



## Article

# Legitimising and Delegitimising Women Coaches in the Golf Industry: Women Golf Professionals' Experiences of Advocacy

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**Abstract:** The underrepresentation of women in sport coaching continues to be recognised by researchers and some international organisations. Golf too suffers from a dramatic underrepresentation of women coaches. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of women golf coaches and how they navigate this male-dominated coaching domain with a particular focus on experiences of advocacy. The research was designed to qualitatively capture women PGA Professionals' lived experiences. Women PGA Professionals (N = 11) with 10–34 years of experience (M = 19.8) participated in semi-structured interviews that were structured on the four Ecological Systems Theory (EST) layers. Data were thematically analysed using the EST layers for initial categorization. From this, four themes were developed: recruitment and opportunity; on the course and in the pro shop; perceptions of women PGA Professionals; and advocacy and allies. The themes were part of two related processes: legitimisation and delegitimation. These dual processes work to either validate women coaches—both as individuals and as a collective—or to undermine them within the profession, respectively, and operate over the four EST layers. Further, these processes are not always discreet and the two may overlap in unanticipated ways.

**Keywords:** coaching; PGA; ecological systems theory; women; advocacy; allyship



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## 1. Introduction

Despite women's growing participation in sport across competitive levels, they have been unable to make inroads in coaching to a similar extent (LaVoi and Dutove 2012). The underrepresentation of women coaches in high-performance sport is considered endemic (Norman and Simpson 2022). For example, only 9–11% of coaches at recent Summer and Winter Olympic Games were women (IOC Gender Equality Review Report 2018). Underrepresentation is also evident among golf coaches. Membership data from the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) of Great Britain and Ireland indicated that as of February 2022, there were 8045 PGA members of which 321 (3.99%) were women. There are numerous dynamic and complex barriers facing women coaches throughout their careers, which may contribute to their underrepresentation (LaVoi 2016; LaVoi and Wasend 2018). Common experiences include gender discrimination, excessive scrutiny, alienation, sexual harassment, pressure to over-perform, and microaggressions (de Haan et al. 2019; LaVoi and Dutove 2012; Norman and Simpson 2022). Further, although underrepresentation of women in coaching has been recognised by some international organisations (e.g., World Rugby (Isherwood 2018); International Olympic Committee (IOC Gender Equality Review Report 2018)) there are still large gaps in our understanding of the experiences of women coaches, including elements that promote women coaches in their careers such as advocacy (Demers and Kerr 2018; LaVoi and Dutove 2012; LaVoi et al. 2019; Allen and Shaw 2013). Therefore, this study sought to explore the experiences of women PGA Professionals

working as golf coaches to develop our understanding of how they navigate and negotiate the challenges faced, including the role of advocacy.

The influences on women coaches' experiences and development in sport coaching are multiple and dynamic, and occur throughout multiple layers of social systems (Allen and Shaw 2013; LaVoi and Dutove 2012). Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner 1993) and a modification of EST, Ecological Intersection Model (EIM) (Burton and LaVoi 2016), have been employed to better understand the complexity of these influences (Burton and LaVoi 2016; LaVoi and Dutove 2012). These models have received support as a broad framework for understanding coaches' development (Cooke et al. 2023; Côté 2006) and women coaches, in particular (Banwell et al. 2021; Borrueco et al. 2023; Gosai et al. 2023a, 2023b; Karlik and Wolden 2023; Kubayi et al. 2020; LaVoi and Dutove 2012; Zdroik and Veliz 2023). Through EST, coaches' development is viewed as a response to personal and contextual demands (Côté 2006). As such, consideration is given to the layers of the environment in which coaches work and develop and the interactions throughout (Côté 2006). However, despite some interest in the notion of advocacy and closely associated allyship to support women coaches' development and progression in their careers (e.g., Kerr and Banwell 2016; Demers and Kerr 2018; LaVoi et al. 2019; Schewinbenz 2021), little is known about where in the developmental system advocacy plays or might play a role and how it operates to support women coaches' development and careers.

EST (Bronfenbrenner 1993) and EIM (Burton and LaVoi 2016) organise influences into four layers: societal, organisational, interpersonal, and individual. As the most distal level from the coach and that over which a coach has the least control, the *societal layer* includes socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes. For example, perceptions of "gender effective coaching" may perpetuate beliefs that there are distinct rules for coaching women that are different to coaching men (Jones and Avner 2021; Shapcott and Carr 2020). Furthermore, perceptions of female and male coaches as unequal and distinct may be promoted through stereotypical claims that women possess "unique skills" and "feminine values" (LaVoi 2016), as well as gender ideology that female coaches are innately more nurturing and caring and are more suited to coaching children, women, or coaching at less competitive levels (LaVoi and Dutove 2012). Combined, these norms and stereotypes may limit opportunities for women, particularly in talent development and performance contexts, and/or position women as "less than" their male counterparts which, in turn, may further limit their opportunities.

In addition, although sport media may "challenge, rather than reinforce, traditional gender stereotypes and may, in turn, lead to social change" (LaVoi and Calhoun 2016, p. 172), women coaches are seldom seen within sports media. This likely contributes to the underrepresentation of women in coaching roles yet is also critical in advancing opportunities for and retention of women (de Haan et al. 2019; Norman 2012; Wasend and LaVoi 2019). Within golf, Kitching et al. (2017) demonstrated the scarcity of visible women golf professionals working with elite men. For example, one PGA trainee in their study was unable to name any women coaches who have worked with elite male players. Another participant suggested this is because within elite male golf tours (i.e., PGA Tour) there have never been prominent women coaches working publicly with male players. An exception may be Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott, who co-founded Vision54 and are known to have coached PGA Tour players Russell Knox and Kevin Streelman. However, their coaching focuses on "human skills" (Vision54 2022) rather than technical aspects of the game. This may challenge notions of "who" is a performance golf coach. However, this could also be considered a "difference narrative" that seeks to differentiate and assert relevance within the performance coaching world, but that may negatively impact the cause for women coaches by promoting conformance to "gender normative coaching behaviours" (LaVoi 2016, p. 27).

The *organisational level* of EST consists of "organisational policies, job descriptions, professional practices, use of space, and opportunities (or lack thereof)" that influence women coaches (LaVoi and Dutove 2012, p. 20). Examples of positive influences include

non-discriminatory organisational policies and training to improve awareness of gender bias within coach recruitment (Kenttä et al. 2020). However, in golf, Kitching (2018) found a focus on social events and women's group programmes aimed at less competitive levels which Kitching suggested was the result of professionals and golf clubs making assumptions about the competitive intentions of women golfers. Kitching also noted a lack of competitive options for female players and the emphasis on social events indicated to women golfers that "serious play was left to the men" (Kitching 2018, p. 409). Current women's golf coaching initiatives such as Love.Golf (Love.Golf 2022), #FOREeveryone (Royal and Ancient 2022), and Women on Par (England Golf 2022) also emphasise social participation over skills development or competition. Such gender-based assumptions may limit women's playing and coaching aspirations and development opportunities (Cunningham et al. 2019; Clarkson et al. 2019; Karlik and Wolden 2023). Further, comparatively fewer women are likely to meet the playing ability criteria (i.e., handicap) to become a PGA trainee (World Handicap System (WHS) index of <8.4 for women and <6.4 for men) as the criteria are somewhat "out of step" compared with the average WHS index for female (27.2) and male (17.1) players. This criteria limits women from entering the industry and restricts opportunities for increased diversity in the coaching workforce (Carroll 2022). Initiatives and attitudes that downplay skill development and competition for women are likely to further reduce the number of "eligible" women and leave coaching "out of reach" for more women compared with men (Carroll 2022; Shapcott and Carr 2020).

The *interpersonal level* of the EST framework captures "social-relational influences such as colleagues, a significant other, friends and parents" (LaVoi and Dutove 2012, p. 20). The *individual level* of influence includes "personal, biological and psychological factors such as cognition, emotions, beliefs, values, expertise and personality of the individual" (LaVoi and Dutove 2012, p. 20). Negative interpersonal interactions may include being marginalised by other coaches (Burton and LaVoi 2016; Karlik and Wolden 2023) and microaggressions (Norman and Simpson 2022) such as gendered microinvalidations—"subtle communication that dismisses or devalues women's thoughts or feelings" (Norman and Simpson 2022, p. 4). These include assumptions of traditional gender roles that undervalue coaches (e.g., a woman cannot be the person in charge; women coach young people and not elite performers), scrutinising and questioning ability and credibility, as well as direct opposition to women's appointments to coaching roles. In golf, generally, a woman coach is the only woman coach within golf clubs and organisations; therefore, they are likely to feel marginalised in these "hegemonic male-dominated spaces" (Kitching et al. 2017, p. 1537) and experience microaggressions. Further, at the individual level, experiences as a minority within the industry and feeling undervalued can have negative effects on confidence, mental and physical health, and subsequently upon female coaching careers (LaVoi and Dutove 2012; Karlik and Wolden 2023). Norman and Simpson (2022) also found experiences of microinvalidations led some women coaches to question their ability, feel like an outsider in their context, and even lose their coaching role.

Despite interest in the experiences of women coaches across sports, to date, less is known about the elements that encourage, promote, and foster women coaches throughout their careers (Demers and Kerr 2018; LaVoi and Dutove 2012; LaVoi et al. 2019; Allen and Shaw 2013). One avenue that shows promise to support and actively promote women coaches is the contribution of social agents (LaVoi and Dutove 2012), in particular, through mentorship (Allen and Reid 2019; Banwell et al. 2019, 2021; Kramers et al. 2023), sponsorship/advocacy (Kerr and Banwell 2016; Demers and Kerr 2018), and allyship (LaVoi et al. 2019; Schewinbenz 2021). Researchers continue to advocate mentorship for coaches in general and for women coaches in particular (Leeder and Sawiuk 2020; Sawiuk et al. 2017). Although mentorship can have a positive influence on women at individual and interpersonal levels (e.g., Allen and Reid 2019; Banwell et al. 2019), it does not address the discrimination that women coaches typically face at organisational and sociocultural levels (Banwell et al. 2021).

Echoing non-sport literature, therefore, a move from mentorship to sponsorship has been suggested (Demers and Kerr 2018). That is, while mentorship shows candidates the doors to progression, sponsorship helps to open those doors to career advancement (Kerr and Banwell 2016). Closely associated with sponsorship is advocacy, with clear parallels between the role of sponsor and advocate. Advocacy is “about politicising an issue to induce actions” (Stenling and Sam 2020, p. 319). Advocacy may be initiated in scenarios considered socially unacceptable, where there is a power bias, and/or where it is beyond the capabilities of an individual to influence outcomes (Heil 2016). Advocates may have the power to promote and fight for equality for women coaches by providing opportunities, offering exposure to influential leaders, and protecting them from negative experiences (Kerr and Banwell 2016). In comparison, allies are members of the overrepresented group (i.e., men) who recognise their unearned privilege and act to bring about change for the underrepresented group (i.e., women) (Bishop 2002; LaVoi et al. 2019). In their study of men’s allyship behaviours in higher education, Warren and Bordoloi (2021) found that exceptional allies demonstrated visible advocacy, such as voicing support for women in front of others when women’s efforts or abilities were questioned and recognising women’s efforts and boosting their professional profiles in front of colleagues. Little is known, however, about gender allyship for women coaches but it warrants examination (LaVoi et al. 2019).

Research is needed to further our understanding of the role these social agents play through mentorship, sponsorship/advocacy, and allyship in facilitating positive experiences and progress for women coaches (Demers and Kerr 2018; Kerr and Banwell 2016; LaVoi et al. 2019; Leeder and Sawiuk 2020; Sawiuk et al. 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of women PGA Professionals working as golf coaches to develop our understanding of how they navigate and negotiate the challenges faced, including the role of advocacy. EST was employed to enable a directed examination of the four levels of influence on coaches. This project moves beyond identifying barriers across levels to include an examination of strategies that have addressed barriers and improved support for women PGA Professionals.

## 2. Methods

Based on a philosophical assumption that the nature of coaching is social and complex (Jones et al. 2013) and our interest in understanding participants’ lived experiences, an interpretative paradigm was considered appropriate to engage with coaches and explore their experiences within the golf environment. As Potrac et al. (2014, p. 32) highlighted, “understanding the (naturally subjective) experiences of individuals and groups lies at the heart of interpretative inquiry”. Through this perspective, we recognise that perceptions and sense making are dynamic and may be influenced by political, cultural, and social factors (Potrac et al. 2014).

### 2.1. Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, PGA Professionals were recruited via a call-to-action email sent from the PGA to all Women’s Professional Golfers’ Association (WPGA) members and shared on the WPGA Facebook page. It included an overview of the project and participant inclusion criteria. Interested professionals contacted the first author and were asked to confirm their eligibility for the study. That is, they (1) were formally qualified as a PGA Professional, a PGA coach, or both (these terms are used interchangeably in golf); (2) had a minimum of 5 years of coaching experience post-PGA qualification; (3) had completed further academic coaching qualifications such as an Advanced Certificate in Golf Coaching, Postgraduate Diploma in Sports Coaching/or ASQ Level 3, and/or achieved minimum PGA Advanced Professional designation; and (4) were currently based in the UK. All participants were sent an information sheet and consent form that provided further details about the study. Interviews were arranged at mutually convenient times and informed consent was confirmed prior to the interview. Interviews were

audio recorded and transcribed. To protect the identity of participants, codes (e.g., C1, C2) were used. In addition, only limited information is provided about each coach and redaction was used where necessary. These measures were deemed necessary because women coaches are a small minority in golf. Further, because of the topics explored in the interviews, participants might share personal and potentially sensitive experiences (Knoppers et al. 2021).

## 2.2. Participants

According to the British PGA, 27 qualified professionals met the study inclusion criteria (PGA 2023). In total, 11 women PGA Professionals were interviewed. All participants were white and over 30 years of age. The number of years as a PGA Professional ranged from 10 to 34 years ( $M = 19.8$  years). Nine coaches had been awarded higher professional designations (e.g., PGA Advanced or PGA Specialist (PGA Fellow) in their chosen role) through the PGA's Accreditation of Professional Achievement and Learning (APAL) scheme (PGA 2022), now known as PGA Excel. The other two coaches each had 20+ years' experience as PGA Professionals. At the time of interviews, only two of the coaches were employed full-time, with the majority self-employed in part, or in full. Recognising the challenge of a limited number of eligible coaches, two participants were included who did not fully meet the eligibility criteria: one had recently left the UK; one did not meet the educational requirements but had 20+ years of experience as a PGA Professional.

## 2.3. Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author who is also an experienced golf professional. Due to geographical separation, interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams. The interview guide (available on request) included an exploration of the experiences of women coaches, considered insights into gender-based challenges, and examined accounts of advocacy. The EST model (LaVoi and Dutove 2012) provided a framework for interviews with questions designed to explore the four levels of influence. Questions included topics around societal influences on perceptions of abilities as a golf coach; the effect of being female on accessing organisational development opportunities; interpersonal relationships and provision of support or imposing barriers on careers; and the impact of gender-based challenges on individuals.

Interviews were conversational in nature, whereby the main questions were followed up with further questions to encourage explanation and elaboration of their experiences (Smith and Sparks 2016). This involved the interviewer actively engaging with the participants' stories and seeking to understand more about their perspectives, promoting rich descriptions of participants' experiences (Smith and Sparks 2016). All interviews were transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Stream, and scripts were reviewed and checked for accuracy by the first author. Interviews lasted between 45 and 95 min ( $M = 69$  min) with 764 min of interview data in total.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis employed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six phases of thematic analysis: (1) familiarisation with the dataset; (2) coding; (3) generating initial themes; (4) developing and reviewing themes; (5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and (6) writing up. The first author began by immersing herself in the data, re-reading each script, highlighting points of interest, and adding notes where appropriate. Data analysis was both inductive and deductive. The exploration of the experiences of women coaches was largely inductive albeit organised around the EST model levels (LaVoi and Dutove 2012). Considering advocacy as a potential strategy for change promoted a more deductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2022). Coding began with identifying initial codes, tagging threads, and generating early themes and patterns of shared meaning across the transcripts. Transcripts were reviewed numerous times to identify similarities and differences in experiences across the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2022). Emerging themes and subthemes were developed

before being reviewed and discussed by the authors and subsequently refined to ensure that they reflected the coaches' experiences.

The four EST layers were used to initially categorise data and suggest preliminary ideas about the meaning of participants' accounts. Reviewing these initial categories and ideas, it became apparent that there were two related processes occurring—legitimisation and delegitimisation. These dual processes worked to either validate women coaches—both as individuals and as a collective—or to undermine them within the profession, respectively. They were evident across each of the four EST layers, sometimes at multiple levels simultaneously, demonstrating the range of barriers and challenges women golf coaches face. To highlight the complexity of the findings, therefore, rather than organising our results by EST levels of analysis, we grouped them according to four themes.

We acknowledge that the interpretations of others may differ from ours; however, we ensured rigour and reliability in several ways. The first author's prolonged engagement with golf, her coaching experience, training and qualifications, and knowledge of the context provided an interview environment where participants felt secure sharing personal accounts relevant to the study (Smith and Sparks 2016). This background also supported understanding and meaning construction with regard to participants' comments and stories (Berger 2015). Member reflection allowed participants to discuss the interpretations of the data and explore gaps or further insights (Smith and McGannon 2018). Reading the transcripts multiple times supported critical reflection and deepened understanding. Discussions amongst the authors interrogated interpretations and organisation of the data, which increases the dependability of findings (Smith and McGannon 2018). In addition, the inclusion of extracts and quotations using participants' own words helped to capture points raised and added to the transparency of meanings generated.

### 3. Results

In this section, we focus on the participants' reported experiences as golf coaches. Our findings are grouped under four themes: recruitment and opportunity; on the course and in the pro shop; perceptions of women PGA Professionals; and advocacy and allies.

#### 3.1. Recruitment and Opportunity

As in any profession, gaining employment is often the key step in beginning or advancing one's career. While gender bias and discrimination in the workplace are illegal in the UK, several participants suggested that some organisations were perpetuating inequalities in their recruitment and hiring practices. One coach, C9, related her experiences following a final job interview at a golf club several years prior:

The chap who phoned me up to say to me, I'm sorry you haven't got the job . . . He said I shouldn't be saying this. The vote was in your favour, but further discussion happened, and they decided that the golf club wouldn't like a female pro.

Here, the implication that "further discussion" led to them choosing a man despite initially finding her to be the most qualified means that this was a considered and intentional instance of gender-based discrimination. Though this happened several years prior, it is indicative of the history of gender-based barriers women professionals have faced.

Such bias was evident from other coaches' accounts, though often less overtly. As noted above, women coaches can sometimes be pushed to take on coaching women or girls rather than boys or men. This may be especially true at higher competitive levels. For example, despite individually coaching an England boy's squad player, when C2 attempted to gain more experience through working with the boys' squad she reported the following suggestion:

Why don't you start with the girls' squad? You're still getting pushed . . . down the girl's route to slowly climb the ladder. That's when I actually thought, yeah, it's gonna be difficult for me to coach a boy or men's squad.

Such apparently discriminatory recruitment policies were also suggested by C5:

I applied for quite a few performance coaching roles and never, despite the fact that at the time I was one of the only people to have (redacted), never even got an interview ... I think it was jobs for the boys, as they say, you know, and I think that's probably the only time where I felt aggrieved that I didn't even get an interview.

C4 further related the biggest disappointment in her career: an opportunity presented to her by a golf governing body but taken away without explanation. Such practices marginalise the few women at this level of the sport and reinforce the game as almost exclusively belonging to men.

Several coaches explained they felt tokenism among organisations was unacceptable and that they would not want to be employed to meet a gender quota (C9). However, C1 and C2 offered positive experiences of being selected to represent the PGA at The Open and suggested that in more recent times organisations need to be perceived to be more inclusive and as a result, the odds of being selected are higher purely because of being a minority. C2 highlighted that she believed gender may have also influenced her selection for a PGA role, "I think one of the potential reasons why I got shortlisted as well for that job is again because I was a female PGA Pro".

### 3.2. On the Course and in the Pro Shop

Golf pro shops are ubiquitous on golf courses and places where advice is sought, lessons are arranged, and equipment is purchased. Here, specialist knowledge and relationship building are key components. They can also be an environment where women professionals' credibility is challenged based on sexism. Experiences of golf pro shops reflected how intrinsically discriminatory these environments can be. C8 explained there was always a gender-biased assumption "that the men in the shop are in charge". Similarly, C4 described how these situations have played out:

I've been in a pro shop, stood next to a male colleague who was the pro shop manager and was not a pro and people asking about lessons and speaking directly to him rather than to me seeing a female there ... So I think that bias is very much alive.

However, while what is socially tolerable has changed significantly, discrimination towards women has also potentially become harder to detect. This also makes it harder to counter, especially when it is continuous. As C6 noted, "it can be sort of nothing particularly overt, but ... it's a bit of an undercurrent, you kind of know it's there". Further, the use of terminology such as "female" or "lady" as a prefix in golf was collectively highlighted as disagreeable among the participants. As C5 stated, "I'm just a pro, I'm a coach ... and the female part, at the front [female golf pro], irrelevant".

There was consensus among the participants that there have been positive changes for women coaches and a socio-cultural shift away from the overt discrimination experienced in the past. Despite this, participants were clear that misogyny and sexism have not been eradicated from golf. Some viewed this as being particular to golf culture, such as C11: "I think the game in itself is fundamentally misogynistic and lacks equality". Other coaches, who had not experienced significant gender-based challenges, recognised that their experience was not the norm, as C5 reflected, "I'm definitely lucky, I know I'm lucky, I know I'm in the minority". While there was recognition of some improvement for women coaches, as C10 commented, "It has changed ... [but] it hasn't changed enough". The lack of progress was highlighted in experiences, such as that shared by C5 who noted "it's better than it was", but also explained that only two years ago, she was not allowed to walk through the same door or sit in the same lounge as male students because she was a female coach. Yet women can also contribute to a sexist culture and club environment, as highlighted by C8's experiences, "Men get blamed for a lot of it. And yes, there are some horrendous attitudes, but I actually find that the women within the golf clubs also perpetuate similar terrible attitudes".

Retaining women is a challenge and these experiences can cause women to avoid advancing into coaching or even to leave the sport altogether. Several participants suggested that unless golf culture fundamentally changes, it is unlikely more women will be retained in the game. This view was summarised by C11, who commented:

The only way you're gonna get female coaches is if you've got more females playing golf. And the only way I can see you're gonna get more females playing golf, is if something's got to change within the sport.

A barrier to women advancing and staying in golf is how they are perceived and what is required, or they feel is required, to be taken seriously in their roles. How women coaches are perceived and what it means for their experiences, opportunities, and advancement in the sport was visible at all four levels of influence, underscoring the complexity and interplay between levels.

### 3.3. Perceptions of Women PGA Professionals

Participants reported feeling that their coaching abilities were often judged purely based on gender, with male coaches perceived to have superior technical coaching skills. C6 related how, "I definitely always feel like you're perceived as being . . . not as good as the guys around you". This was not limited to club professionals but extended to other higher-profile coaching. As C8 explained:

I think the one thing that I would always say is things like county coaching or higher-level coaching is an assumption I think that again that males are more qualified in those kinds of roles.

All the participants reported facing assumptions that they only teach women or juniors and are still asked if they teach men. This subsequently affected feelings of self-worth, with C1 describing it as "degrading". Further, there was consensus amongst participants that they did not want to be seen exclusively as a women's coach. This desire to not be typecast was highlighted by C4, who suggested that such social influences and assumptions affected her initial career decisions, "I did fight it for quite a while because I didn't want to be seen as, you know, a female coach that only coached females". However, as a business model coaching women has clear benefits. Some used the gap in women-focused coaching to their advantage, such as C6's experiences joining a new club that did not offer women's sessions and suggested it was "the low hanging fruit". Others recognised both the opportunity and limitation of the models, such as C7 who also stated, "as a business it is a niche market and I want to encourage ladies . . . but I don't like marketing ladies only stuff".

Crucially, participants highlighted that women coaches needed something extra to gain credibility in the eyes of others, such as further qualifications or elite playing ability. This was reported as a way of challenging and overcoming the gender barrier, as C11 noted that, "for a female coach to stand up equally against a male coach at an elite level, there is no doubt you have to have a lot more behind you". Similarly, C5 suggested that perceptions around one's own playing ability can provide opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach, suggesting that "had I not been a player, I don't think I would have ended up coaching so many high-profile players and been involved in counties and national squads". Participants suggested that Continued Professional Development (CPD) promoted assumptions of competence and increased their credibility in the eyes of others, and these also worked as personal validations of coaching capabilities. Participants described the necessity of this, as in C8's recent conversation with another woman coach who explained that she felt the need to do a large amount of CPD to "validate her credentials as a coach". Indeed, undertaking these extras was reported as a way of shoring up one's own legitimacy, as C4 explained that recognition and validation from others were motivating factors to gain more qualifications. Similarly, C5 stated, "being a female has absolutely driven me to try to get as many qualifications as possible to try and I guess command a bit more respect".

### 3.4. Advocacy and Allies

Most coaches were unclear about the concept of advocacy or its application within coaching. However, given the opportunity to reflect, some coaches identified previously unconsidered examples of advocacy or allyship. C2 described positive experiences of advocacy through the support of a renowned PGA Professional and the positive impact on her self-efficacy:

When I left the session and I reflected on it, it just, it made me get that little bit of inner belief that, you know, as a female coach . . . you can coach elite men, you can coach elite men in squad situations and they can come out of it, everyone can come out of that situation learning and progressing and being positive. You know it was for me, it was a really positive experience.

Additionally, C8 and C9 described how advocacy had opened doors and created career opportunities, including access to county and national coaching experiences. C8 explained the influence of a county coach who probably “opened up that opportunity because he trusted me, then other people trusted me”. Having her expertise validated by others well-placed in the profession was key to building on these chances, helping to further progress her career. Such experiences were clearly positive and demonstrated the impact that advocacy can have in the promotion of women coaches.

However, the majority of participants voiced that they had not received active support from others. C10 commented she felt that she had accomplished it all herself, referring to the opportunities and success she had so far. In a similar vein, C5 explained “so a lot of where I’ve got to is from me approaching people . . . I think it’s been less people opening doors for me”. C2 stated that women coaches “have to make all your own opportunities”. However, having described an experience of advocacy above, C2 revealed a contradiction that some coaches could be receiving more support than they had previously recognised. C3 also explained how important the support of male colleagues as allies had been to her self-confidence as a young coach:

You know, the lads that I worked with were again, incredibly supportive, they’d often turn around and say ‘oh, that’s C3’s. She is a bit of a specialist when it comes to that,’ even though I wasn’t. They would actually do that so that they’d get these people talking to me and help me build my confidence.

Participants also highlighted the role of allies in challenging discrimination. C4 explained that she felt it was the responsibility of lots of different parties to call out biases.

## 4. Discussion

Women golf coaches reported a range of experiences, both positive and negative, that impacted their choices and opportunities throughout their careers. Their experiences and events either legitimised or delegitimised them as coaches, both collectively and individually, and were visible across each level of EST analysis. Some of these were the result of sociocultural beliefs about women in golf and the proficiency of women coaches (societal level), while others were more organisationally driven and reflected how professional opportunities and PGA or club policies may help or hinder women coaches in the sport (organisational level). Still others were recollections at the interpersonal level, including interactions with other golf pros, club members, or others involved within the golf environment. Participants also noted individual-level factors that shaped their coaching careers, such as their own motivations, fears, or perceptions. Relatively few coaches recounted experiences of advocacy or allyship, although those identified, such as key people opening opportunities, building confidence, or validating expertise, were considered influential and legitimising. While examples of overt misogyny and sexism were shared, these appeared to be isolated incidents. Rather, findings suggested that institutional sexism was the primary concern, with policies, practices, and cultural norms of golf institutions not sufficiently addressing gender issues that delegitimise women coaches.

Deligitimisation of women coaches was both blatant and subtle. Beginning with golf itself, the lack of urgency around recruiting and retaining women into coaching could be barriers to changing the narrative around women's place within what is viewed as a male endeavour (Norman and Simpson 2022). It also suggests a lack of advocacy for coaching as a profession for women. Study participants suggested that coaching expertise was also often undermined by gendered assumptions that devalued their technical skills. Coaching women's squads was presented as a means to "slowly climb the ladder", simultaneously undermining the coach by suggesting they are not capable of teaching men, whilst also belittling the women players who are metaphorically presented as the bottom rung. Such microinvalidations undermine the technical expertise that women coaches can offer all golfers and close off a large proportion of the sport to women coaches. Consistent with the EST view that development is a response to personal and contextual demands (Côté 2006), where other coaching opportunities have been limited, some study participants have opted to market themselves as "women's coaches". While offering some specific benefits for participants in this study, this strategy may also exacerbate stereotypes and promote "gender normative coaching behaviours" (LaVoi 2016, p. 27) and assumptions that fail to challenge socio-cultural gender norms (Burton and LaVoi 2016).

Coaches in this study highlighted that key golf organisations, and many golf clubs, have recognised the inequality within the sport, and there are concerted efforts to increase women's participation and visibility, which were commended. However, while campaigns may increase the number of women learning to play and may even be seen as a form of advocacy, these initiatives could be considered lip service if the culture of clubs and the practices in golf organisations are not improved in ways that legitimise women at all levels in the sport. This echoes Kitching's (2018, p. 412) assertion that if there is not a "fundamental shift in assumptions, attitudes and policies within golf club settings . . . females will continue to remain outsiders in the masculine world of golf". Bowes and Kitching (2021, p. 231) further highlighted that within golf there are "deep-rooted, gendered power imbalances' perpetuated in multiple ways". Study participants speculated that in the absence of fundamental change at a club and amateur level, there is unlikely to be any real shift in the ratio of female to male golf professionals.

Gender-biased recruitment practices were discussed, with participants describing some appointments within governing bodies resulting from a kind of boys' network. This type of discrimination may be described as "homologous reproduction" (LaVoi and Dutove 2012) whereby "people will hire someone similar to themselves, as it is the easiest, most comfortable thing to do", and can be linked to an "unequal assumption of competence" (Kilty 2006, p. 224). Homologous reproduction shows how men have access to opportunities, privilege, and authority purely based upon being a member of a dominant social group (Schewinbenz 2021) rather than expertise or experience. The interpersonal experiences of study participants in golf pro shop environments were a common exemplar of this, as men were assumed to be professionals, irrespective of their actual roles or qualifications. Women coaches feeling ignored and overlooked because of their gender is similar to the experiences reported by women golfers (McGinnis et al. 2005). Therefore, while some coaches in this study stated that they were seeking equality and not favouritism, it could be speculated that they did not recognise the privileges afforded to men and how such gendered assumptions delegitimise them and women professionals in general. Further, in these situations, the men in the pro shops had opportunities to advocate for their female colleagues by correcting inaccurate assumptions about who was the golf professional and legitimising them. However, with one exception, such opportunities did not appear to be taken.

Other sports may provide potential models for how changes could be enacted, such as World Rugby's introduction of a recommended quota for women coaches (Isherwood 2018) and advocacy at an organisational level. Participants in the current study were clearly reluctant to perpetuate tokenism, preferring clarity that recruitment is based on skill and fit for the job. When combined with a steadfast view that they need to "do it themselves"

and “get there on their own merit”, these perspectives present a challenge for advocacy as women may be reluctant to take up opportunities if it might be perceived that they did not earn it. These views suggest that in response to contextual demands (credibility based on gender rather than ability and qualifications), participants developed a cautious, perhaps even sceptical, view of receiving assistance. However, if positive action were applied within golf coach recruitment, it would ensure that if two equally qualified PGA Professionals were in a tie for a position, under the Equality Act 2010, the under-represented group, in this case the female coach, could be legally hired (Caccavale 2021). Such a policy may help overcome the traps of homologous reproduction or more overtly sexist recruitment practices and serve to advocate for women, further legitimising them in the profession.

Yet a perceived need for resilience emerged at the individual level, and study participants conveyed an innate self-reliance mentality. This may be rooted in some of the coaches’ own gendered assumptions of who is responsible for working towards equity in the sport. Some coaches had been in the industry for up to 34 years and as Lough et al. (2022, p. 8) argued, “while older generations tend to place responsibility for achieving gender equity on the shoulders of women, 59% of male Gen Zer’s (Generation Z) believe it is men that have a larger role to play”. The unfamiliar concept that male advocates could fight for women’s career advancement (Kerr and Banwell 2016) and help to metaphorically open doors, was met with scepticism from some coaches in this study. Though this may be the result of participants not receiving such support, some participants may also feel that any dependence on male power to provide opportunities could work to delegitimise them. This is consistent with other findings suggesting mentorship for women is somewhat paradoxical in that it can be empowering whilst also possibly promoting perceptions of weakness (Banwell et al. 2021). Several participants indicated more willingness to embrace collective female power as a way of legitimising women coaches within the sport. However, there was also recognition from several coaches that collective power will be limited until more women are in influential positions within golf organisations, consistent with Norman’s (2012) findings.

### *Limitations*

This study explored the experiences of 11 female coaches. Given the small population size, this relatively small sample was deemed acceptable. The lead researcher is a PGA Fellow Professional with 13 years of experience, and with that, it was recognised that she brought her own bias to this research project. Interpretative enquiry is by nature subjective, and interviews fostered emotional engagement as participants shared their experiences. This was mitigated through discussion and review of data and interpretation with the two other authors. Insights from this group are not intended to be generalised to other groups or coaches in other sports. However, readers may see parallels with their experiences and, therefore, learn from the views expressed by these participants.

### **5. Conclusions**

Taken together, the findings show that the line between legitimisation and delegitimation for women golf coaches is far from clear. Some initiatives intended to legitimise and advocate for women may be counter-productive and effectively “ghettoise” both players and coaches, while others may leave women in the sport feeling that they are progressing only through coercive policies or the goodwill of others rather than on their own merit. The overriding focus on social play for women rather than development offers women a legitimate but limited space in the sport. At the same time, this may also delegitimise women in golf as this focus will ultimately limit how many women are able and expected to qualify as golf professionals or hold leadership positions within organisations. The clear tension between these two processes shows how complex and nuanced gender is for women coaches.

Yet there are areas across levels where improvements can be made for women coaches. At the individual level, building resilience through training is important for working in a

sport like golf. There is also the potential for positive change stemming from expanding interpersonal networks, particularly developing relationships with advocates and allies of both sexes. Partnering women coaches with male advocates in positions of power that are appropriately placed to provide opportunities for career advancement may be key to making initial inroads (Kerr and Banwell 2016). Working with other women in key organisational roles, paired with the work of male advocates and allies, could expand women's collective power and lead to a shift within golf organisations and the development of a culture that recognises the legitimacy of women as coaches. These influences require power and, as illustrated by EST, that power should be considered from a multidimensional perspective, i.e., from the top down, such as the role of advocates to enable change for women coaches, but also "that the individual coach as subject also has the agency and power to create change, disrupt power and transgress systems from the bottom up" (LaVoi 2016, p. 19). It is important to note, however, that in general, women and other minorities have reduced power and status when compared with dominant social groups (Kenttä et al. 2020).

Crucially, change is necessary at the socio-cultural and organisational levels. Overcoming gendered expectations and assumptions that women are more than an adjunct or accessory to the men's game requires real effort at the highest levels. Women PGA Professionals' qualifications are as legitimate as men's and both are capable of coaching both women and men golfers. Golf needs to be proactive at promoting and centring the expertise available from women coaches for all athletes. The impact of a golf professional on a golf club environment is potentially huge, but women need legitimating opportunities to make inroads. Golf organisations could begin this process through advocacy for women coaches by showcasing women PGA Professionals' talents in media and public relations activity, rather than drawing on male PGA Professionals and/or higher profile women players (current or former) who may not be qualified. Steps like these would aid in normalising women PGA Professionals in golf clubs and pro shops, ultimately making the interpersonal and individual level experiences more positive.

### *Recommendations*

As a result of the above, we have recommendations for how to put these findings into practice to develop and support women golf professionals that cut across the EST layers. One is a better understanding that anyone can be an ally or become an advocate for women in golf. At the societal and organisational levels, this could be in the form of a media campaign from the PGA itself highlighting the importance of supporting women professionals and specific ways of doing so (i.e., targeted recruitment of women to PGA Professional career paths, highlighting women PGA Professionals as experts in media coverage of both men's and women's golf). This could then be expanded at the interpersonal and individual levels in the form of ally and advocacy training as part of the PGA Education and Membership Programme.

A second recommendation is the proactive development of advocate-coach partnerships, both within golf and externally. As there are so few women PGA Professionals currently, this could be coordinated on an individual basis or as part of a women in golf coaching programme. Hockey has provided an example of how this might work (Allen and Reid 2019). This programme was similarly aimed at developing and promoting women coaches and included bringing identified women coaches together as a cohort and allocating mentors along with other development opportunities. Crucially, it also created a network amongst the women coaches to support each other, with other coaches added as new cohorts were brought into the programme. This could be institutionally or individually led, such as by a coach or keen advocate, but it does require someone to take the lead. Such an intentional forming of advocacy networks within golf would both normalise and expand the understanding and practice of advocacy for women within the golf industry.

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