

# Elite women coaches negotiating and resisting power in football

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## Abstract

While football remains mostly a sport associated with men and national identity, it has also become a popular sport for women and girls in Western countries. Despite this success, however, the coaching of football remains a strongly male dominated occupation. In this paper, we explored how 10 elite women coaches of national football teams negotiated and resisted the entanglement of techniques of biopower, sovereign and disciplinary power within the sport. The results revealed that sovereign power as exercised by Football Associations was intertwined with forms of discursive and biopower. This power constructed men as more knowledgeable about women's football than women who have years of playing and coaching experience at the elite level in the sport. Consequently, men are more often hired to coach women. In response, elite women coaches negotiated and resisted these forms of power by engaging in problematization, public truth telling/parrhesia, self-transformation, and by creating alternative discourses about gender and football. They constructed their fellow women coaches as being more knowledgeable and more experienced than men coaches in women's football. The findings suggest that this use of a Foucauldian analysis into the entanglement of forms of power within such male-dominated organizations and

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into the technologies of the self, utilized by women coaches, provides new insights into understanding the relative lack of change in gender ratio in (sport) leadership.

#### KEYWORDS

coaches, football, Foucault, power, women

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*I constantly heard, 'you shouldn't', 'you can't', 'it's a men's sport' but I never really believed it because I played it.(a woman coach of a national team)*

Although in most countries, football has been associated with men and national identity, it has also become a popular sport for women and girls in Western countries. FIFA reported a combined 1.12 billion viewers tuned into official broadcast coverage of the FIFA Women's World Cup 2019, a record audience for the competition. Although many girls and women are active in football, only 7% of all football coaches are women (De Haan, 2020). Yet, all but one of the coaches of winning women's football teams of major events such as the Olympics, World Cup and European Championships from 2000 to 2019 have been women. Despite this success, the coaching of football is a strongly male dominated occupation, not just numerically but also in terms of its gendered organizational culture that emphasizes values, ideas and meanings associated with celebrated discursive practices of masculinity and its associations with national identity (Fasting et al., 2017; LaVoi, 2009). Current women football coaches at the international level are pioneers; they were often the first women in their country to coach at the international level. Many of these coaches grew up playing football with boys in both formal and informal settings. They played street football and were part of boys' teams until they were no longer allowed to be part of those teams. They negotiated a place for themselves in a world in which men's football and men, and their preferred practices of masculinity, were/are the norm. Our interest is in understanding how these elite women coaches have negotiated and resisted this masculine norm while working in a setting that celebrates it.

Research focusing on the relative lack of women coaches has been ongoing for at least 30 years (e.g., Knoppers, 1992; Theberge, 1990) and yet women continue to be underrepresented in coaching. The continued paucity of women coaches despite policies to counteract that and the obstacles and challenges they face as coaches have changed little and are often attributed to issues of positional power (e.g., LaVoi & Calhoun, 2016; Norman, 2008, 2010, 2013). Specifically, women coaches are represented in the research literature as occupying positions in which they have relatively little power while men are assigned positions of power and serve as "power holders" (Fasting et al., 2017, p. 7). This research has generally framed these women as facing obstacles and being relatively powerless within the world of football organizations. Scholarship focusing specifically on elite women coaches, especially in football, is now beginning to emerge. The relatively low gender ratio in coaching positions in elite sport is often located in organizational culture in which male directors of sport clubs/departments and of board members of (inter) national sport associations appoint (male) coaches. For example, Barker-Ruchti et al. (2014) focused on career progressions of women who coached football at the national and league levels and the obstacles they encountered in their career trajectories. Such obstacles included working in male-dominated environments where men were seen as the holders of power. These women experienced a lack of support from governing body boards or committees, and coped with poor job security. Similarly, Fasting et al. (2017) found that elite women football coaches in Norway often felt sidelined. They were pessimistic about their career possibilities in elite football and felt excluded from positions of power. Reade et al. (2009) compared the qualifications of male and female Canadian coaches at low and high levels of coaching and found that there were no significant differences in qualifications that might explain the underrepresentation

of women coaches. The authors concluded that gendered power was a significant structural issue in explaining the relatively few women coaches. They drew on Kanter's (1977) conceptualization of power as the capacity to distribute resources and concluded that, regardless of level, women coaches had less access than their male colleagues to positions of power such as the position of head coach or athletic director and therefore relatively little ability to distribute resources. A common conclusion of the relatively few available studies about high level women coaches is therefore that these women experience marginalization and lack of power that keeps them from being appointed and/or attaining or maintaining top performance positions such as director, head coach or chair. Since men are over-represented in holding these positions within sport organizations, they have been constructed as the "power holders" (Fasting et al., 2017, p.7).

This perspective of male power as being positional depicts a limited view of power, however. Its unidimensionality constructs elite women coaches as objects with little or no agency who are primarily dependent on "powerful" males for their opportunities and success. Women coaches of elite teams have, however, navigated and negotiated their way through the world of women's and men's football to become coaches of women's national teams. Framing them as powerless and solely dependent on males may not do justice to nor explain their accomplishments and their ability to attain positions of coaching national teams. This paradox suggests that framing power as being only positional may not capture the gendered dynamics of women coaching in a male dominated field. This structural approach that has been frequently used in theorization about women coaches and their underrepresentation uses a binary lens based on the powerful and the powerless. Conceptualizations of power that construct it as a monolithic possession of men who use it in a repressive manner and positions women as passive subjects, ignore the ambiguities and the role of resistance, however. The predominant use of this lens may mean that other ways of examining and understanding the operation of power in the underrepresentation and experiences of women coaches are ignored. Possibly other conceptualizations of power might be used to add to understandings of gender relations in coaching instead of framing power as something women leaders lack. We specifically draw on Foucauldian notions of power to explore this possibility and to provide other insights into the dynamics of the relatively low gender ratio in coaching.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ladkin and Probert (2021), who have focused on power and leadership in nonsport organizations, contended that a view of power as personal and status related is unidirectional and deterministic while power can also be regarded as more fluid and ephemeral, relational and as being more productive than repressive. Foucault (1983) has argued that power does not reside in individuals but is everywhere, becomes visible only in its productive effects, and always involves both compliance and resistance. Power as a relational concept works through the actions of individuals producing identities and meanings (Foucault). This suggests athletic directors, sport administrators and board members of national and international Football Associations (FAs) do not become power holders because they have power. They can, however, be influential because of their strategic use of ideas or discourses that currently circulate about women, men and football. A research focus on challenges elite women coaches have faced (e.g., Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014; Clarkson et al., 2019; Fasting et al., 2017) that name men as power holders may ignore the ambiguities and contradictions these women have experienced and how they negotiated them. In contrast, a Foucauldian examination of the underrepresentation of elite women coaches could focus on how discourses of gender have been strategically utilized by dominant groups and how these discourses have been resisted by women coaches through a critical awareness of the effects of these discourses (Foucault, 1983; Pringle, 2005). A Foucauldian analytic of power means

taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. ... so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods

used. ... it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies (Foucault, 1983, p. 780).

Foucault (1983) identified various forms of power such as sovereign power, biopower and discursive power and described how they are exercised. Sovereign or judicial power primarily consists of ruling by creating and enforcing laws, procedures and regulations and by selecting, hiring and firing individuals. Football Associations, who are the sport's governing bodies at the national and international levels, rule primarily by sovereign power due to their ability to dominate the game; they have no competition from other organizations and instead form the equivalent of a cartel (Blair & Wang, 2018; Stewart et al., 2005). Their rule is not absolute, however, since they are accountable to other organizations such as the International Olympic Committee and to other powerful stakeholders such as sponsors, sport media and local and national governments. The role of these stakeholders became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic that shaped the conditions under which football could be played (Clarkson et al., 2020; Reade & Singleton, 2021). Football Associations have the power to set and enforce rules and regulations, but they also change rules in response to pressure from other groups that determine how the game is played. The FAs determine the pay scale for national and international teams, decide who is allowed to play and coach via licensing structures and make decisions about hiring and firing of coaches, especially at the national and international levels. It is not surprising then that sovereign power has been the form of power that has received a great deal of attention in research on gender and coaching (Norman, 2010; 2014).

In contrast to sovereign power, biopower is a form of power that controls and organizes human subjects as a population and as such, monitors and regulates bodies (Foucault, 1977; Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2007). Biopower has been used to formally structure sport at the participatory level into a gender binary that results in women's football and men's football. Biopower has also been used to categorize coaches specifically as men and as women coaches. Discursive practices in elite sport suggest, however, that women sports and women coaches are associated with/identified by gender while men sports and men coaches are not marked as being gendered (De Haan & Knoppers, 2020; Norman, 2010, 2014).

Discursive or discursive power is a third form of power that operates as systems of knowledge that encourage and stimulate individuals to agree with and internalize not only the rules and regulations that govern and organize society including gender, but also with ways of thinking and doing. Foucault (1977) called these systems of knowledge that shape ways of thinking and doing, discourses. He contended that some become so dominant that they are assumed to be common sense and "true." Biopower and sovereign power in sport also incorporate aspects of disciplinary or discursive power as reflected in the normalization of a gendered binary hierarchical structure used by the FAs to position men's football as more valuable than women's football and women coaches as anomalies (Norman, 2010, 2013).

Foucault (1983) argued that where there is power there is resistance. A Foucauldian notion of resistance to relations of power frames it as discursive practices that challenge dominant discourses. According to Mumby et al. (2017), resistance reveals ways of thinking that have been marginalized and in doing so, rupture the dominant orthodoxy. [It] "counts' [as resistance] when these prevailing structures of power are made visible, denaturalized, and the metrics for their operation is placed under scrutiny and questioned" (p. 1164). Foucault's focus was on resistance at the micropolitical or individual level. Individuals challenge techniques of power using what he called care of the self or technologies of the self (Foucault, 1983; Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2007). We conceptualize resistance as a discursive practice that challenges and problematizes oppressive and/or coercive power relations.

When technologies of the self are used as a strategy for resistance by those who are objects of techniques of dominance, individuals become subjects (subjectification) exercising agency, instead of being objects (Foucault, 1977). This subjectification can be achieved through resisting power by engaging in practices such as problematization, critical self-reflection and transformation, public truth telling (parrhesia) and drawing on alternative discourses (Crocket, 2017; Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2007; Markula, 2003). Problematization consists of questioning assumptions underlying a dominant discourse or way of thinking and doing. In other words, a discourse has lost its familiarity

or common sense nature and has become problematic (Foucault, 1983). Parrhesia or fearless speech refers to naming a truth publicly regardless of the consequences. Its use contributes to subjectification. It is a transformative technique of the self that draws on problematization and acts as a public practice of resistance against existing dominant discourses (Crocket, 2017). For example, women football players of the 2019 World championship team problematized heteronormativity and used parrhesia to publicly support sexual diversity after winning the World Championship. We assume resistance as exercised by elite women coaches in football is an assemblage of practices, operating primarily at the microlevel, consisting of expressions of opposition to regulations, categorizations, discourses and practices that are embedded in forms of power relations.

### 3 | PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Elite women coaches have reached the highest echelons of a male dominated profession and as the literature cited above has suggested, have encountered resistance to their presence and influence. The current study explores the forms of power these women have encountered and the technologies of the self they have used in their work as coaches. Specifically, how have women coaches of women's national teams used technologies of the self to negotiate and resist discursive practices of biopower, sovereign and discursive power that circulate in elite football? Such an analysis goes beyond identifying barriers and/or lack of power that women football coaches may encounter as has been done in previous studies. Our focus on various forms of power and their entanglements can reveal how these forms currently circulate in sport now that the participation of women in football has been institutionalized while insight into strategies of resistance may add to understandings of the dynamics of power relations in sport and nonsport organizations and reveal how women can exercise agency within a male dominated work environment (Verloo, 2018).

### 4 | METHODS

This paper is part of a larger qualitative project focusing on the experiences of women who coach national football teams. We approached this paper as a case study that asks "how" questions and that provides in-depth details about the contexts in which these coaches work (Miles et al., 2018). Data were collected through semi structured in-depth interviews or conversations, where possible in person, or alternatively, via phone or other online platforms such as Skype. On the average, interviews lasted 60–90 min. The interviews were very informal since the development of women's football differs significantly by country and since these women had had various work histories. The interviews were loosely guided by an interview schedule drawing on the literature on gendered processes in coaching and organizations and our own knowledge and experience of doing research in this area. The major topics consisted of personal career trajectory, experiences and challenges in coaching in a male dominated sport, recruitment and hiring procedures for coaching positions and the role gender plays in these processes and coaching football in general. We used probes and follow up questions to explore experiences and challenges faced by these coaches and how they dealt with them (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Interviews were conducted by the authors and recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants were given the opportunity to check the transcripts to make sure they were accurate, to add information they thought was pertinent and to remove anything they felt would be revealing or compromise them or anyone else. We noted that several coaches redacted/deleted/altered parts of their interview after reading their transcript.

This study was undertaken in compliance with Institutional Review Board guidelines for ethical conduct of human research as understood by our respective institutions. International coaches were recruited to the study via word of mouth and a third-party industry insider. Coaches were asked to participate in the study if they had experience coaching at an international level and if they had an appropriate level of spoken English to converse on this subject

matter. We cursorily read each interview after it had been transcribed and continued to recruit coaches for the study until our reading suggested no new ideas or experiences were emerging. We assumed saturation had been attained with respect to the various topics guiding the interviews. Ten coaches were included in this study. Collectively, they had coached national teams in more than 20 countries. Due to the sensitivity of the topics being discussed and the relatively small number of elite women football coaches worldwide, the coaches remain anonymous in this paper. We offer no information such as nationality, ethnicity or age of the coach, their specific national or club playing, or coaching experience, for fear of leading to identification. In the current study, we primarily focused on data dealing with the technologies of the self challenges named by the coaches. These were related to recruitment and hiring of coaches and to being marked by gender. We assumed these challenges were part of power relations circulating in football recruitment, hiring and firing and other challenges of being a highly skilled woman in a male dominated environment.

Foucault (1983) stated that an understanding of power relations is best achieved by first looking at forms of resistance and then at the “strategies” that act to limit that resistance. Lilja and Vinthagen (2014), who used a Foucauldian lens to discuss forms of power, argued that “if resistance is a reaction to power, then the characteristics of the power strategy/relation affect the kinds of resistance that subsequently prevail” (p. 107). They argued that each form of power requires its own strategies of resistance. This is the approach we first took in our preliminary analysis of the data. We looked for and attempted to identify technologies of the self such as problematization, parrhesia, critical self-reflection/transformation, and creation of alternative discourses and when they were used. We subsequently attempted to link these to a specific form of power such as sovereign, discursive or biopower. We discovered, however, that these forms of power and resistance could not be neatly separated but instead were entangled with each other. Subsequently, we re-examined the data to explore this entanglement of the three forms of power that the coaches resisted. We looked for ways to describe how these forms of power interrelated in specific situations and paid special attention to how these coaches positioned themselves in relation to the circulation of these forms. The first two authors independently read the transcripts of interviews several times. They subsequently looked for use of technologies of the self and coded when each was used in response to a specific issue. The two authors then compared and discussed their findings until they reached unanimity on the issues. The most frequently used strategy was problematization. The authors identified the use of technologies of the self pertaining to issues of selection and hiring, coach education, behaviors needed to survive and the assumed superiority of men's football and its coaches. Each of these issues reflected various entanglements of forms of power, although in each case one form was dominant. The third and fourth authors served as critical friends who asked critical questions about the process of analysis and the results (Miles et al., 2018).

The members of the research team have a commitment to transforming sport to be a site of equity. We had no opportunities to play football as a child although we have all played competitive sport. One of us has coached at the high performance level; all of us have given workshops on gender in sport/coaching. Three of us live in a country where men's football is considered to be the national sport. We have all previously published research with a critical focus in the area of gender and coaching and have also published papers/chapters on gender and football.

## 5 | RESULTS

### 5.1 | Entanglement of sovereign with discursive power and biopower: The role of Football Associations

The results revealed that the sovereign power of FAs has been infused with discursive power that is built on a biopolitical hierarchy that sets men's football as the norm. Football Associations set the rules for selecting coaches and for the standards coaches need to meet to be licensed as an international coach, regardless of gender. The use of sovereign power by FAs is reflected in both the content of coach education and in the hiring/firing of national coaches. Those wishing to work at the national and international levels are therefore dependent on the FAs for jobs and

licensing. We use two examples to reveal how sovereign power was supported by discursive and biopower and how the coaches used technologies of the self such as problematization to negotiate this entangled form of power. One example pertained to coach education and while another example focuses on selection and firing of women coaches.

### 5.1.1 | Coach education

All those who wish to coach at the international/national level have to follow courses in order to obtain the required international/professional license. This requirement reveals how FAs exercise sovereign power over women and men coaches. The courses, however, constructed football as a sport played primarily by men and discursively made women invisible. The coaches in our study problematized this invisibility of women and women's football in the course as the following fragment illustrates:

Men take the courses, but also fill the videotapes [that were used], the videos were of the men's national team. It was only men, and never a woman in a million years.

Such courses also have material effects. They have limited capacity and are expensive. According to our coaches, men are more likely to be sponsored by an FA to take such courses to enable them to take up positions as coach at the international level. Those who are not sponsored, often women, have to pay for the course themselves. Lack of funding initially prevented one of our coaches from obtaining her license. Another coach described how this licensing requirement and problems of limited capacity in such courses created dilemmas: *They had to create an extra place for me in the course. It was extra because otherwise I might prevent a man from getting his professional license because men are seen as the breadwinners and need the money; women do not.*

Women are not only invisible in course materials in coach education but women's football is also discursively constructed as inadequate as a site for gaining the required internship experience. A coach recounted that her planned internship with the national women's senior team could not count toward the requirements of her license because of the perceived "lower" level of play in women's football. She had to intern with a young men's team for it to count toward her license. These findings of women's invisibility and gender hierarchy in coach education are similar to those described by others (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2008, 2011; Lewis et al., 2018; Norman, 2010; Sawiuk et al., 2021). The FAs engaged in sovereign power to require coaches of national teams to be licensed and used discursive power and technologies of gender to constitute coach education and football as being primarily for and about men. This exercise of sovereign power relied on both biopower and discursive power to position women and their knowledge as illegitimate or inferior and to strengthen a discourse that football is a men's game and women's football is inferior.<sup>1</sup>

These coaches resisted this entanglement of various forms of power by problematizing the content of these courses and also engaging in self transformation by taking responsibility for their own learning. A coach described how she exercised agency by finding her own sources about coaching women's football

I found coaching courses really boring, painfully dull, very un-stimulating, zero references to women, which used to annoy me. Coach education is a pile of shite. ... I'm a pro [license] coach, ...[profanity] I've received zero knowledge around women's football .... I had to go and self-learn.

A coach stated that she attended many conferences and conventions, not only in sport, but also in related subjects to gain more knowledge. Another asserted "I want to read and learn from any research that comes my way. I follow all the big games and try to constantly innovate my ways of coaching." These coaches, therefore, relied on their own acquisition of necessary knowledge to challenge this entanglement of sovereign power with discursive and biopower. They challenged techniques of domination they encountered to engage in technologies of the self to produce subjectivities

who felt competent and self-confident in the tools they needed to be able to coach at the highest level. A coach asserted: *“decisions made in the male dominated system will not change my knowledge and skills”*. These coaches did not invent the knowledge that they acquired but went to where they thought they could obtain the information they thought they needed. This search for alternatives reflects Foucault's contention that practices of resistance or self-transformation are not *“something invented by the individual himself [sic]. They are models he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group”* (Foucault, 2000, p. 291).

### 5.1.2 | Recruitment and selection

All of the coaches participating in our study had coached a women's national team in at least one country while most had coached in two or three countries and thus had been employed by various FAs. The competition among women for these jobs is fierce since the opportunities for employment for women are limited and also decreasing as men move into the field of coaching women. The entanglement of sovereign with discursive and biopower was evident in descriptions of the selection and firing of coaches for women's (and men's) programs. The exercise of sovereign power by the FAs to recruit, select and remove coaches of national teams was informed by the discursive power of a discourse of assumed superior male knowledge and experience. This entanglement of sovereign power with discursive and biopower resulted in a practice in which women were often bypassed for high performance coaching positions. As we describe below, interviewees recounted many stories about ways women were kept out of football coaching positions and how their absence enforced the sovereign power of the FAs and the dominant discourse that coaching football is the domain of men (see also Norman, 2013).

According to our interviewees, the criteria FAs set out at the beginning of a search procedure for filling a position on the women's side are often transparent and clear cut. However, these criteria often seemed to have little impact on the actual hiring. A coach explains, *“those doing the hiring had a long list of criteria for the coach-to-be and then ended up with a famous male player without any coaching experience”*. The circulation of biopower in football also limits women since they are considered only for positions for coaching women. They are not approached for positions on the men's side. In the following fragment, a coach described how her application was disregarded for a position for which she was well qualified:

I wanted to move up into the division of technical administration. There was no position in women's football but there was a position [in men's football] so I applied for that job in that division. I had all the necessary papers, international playing experience and extensive knowledge but they appointed a man who did not even have the proper required license. I was very disappointed; that affected me a lot.

Similarly, a coach who had led women's national teams in various countries and thus had the necessary experience, wanted to apply for a high level coaching position on the (professional) men's side. She received many comments *“She has never coached men. She needs to start with [men's] division 3”* or *“How much does she know about men's football?”* Another woman who had all the required licenses and who had played on and coached a national women's team for many years described what happened when she asked about applying for a coaching vacancy at a professional men's club: *“Club coach?? That was impossible, absolutely. They could not imagine having a woman coach [in that position] even one who had had a lot of experience playing on the national team and who had had the top license for four years.”* This exclusion from consideration for positions on the men's side meant the availability of high level positions for these women was limited to coaching positions of women's teams. This suggests that the FAs rely on an enmeshment of sovereign and biopower to support a gendered structure of coaching opportunities. These are situated within a discursive hierarchy that values men's football and their knowledge and experience over that of women. Consequently, women have relatively few job opportunities at the elite level.



The foregoing illustrates that the FAs do not possess power because they are an FA but have become powerful because of the workings and strategic use of discourses that position coach education and selection of coaches for women's teams as being primarily but not totally about men since a few women are appointed. We return to this point in the next section.

The results suggest the women coaches we interviewed engaged in resistance to the sovereign power of the FAs primarily by problematizing practices based on discourses that assumed men's football and those involved in it are superior in performance and knowledge than are women. The freedom these women coaches had to act beyond the problematization and the self-learning they did was, however, limited. The many redactions in the transcripts suggest that they were afraid of this sovereign power since it dominates and shapes the job market. Biopower was embedded within institutionalized discursive practices that normalized the sovereign power of the FAs and supported their preference for men's football.

## 5.2 | Biopower entangled with discursive and sovereign power

In this section, our focus is on how these women were often approached and discursively constituted specifically as women first rather than as coaches. Biopower that is based on a gender binary shaped their invisibility as coaches and visibility as women within a heteronormative climate in football (Kauer, 2005). We give two examples of this entanglement. One example focuses on the discourse of women coaches not being considered for positions while the other details how women specifically are expected to enact a "nice" or desirable femininity.

### 5.2.1 | Invisibility as coaches

According to Butler (2004) "an exclusive binary gender structure performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption" (p. 43). This exclusiveness is revealed in how women coaches were constructed as having gender while their men colleagues were not. Specifically, when women coaches were seen or visible, they were constructed as women first and then viewed as coaches who may know something about football. These coaches resisted and disrupted this operation of power. One of our coaches described how a normalizing judgment that assumed women coaches did not exist played out in practice and how it shaped her subjectivity and determination to challenge and disrupt this:

Part of my job was coach education [for club coaches] and then you meet resistance. You walk into a club to give a course and they all exclaim, "It's a woman!!" Even the little kids. They do not see you as a coach or instructor but as a woman. I ignored it and thought "you wait and see!!!"

As Clarkson et al. (2019)'s study of English women football coaches suggests, this coach was not the only woman coach to have such experiences. Women coaches are an anomaly, especially those who are experts. They are seen as women first, rather than as elite coaches. None of our coaches were deterred by this dynamic, however.

The problematization of the dominant gender binary by these women coaches, extended to describing how some of the men coaches of women's teams positioned themselves or were positioned by the FAs as male experts. One coach recounted angrily how a "professional team announced that their women's side will be coached by a former player, male, hardly any experience. He says that he is: 'looking forward to gain experience for the rest of his career!!'" These women coaches were aware of, problematized and were exasperated by how both biopower and the discursive power of the assumed superiority of men informed the thinking about what is assumed to be "good" for the women's game: "The man who became the coach of the National Women's A-squad said: 'I will learn so much', and it was well received. Can you understand this?! He is the one who is supposed to be knowledgeable! He is not there to learn!!"

This entanglement of biopolitics and discursive practices of male superiority also suggested the presence of men coaches in women's football is assumed to increase its status or visibility. Two coaches described and problematized what can occur when a former male football player is appointed by an FA to become the coach of a women's national team

People were happy and appreciative [when a male football player was appointed]. "Wow! He wants to give up his time/work to coach women!"

and

A big press announcement, a big press release about the hiring of a male player for women's football. [The chair of the FA probably thinks]: "it is going to make me look like a genius when this press release comes out!" So, they're hiring by ego rather than by procedure.

We contend that the hiring was not entirely "by ego" but was based on the assumption that men discursively own football knowledge, skills and coaching practices. Women coaches therefore, had to continually deal with the consequences of the biopolitics on which the FAs drew and that was entangled with discursive power as well as sovereign power. The primary strategy of these coaches for dealing with this invisibility was to problematize it.

## 5.2.2 | Doing gender appropriately

All of the coaches we interviewed were well aware of the biopolitical discursive gaze that positioned them as women before being seen as a coach. Welford (2011) described how women working in football clubs had to simultaneously enact "niceness" and an overt masculinity associated with men's football. The women participating in the current study also had to engage with this discourse. Although the coaching performance of women coaches and their expertise play a large role in their selection by FAs, these coaches have been disciplined into the knowledge they must also be personable in order to be accepted and survive as a football coach, "*Those doing the hiring are always male. In an interview I try to show that I'm very knowledgeable and can make players play better but I also try to engage with the hiring panel, so they like me as a person.*" The discursive power of this practice continued beyond the hiring process. These coaches explained how noncompliance is punished, how they felt they could not be outspoken, "*The marketing control is about being nice, pleasant, being like a puppy; that's more important than the game.*"

The sovereign power of the FAs to hire and fire women at will circulated as a discursive technique grounded in biopower and shaped the degree to which these elite coaches were willing to be nice. As a whole, they tended to resist and refused to act in the desired way. A coach explained that "*if you have a strong personality they easily call you a bitch. They do not value your qualities; you need to be nice and fit their perception of a female*". Another coach recognized that: *we cannot get unhinged [as men coaches can/do during a game]. I don't think women are accepted as strong leaders when they are vocal or strong in their opinion or express resistance to an idea. I think white men still haven't figured out how to deal with strong confident females.* Another coach pointed to how the discursive expectations about "women" also created degrees of desirability. Biopower also includes age

We, the older generation, have more experience and extensive knowledge but are less in the picture for positions now. When men get older, they become more valued as coaches; for women it is the opposite. Getting older means getting out. You are not pretty anymore.

The women coaches in the current study did not always comply with the dominant discourse of desirable femininity, however. A coach described how she challenged its discursive power and the sovereign power of an FA:

I was really steadfast in my decisions and I wanted to do it my way. I didn't want them to decide what I should do and so on. I won't allow a boss to impose a player on me. Then I'm called confrontational, closed, and [they say]: "she doesn't allow herself to be helped."

Shaw and Hoerber (2003) reported similar experiences of women who worked in sport organizations. Displays of "overt masculinity" were valued in these sport organizations but women who enacted such masculine practices were called a bitch. Similarly, Whiteside and Hardin (2012) found that women sport managers were often asked to smile while working. It is not surprising then that the coaches participating in the current study were seen as women first and expected to engage in what FAs defined as desirable femininity. These elite coaches, however, resisted this definition and did not always engage in what was constructed as appropriate gender behavior.

Being seen as women first also meant attention was paid to how women dressed. A coach reflected on the frequency of negative comments about the way women coaches look and dress: "*you hear it all the time, especially working at XXXX: comments like, 'Women! Look at the way they act, they look like men!', or 'They act like men, they should dress differently.'*" This biopower practice of explicitly categorizing only women by gender and seeing them as heterosexual objects made these coaches vulnerable to sexual harassment and intimidation. These coaches were not afraid however, to engage in critical self-reflection and parrhesia [truth telling]. A woman coach who had been sexually assaulted by a member of the coaching staff knew, "*there are guidelines to prevent this [assault] from happening, but those guidelines were violated*". She saw speaking out as a moral obligation to women players and coaches: "*I had to talk about it, it was an obligation toward other women*". Others situated such behavior within the male dominated football culture where harassment of women is so normalized it is almost invisible. These women resisted this entanglement of biopower and discursive power and spoke up to make it visible:

[have I experienced] Sexual harassment yes.... from male players, from other coaches, from newspaper reporters. I think that's a constant in every woman's life, no matter what area you're in. But in male-dominated cultures, yes, I think they feel that they're less of a man if they're not saying things or having certain attitudes. [When I point to] men harassing the women players, then the comment was, "oh, but that's natural!"

Women coaches, regardless of sport, often have to negotiate this normalized discursive practice of heteronormativity that is embedded in both biopower and discursive power in sport (Kauer, 2005; Norman, 2013, 2014). Resistance can have consequences. One of the coaches recounted four experiences where she was on the brink of being offered a position but the offer did not come because she was known as a "*troublemaker who had reported sexual harassment by football coaching staff*." Hindman and Walker (2020) found that women working as managers in sport organizations clearly understood that problematizing sexism and harassment had consequences for their career and future hiring because they were seen as troublemakers. This is a discursive practice often enforced by FAs. These coaches, however, also dared to disrupt the demands of biopolitics and its entanglement with discourses about desirable femininity by engaging in critical self-reflection. For example, a coach refused to comply with directives to be sexier and used parrhesia to do so publicly. She explained: "*when a reporter said: 'Can you take on a different pose, something sexier, very direct?' I just looked at him and I said, 'No, that is not what I want to portray.'*" Two coaches described their resistance to this dominant discursive practice:

I don't fit a mold. And I can understand them [the governing body] wanting to have this woman who is made- up every day, whose objective is to be sexy the moment she walks out the door, but that's not me. That's not what I look like when I walk out the door.

and

I've always admired strength and athleticism in females knowing it's not as accepted... I've always felt I'm a bit different, or an outcast, or don't fit the ideal that society has accepted [for females] but I'm okay with that.

Such microlevel acts of resistance by these coaches may seem insignificant in a world where women athletes are routinely sexualized in the media (e.g., Kavanagh et al., 2019; Sherry et al., 2016). Markula (2003), however, argued that technologies of the self used in sport that challenge heteronormativity can “establish a chance for public impact by provoking confusion about the present discourse of femininity” (p. 102).

### 5.3 | Entanglement of discursive power, biopower and sovereign power: Creating alternative discourses

As the foregoing suggests, these women primarily employed problematization, parrhesia and critical self-reflection as ways to resist entanglements of forms of power. Another technology of the self, however, consists of creating or drawing on alternative discourses as women athletes have done who have been active in male dominated sports (Crocket, 2017; Spowart et al., 2010; Thorpe, 2008). The women participating in the current study resisted the discursive power relied on by FAs that constituted men as being THE experts. These coaches reversed the dominant discursive gender binary and judged men coaches of women's football as being second best. They questioned the adequacy of the skills and motivation of men to coach women. Specifically, they critically interrogated the discourse of men as experts in women's football. These coaches argued men are inferior coaches compared to women. According to the coaches, men either see coaching women as a way to gain entry to the men's program or as second best because they cannot get a job on the men's side. Two coaches explain:

*Male coaches want to coach for the men's side. There's more money, more future. So normally if someone's not so good, they just go to the women's side.*

There's now a market for coaches, a market for [women] players, and the World Cup is a world class event. I think there's [sic] a lot of men out there who today are well known because of the women's game, that in the men's game they would have never made it and would continue to not shine, while now the women have been displaced and these men are being given the position.

These elite women football coaches drew on their own knowledge, history in the sport and experience to challenge the discourse that men are experts because they are men. These women see themselves as the experts in women's football; they have been involved in it since they were children. They problematized the discursive power and fixed gender binary (biopower) that has constructed a double standard that prevents them from being appointed in men's programs by FAs. They questioned the assumption that men are able to coach women without ever having played the women's game.

We've had two high profile job openings at the international level – the xxx job, and the [country] job. In the end, here's what they have in common: They hired a man who didn't apply for the job, has never been a head coach, and never coached women.

These coaches challenged this discourse in other ways as well as they worked with women football players. Women athletes also assume men know more about football because they are men.

The players [of a senior women's national team] have also grown up in that male dominated environment. The women wanted a male coach before I came and had written a letter to the FA insisting on

that. Two days later the FA of [the national team] appointed me, a female coach. I thought: "oh wow, that makes for a difficult beginning."

These findings echo those of Harris (2005) and Kristiansen et al. (2014) who also found that professional women football players preferred to be coached by men. In the above example, we note the FA had also subverted the dominant discourse about male superiority in football by hiring a woman while the athletes drew on it.

These women primarily engaged in parrhesia (truth telling) using problematization of current dominant discourses that positioned them as objects. In so doing they transformed themselves into subjects creating an alternative discourse that positioned them as very knowledgeable about and competent in women's football. Since they had participated in women's football as athletes and as coaches at the highest levels, they contended that this history meant they were more knowledgeable/competent in coaching women's football than men who have not done so (see also Allison, 2020). They also have experience in men's football, often by having played on boys' teams and by participating in coach education that was based on the men's game. Their knowledge of and experience in both the center and the margin of football therefore, enabled them to create an alternative discourse that disrupted a dominant gender binary.

Although they problematized this gendered hierarchy and its micro-politics, sustaining an alternative discourse was a challenge. Some of the interviewees were aware they have absorbed the assumed superior knowledge of men and as such, were also able to problematize it. A coach admits that, "*my stumbling block is that I am so used to being in a second ranked position that I accept resistance to my position and the superiority of men as normal and shortchange myself in the process*". This dynamic illustrates how a discourse "*can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy*" (Foucault, 1978, pp. 100–101).

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Crocket (2017) reviewed various studies in which women resisted discourses of male superiority and dominance in sport. He concluded that the most common technology of the self used by women in male dominated sports was problematization while the creation of alternative discourses rarely occurred. Similarly, in the current study, the women coaches primarily engaged in problematization of the discourse of male superiority and challenged the misuse of sovereign power by the FAs based on this discourse although they did create an alternative discourse. The women coaches did not question or resist the gender binary itself in its structuring of football into men's and women's football. This is not surprising since at the senior level the sport currently consists of two competitions: one for women and one for men, and their experience as players is based on this binary. Currently, the ability of these coaches to obtain continued employment depends to a large extent on the existence of this binary and the influence of organizations like the International Olympic Committee that insists more women be placed in positions of leadership.

These coaches also disrupted discourses of biopower, however, especially those that created a gender hierarchy, through their hard work and persistence in their coaching careers and drawing on their own experience and expertise. They problematized discursive constructions of women, often refusing to employ what are constructed as appropriate gender practices. They engaged in problematization in their encounters with the media, officials from national FAs and athletes. The subject positions they took reflected what they saw as reflecting their best interest and enabled them to create alternative forms of knowledge, specifically about the capabilities of women coaches and equal opportunity.

The results expose the complexity of power relations in which gender is a site of empowerment through women's football but it is also a site for control and domination. The analysis reveals how this entanglement of various forms of power continues to function. This entanglement has possibly been strengthened rather than weakened despite the entry of women coaches into the male dominated football arena. Women football coaches need/want jobs coaching

national teams and therefore in some ways must comply with dominant discourses about gender and football. These elite women coaches, whose knowledge and experiences were frequently considered to be invisible, were seen and marked as women first and then as coaches. They resisted this invisibility as coaches and their supposed inferiority through problematization, parrhesia, critical self-reflection and the creation of alternative discourses. They were not passive when negotiating various forms of power but created new meanings and their own subjectivities to “create, appropriate and transform discourse” (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 684). Butler (2004) has argued that individuals not only struggle for rights that attach to them as individuals but struggle to be “conceived as persons... to create a social transformation of the very meaning of personhood” (p. 32). If this is paraphrased to apply to women as elite football coaches, this means these women struggled to be conceived as coaches and to transform the gendered meaning of “football coach.” This drive for recognition can be found through their use of alternative discourses that do not disenfranchise them but celebrate women's football.

Our results suggest that sovereign, discursive and biopower were entangled to the extent that linking them separately to a specific act of resistance was not possible. Discursive, sovereign power and biopower often coalesced together into forms of power that these coaches resisted in various ways using technologies of the self. The results confirm Armstrong and Murphy (2012) argument that the relationship between power and resistance can be seen as a “complex network with multiple points of potential difference or divergence bringing possibilities for disruption to the discursive flow” (p. 222). The entanglement between the three forms of power reflects Foucault's (1983) contention that a shift has occurred away from solely ruled by sovereignty toward technologies of discursive power and of biopower, aimed at creating docile subjects. The results suggest, however, that although these women were not docile subjects, this entanglement has facilitated the exercise of sovereign power by the FAs.

The FAs have constructed leagues and championships for women and men, grounded in discourses about gender and football using biopower to enforce a hierarchical gendered binary distinction. Munro (2003), in her essay about power and resistance, has argued that “the Foucaultian thesis offers an agenda for resistance within which the primary concern is the dilution of congealed power relations rather than radical transcendence of overarching power regimes” (p. 94). The results of the current study suggest that this dilution by these elite women coaches of congealed sovereign power exercised by the FAs to control the game and its gender hierarchy is minimal. Dilution has been confined to the occasional hiring of women for national teams; otherwise these women would not be coaching. Possibly, a constellation of biopower and discursive power together strengthen the sovereign power exercised by FAs. In such a state of domination, the possibility of effective resistance is heavily constrained. The relationship between women coaches and FAs is largely one sided. Control of women coaches in football is ensured, not only through the direct exclusion of women by national and international football organizations, but also through the employment of more invisible mechanisms of normalization. Discourses about football as a men's domain and male superiority are the medium within which these constructs of power and normativity unite (Norman et al., 2018).

## 7 | CONCLUSION

The dominant discourse that has prevailed since the codification of football in the middle of the nineteenth century and had suggested only men played football has shifted to include women. The results suggest that this recognition has created social change that has acted against women coaches. The shift to a recognition of the game of women's football has made the coaching of women more enticing and lucrative for men and thus enables them to displace women coaches. Lusted and Fielding-Lloyd (2017) have argued that this shift by FAs to enfold women into its institutional structures while protecting and prioritizing male interests has occurred in many sports including football and is part of the history of the growth of women's sport. Women coaches, therefore, cannot rely on formal binary forms of biopower to argue for their right to coach women but need to argue about their competence as the coaches did in the current study. The results suggest that scholars who focus on women as leaders in sport and nonsport organizations may need to pay less attention to positional power but more to forms of power, how they circulate and are

resisted and what shapes that resistance. Investigations could examine how resistance to these relations of power differ across context, not only across sports but also in comparison with nonsport contexts.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared; confidentiality was promised to the interviewees.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Heiko Vogel, a club coach/manager, told two female referees during a game that women had no place on the football field. He was fined, banned for two league games for sexist comments and as further punishment required to conduct six training sessions of a women's or girls' team. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-female-footballers-slam-sexist-punishment-for-soccer-coach/a-56941742>.

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