Women’s Baseball in Japan: Women’s Experiences Navigating a Male-Dominated Sport

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The Women’s Baseball Federation of Japan (WBFJ) strives to develop the next generation of female athletes through baseball (WBFJ, 2020). However, the “baseball is a sport for men only” stereotype creates barriers to expanding participation in this traditionally male dominated sport. Women who find themselves in male dominated cultures whether in business settings or in sport face barriers such as the old boys network (Bower & Hums, 2009; Hancock, 2012), homologous reproduction (Aicher & Saga, 2009; Stangl & Kane, 1991), gender role stereotypes and perceptions of gendered opportunities (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011), and gender discrimination and stereotypes (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Women participating on all-women’s teams in traditionally male sports such as wrestling, ice hockey, football, or rugby also experience challenging environments (Burtka, 2020; Ingemi, 2019; Shai, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to determine ways to increase participation in women’s baseball by listening to the voices of women who play the game. The phenomenological design examined the participants’ experiences and thoughts on how to grow participation in women’s baseball in Japan. Twelve current and former Japan National Women’s Baseball Team players were interviewed for approximately 60 minutes each. The interviews were translated into English and then back-translated for accuracy (Sousa & Rojjanasrirat, 2011; Weeks, Swerissen & Belfrage, 2007). Wolcott’s four phases of analyzing and interpreting were used to reduce the interview data. HyperResearcher 4.5 allowed the researchers to code and categorize the data. Constant comparative analysis was used throughout this stage. Trustworthiness of the study was established by using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The first research question was “What strategies can help increase participation by girls and young women in baseball?” Five themes emerged: (a) make baseball fun for young players, (b) the need to create a better environment (discrimination), (c) more media exposure, (d) more junior high level teams, and (e) a commitment by experienced players to be role models to young players. The second research question was “What advice would you offer to girls and young women wanting to play baseball?” Three themes emerged: (a) love of playing the game, (b) always do your best, and (c) do not be discouraged by the environment – keep playing.

The results provided insight into the challenges and current situation of women’s baseball players in Japan and were consistent in many ways with the challenges women face in male dominated work and sport environments including gender role stereotypes and discrimination. What is unique here is that women experience this on all-women’s teams in a traditionally male-dominated sport and not just as one of a few women attempting to play on a men’s team. This information can prove useful to WBFJ officials in their goal of increasing women’s participation in baseball. It also provides researchers insight into the status of the difficulties women’s baseball players and potentially women playing on all-women’s teams in other traditionally male-dominated sports face and how to overcome them, which needs to be explored further.