

The 'cost of football': Motherhood, coaching and work-family conflict

Issy Martin (Manchester Metropolitan University) & Ali Bowes (Nottingham Trent University)

Martin, I. & Bowes, A. (2024). The cost of football: motherhood, coaching and work-family conflict. *Managing Sport and Leisure*. (Advanced Online Publication).

Abstract

Purpose/Rationale: The gender-specific needs of employed female football players are now recognised, but it is more complex for female coaches. As such, this research aimed to document the experiences of elite female coaches who are mothers as they navigate parenthood with paid work as a coach.

Design/Methodology/Approach: 4 full-time, elite level mother-coaches took part in a semi-structured interview, analysed using reflexive thematic analysis using the Ecological-Intersectional Model as a theoretical lens.

Findings: Professional female mother-coaches in women's football in England report that they are exposed to several challenges. Mother-coaches felt pressure to choose their career over family, were perceived negatively by most colleagues, and highlighted the profession was unprepared for mothers. They relied on supportive individuals to navigate motherhood and coaching.

Practical Implications: Change is needed at both interpersonal and organisational levels in the football industry to better support mother-coaches at an individual level. This could include practical support for mother-coaches such as work flexibility, childcare support for out of hours work, and wider acceptance of family life within the industry.

Originality/Value: In highlighting the experiences of professional women football coaches and motherhood, and the navigation work-family conflict. This insight can provide a starting point for appropriate policy change.

Keywords (3-6): Motherhood, Football, Coaching, Work-Family Conflict, Women Coaches

Introduction: Women's Football as Work

It has been well documented that women's football has evolved at an exponential rate during the last decade, especially at the elite level (see Culvin, 2023; Culvin & Bowes, 2023; Fielding-Lloyd & Woodhouse, 2023). As Culvin (2023) has noted, football as work is now a reality for elite female footballers in England. However, the World Players' Union, FIFPro, state that despite the increasing professionalisation of women's game, 'viable career paths and proper working conditions are still lacking...adverse labour conditions still plague the game' (FIFPro, 2020, p. 6). Historic issues including the absence of funding, low wages, precarious working environments, and limited maternity policies have contributed to gendered barriers faced by women playing the sport as a profession (Culvin & Bowes, 2021).

Such socio-cultural and economic circumstances have a significant impact on the careers of women players in terms of both early retirement and decisions about motherhood (FIFPro, 2017). Indeed, there exists a perceived incompatibility with women having a family during their athletic career (Roberts & Kenttä, 2018; Culvin & Bowes, 2021). Responding to these issues on a global level, Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) has recently published proposed changes to the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players to provide employment protections for female players in the form of pregnancy and maternity rights (FIFA, 2020). This includes: mandatory remuneration of a minimum period of 14 weeks paid absence; clubs under obligation to reintegrate players back into football activity with adequate ongoing support; players given the opportunity to breastfeed an infant or express milk; and pregnant players given the right to provide services to their club in an alternative employment.

Despite these welcome and much-needed concessions for players, issues around working conditions because of the professionalisation of women's football does not solely impact players (Culvin & Bowes, 2023). The opportunity of 'football as work' extends beyond this, and as the game has grown, so has the need for a professional workforce to support it. Increasing the number of female leaders, coaches and referees in football continues to be a key part of strategies that centre on the women's game, with the Football Association (FA) in England specifically earmarking the development of female coaches as a central component for women's football growth; this includes a strategic objective to have a high-performance coach programme for 14-18 coaches, with 75% women, which should enable women to work at the highest levels of the club and international game (The FA, 2020, p. 36-37 for more detail). As both policy and research develop in the women's game, and specifically for professional female football players, we must then also consider professional females working in the game more broadly. This includes coaches, who play a central role in the business of football.

1 Interestingly, and while we know that men's professional football is near enough the exclusive
2 domain of men across all central positions, men also dominate roles within the female professional
3 game. McLoughlin's (2021) report spanning the WSL, Women's Champions League, USA NWSL,
4 German Frauen-Bundesliga, French Division 1 Feminine and Spanish Primera division as well as the
5 top 25 ranked teams in the women's world rankings found that 72.06% of the head coaches were
6 male. However, McLoughlin pointed to the WSL as an example of increasing gender equality in
7 coaching roles: in 2016, 25% of head coach roles were filled by women, growing to 56.25% in 2021.
8 Given the strategic focus within football governing bodies, and the increasing number of women
9 working in high profile - and paid - coaching roles within women's football, there exists a need to
10 investigate their experiences, including any gender-specific employment protections and rights, such
11 as maternity.

12 ***Work, maternity and motherhood***

13 Despite the development and implementation of various pregnancy and maternity policies within
14 the workplace – for example, the UK introduced maternity leave legislation via the Employment Act
15 in 1975 - 'the pregnancy penalty' continues to contribute to negative employment outcomes for
16 pregnant women and mothers (Bennett Shinall, 2018). Writing in an American context, Bennett
17 Shinall (2018) used the term to describe the outcome of an employer's assumptions on the value-
18 incompatibility of a pregnant working female. In the UK context, the Equality and Human Rights
19 Commission's 2016 report found 75% of women 'had a negative or possibly discriminatory
20 experience during pregnancy, maternity leave, and/or on return from maternity leave' (Equality and
21 Human Rights Commission, 2016, p. 12). Other findings included employer's beliefs that new
22 mothers are less aspirational regarding their career progression, and that pregnancy in the
23 workplace puts an unnecessary burden on the workplace.

24 In the sports workplace women already face additional gendered challenges in their working
25 environment related to legitimacy and credibility. Writing about football in the UK, Culvin and Bowes
26 (2021) note that women are walking a 'tightrope' when working in male-dominated spaces, an
27 environment that meant they felt constantly under examination and required to prove themselves –
28 often over and over. Motherhood then adds an additional layer of complexity for women playing
29 and/or working in sport (McGannon et al., 2018, Massey & Whitehead, 2022; McGregor et al., 2023).

30 In research on professional women footballers in England, prior to the aforementioned FIFA
31 maternity regulations, many felt that being an athlete-mother was incompatible with being a
32 professional footballer (Culvin & Bowes, 2021). It was recurrent that players felt 'the gendered
33 practical considerations of ... long periods away from home, inflexible working hours, and little

control over relocation' (Culvin & Bowes, 2021, p. 9) contributed to a perceived incompatibility with motherhood. Further to this, most were unsure of their rights as mothers, or explained that an absence of maternity leave, pay, or childcare support from clubs led to the perception that maternity wasn't feasible for players. However, women in sport – as both athletes and coaches – with children have demonstrated that motherhood does not have to signal the end of sport engagement, athletic identities, or leadership roles (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011; McGannon et al., 2019; Spowart & McGannon, 2022). It remains though that mothers in sport must navigate the complex relationship of their sporting and motherhood identities. This included gendered ideologies that result in guilt for women in pursuing a career, as women strive to excel in both their family and sport lives (Spowart & McGannon, 2022).

Women coaching football

Despite the growth of women's football in England, the sport has been described as a deeply masculinised institution (Norman, 2012). Gender equality is a strategic focus of the governing body for the sport, with a desire to increase gender diversity among leadership, and gender targets set for national team coaching staff (The FA, 2021). However, a survey conducted by the organisation Women in Football found 66% of women have experienced gender discrimination in the footballing workplace (Women in Football, 2020), and there has been a historic concern over the number of women involved in coaching the sport. It has been claimed that 'the challenge for women football coaches is not only to survive within this challenging and often discriminatory culture, but also to understand, and ultimately challenge, these pre-determined and often socialised views' (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 29).

The barriers to women in sport coaching have been well documented across a multitude of contexts (see, for example, Kilty, 2006; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Knoppers et al., 2022; Norman & Simpson, 2023). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) was used by LaVoi and Dutove (2012) to expose, and categorise, the different levels in which barriers to the profession exist. Their work on the Ecological Model of Barriers and Supports for Women Coaches was later amended to include intersectionality and power in LaVoi's (2016) Ecological-Intersectional Model (EIM). EIM specifies that 'human development and experience is influenced by a variety of primally located individual, interpersonal, organisational and socio-cultural environmental systems' (LaVoi, 2016, p. 19). In brief: at an *individual level*, intersectionality of identity is key, with self-perception highlighted as an *individual barrier* to women's entry, or continued involvement, in coaching, as well as feeling undervalued and time restraints. *Interpersonal level* describes social influences like colleagues and peers, where *interpersonal barriers* centre on a lack of support, in part due to women's expected

role as a primary care giver at home, and in part due to the 'Old Boys Club' network. *Organisational level* includes policies, professional opportunities, and practices, with *organisational barriers* involving male-run coach education programmes, unclear career pathways, marginalisation and tokenism. The *socio-cultural level* includes social norms and cultural systems, with *sociocultural barriers* relate to dominant gender ideologies associated with femininity and leadership, such as the value placed on men as superior coaches and athletes. The masculine context of sport alongside dominant masculine leadership ideologies results in beliefs that men are naturally better sport leaders and coaches, than women (Madsen et al., 2017).

Motherhood, maternity and coaching

Motherhood makes women's experiences as coaches even more challenging. Bruening and Dixon (2007) state that 'the focus of work family experiences in all professions and in particular the coaching profession is strongly gendered and viewed largely as a women's issue' (p. 492). Bruening and Dixon (2008) explored the gendered experiences of head coach mothers (herein mother-coaches) in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 (D1) institutions through a life course perspective. The research found that the birth of a child was a hugely significant point in the lives of the mothers which highlighted real structural incompatibilities between caring responsibilities and a coaching lifestyle and the needs of young children (Bruening & Dixon, 2008). The types of support mother-coaches desired fell into three categories: overall consideration, flexible scheduling and staffing. This included autonomy over their schedules, gaining an extra assistant, accommodation for family, the feeling of acknowledgment and the sense that the family are recruited as one, not just the individual as a head coach.

In more recent research, but still in the US context, Mazerolle and Eason's (2015) work explored perceptions of NCAA D1 female athletic trainers on motherhood and work life balance. Here, participants instead revealed an adaptive lifestyle preference, one that encompassed balancing work and home/parenting roles. Mazerolle and Eason (2015) also presented that long hours, travel, inflexible work schedules as well as sociocultural factors such as societal expectations, may contribute to women departing the profession. Boswell and Cavallerio (2022) found that women coaches wanted to remain working at a high level *and* be mothers, yet their attempts to do so saw them face discrimination, experience a lack of support, and feel pressure to both prove themselves as coaches and fulfil their expected roles of mothers. McRae (2004) and Moen (2011) state that family adaptive strategies at different points in a life course is key to social change in the work/family arena; what might appear as a women's choice at the individual level when a coaching

1 mother decides to leave the profession; is in fact influenced by the organisational and socio-cultural
2 context in which the mother is embedded within.

3 Motherhood, underpinned by socially constructed gendered ideologies, clearly complicates women's
4 place in the sports workplace. We know that women who are professional coaches face barriers in
5 the workplace, particularly in relation to acceptance, legitimacy, and credibility (Norman, 2012) and
6 that motherhood further complicates women's positioning as coaches (Bruening & Dixon, 2008). As
7 LaVoi (2016) notes, gaps remain in the literature on barriers to women in coaching and although
8 many formal barriers have been removed through policies and legislation, implicit and entrenched
9 biases remain. Clearly, maternity/motherhood is connected to women's experiences of work and as
10 such, it is an avenue worthy of increased academic attention, especially how it is problematised in
11 the lives of women coaches. In the UK context, given the increasing numbers of women working in
12 as coaches in the WSL, and the strategic organisational aims of the FA increasing women in the
13 coaching workforce, there exists a need to understand the experiences of females when
14 motherhood and professional coaching in football combine. As such, we identified the research
15 question as: what are the experiences of professional mother-coaches working in football in England
16 in relation to work-life conflict?

17 **Methodology:**

18 This project adopted an interpretative, qualitative approach. For Smith and Pheonix (2018),
19 qualitative research is a field of inquiry centralising people's experiences, where knowledge is
20 socially constructed. These epistemological and ontological beliefs underpin how the research was
21 designed and conducted, acknowledging multiple social realities. Following an initial literature
22 review phase which, as outlined above, highlighted the complexity of women's lived realities within
23 both coaching and football, and the additional challenges associated with motherhood - but with no
24 specific work focusing on the intersection of the two - this body of work informed the development
25 of the research methodology.

26 Seen as the mainstay of qualitative research in sport, the semi-structured interview allows the
27 researcher to create a conversation with participants to tell stories about their perspectives, insights,
28 experiences and feelings about a research topic (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). It was decided that this
29 would be an appropriate way to investigate the research question. Following ethical clearance from
30 (lead author institution), a criterion-based sampling approach was developed, requiring that
31 participants must be both mothers and be working (or have worked) in a professional coaching role
32 (defined here as a paid role which may be part- or full-time) within women's football in England in
33 the last 5 years. Central to the development of the research question, the methodology and

participant recruitment is the lead researchers positioning within the field, which will be discussed in more detail.

Researcher Positionality:

As a previous full-time professional women's football coach in England for 3 years, with 9 years total coaching experience, the lead researcher operated in an "insider" role for this project. This approach supports an in-depth understanding of the context the women are working in, and the co-construction of knowledge as per the ontological and epistemological assumptions of qualitative research. Although not a mother, through both her experiences as a coach and her personal coaching network, the lead researcher became aware of the challenges faced by mother-coaches, which formed the basis of this research.

Interviews:

The research interviews were conducted by the lead researcher between October 2022 and January 2023. Utilising a purposive sampling strategy outlined previously, 7 mother-coaches were contacted, which was saturation of the researcher's personal network within the small potential sample of participants. 4 coaches completed recorded, semi-structured interviews which lasted between 30 minutes and 45 minutes. The participants as a collective held paid professional roles across the top 3 tiers of women's football in England, as well at international level. Given the public nature of their roles, any further specific information about the participants cannot be disclosed to protect participant anonymity.

The interview questions were developed with the intention to guide the coaches to discuss their experiences as mothers whilst in professional coaching roles, to understand what support they currently have in their role and provide opportunity to share recommendations for the industry. Questions focused on: their experience as a working mum in football coaching; any challenges they have faced as a mother whilst working as a full-time coach; any support that they felt had enabled their success as a mother-coach; broader discussions about the suitability of the profession for mothers; and advice they would give to other coaches, clubs of national governing bodies regarding balancing coaching with maternity and motherhood. Given the semi-structured nature of the interview, although there were key questions and areas of focus, there was scope throughout the interview to probe further and maintain a conversational feel to the interview.

Data Analysis

Following completion of the interviews, each was transcribed and printed to enable the lead researcher to read, re-read and annotate each transcript as part of a reflexive thematic analysis

(RTA) process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In line with the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this research, RTA acknowledges the researchers active role in knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019). RTA is then considered a reflection of the researchers interpretive analysis conducted at the intersection of the dataset – here, interview data with the mother-coaches -, the theoretical assumptions of the analysis – the EIM model -, and the analytical skills of the researcher (Byrne, 2022). As such, the codes and subsequent themes were develop with the layers of the EIM in mind, cognisant of the how the experiences of the mother-coaches fit here, and our role as researchers in shaping the theme development.

Confidentiality

One key issue the authors sought to address throughout the production of this research was ensuring confidentiality and, as best we can, anonymity. This was particularly pertinent given the aforementioned challenges women face within sport coaching spaces. To do this, it was important to create an interview environment that promoted trust, honesty, and openness, whilst also reassuring the coaches of confidentiality. This was addressed given the lead authors insider status within the field, followed by a rigorous anonymisation process which included removing any identifying information from the transcripts and subsequent data extracts. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was then further assessed by the second author, with relevant amendments made throughout the first draft of this paper to reduce the possibility that a participant would be identifiable.

Following this, and as per Smith and McGannon's (2018) recommendations, member checking was utilised to account for the possibility of breaching confidentiality via deductive disclosure, a term used to describe the unintentional identification of participants (usually for small and/or high-profile samples) through the detail and descriptions in their interview data. A final, full draft of this manuscript was sent to the participants, with 3 of the 4 participants asking for amendments to their data extracts to ensure anonymity, including descriptions, words or phrasing used. Finally, all participants were in agreement on how their voices were represented, and on both the accuracy and importance of the findings. These will now be discussed, supplemented with anonymised data extracts.

Findings

Following RTA, practical connections between shared experiences were made, and then the theoretical lens of EIM to guide the analytical process. As LaVoi (2016) and Bruening et al. (2016) propose, a multi-level approach is recommended to understanding and research the experiences of mother-coaches.

In total, 21 subthemes (see Table 1) were collated through the thematic analysis, which were refined and grouped into four themes by the two authors that addressed the multi-level nature of EIM. Across these themes – and although the first three themes predominantly relate to a specific level – the interaction between the four levels is highlighted, with the specific influence of the sociocultural level central throughout:

1. Individual: Children or career choice
2. Interpersonal: Perceptions of mother-coaches
3. Organisational: A profession unprepared for mothers
4. Making positive changes

Individual: Children versus Career Choice

The first theme considers the first stage of the EIM model – the individual level – and here it is clear that parental status is a central feature of mother-coaches identity, but one that brings significant challenges. However, the mother-coaches describe how this identity has a detrimental impact on career progression opportunities. The coaches highlight the lack of mother-coach role models as a contributing factor, with Coach B stating: “...there aren't really examples of it happening very successfully or very widely, so there's only a few examples...”. Without extensive examples of mothers who are coaches, there is perception that it is not possible to progress and succeed in coaching roles at the top level of the game.

However, something that was significant for this particular theme was the way in which *individual decisions*, such as career choices, are shaped by *organisational* or *sociocultural* constraints. This related to *organisational level* concerns around the demands of a new role conflicting with motherhood – work-family conflict – and, at an *individual level*, such as the fear of being in an unsupportive environment, and the timings of work/family decisions:

“I think it impacts the timing of when you want a child, it'll impact the type of job you get or that you go for. My example, personal example of that is not long ago either, a club did come and speak to me about a job. It's a job that I could see myself going into. But right now, I can't do it because, I wouldn't be able to fully, I don't feel I'd be able to fully do my job while [child] is this young either. So, I definitely think there's a reluctance in certain jobs and women being able to feel that they can do both roles really, really well. Or not be judged on if you're not very good, that being a factor, yeah.” (Coach D)

“I remember speaking with [coach] at one of our away days and asking, like, ‘how did you cope with that situation?’. I think it's OK when you've got like, you might be able to take a year, two years away when you've got a big reputation or caps, like if you're an ex-pro or big name. Umm, the comeback is not maybe so hard. But when you're still building a name for

1 *yourself where you're still younger and an aspiring coach, 1-2 years out of the game is huge."*
2 *(Coach C)*

3
4 The mother-coaches' concerns resemble those of the professional players in England (Culvin &
5 Bowes, 2021), where a fear exists that taking time away from football due to maternity would make
6 them more replaceable or demonstrate a lack of commitment. This has also been seen in Bruening
7 and Dixon's (2008) research on NCAA coaches, who felt maternity leave would be perceived
8 negatively by their employers and hinder their progression. This contributed to feelings of precarity:

9 *"The lack of job security as well, I think, probably make some people feel more sackable or*
10 *just the fact that if things aren't going quite right because you're having to change things*
11 *and do things differently because you're on maternity, or you've got bigger and different*
12 *responsibilities that take you away from your job, and I think could probably make people*
13 *worry about actually having a kid in the first place."* *(Coach B)*

14 Coach D also suggested pressures on career progression have an impact on female coaches'
15 individual decisions related to motherhood:

16 *"...She felt she couldn't have a kid because the timings of when you have it is when you come*
17 *into, like your peak but you're, you know you're on the rise in your career and she just felt*
18 *that she couldn't have a kid. And then by the time she reflected, it was too late. That's really*
19 *sad that I think that, that's the culture that she had to come through as a female coach."*
20 *(Coach D)*

21 Clearly, the *sociocultural context* of women's football in the UK impacts upon *individual level*
22 *decisions* that female coaches are making. That context also includes short-term job contracts and
23 financial precarity (Culvin, 2021; Fielding-Lloyd & Woodhouse, 2023). As such, professional coaches
24 in the women's game understand that taking a job comes with a financial risk, especially given the
25 transient nature of professional coaching jobs, and possible relocation:

26 *"Certainly, when looking for new jobs, I feel limited about where because of the lack of job*
27 *security and the lack of finance in the women's game. I don't feel like I could just take a job*
28 *anywhere. So, I was offered an interview for the [club] head coach's role the previous*
29 *summer, which I declined because the lack of security and finances in the game just meant*
30 *that I couldn't justify moving my family to the [location] to potentially not have a job a few*
31 *months later"* *(Coach B)*

32 The relationship between *socio-cultural context, organisational influence, and individual decision*
33 *making* is clear here. The decisions connected to motherhood, primarily at an individual level, were
34 grounded within the broader context of the mother-coaches working environment.

35 ***Interpersonal: Perceptions of mother-coaches***

At an *interpersonal level*, including the relationships between mother-coaches and their peers, there existed challenges for the participants. Predominately, and as noted by Boswell and Cavallerio (2022), the accounts shared by the coaches presented a collective experience of negative perceptions towards mother-coaches, centring on ideas such as a lack of commitment to the club/sport, and concerns that they would not be as dedicated to the profession. For example:

"... I genuinely feel that is perceived that you're no longer doing your job to a sufficient standard, where that's not the case. It's just now you have a family. You either do it or you don't do it, and it almost then impacts your reputation. I don't think you can be a present mum in my previous role and be seen to be doing your job properly."

(Coach C)

The coaches raised negative perceptions associated with their ability to no longer devote the entirety of their time to their coaching role. Motherhood meant that the mother-coaches were approaching things differently - for example watching recordings of matches rather than attend them in person or organising meetings around childcare – and although they were still fulfilling the role requirements, it was felt to be not good enough (REF). The mother-coaches indicated it was not seen to be appropriate to prioritise family over work:

"When you think about work-life balance and stuff. I think there's a perception, and I think there's obviously a perception in some areas of the game still and some clubs, some organisations, about women's suitability for the roles anyway. So, I think the minute you then are not just a woman, but you're also a mother, and you're asking to leave early or not come in because your kids aren't well, or to have maternity leave or whatever and miss things. I think comes with some judgment at times."

(Coach B)

These challenges extend beyond the *interpersonal level* and into the *organisational level*, where coaches felt marginalised by their employers across the hierarchy, with inadequate organisational support, as well as highlighting problems at a *sociocultural level*. A poignant example was shared by Coach A, who was subjected to discrimination by the club as a direct consequence of becoming a mother whilst in her coaching role:

"...the conversations that I had from the time that I told the CEO to when I left, they were all very much around the fact that I had chosen to be a mother. That I, you know, hadn't thought of the implications on the club. The implication was almost I was selfish, that I couldn't do both things. That was the undertone of it, you know, you can't be a parent or a mum and be a football manager...I got a day's notice to say that they were starting my maternity leave early, that it was for my own good. And that I would be off on full pay. Basically, like shut up and get out the door because we want someone else in now"

(Coach A)

Coach A's example emphasises the broader influence of the *socio-cultural conditions* around elite sport, and how women's professional football is not currently an environment accepting of mother-coaches. When discussing work and family balance in the profession, Coach D's use of the term "cost of football" is telling:

"...it's the cost of football, and you speak to anyone in top-flight management, the cost of football 9 times out of 10 is your family and you've got to make a choice, haven't you? It's not just kids but relationships. The number of managers I know whose relationship broke down as a direct result of them feeling pressure in their job and doing more or being uncomfortable to say no..."

(Coach D)

Clearly, work-family conflict (Bruening & Dixon, 2007) is persistent in the cultures of elite women's football in the UK. Coach A shared that if clubs were more openly accepting of motherhood and presented a supportive environment to be a mother and a coach, then coaches would be more inclined to apply for progressive roles:

"I think if clubs were to say, look, we understand your situation, we know where you're at, we understand XYZ, but we think you'd be a good fit anyway, that's a completely different, that's a different perspective and a different starting point. But it's hard enough for female coaches to become managers as it is. I think if you're a female manager with a baby, that's completely, you know, whether people want to admit it or not, a massive red flag"

(Coach A)

Whilst considering the perceptions of mother-coaches from within their work environments as operating primarily at the interpersonal level, it is clear that again issues connected to perceptions of mother-coaches then impacts on organisational structure and support.

Organisational: A profession unprepared for mothers

This theme centres primarily on *organisational level* issues connected to the profession of coaching in football. The mother-coaches were explicit in describing how their working environments were ill-equipped for them to enter as, or become, mothers. Coach B's statement illustrates this:

"I think firstly, clubs are not prepared for people to be mothers in the roles that I undertake ... society still believe generally mothers are the key care giver so there's very little understanding I think from male-dominated environments that it's even a thing that needs to be considered." (Coach B)

Clearly then, again the *sociocultural context* of football as a male-dominated culture is key here - even in the women's game - and impacts the *organisational structure* of football and the subsequent experiences of the mother-coaches. In considering more specifically *organisational level* issues, 3 out of 4 of the coaches raised concerns over a lack of specific knowledge, workplace policy

1 and/or risk assessments that would support them to perform their coaching roles whilst pregnant,
2 including Coaches A and B:

3 *"...there was no support, no medical support. There was nothing put in place to think outside*
4 *the box in terms of, you know. Well, she's pregnant... Like, what are the risk factors? There*
5 *was no risk assessment done. None of the fundamental basics that you would expect in any*
6 *workplace, that wasn't followed."* (Coach A)

7 *"...when I was pregnant at [club] and the health and safety lead had to do a risk assessment,*
8 *like she had no idea, she had obviously never done a risk assessment for a coach before, for a*
9 *pregnant coach"* (Coach B)

10 The accounts highlight *organisational neglect* towards the needs of pregnant coaches, not only
11 leaving them feeling undervalued but also potentially placed at risk by their organisations.

12 Furthermore, the data revealed employer reluctance to adapt workplace structures and
13 expectations to the changes invoked by both pregnancy and motherhood. For example, both Coach
14 C and Coach D found being away for long periods of time on camps challenging, as this invoked
15 work-family conflict (Bruening & Dixon, 2007), where the mother-coaches felt unable to
16 appropriately fulfil their roles as both a coach and a mother. Coach D shares an example of being on
17 a training camp:

18 *"[Child] had a sickness bug whilst I was away. My [partner] had to take time off work, but no*
19 *one was like 'do you need to get home and go and sort [Child] out' or anything like that. Even*
20 *after telling people... so that's probably a time when I felt that's probably not right. I didn't*
21 *feel I was able to do what I would have needed to do as a parent and as a mum and as a wife*
22 *because of work, but I think in a different industry or different job I'd probably just been sent*
23 *home to deal with my little one."* (Coach D)

25 Coach C shared how there was a reluctance to support or adapt her role as a coach to enable her to
26 fulfil her role as a mother:

27 *"I remember a conversation when I first returned to work around being like a consistent like*
28 *figure on one of our camps and expressed an interest, like was asked, would you like to be*
29 *involved? And I said yes, but I said my situation is different, so I just need a little bit of*
30 *support and it might need to look different to what maybe it looked previously...I just said*
31 *that the camp's close enough for me to come home every night and be back before the*
32 *players are even up every day so that I can be at home for my [child]... or then I gave another*
33 *option of I'll come but [child] comes and I arrange childcare during the day, but [child] is with*
34 *me at night and this was like in the first, maybe 18 months of [child's] life. But, so I asked for*
35 *the support so I could still be a present coach on those camps. And then, yeah, it was never,*
36 *never addressed and an external was brought in."* (Coach C)

37 Further to this, Coach B shared her experiences on the lack of compatibility between the high
38 demands and unpredictable nature of football schedules and childcare:

1 *"...you can't just drop kids in and out of nursery and the everchanging football week, you*
2 *know, certainly at the top level when your whole week is set up based on your game day and*
3 *your day off then changes. And you know, when I was at [club], I had to miss some Monday*
4 *sessions because Monday was normally our day off..."(Coach B)*

5 It seems here that a 'one or the other' approach exists: due to the unpredictable and changing
6 nature of the football schedule, a coach must choose between work or family. Coach A was the only
7 coach would feel comfortable enough to ask to bring her child to work if she was struggling with
8 childcare. No coaches interviewed received childcare support or additional financial support from
9 the organisations they worked for that accounted for the extra time (e.g. beyond the usual full time
10 working week) or changing demands of their daily/weekly work as coaches. As Bruening et al. (2016)
11 noted, written and unwritten expectations of extensive working hours, including time typically
12 reserved for family such as evenings and weekends, makes it difficult for mother-coaches to coach as
13 a career.

14 The *organisational structures* of the workplace also had an impact on decisions mother-coaches
15 made about breastfeeding. After giving birth to her child, Coach D decided to bottle feed her child
16 due to the restrictive nature of her employment; she also recalled a scenario with a physiotherapist
17 who could not attend a training camp because she was breastfeeding. Coach B's example further
18 emphasises the lack of flexibility in the coaches' working environments to enable them to fulfil both
19 their role as a coach and as a mother:

20 *"Preparation around where I could express milk when I was away and stuff, but like it's just*
21 *like madness to some people, like, hadn't even - wouldn't even - consider it. There was no*
22 *kind of discussions around when we went and travelled for away games and stayed over like*
23 *there was no offer or discussion around taking [child] with me." (Coach B)*

24 It is evident that, instead of accommodating the needs of the coaches during pregnancy and
25 subsequently motherhood, it is seen problematic in their workplace. Coach A and Coach C left
26 coaching roles because of the lack of proactive support received by their club, and weighing up the
27 feasibility of being able to fulfil both their roles as a coach and a mother:

28 *"And I think at that point it made it very clear to me that that was not a place that I would be*
29 *able to return to and be supported in as a mum. You know, I was 8 months pregnant,*
30 *standing out in a mud pit under a tent with no desk" (Coach A)*

31 *"...literally the only reason I left was probably because I became a mother. And that was the*
32 *only reason I left in that, the culture wasn't right and conducive for me to be a mum and it be*
33 *a positive experience" (Coach C)*

34 As Bruening et al. (2016) highlight, women's individual decisions are tempered by the organisational
35 and socio-cultural context in which the mother-coach is embedded, and that is clearly evident with

the participants here. The unpreparedness of the profession provides evidence of challenges at both organisational and sociocultural levels.

Making positive changes

The final theme is split into two subthemes: individual change makers and mother-coach recommendations. Despite the clear issues at an *interpersonal, organisational and sociocultural* level, and the subsequent impact that the cultures of the organisation and the broader sport ecosystem has on *individual agency*, there were some positive examples that were discussed, which centred on some of the supportive interactions the mother-coaches experienced, and their recommendations to make the profession more supportive.

a) Individual change makers

At the *interpersonal level*, all 4 of the mother-coaches discussed the significance of key individuals on their ability to succeed as both mothers and coaches in their professional careers to date:

“At [club], [manager] was so understanding as a manager it was really important to [manager] that staff got what they needed and had time off when they needed it. And there was an approach of ‘it will be OK and we’ll make it work with whatever we’ve got’. So there was never any pressure or expectation from my direct line management to not be able to do what I need to do as a parent.” (Coach B)

Similarly, Coach A explained that at her club:

“I think from the moment that [manager] asked me to come across, [manager] said ‘what do you need?’. Like, ‘what does that look like for you? How do we make this work?’. I guess until you’re in the door here, you don’t realise what this place is like, it doesn’t stop for anybody. So, for [manager] to then be that supportive and that thoughtful was really, really made me feel valued” (Coach A)

At an *organisational level*, Coach A highlighted a positive experience within the industry, describing a more ‘family-friendly culture’, as Bruening et al. (2016) explained, with a flexible return to work post maternity, medical support for the child and herself, and flexibility in childcare issues:

“...and I came back three days a week, and I worked from home the other two days because I didn’t want to put [child] into nursery straight away, five days a week. Then that transitioned to four days. And then obviously, back in full time. But anything medical that I need for me or [child], the club provides...I think if I needed to and I said, look, I’ve got no one for [child], the response would be, what can we do? Does [child] need to come with us? You know, can we get someone to look after [child]? Yeah, [manager] just thinks differently.” (Coach A)

Bruening et al. (2016) describes how flexibility in work hours assists in the establishment of a family-friendly culture, where individuals can impact organisational change. This is a movement away from work-family conflict and towards work-family enrichment.

1 *"I genuinely think it's possible to do both. But I think the support wrapped around mothers*
2 *needs to be, like, worlds apart from what it is and our thought process around it." (Coach C)*

3 **b) Mother-coach recommendations**

4
5 To conclude the interviews, the mother-coaches were asked to provide recommendations for
6 industry-level change to support mother-coaches working in professional women's football. The
7 majority of these centred on *interpersonal* and/or *organisational level* change, with the mother-
8 coaches displayed a desire for organisations to be more forward thinking in their support for future
9 mothers in the profession:

10 *"I think just make females feel valued for, not only their role at work, but their role as a*
11 *mother. Like if you validate that, and you make people feel like they're not choosing one or*
12 *the other and that they can coexist with both, that's a massive step in the right direction...So*
13 *I think any organisation that can just validate both roles I think that's a step in the right*
14 *direction cause, both roles need to be able to coexist, have to." (Coach A)*

15 What was made evident was the fear that the professional game was losing female coaches who are
16 mothers because of the lack of support provided in the industry:

17 *"I just think that more women should be encouraged to get in the profession. It's one thing*
18 *being in the profession and having a kid, I think there's lots of restrictive things to people*
19 *even getting in the profession because they have children." (Coach B)*

20 Recommendations included proactiveness in implementing maternity policies that enable pregnant
21 women to work safely in a professional football environment; for organisational staff to be educated
22 and trained to understand a mothers' needs, enabling them to make organisational changes in
23 preparations for mothers entering their environment - for example designated spaces for expressing
24 milk and safety procedures for pregnant mothers that enable them to do their job; extra resources,
25 in terms of staffing, to allow for flexibility in schedules, or job shares which would support mothers
26 to remain in the profession, especially in the early stages of motherhood; on site nurseries/childcare
27 at training grounds, or financial childcare support, that accounts for the unpredictable schedules of
28 professional football; and finally, a need for re-inductions post maternity, to help mothers in their
29 return to the fast-paced industry. Some of these would be easier, in both structural and financial
30 terms, to implement. Key here though is that something needs to change in these workplaces, and
31 as Bruening et al. (2016, p. 97) note, the 'possibility and potential to promote and sustain a more
32 enriching workplace culture must occur at an organizational level'.

33 **Implications and Conclusions**

34 This research project has presented the voices of professional mother-coaches and has
35 demonstrated the multiple challenges they face. The increasing opportunities for women to work in

1 football contexts can be applauded, as can the increasing levels of support for players during periods
2 of pregnancy and maternity. However, this research highlights the challenges associated for mothers
3 who are employed as professional coaches within the elite game.

4 The research draws from LaVoi's (2016) EIM model and builds upon the work of Bruening et al.
5 (2016) to understand the challenges mother-coaches face across multiple levels. Through
6 investigating the experiences of professional women coaches in English football, this work extends
7 the body of knowledge on coaching mothers. In summary: at an individual level, the mother-coaches
8 were aware of the impacts of their work environment (across interpersonal, organisational and
9 sociocultural levels) on their individual decision making around work-family life, which often resulted
10 in conflict (Taylor et al., 2018). At an interpersonal level, the lack of mothers in the football
11 profession led to negative perceptions, again rooted in ideas about work-family conflict. As such, at
12 an organisational level, the work environments of professional women's football clubs are
13 predominately unprepared, unsupportive, and seemingly unwilling to adapt for mother-coaches.
14 This is manifest in the limited policies in place to support coaches through maternity and the return-
15 to-work post-partum. At a sociocultural level, the masculine roots of the game of football, and the
16 way in which the women's professional game has initially developed, problematically, in the mirror
17 of the men's game, contributes to work-family conflict for mother-coaches.

18 Whilst the mother-coaches predominantly articulated challenges, there were clearly some key
19 individuals present in the workplaces of the coaches in this study who prioritised a work-family
20 enrichment approach and have subsequently been central in their successes. This included, at the
21 interpersonal and organisational level, colleagues who supported flexibility for family commitments,
22 enabled a slower transition back to full-time work within the football workplace, and advocated for
23 support for the mother and child (in terms of both medical and/or childcare). However, it's clear
24 more needs to be done across the industry. The results show that, to ensure working as a
25 professional football coach is a viable career choice for mothers, there needs to be changes at
26 interpersonal, organisational and sociocultural levels. At an interpersonal level, football workplaces
27 need to challenge problematic attitudes and assumptions about motherhood and family
28 commitments. Clubs, the national governing bodies (such as the FA) and international sports
29 federations (such as UEFA or FIFA), need to implement organisational support via policy and practice
30 for mother-coaches. This includes gender-specific policy, procedures, and regulatory framework to
31 normalise, and support, motherhood for female employees working in the women's professional
32 game. Considerations about caring responsibilities, including breastfeeding and childcare out of
33 hours, need to be part of the conversation. Arguably, a formal shift in organisational support would
34 influence perceptions towards motherhood/parenthood within specific football environments, and

1 across the broader football culture (Bruening et al., 2016). Organisational support plays a
2 'tremendous role in whether or not the coaching mother can successfully navigate the multiple roles
3 at critical turning points in their lives.' (Bruening & Dixon, 2008, p. 16). Furthermore, change at an
4 organisational level, is more likely to influence the experience of mother-coaches long term (LaVoi &
5 Dutove, 2012).

6 The novelty of this work lies in accessing a hard-to-reach and underserved population, who spoke
7 openly and honestly about their challenging experiences in the emergent workplace of women's
8 football. Whilst it is widely known that women experience many barriers in the world of sports
9 coaching, less is known about how mothers navigate that landscape, and even less about mother-
10 coaches in the English football context. However, at this point, it is necessary to critically consider
11 the limitations of this work. As with any research embedded within a social world, temporality is key
12 and the experiences of the mother-coaches are specific to the particular environment of football.
13 Although a limitation in terms of long-term applicability, it remains important to critically consider
14 these experiences and make recommendations for change. In terms of future-research, longitudinal
15 research on how mother-coaches navigate work-family life would be insightful, as is a need to
16 consider more closely additional intersectional identities within this cohort (particularly around
17 sexuality, race/ethnicity, religion, social class, disability and so on). Furthermore, work-family conflict
18 is not simply a 'women's issue' (Bruening et al., 2016) and research investigating challenges
19 associated with paternity (Fletcher, 2020) and shared parental leave would be welcomed.

20 To conclude, this research project evidences that professional female coaches who are mothers in
21 women's football in England are exposed to several challenges which hinder their ability to co-exist
22 in both roles. The role of a mother is seen as separate and is predominately not acknowledged
23 within the profession. Consequently, the coach-mothers are left to survive the challenges of
24 motherhood and professional coaching in workplace environments that are unprepared and
25 unwilling to adapt to their needs, preventing them to perform to the best of their ability in both
26 roles. The organisations the women are working in are built upon gendered ideologies that expects
27 mothers to be the primary care givers (Roberts & Kenttä, 2018), which contributes to negative
28 perceptions towards coach-mothers working in environments where, ultimately, football trumps
29 everything. Aspiring women coaches must 'see that working as a coach can be a feasible and
30 sustainable career path at all life stages' (Bruening & Dixon et al, 2017, p. 104), including during
31 maternity and motherhood.

References

- Bennett Shinall, J. (2018). The pregnancy penalty. *Minnesota Law Review*, 103, 750-842.
- Boswell, S. & Cavallerio, F. (2022). Uncovering stories of motherhood and coaching with story completion. In L. Spowart & K. R. McGannon (Eds). *Motherhood and Sport* (pp. 62-75). Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597.
- Bruening, J. & Dixon, M. (2007). Work–family conflict in coaching II: Managing role conflict. *Journal of Sport Management*, 21, 471–496.
- Bruening, J. & Dixon, M. (2008). Situating Work–Family Negotiations Within a Life Course Perspective: Insights on the Gendered Experiences of NCAA Division I Head Coaching Mothers. *Sex Roles*, 58(1-2), 10–23.
- Bruening, J., Dixon, M. & Eason, C. (2016). Coaching and Motherhood. In N. LaVoi (Ed.) *Women in Sports Coaching* (pp. 95-108). Routledge.
- Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke’s approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity*, 56(3), 1391-1412.
- Culvin, A. (2023). Football as work: the lived realities of professional women footballers in England. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 28(6), 684-697.
- Culvin, A. & Bowes, A. (2021). The Incompatibility of Motherhood and Professional Women’s Football in England. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 3:730151.
- Culvin, A. & Bowes, A. (2023) (Eds.). *Women’s Football in a Global, Professional Era*. Emerald.
- Equality & Human Rights Commission. (2016). *Pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage: Experiences of mothers*.
https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/mothers_report_-_bis-16-146-pregnancy-and-maternity-related-discrimination-and-disadvantage-experiences-of-mothers_1.pdf
- Fletcher, T. (2020). *Negotiating Fatherhood: Sport and Family Practices*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fielding-Lloyd, B. & Woodhouse, D. (2023). Responsibility and progress: The English Football Association’s Professionalisation of the Women’s Game. In A. Culvin & A. Bowes (Eds). *Women’s Football in a Global, Professional Era* (pp. 17-32). Emerald.
- FIFA (2020). *Women’s football: Minimum labour conditions for players*. <https://www.fifa.com/legal/news/fifa-steps-up-protection-of-female-players-and-football-coaches>
- FIFPro (2017). *Global Employment Report: Working Conditions in Professional Women’s Football*.
<https://fifpro.org/en/reports/women-s-global-employment-report>
- FIFPro (2020). *New Maternity Regulations Provide Female Footballers with More Opportunities*.
<https://fifpro.org/en/supporting-players/conditions-of-employment/maternity-and-parental-provision/new-maternity-regulations-provide-female-players-with-more-opportunities/>
- Kilty, K. (2006). Women in coaching. *The Sport Psychologist*, 20(2), 222-234.
- Knoppers, A., de Haan, D., Norman, L., & LaVoi, N. (2022). Elite women coaches negotiating and resisting power in football. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 29(3), 880-896.
- LaVoi, N. M. & Dutove, J.K. (2012). Barriers and supports for female coaches: an ecological model. *Sports Coaching Review*, 1(1), 17–37.
- LaVoi, N. M. (2016). A framework to understand experiences of women coaches around the globe. In N. M. LaVoi (Ed.). *Women in Sports Coaching* (pp. 13-34). Routledge.
- Leberman, S.I. & LaVoi, N.M. (2011). Juggling Balls and Roles, Working Mother-Coaches in Youth Sport: Beyond the Dualistic Worker-Mother Identity. *Journal of Sport Management*, 25(5), 474–488.
- Lewis, C.J., Roberts, S.J. & Andrews, H. (2015). ‘Why am I putting myself through this?’ Women football coaches’ experiences of the Football Association’s coach education process. *Sport, Education and Society*, 23(1), 28–39.
- Madsen, R.M., Burton, L.J., & Clark, B.S. (2017). *Gender role expectations and the prevalence of women as assistant coaches*. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 11(2), 125–142.
- Mazerolle, S.M. & Eason, C.M. (2015). Perceptions of National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Female Athletic Trainers on Motherhood and Work-Life Balance: Individual- and Sociocultural-Level Factors. *Journal of Athletic Training*, 50(8), 854–861.
- Massey, K. L., & Whitehead, A. E. (2022). Pregnancy and motherhood in elite sport: The longitudinal experiences of two elite athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 60, 102139.

- 1 McGannon, K. R., McMahon, J., & Gonsalves, C. A. (2018). Juggling motherhood and sport: A qualitative study
2 of the negotiation of competitive recreational athlete mother identities. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 36,
3 41-49.
- 4 McGregor, B., McGrath, R., Young, J., & Nottle, C. (2023). A scoping review of the experiences of elite female
5 athletes concerning pregnancy and motherhood. *Sport in Society*, 1-33.
- 6 McGannon, K.R., Tatarinic, E. & McMahon, J. (2019). The Long and Winding Road: An Autobiographic Study of
7 an Elite Athlete Mother's Journey to Winning Gold. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 31(4), 385-404.
- 8 McLoughlin, D. (2021). *More Female Football Coaches than Ever Before, but Men Still Dominate*. Female
9 Coaching Network. [https://femalecoachingnetwork.com/2021/09/07/more-female-football-coaches-than-](https://femalecoachingnetwork.com/2021/09/07/more-female-football-coaches-than-ever-before-but-men-still-dominate/)
10 [ever-before-but-men-still-dominate/](https://femalecoachingnetwork.com/2021/09/07/more-female-football-coaches-than-ever-before-but-men-still-dominate/)
- 11 McRae, S. (2004). Choice and constraints in mothers' employment careers: McRae replies to Hakim. *British*
12 *Journal of Sociology*, 54(4), 585-592.
- 13 Moen, P. (2011). From 'work-family' to the 'gendered life course' and 'fit': five challenges to the field.
14 *Community, Work & Family*, 14(1), 81-96.
- 15 Norman, L. (2012). Developing female coaches: strategies from women themselves. *Asia-Pacific Journal of*
16 *Health, Sport and Physical Education*, 3(3), 227-238. doi:10.1080/18377122.2012.721725.
- 17 Norman, L., & Simpson, R. (2023). Gendered microaggressions towards the "only" women coaches in high-
18 performance sport. *Sports Coaching Review*, 12(3), 302-322.
- 19 Roberts, C. M., & Kenttä, G. (2018). *Motherhood as an athletic career transition*. Paper Presented at the
20 Inaugural Women in Sport and Exercise Conference
- 21 Smith, B., & McGannon, K. R. (2018). Developing rigor in qualitative research: Problems and opportunities
22 within sport and exercise psychology. *International review of sport and exercise psychology*, 11(1), 101-121.
- 23 Smith, B. & Sparkes, A. C. (2016). Interviews: qualitative interviewing in the sport and exercise sciences. In B.
24 Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Eds). *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Sport and Exercise* (pp.
25 103-123). Routledge.
- 26 Smith, B., & Phoenix, C. (2018). Qualitative research in physical activity and health. In S. R. Bird (Ed). *Research*
27 *Methods in Physical Activity and Health* (pp. 109-116). Routledge.
- 28 Spowart, L. & McGannon, K. (2022) (Eds). *Motherhood and Sport*. Routledge.
- 29 The FA (2020). *Inspiring positive change: The FA strategy for women's and girls' football: 2020-2024*.
30 <https://www.thefa.com/news/2020/oct/19/new-fa-womens-strategy-launched-191020>
- 31 The FA (2021). A Game for All: The FA's new equality, diversity and inclusion strategy. [A game for all: The FA's](https://www.thefa.com/news/2021/oct/19/new-fa-womens-strategy-launched-191020)
32 [new equality, diversity and inclusion strategy 2021-2024](https://www.thefa.com/news/2021/oct/19/new-fa-womens-strategy-launched-191020)
- 33 Women in Football (2020). *Women in Football - Women in Football launch new phase of growth as two thirds*
34 *of members working in the industry report gender discrimination*.
35 [https://www.womeninfootball.co.uk/news/2020/10/08/new-phase-of-growth-as-66-per-cent-of-members-](https://www.womeninfootball.co.uk/news/2020/10/08/new-phase-of-growth-as-66-per-cent-of-members-working-in-the-industry-report-gender-discrimination/)
36 [working-in-the-industry-report-gender-discrimination/](https://www.womeninfootball.co.uk/news/2020/10/08/new-phase-of-growth-as-66-per-cent-of-members-working-in-the-industry-report-gender-discrimination/)
- 37