

“That’s just the way it is”: Exploring the Emotional Labour and Emotion Work of Women High-Performance Sport Coaches

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Introduction

In the October issue of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching, authors Alixandra Krahn, Parissa Safai, and Michele Donnelly tackle a perennial dilemma that puzzles and disturbs women at the higher levels of sport, not only in Canada but throughout much of the world: Where are the women coaches?

Undeniably the growth of girls and women in sport is unprecedented and unstoppable in virtually every sphere. They compete in virtually equal numbers at every major athletic competition, they excel in every sport imaginable, they are leaders in technical innovation, their research is outstanding, and they are trailblazing leaders of powerful sport organizations. For the latter, I think of the Coaching Association of Canada’s CEO Lorraine Lafrenière who is also president of the International Council of Coaching Excellence; Anne Merklinger, the long-time leader of Own the Podium; Karen O’Neill, who heads the Canadian Paralympic Committee, and of course, Kirsty Coventry, the first woman president of the International Olympic Committee.

Despite plentiful examples of inspirational role models, women continue to be chronically absent from sport coaching leadership with those persistently few exceptions mentioned above.

That’s just the way it is”: Exploring the Emotional Labour and Emotion Work of Women High-Performance Sport Coaches makes clear that the demands of the profession are many and complex, particularly for women as they painstakingly explain. In examining “working realities”, the authors explore how, in many situations, women coaches are required to manage the emotions of others – not only their athletes, but also their peers, employers, and boards - while simultaneously regulating their own emotional responses. This is an area that has received scant attention until now, but its importance cannot be underestimated. The authors argue persuasively: ... distinguishing between emotional labour and emotion work is necessary to more fully understand the scope of this often-invisible work and how it is experienced, valued, and recognized—or overlooked—within and beyond the formal sport coaching workplace.

They build a compelling case and buttress their argument with pragmatic recommendations rightly taking aim at the very organizations which employ women coaches. As noted above, the situation has long puzzled and disturbed. If sport is to attract and retain women coaches and guarantee them a healthy and positive working environment, surely meaningful change should be an immediate priority. If only ... — Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor.

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Women’s professional sport in Canada is experiencing unprecedented growth. From the arrival of a new WNBA team in Toronto to the expansion of the PWHL and NSL to Hamilton and Winnipeg, exciting new opportunities and initiatives are reshaping the Canadian sport landscape. Yet, despite this momentum, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in coaching.

As Ann Pegoraro and Emily Moore highlight in their short but powerful piece, *Signals Versus Noise: Gender Equity in Canadian Sport*, data provide a clear indication of Canada’s progress toward achieving “gender equity in sport at every level by 2035.” However, they caution that we must also pay attention to the “noise”—the factors that distract us from the truth. In discussions of gender equity in Canadian sport, there has been a tendency to celebrate increases in women athletes’ participation alone as evidence of progress. While athlete participation has undoubtedly increased across many areas of sport, this progress has not translated to women’s representation in coaching.

The most current research demonstrates a stark disparity. Women in Canada hold fewer than 10% of national and/or Olympic-level coaching positions, approximately 26% of head coaching positions in university and college sport combined, and around 34% of coaching positions in grassroots sport. These numbers reveal an important gap between the growth of women’s sport for athletes and the opportunities available to women as coaches. As such, we are left wondering why, despite the rapid growth of women’s sport, do women continue to be so significantly underrepresented in coaching?

While there is no shortage of important research in this area, there remains a dearth of research examining the working realities of women in coaching. In other words, what is it about the nature and structure of coaching work that may be preventing women from advancing in the field? And are there particular forms of coaching work that contribute to women’s continued underrepresentation? This article presents data from a larger study examining the working conditions of women coaches in the context of Canadian high-performance sport.

Sport Coaching Work and Gender

Research examining coaching as work, although still relatively limited, consistently demonstrates that it is a demanding occupation that requires coaches to be near-constantly

available and engaged in their work. Some research has described coaching as a form of precarious labour, marked by vulnerability, limited social benefits, low wages, job insecurity, and increased risks to health and well-being. These conditions are closely tied to the significant time demands of coaching, which can leave coaches with little opportunity for time off or space to attend to personal and family responsibilities. As a result, scholars have identified high-performance coaching as a context in which an overwork culture is often normalized, with long hours and constant availability becoming accepted as simply part of the job.

Within this already limited literature, even less attention has been paid to the gendered experiences of coaching work, and research that considers intersectionality and coaching work is particularly scarce. What research does exist suggests that women coaches may experience heightened precarity because they are underrepresented within coaching and are often expected to undertake additional forms of labour, including unpaid care work (often referred to as socially reproductive labour), impression management, and emotional labour. These expectations are rooted in longstanding gendered assumptions that women are more nurturing, organized, emotionally attuned, and capable of managing interpersonal relationships (to name a few).

To this end, research has demonstrated that male head coaches may rely on female assistant coaches to manage team conflict and “drama,” serve as emotional checkpoints for their own reactions to the team, and take responsibility for tasks such as travel planning, budgeting, and recruitment. Where and when women are in head coaching positions, they often feel that they must engage in impression management (that is, the desire to present oneself in the best possible manner to and with others to avoid stigma and social rejection) to establish their credibility and legitimacy within a male-dominated coaching environment. This can involve carefully managing their dress, speech, and body language, concealing health challenges so as not to appear weak, or participating in social practices—such as having beers with colleagues after work—that they might not otherwise engage in. Importantly, these demands are not experienced uniformly. For women whose identities intersect with other categories of marginalization, the labour of navigating coaching may be further intensified by racialization, sexual orientation, disability, and other dimensions of identity.

Importantly, much of this labour remains invisible. Given that emotional, relational, and reproductive forms of labour are not readily observable or formally recognized as part of the coaching role, they can be overlooked, undervalued, and even internalized by coaches themselves as simply “just the way coaching is.” When work remains invisible and underrecognized, its effects are often disproportionately experienced by those performing it. Moreover, once this labour becomes normalized, it can shift from being seen as an additional contribution to becoming an unquestioned expectation of the job. In this way, the normalization of invisible labour further reinforces the broader culture of overwork in coaching, where continually taking on more work is simply accepted as part of the role.

Against this backdrop, our findings focus specifically on emotional labour and emotion work. Although these concepts are often combined within the coaching literature, distinguishing between them is important for understanding the different forms of work women coaches undertake and their impacts. Making this distinction allows for a more nuanced appreciation of

the often-invisible labour that women contribute to coaching and, ultimately, provides a clearer picture of what it means for women to experience coaching as work.

Distinguishing Emotional Labour from Emotion Work

Although the limited literature examining women coaches' emotional labour has demonstrated that women undertake significant amounts of emotional work to navigate the gendered expectations and conflicting demands of being both a "good coach" and being a woman in sport, the concepts of emotional labour and emotion work are often combined without a clear distinction between them. This distinction is important because women coaches may be required to manage both their own emotions and the emotions of others as part of their everyday coaching work, yet these forms of work are not necessarily experienced in the same way.

Drawing on the work of sociologist Arlie Hochschild, emotional labour refers to the work that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."

In the context of coaching, emotional labour therefore involves a coach managing their own emotions; for example, suppressing frustration, remaining calm, or presenting confidence despite feeling uncertain. In contrast, emotion work differs from emotional control or suppression and is often defined as work involving emotions that is carried out in an organizational context, which could include managing one's own emotion in the workplace; for example, managing disappointment about a decision made by a superior. We extend this definition further to include the work that coaches do to manage the emotions of other people around them. For coaches, this may include helping athletes, fellow coaches, administrators, officials, or parents regulate their emotion and/or response to difficult situations. The distinction, then, is between managing one's own emotions and helping to manage the emotions of others.

Of course, these forms of work do not always occur separately. For example, when an athlete approaches a coach upset about their performance, the coach may first engage in emotion work by helping the athlete calm down before engaging in emotional labour by managing their own response and suppressing frustration so as not to further upset the athlete. Similarly, if an athlete experiences a serious injury and becomes hysterical, the coach may work to manage the athlete's emotional response while simultaneously regulating their own reaction to present a sense of calm, even if they are deeply concerned about the severity of the injury. In these moments, emotional labour and emotion work overlap and interact.

Below, we present data examining coaching as a form of precarious labour for women to further illustrate these distinctions. We analysed our results using feminist political economy (FPE,) an intersectional theoretical framework, to capture the full range of work and/or labour undertaken by women coaches, with particular emphasis on forms of work that are often invisible, underappreciated, and consequently treated as an unquestioned part of the job. We argue that distinguishing between emotional labour and emotion work is necessary to more fully understand the scope of this often-invisible work and how it is experienced, valued, and recognized—or overlooked—within and beyond the formal coaching workplace.

Women Coaches' Experiences of Emotional Labour and Emotion Work

The insights shared here are drawn from 16 women coaches who documented their coaching work for one week at two different points in their season: off-season, pre-season, in-season, or post-season. Following each submission, participants also completed a follow-up interview via Zoom. Interviews ranged in length from 65 to 98 minutes. Participants were asked to select a pseudonym and were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts prior to the use of quotations in the analysis. The coaches worked at provincial sport organizations, colleges and universities, and national sport organizations, and represented both team and individual sports, including swimming, volleyball, wrestling, and rowing (to name a few).

When we spoke with the women coaches, their accounts revealed clear experiences of both emotional labour and emotion work. While these forms of labour often overlapped in practice, the distinction between them is analytically important. Emotional labour was evident when coaches described managing their own emotions and carefully regulating how they presented themselves to produce a particular response in others. For example, Ava reflected on the considerable emotional demands of supporting athletes through difficult conversations:

"I really had to manage myself well because [these conversations] take so much engagement and focus and it's taxing because [athletes] hang on to every word you say [as a coach] and so I [couldn't] let my level dip or be unsatisfactory from one athlete to the next, I was tired, but these athletes deserve my thoughts and to be listened to."

Similarly, Layla described the importance of managing her presentation to establish trust and credibility with her athletes:

"I make sure when I appear at practice, I seem prepared. Like I can be trusted. I think part of presenting that way to my athletes also provides me with some credibility."

In both accounts, the coaches were not primarily describing the management of others' emotions; rather, they were consciously managing their own emotional states and outward presentations. Ava described suppressing or managing her fatigue to ensure that each athlete received the same level of attention, while Layla carefully presented herself as prepared and trustworthy to establish credibility. These examples illustrate how emotional labour can be embedded in the everyday expectations of coaching, requiring women to regulate not only what they feel, but also how those feelings are expressed.

For women who worked as assistant coaches alongside male head coaches, emotional labour sometimes took on an additional dimension. Ashley, for example, described working with a male head coach whose approach was inconsistent with her own values and coaching philosophy. Despite experiencing significant frustration with the situation, she explained that she would "[try] to remind [the athletes] to just have fun, when really I was just frustrated and, I think it was actually rage underneath it all, like I just did not want to be there." Here, Ashley suppressed feelings of frustration and rage and altered her outward presentation to create a more positive experience for the athletes. Her account demonstrates how emotional labour may be particularly

demanding when coaches must regulate their own emotions in response to working conditions or leadership practices over which they have limited control.

Alongside the experiences of managing their own emotions, the women also described substantial emotion work; that is, work directed toward helping others manage their emotions. Serena and Hazel, for example, both spoke at length about the emotional support they provided to athletes:

“Those were maybe some of the most stressful days of my coach life and days where I felt I was incapable of being the person [the athletes] needed me to be at times because I was no longer a coach [laughs], I was the mother or the therapist or the support system! It wasn’t about [sport].”

“I’m the first point of contact for any of these athletes if they’re having mental health issues or problems at home or you know, emotional abuse even, there’s like a wide variety of things that have, you know, across my desk.”

These accounts demonstrate a clear distinction from the examples of emotional labour described above. Rather than primarily regulating their own emotions, Serena and Hazel described supporting athletes as they navigated emotions and circumstances that extended well beyond sport performance. Both coaches emphasized that athletes were people first, managing a range of personal and interpersonal challenges outside of their sport. As a result, the coaches’ work often expanded beyond what might traditionally be understood as coaching to include forms of emotional support more commonly associated with caregiving or counselling roles.

Similar patterns of emotion work were evident among women who worked as assistant coaches to male head coaches as well. Lucy described taking on significant emotional work after leading a program for the first few weeks while her male counterpart coached with another program. When he returned, Lucy and the other assistant coaches observed a noticeable decline in athlete performance. She recalled that, by the end of one practice, some athletes “were crying to themselves” and appeared to be “performing under fear.” When Lucy and the other assistant coaches raised these concerns with the head coach, his focus remained primarily on performance and the athletes’ cognitive load. As Lucy explained, “he just completely removed all the emotion from it.” In the aftermath, she and the other assistant coaches undertook what she described as “a lot of emotional work” with the athletes “to repair what we had created before he left.” This example illustrates how emotion work can emerge in response to organizational and interpersonal dynamics within the coaching environment. In the case of assistant coaches, they were not only supporting athletes through their emotional responses but were also navigating the head coach’s reaction to the situation and supporting one another. In this sense, the women’s work extended beyond their formal coaching responsibilities and involved repairing relationships, managing the emotional consequences of others’ leadership practices, and helping to restore a sense of safety and stability within the team.

Although distinguishing between emotional labour and emotion work is analytically useful, the data also demonstrate that these forms of labour frequently overlap. In many situations, coaches were required to manage the emotions of others while simultaneously regulating their own

emotional responses. Tamara, for example, described the emotional demands of conducting regular check-ins with athletes during a difficult season:

“I forget how draining these check-ins can be, this year especially because we had only won one game in the first half of the season and we had gone a whole year of losing the year prior to COVID. So, it’s a lot about dealing with the weight of their emotions, so that was draining to get through. Especially with our older players, just the emotions in it.”

In this example, Tamara was engaged in emotion work by supporting athletes and helping them navigate the disappointment and frustration associated with sustained losing. At the same time, she was performing emotional labour by managing her own fatigue and emotional capacity throughout these conversations. Connie’s account further illustrates how women may internalize the responsibility for managing their emotional responses to the environments in which they work. She explained:

“Whereas I do feel [judgement] from other people and coaches and I get it, it’s something I need to manage [...] like how do I cope with not feeling good enough? Or you know maybe, what’s the word, being an imposter. That’s my own personal stuff.”

Connie was clearly aware of the judgement she experienced from others in her coaching environment. However, rather than questioning the conditions that may have contributed to these feelings—particularly as one of only three women coaches—she positioned the management of her response as an individual responsibility. Her account reflects how emotional labour can become internalized, with women assuming responsibility for adapting to inequitable or exclusionary environments rather than questioning the structures that produce these experiences in the first place.

Collectively, these findings highlight the significant emotional labour and emotion work undertaken by women sport coaches within their organizational contexts. Whether working in university, provincial, or national sport settings, all the coaches described managing either their own emotions or the emotions of others. Much of this work, however, remains invisible and unrecognized, in that it was not necessarily outlined in coaching contracts, formally acknowledged as part of the job, or readily observable to those around them. As a result, many of the coaches had normalized this work as simply part of what they were expected to do, with several explicitly describing it as “just what I have to do.”

The consequences of this largely invisible labour were also evident in the participants’ accounts. Many described disruptions to their health and well-being: Lucy, Ava, Hazel, and Tamara spoke about difficulties sleeping; Serena and Layla described constantly scrambling to find more time in their days; and Ashley ultimately made the decision to walk away from her coaching position.

Taken together, these findings suggest that emotional labour and emotion work are not simply additional skills that women bring to coaching. Rather, they represent substantial and often unrecognized forms of work that require time, energy, and emotional resources. Distinguishing between these forms of labour is therefore important for understanding the full scope of women’s

coaching work and the ways in which invisible expectations may contribute to the precarity and unsustainability of coaching for women.

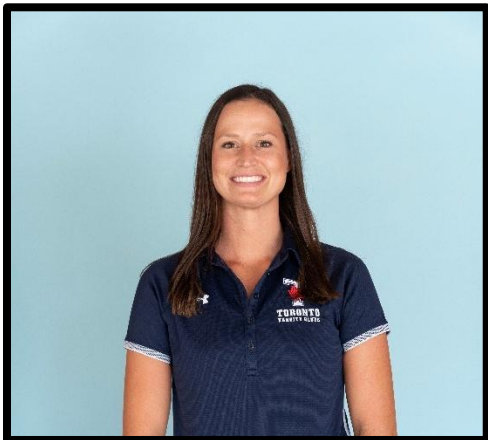
What can organizations do to support their women coaches?

Our coaches identified several ways their organizations could better support them, including additional assistant coaches or support staff to reduce administrative workloads, greater financial resources to access specialized supports, policies that recognize and address anti-racism and gender equity, and more supportive organizational leadership and boards. Some also identified practical resources, such as specialized equipment, that could help alleviate demands when additional coaching support was unavailable.

Building on these recommendations, organizations should also provide education about emotional labour and emotion work to increase awareness of how these often-invisible forms of labour shape coaching experiences and workplace culture. Greater access to mental and emotional health supports for both coaches and athletes could also reduce the expectation that coaches must act as counsellors, therapists, and primary emotional supports. Perhaps most importantly, organizations must move away from expecting individual coaches—particularly women—to absorb the emotional consequences of the sport system. Instead, care should be treated as a collective organizational responsibility, shared across coaches, administrators, support staff, boards (in some cases), and leadership.

Regarding how organizations should prioritize these supports, it is difficult to offer a universal recommendation, as organizations operate with varying levels of resources, including funding and government support. It may first be valuable for organizations to understand the magnitude of the emotional labour and emotion work demands faced by their coaches, which could assist in tailoring the types of education and support warranted. While the provision of mental health resources for coaches and athletes will inevitably depend, in part, on organizational resources, the broader work of becoming an organization that treats care as a collective responsibility is something that all institutions can begin to take on. This requires acknowledging that meaningful changes to workplace culture and organizational values takes time.

About the Authors



Alixandra (Alix) Krahn, PhD

Alixandra Krahn is a feminist sport scholar whose research examines sport at the intersection of work and gender, or the sport-work-gender nexus. Her research is an extension of her own personal experience navigating the contested terrain of high-performance coaching. Alix's current research examines the precarious and often invisible forms of labour embedded within coaching, including emotional and socially reproductive labour. She is the lead assistant coach with the Toronto Varsity Blues Women's Volleyball team and a dedicated community member who serves her community in a variety of roles.

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References available upon request.