men, which is the case in some areas. So, 44% of coaches are women, 46% men – so that is probably a lot more even than most people would expect. But when we start to look at where those 44% of women coaches are working, that's where you start to see the differences. Men are more likely to coach with young adults or in club environments and competitive environments, whereas women coaches are more likely to coach in school environments or with younger children.

Also, if you start to unpick the 44%, it's made up of 79% white women. So, the ethnic diversity within that 44% of women coaches is quite limited as well. In terms of qualifications, men tend to have higher level qualifications compared to women and there is a difference in the kind of support that men and women coaches receive. There's also a huge disparity between the sports that men and women coach. There's a higher number of women who coach in dance, movement and fitness classes; far fewer women coach in team sport environments.

### Q. What have you done within your role as a result of some of the data coming out of the surveys?

We have recognised – not only through the survey but elsewhere too – that helping more women to coach and removing some of the barriers for them to progress in coaching is really important. So, for example, we know that there are more women coaches at the younger age groups and in school environments and that number decreases the older participant or the higher the competition level or performance pathway level. At the Tokyo Olympics for Team GB, 13% of the coaches were women: so, you go from 44% of the coaching population in general being women to 13% for Team GB. What we don't have is data that tells us where in between that figure starts to go down. We don't know if it's a gradual decrease as they go up the levels, or if there's a sudden cliff edge where they drop off. We need to prioritise collecting more data on that moving forwards and UK Coaching are working with UK Sport to look at that performance pathway part of the system to try and understand what are the barriers for women that want to progress into that pathway. We need to know what's stopping more women getting to that top level.

**Q. What programmes does UK Coaching deliver to help advance coaching?**

We deliver a number of programmes each year funded by UK Sport. They're targeted at coaches in the performance pathway space and some of those programs are mixed gender, but we have in previous years delivered female-only programs. The insight from the women-only programme has been that it's had a really positive impact on those women coaches who've been involved. They've felt more confident, they've got more connections and support, and they have felt they've developed their knowledge or their skills by sharing learning and building knowledge across sports. Coaches have said that they have applied for jobs that they wouldn't normally have applied for. In some cases, coaches have said they were at the verge of quitting coaching, but now they are re-energised and have gained clarity on what they want to do. So, it's had a real positive impact.

However, the most useful thing from the programme that women have identified is that the programme has been across sport, and not that it's been a women-only space. That really got me reflecting on does it need to be women only? Could it be beneficial if it was a mixed gender programme? I began to see that a lot of the problems we were trying to address were also there for men too. For example, a lack of confidence, which has been labelled as a women's issue, but what I was seeing with male coaches I was working with was that they were also describing a lack of confidence. So there was, I suppose, a contradiction between some of the things I was reading in the academic literature and what I was experiencing on the ground. It got me thinking that maybe male coaches would gain value from a programme like this too. Does it need to be women only?

It also made me really mindful of the unintended consequences of these programmes. If we say that women lack confidence and we're going to put on this programme to address this confidence, we reinforce the narrative that the problem is women's confidence, whereas actually my experience is that men also lack confidence. We need to be careful that we don't label or create that narrative that it's a women's problem. It's not. It's a problem for coaches from all backgrounds.

**Q. When you spoke at the FA Conference, you also mentioned the similarities for men and women coaches with regard to work-life balance: can you tell us more about that?**

Yes, so this is based on my experience of working with male and female coaches, but this is also backed up by our survey. Men and women alike report work-life balance as a barrier for coaching. Often this is cited as the main barrier for women because of parental responsibilities and caring responsibilities. There is some literature outside of sport that says women do 80% of the caring and the domestic duties. However, my experience from working in sport as a coach, but also supporting coaches, is that men are also describing these responsibilities and these challenges. There was a bit of a contradiction between what I was hearing and what I was experiencing on the ground. Men also struggle with that work-life balance.

**Q. Were there any other points of interest in the difference or similarity for men and women coaches?**

Interestingly, the only significant difference between men and women for the barriers experienced was relating to the behaviour of others. So, women have described the way that others behave as being a significant barrier, whereas male coaches have not described that as a challenge. Sometimes unfortunately there is direct sexism and misogyny like banter in sports. Sometimes it's unconscious bias. For example, a female coach might be the head coach of a team, but when a parent walks in and is looking for the head coach, he or she goes to the male colleague in the room and assumes that they're the head coach. Or a new member of staff comes in and asks the female head coach, not knowing their role, 'are you the physio?'. They automatically assume that women have a caring role rather than a leadership role.

This is something I've experienced myself – not here in the UK because my background is in netball coaching where people aren't surprised to see a female coach. But when I went to Africa, there was an experience where they did not think I was the head coach at all. They went to my male S&C assistant and shook his hand and said 'hello coach', and he said 'no, I'm not the coach'. Then they went to the male performance analyst and said 'hello coach' and he said 'no, I'm not the coach'. They looked around and then they saw my assistant coach who was a

woman in her 50s, tall at 6'2" and very imposing and very present in the room, and they went to her and shook her hand and said 'hello, coach'. She then said 'well, I'm not the head coach either!' And they looked around and then they saw me. Everyone was looking at me and they were really surprised to see that a young female coach was head coach of the team.

**Q. What are your thoughts on having women coaches in men's sport and men coaches in women's sport?**

I think any form of diversity adds value because it brings diversity of thought, diversity of experience and diversity of perspectives. It might add to the coaching expertise because you've now got different viewpoints. You've got different ideas. You might be able to innovate and do things differently because you see the world through a different lens or a different perspective. Whether that's a male in a female environment, a female in a male environment, somebody from a different ethnic background or somebody from a different socioeconomic background, I think any form of diversity is of benefit.

**Q. What are your thoughts now on women-only programmes?**

I think when we run women-only programmes to support women, there's good intent behind that. But I think we're actually undermining equality by doing that because we are we're making an assumption that the masculine culture that exists in sport is only a problem for women. And it's not. It's also a problem for some men, especially some men when you start to look at the intersectionality of different characteristics. We just say we're going to have this conversation with women.

And that's why, in my opinion, we have to start to move towards not just women-only programmes, but to bring those same themes into the programmes where there are mixed genders and we say let's talk about the power and privilege that exists in sport. How is it for you as a white person? How is it for you as a woman? How is it for you as a disabled person? How is it for you? And we start to talk about it collectively from every single viewpoint. Clearly there is a place for women-only programmes. But at some point, I think they need to have experiences alongside men and those conversations need to be had collectively about how the masculine culture of sport is experienced by everybody within it. Whether that's participants, athletes, male coaches, female coaches, disabled, non-disabled people...

**Q. What advice would you give to any organisation that wants to improve in respect of equity, diversity and inclusion?**

My advice would be show commitment to the people that you want involved in your organisation. For example, you have a woman that you've identified as a good coach that you want involved: sit down and have a conversation with her and ask her: 'What are your goals? What support can we give you? Let's help wrap that support around you. Let's take that responsibility off you to go and find your own mentor and we'll help find that person for you and those opportunities that you need.' Doing it this way takes some of that responsibility and burden off the coach themselves and shows commitment from the organisation to the coach.

What you can do, which costs no money, is when you are recruiting or making decisions, to have a panel of people from diverse backgrounds. It will bring about such a different outcome and one that's more diverse.

If you truly want diversity, think about not just how you support this, but look at yourself, your environment, your organisation as well. Are you truly open to diversity? Diversity means that people might come in and talk differently, they might dress differently, they might behave differently. But if you are truly open to that, then you won't feel the need to change them. But if you're putting on diversity programmes and just trying to get them to fit your mould, then that's not really diversity.

We have a phrase which is: 'fix the system, don't fix the woman'.

**Q. What advice would you give to any aspiring women coaches or those who want to work at the highest level?**

Look after yourself. You have to prioritise yourself. Coaches are notoriously poor at this because they serve others as coaches and they're not so good at looking after their own health. Go and create some opportunities for yourself. Don't have any self-limiting beliefs like 'I'm not ready' or 'I'm not going to make it because I'm not an ex-athlete' or 'I'm not a man' or 'I'm not like the perception someone else has of me'. If you have any of those thoughts, challenge your thoughts and just tell yourself that it is possible.



## VAL CRAFT

Val's work predominantly supports teaching on the MSc in S&C at Loughborough University, while studying for a PhD on the under-representation of Women in S&C Coaching. She has a wealth of diverse experience with over 20 years of experience in fitness and sports coaching, experience in elite sport as an exercise physiologist, and experience within the social sciences. Her private coaching focuses on athletes, putting their health at the core. Youth and community work, as well as life coaching, combine her interests in the body and the mind for improving health and performance for everybody.

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