

## **Women in Athletic Training: Striving for Equity**

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**Abstract:** The demands of athletic training are unique to the profession and many of the concerns of women in the NATA are similar to those of female executives in other professions. The purpose of this paper is to identify challenges for women in athletic training and reveal areas of inequity.

Sport is a microcosm of society. Throughout history, there have been parallel occurrences between corporate professions and the sport and leisure industries, including athletic training. While the demands of athletic training are unique to its profession, a *Fortune* magazine survey showed that many of the concerns of women in the National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA) are similar to those of women who are female executives. A 1995 U.S. Department of Labor report revealed that women and minorities are still underrepresented at the highest levels of corporate America. Specifically, 95-97% of the senior managers of Fortune 1000 industries and Fortune 500 companies were men (Shinew & Hibbler, 2002). Many women opt to leave athletic training for more predictable jobs; at the same time, 87 % of female executives polled reported they were seriously considering a major life change (Nussbaum & Rogers, 2000).

Women in athletic training generally represent a silent minority and little is known about their early experiences and the barriers presented to them (Anderson, 1991). Few studies have been conducted specifically about women in athletic training, and more extensive research on this topic is needed to identify and address the issues. However, several related studies have been helpful in understanding the development of the role of women in the sports and leisure industry.

While a paucity of data exists specific to the field of athletic training, an extensive review of the relevant literature was conducted to identify the obstacles encountered by women in all aspects of careers in sport. Females experienced many barriers to advancement, including less compensation, exclusion from leadership opportunities, and greater difficulties balancing their career and family life. This paper will suggest possible ways to address and improve upon the diminished status of females in athletic training, in order to keep the field as an attractive career option for women.

### **Related Literature**

The social institution of sport has long reflected societal attitudes toward women (Depauw, Bonace, & Karwas, 1991). Discrimination against women in both athletic careers and the American society in general has been a problem throughout history. A report issued by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1991 identified the barriers that women and people of color often face, including limited career enhancing assignments and lack of acceptance by top management (Shinew & Hibbler, 2002). Although progress has been made over the past three decades, there is great room for improvement. Women are still underrepresented as leaders in the organization of sport at all levels. A study by Booth (2000) indicated that issues of gender equity and barriers to advancement in athletic training parallel those in other professions and work settings. In athletic



training, as in society in general, women do not have the same status as do men and view barriers to equity differently than do men.

In 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments was passed. It is a well-known federal law that prohibits gender discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal funding (National Women's Law Center, 2000). It is commonly known for its success in opening the door to athletics for women and girls. However, the impact of Title IX on coaching opportunities has not matched its promise. In 1972, over 90% of the coaches for women's collegiate teams were women. In 1990, only 47.3% were women (Acosta & Carpenter, 1992). Before Title IX, same gender coaches were the norm. Because it became more lucrative after Title IX was passed, a larger number of men began applying for and were hired for positions as coaches for women's teams. During the year Title IX was enacted, over 99% of men's collegiate teams were coached by males (Acosta & Carpenter, 1992). The same is true today, almost 30 years later.

The Women in Athletic Training Committee (WATC) survey (1997a) revealed that women and men had the equal knowledge, skills, and education required to be successful in the profession as well as in leadership positions. However, women had fewer opportunities for advancement than men and received less financial compensation. A recent report published by the NATA (2000) showed that women certified athletic trainers (ATC's), on average, earned approximately \$10,000 less per year than male ATC's.

When women were asked what concerns or obstacles confronted them as women in the profession of athletic training, the most common answers were family/personal life, lack of opportunities, the "good old boys' network," and salary (WATC, 1997a). Men were asked the same question regarding themselves. Their answers included quotas/affirmative action, long hours, and the "good old boys' network" prevents younger men from participation in leadership activities (WATC, 1997b). A majority of the men polled also suggested that there is a reverse discrimination issue that needs to be addressed.

Whether these rankings reflect reality is perhaps less important than the fact that they reflect perceptions. In this case, it is the male perception that carries the greatest weight, simply because in 84.1% of our college and university athletic programs, a male makes the personnel decisions (Acosta & Carpenter, 1992).

To further the above research, a study by Booth (2000) concluded that there are issues of gender equity and barriers to advancement for women in athletic training. She also concluded that women athletic trainers perceive these barriers in ways different than men, in concurrence with aforementioned research by the WATC (1997a /1997b).

The NATA was founded in 1950 by 101 athletic trainers (Samet & Sweet, 2001). No women members were recorded at that time (Graham & Schlabach, 2001). Early research on the experiences of the first women to enter the male-dominated profession of athletic training showed that these women were oppressed, and that they were excluded from access to programs, facilities, equipment, budgets, high risk sports, and supervision that were accessible to men (Anderson, 1991). This oppression kept them silent, isolated, and powerless. A lack of understanding and support of the role of women athletic trainers by other professionals was reported by all thirteen participants in Anderson's study. All participants were identified as being certified as athletic trainers between January 1, 1970 and December 31, 1974, the same era as the enactment of the Title IX legislation.

While these women loved their working relationship with athletes and student athletic trainers, many could not continue working the long hours for a limited salary, nor could they develop and nurture a social life, family life, or maintain the energy needed to deal with the daily



aspects of their personal lives. Of the 13 women interviewed, only three remained working within a traditional athletic training setting (Anderson, 1991). The remaining ten women had moved into other working environments that did not place such an excessive demand on their time and that provided better economic opportunities. Two decades later, a 1995 WATC survey found that quality of life issues were still the number one challenge for women in the profession (Schlabach, 2001). One woman recently interviewed stated that, "What tends to suffer, especially for women in this profession, is personal time. It's difficult to set aside time to do things like work out or eat lunch" (Hunt, 2002).

Currently, women make up 45% of the NATA certified membership (Nussbaum & Rogers, 2000). However, the fact still remains that less than 1% of these women have ever held key leadership positions in the NATA (Anderson, 1992). Becoming accepted as a member of a male-dominated team is not easy for women (Rusin, 2001). The WATC (1997a) showed that only 0.2% of female athletic trainers pursue leadership roles in the NATA at the national level. Almost 78% of the women believed that women would like either to pursue leadership roles, but those roles are not available, or that women perceive pressure from men not to pursue leadership roles. Ninety-three percent of all women surveyed had never been asked to serve on NATA committees on the national, state, or district level. These same women also reported that 63% of them were excluded from male networks, and 96.8% agreed that preference is given to male candidates for professional team positions. In order to improve upon this issue, women must motivate themselves to assume positions of authority and leadership and to support and encourage other women to pursue these positions (Depauw et al., 1991).

A survey of men in athletic training indicated that 21% of men have pursued leadership roles in the NATA at the national level. In agreement with the opinion of women athletic trainers, over 70% of men feel that women would like to pursue leadership roles, but those roles are not available; they also believe that women perceive the pressure not to pursue leadership roles. Almost half of the men surveyed reported that they believe that women are excluded from male networks, and over 97% believe that preference is given to male candidates for professional athletics employment settings (WATC, 1997b).

It is evident that there is overwhelmingly male-dominated control at the top of the NATA, leaving few role models for career-minded women (Rusin, 2001). The fact that men are aware of the discriminatory practices in athletic training may be promising. In 2000, a woman assumed presidency of the NATA, becoming the first female to serve the association in that capacity (Graham & Schlabach, 2001). However, the fact that the NATA still has to have a committee dedicated to women in athletic training is evidence that inequity continues to oppress women in the profession (Grove, 1999). Samet and Sweet (2001) were hopeful and indicated that future leadership opportunities for women were expected to increase as the NATA continues to grow.

Women will comprise 47% of the total workforce by 2005 (Mathis & Jackson, 2000), a percentage similar to the number of women who are currently certified members of the NATA. The work world is predominantly the world of men, but family life is still predominantly the responsibility of women (Rusin, 2001). This double standard is extremely prevalent in the athletic training profession. About half of all women currently working are single, separated, divorced, widowed, or otherwise single heads of households (Mathis & Jackson, 2000). Consequently, they are the "primary" income earners. A consequence of this situation is that balancing work and family issues will continue to grow in importance for women. Nussbaum and Rogers (2000) reported that of women employed as ATC's surveyed, 86% reported feeling a greater conflict between family and professional responsibilities than their male counterparts.



Women ATC's employed in Division I National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) jobs experienced detriments to combining motherhood with their professional responsibilities at this level of employment (Nussbaum & Rogers, 2000). Some of these detriments included long hours, travel demands, odd hours, and burnout. In the nine-question survey mailed to 97 NCAA Division I colleges in the USA, women (both mothers and women without children) reported their concerns about working while maintaining a family life.

As liberated as some aspects of our society may seem, the primary role of raising children still falls on women (Rusin, 2001). Ninety-three percent of all mothers polled in NCAA Division I athletic training jobs needed to use some form of child care. Only 26% stated that their colleges provided day care facilities (Nussbaum & Rogers, 2000). Two-thirds of women without children reported that they felt it would be very difficult or impossible to work at the NCAA Division I level and have a child.

Family demands were reported to add stress to both the mothers and coworkers who were asked to cover for their colleagues. Mothers who may have to take leave on short notice or leave work early may seem like less of a team player to the other staff members (Rusin, 2001). Many respondents of the questionnaire reported negative reactions to the added responsibilities placed upon them by co-workers with children (Nussbaum & Rogers, 2000).

Despite many concerns, it is still possible to have a family and work as a woman ATC. Over half of the mothers employed as ATC's surveyed identified factors that would make balancing their demands easier. These included a supportive partner, understanding supervisors, decreased travel responsibilities, and help from a support system (Nussbaum & Rogers, 2000).

#### **Related Theories**

The core belief of the feminist theory is that men and women should be equal politically, economically, and socially; however, different branches of feminism exist. Individualist feminism tends to encompass the men widely and focuses on the barriers that women and men face due to their gender. Gender feminism holds the belief that in order for men and women to be equal, women must be granted some special privileges. For example, the National Organization for Women publicly supports women who wish to enter traditionally all male schools, but does not necessarily believe that men should be able to enter all female schools.

Equity theory is used in comparing an employee's work inputs and outputs with those of his or her co-workers. If the employee perceives inequity, she or he will act to correct the inequity, utilizing one of the following four actions: lower productivity, reduced quality, increased absenteeism, and voluntary resignation. If the person's work input to output ratio is not perceived to be equal, he or she will usually strive to restore equity; this balancing is often accomplished by women ATC's by leaving the profession.

#### **Discussion**

The importance of networking to women and their access to sport leadership positions cannot be overemphasized (Rusin, 2001). Networking is more than being friends; it is sharing ideas and experiences of others. The majority of women ATC's surveyed suggested that the NATA must encourage networking and support role models (WATC, 1997a). Women are encouraged to find a peer or someone who has had their job before and ask them for advice (Rusin, 2001). Sharing power, influence, and expertise with other women through networking can help overcome traditional barriers in the male dominance of sport (Depauw et al., 1991).



Mentors are especially important in helping women to grow and mature as leaders (Rusin, 2001). Not only can they offer advice on specific problems, but they can also suggest what women need to be working toward for career advancement. Both male and female sport leaders who can serve effectively as mentors should be sought. Establishing cross-gender associations can also be effective in changing the attitudes of some of the "good old boys" toward women in sport leadership positions (Depauw et al., 1991).

To address these issues, the WATC is committed to not only improving the conditions for women ATC's in the workplace but also strengthening bonds between the many generations of women ATC's (Ringer & McAuliff, 2001). A systematic planning effort should entail projecting into the future and developing plans to include women among the decision makers and leaders of sport worldwide (Depauw et al., 1991). Inclusion helps more than just women; it strengthens the entire profession (Grove, 1999). Other strategies to assist women working in the field of athletic training include greater flexibility in work patterns or schedules; more variety in benefits programs and human resource policies, including child-care assistance and parental-leave programs; job placement assistance for working spouses; and greater awareness of gender-related legal issues (Mathis & Jackson, 2000).

Specific ways to foster equity in athletic training also include in-service workshops on discriminatory practices and attitudes, leadership training institutes, national identification programs for potential leaders, recognition for research on leadership issues for women, internship programs, and strong recruitment efforts (Depauw et al., 1991). Because women are becoming increasingly more involved in the profession, the above ideas need to be employed to help prevent competent ATC's from leaving their profession. The responsibility for change lies within both women and men involved in athletic training, but especially with those who occupy positions of leadership and authority, regardless of their gender (Shinew & Hibbler, 2002)

Ghandi spoke of three levels of human interaction. The first and lowest level involves seeing differences between people and, therefore, treating people differently. The second level involves seeing differences but treating people equally despite these differences. The third and ideal level is no longer seeing differences and treating all equally (Acosta & Carpenter, 1992). Title IX has been a stepping-stone from the first to the second level. For tomorrow's sake, we, as well as our sons and daughters, need to strive toward equity and moving past level two today.

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