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Exploring the Experiences of Elite Female Wrestlers From Developed and Developing Countries

Amanda D. Stanec¹ and Jennifer A. Bhalla²

ABSTRACT. The sport of wrestling lays claim to being the world's oldest sport, with artifacts from Sumeria depicting wrestling from over 5,000 years ago, and was widely practiced in many ancient cultures (Petrov, 1993). Widespread female involvement in the sport is relatively new compared to male formal amateur competition. For example, while male wrestling has been a part of the program of the modern Olympic Games since 1896, female wrestling debuted at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. Consequently, the research on elite female wrestlers is limited. Research that has been published exploring issues related to female wrestling has typically been done so at the national level, and primarily examining gender issues (Khan & Ali, 2011; Macro, Viveiros & Cipriano, 2009; Miller, 2010; Stuart & Whaley, 2005).

Keywords: wrestling, sport, upward mobility, female athletes, elite sport

It is important to consider why female wrestling has experienced such dramatic growth in recent decades. Perhaps this can be answered by the low cost of the sport and the fact that competitors participate according to weight categories so individuals are seldom excluded because of genetic predispositions—height, for example, experienced tremendous growth over the past two decades (Macro, Viveiros, & Cipriano, 2009). Since the first recognized women's world championships were held in 1987, with participants from nine countries, to the 2014 world championships, 85 countries have sent participants to the world championships (Curby, 2015). The number of weight categories for female wrestlers recently increased from four to six for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games partly due to the growth of the number of female competitors in wrestling, as well as an attempt to make wrestling more inclusive of females.

Wrestling supports physical fitness in participants as well, which research has found to benefit health (physical, social, emotional) as well as learning and memory (Erickson et al., 2010; Ratey & Hagerman, 2008; Sallis, Procasca, & Taylor, 2000). Although the rise in female involvement is encouraging, female participation in wrestling may be hindered be-

cause of the perception that wrestling is traditionally defined as a masculine sport.

Other factors to consider when examining wrestling are socioeconomic status and social status. There is great economic disparity between different regions within many countries, as well as between countries. Promoting and growing affordable and accessible sports, such as wrestling, might support athletes in achieving upward social mobility—or an elevation in status. Previous research shows some support for upward social mobility among elite athletes in multiple sports from some developing countries (Földesi, 2004; Sohi & Yusuff, 1987), although social mobility has not been examined among elite female wrestlers from a global perspective. Caution should be taken when generalizing upward mobility claims from studies that report athletes' upward mobility in other sports. Wrestling is a masculine-defined sport and some cultures frown upon female participation. Thus, before generalizing upward mobility claims in sport to female wrestlers, research should determine if females experience any downward mobility in terms of opportunity and status within a community and/or culture for participating in wrestling. Thus, there is great need for seminal work in this area.

Yet before wrestling and its potential impact on social mobility is fully examined, wrestling's natural tendency to support social justice in sport should be considered. Social justice aims to provide equal opportunities to citizens through education, health care, and labor. The numerous social injustices felt among many societies also spans into sport. For example, if children live in poverty, they are very

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unlikely to have opportunity to participate in sports despite the potential for them to gain in valuable skills that might enhance their education, health care, social capital, and employment. Social mobility through sport is impossible if opportunity to participate in the sport does not exist due to social injustices.

Therefore, the purposes of this study was to identify opportunities, challenges, and issues faced by elite female wrestlers from developing and developed countries, and to determine if or how competing in the sport of wrestling influences female wrestlers' social mobility in an upward or downward direction.

METHODS

Research ethics approval was attained from Pacific University (0004173) conduct this study. Nine women from eight developing (*n* = 4) and developed (*n* = 5) countries gave informed consent and participated in semi-structured interviews exploring perceived challenges, opportunities, and potential social mobility through wrestling participation. Participants were between the ages of 18–44 years, and had wrestled (or were wrestling) at national (*n* = 1) or international levels (*n* = 8). Interviews were conducted through Skype or Google Hangouts. Participants were sent the definition of social mobility via email prior to the interviews. The interviewer explained the term during the interview and invited participants to ask questions if needed to deepen their understanding of social mobility. The primary interview questions were the same for all participants. Example interview questions included, “What unique opportunities have you had because of wrestling?” and “Have you experienced any social mobility through the sport of wrestling?” Follow-up questions were based on participants' responses. Participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and all

names of countries were omitted from all transcriptions so that participants could not be identified. This was to ensure anonymity and to increase the likeliness that participants felt safe to answer questions in the way that they chose. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and included body language since interviews were conducted over video conference calls.

Data were analyzed using inductive content analysis, as well as constant comparison and open coding (Patton, 2002). Trustworthiness was attained through researchers' qualifications, and the use of a member check, a collaborator, and an external reviewer, similar to past research and methodological protocol (e.g., Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002; Patton, 2002). Both researchers are trained in and have published previous studies using qualitative research methods (e.g., Bhalla & Weiss, 2010; Stanec & Murray-Orr, 2011). Finally, both researchers conducted a pilot study examining the experiences and perceptions of female wrestlers in North America. Data from the pilot study were presented at the National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA) annual convention in 2014, and was used to help derive questions for the current study.

RESULTS

Participants in this study explained how they gained valuable opportunities through wrestling by applying a resilient mindset, coupled with support of strong advocates of female wrestling. Figure 1 is a diagram illustrating the relationships of the three primary dimensions that emerged from the data.

Dimension 1: Applying a Resilient Mindset

Resilience is viewed as a measure of stress coping ability (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Thus, a resilient mindset may

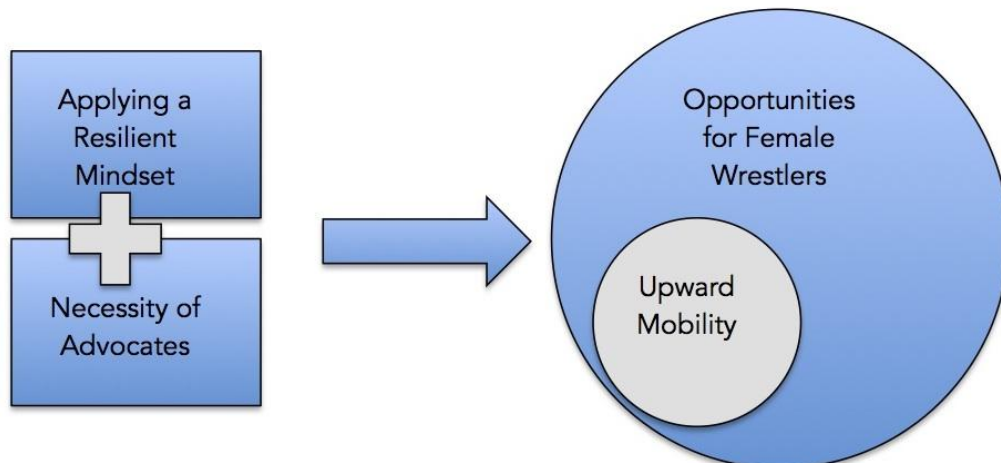


FIGURE 1 The relationship between the three dimensions that emerged from the data.

be thought of as the “I can overcome” approach one takes to address stressors. One dimension derived from the data analyses suggests that female wrestlers applied a resilient mindset to create opportunities to participate in wrestling, and to take advantage of opportunities that arose from competing in wrestling^{3/4}despite the fact that there are limited opportunities for female participation in many countries, and some existing cultural norms female participation in male-defined sports. The three higher order themes within the first dimension include:

Theme 1: A resilient mindset can increase opportunities to participate in a masculine-defined sport

The elite female wrestlers who participated in this study highlighted ways in that their resilient mindset allowed them opportunities to participate in a masculine-defined sport in countries where this is not a societal norm. If individuals questioned their participation in wrestling, the female wrestlers would educate them on why they would continue to compete in the sport. For example, Cathy shared:

[I] always told them “NO, I like to do it and I am good at it. And, also, if girls can do tae kwon do and judo or karate or any of these sports, why can’t they wrestle?”

Theme 2: A resilient mindset can change traditional perceptions of males who do not agree with female participation in wrestling

Participants were mindful of traditional perceptions of female participation in wrestling, and shared how they worked diligently to rewrite these stereotypes. Lucie shared:

We knew we had to work as hard or harder than the guys to kind of show that we belonged.

Lucie spoke at length about the hardworking group of female teammates she had on her high school team who wanted to prove that they belonged in the sport:

I think that’s the kind of feeling that all of those girls, on my team, at the time, had and they, um, I think they changed a lot of guys’ minds, like those old guys out there who didn’t grow up with women around the wrestling room at all.

Theme 3: A resilient mindset can aid opportunities to compete at an international level despite the novelty of female wrestling in one’s native country

The challenges around participating in the sport of wrestling, and how to reach potential in the sport, varied depending on the participant’s home country. Marya, who lives in a developing country, explained:

Some people they told, they always [say] . . . you can’t. You can’t, you’re training in [native country], you can’t—how do you think you can qualify training here, come on. So, but, uhh, ehh you have a lot of people that.

Marya went on to share how she overcame such challenges (e.g., limited opportunities for her to receive the competition she needs in her country to reach her potential) by traveling around her country searching for gyms and people to help her reach her goals in wrestling:

I look for the—the, so, I train, umm, MMA teams. The guys there they train in wrestling too, so I travel and look for guys to training.

Dimension 2: Necessity of Advocates

Participants spoke about both opportunities and challenges regarding the complexities of their continued participation in female wrestling (e.g., fewer females to defeat to compete at the international level, finding coaches who would coach females). They agreed that strong advocates of female wrestling are instrumental in providing opportunities for them to pursue the sport at local, national, and levels. Mulan explained how key advocates at all levels supported her participation in wrestling in a developed country as a female in a masculine-defined sport:

Like every barrier, there’s always been someone there, that I just didn’t realize—that if they weren’t there, then it just wouldn’t have been possible without this person.

Theme 1: Support from male coaches who advocated for participation

Since female amateur wrestling competition is new in comparison to male, wrestling coaches are predominantly male. The need for all wrestling coaches to support female wrestling and to cultivate opportunities for female participation is apparent. For example, Talia perceived her coach as someone who wanted her to wrestle on the high school team and this encouraged her to continue competing in the sport:

I was lucky. Like I said my coach wanted me to wrestle, you know—like yeah. So, I didn’t have any challenges about being on a boys team and not being included, you know.

Lucie also alluded to having coaches and teammates who made her feel that she belonged on the wrestling team, and these advocates allowed her to pursue the sport despite some of the oppression she experienced:

I do remember feeling, uh, some of that oppression from men that didn’t think that women belonged in the wrestling rooms; they weren’t supposed to be wrestling. I did feel

that . . . so my high school coach and also my university coach was very—he’s a huge advocate, he has done a lot of great things [for female wrestling]. I felt that support, so I think that was definitely a cushion for all of that other, you know—negativity.

Marya also felt supported by male wrestling coaches who were willing to help her achieve her goals not because she is a female, but because she is a hard-working athlete:

But, uhh, [I got] special attention because I always was asking and wanted more, you know, so they—they saw I was interested in that and they—they [male coaches] gave me more attention. Not because I was, am woman.

AnaMaria pointed out that although one of her coaches comes from a country with a strong and successful tradition in male wrestling, and a culture that does not provide opportunities for females to wrestle, she perceived him to appreciate the work ethic of the female wrestlers.

I think—so—he prefers work with the woman than the man. He say “no, no, you are very lazy man. No, I prefer women. They work hard” [smiles].

Theme 2: Accepting male teammates supported female wrestlers’ participation and improvement

The attitudes and perceptions of male wrestlers are instrumental in supporting female wrestlers’ sense of belonging in the wrestling room along with the males. While some females—such as Mulan (from a developed country)—had to navigate both subtle and overt oppression from male wrestlers throughout their careers, others—such as Cathy (from a developing country)—recall ways of feeling supported by males in her native country, and found it odd that the researchers would even ask whether or not male teammates were supportive of her:

We (teammates) are all brothers and sisters. It’s individual but it’s also a team sport. These teammates would take me to the hospital before my own family.

Lucie highlights how female wrestling is becoming more common in her developed country, and how younger male wrestlers welcomed her on to their teams and to the sport:

All the—the male wrestlers on my team, were you know, they were cool with it, they were, you know, kind of growing up with women on the team, so it wasn’t as big a deal.

Theme 3: Parental and familial support for participation and achievements in wrestling

Participants in this study shared that they had parental and/or familial support in some capacity that provided them with opportunities to wrestle. Ebba explained:

My father, uh, had a friend who was a trainer and he just picked us up from school, yeah, preliminary school, and “yeah, we’re going to do something fun”—and it was me, and I also have two sisters, so we were three and we ended up on the mat. And we would just play and we had so much fun.

Not all participants had the same parental support or experiences. Lucie shared that her father’s cultural ethnicity was a potential barrier to her participating in the sport:

My dad, was—you know—was [a] traditional [ethnicity] man and so a lot of things that, um, he thought we should be doing, like, typically, like, you know, focusing on school, that’s always the first thing. And, um, yeah, there was no way he would have thought that a daughter of his would be wrestling—like, I don’t even know if he knew what that was at first.

Lucie further explained how, despite her father’s reservations, her older sister and mother supported her involvement in wrestling enough for her to continue in the sport:

. . . so I knew that he [my father] didn’t really approve but he couldn’t really do much about it, whereas my mom, my mom was very much like go do everything that you can . . . and she [my sister] kind of, um, you know, she paved the path for us, she fought for a lot—like her right to do certain things.

Dimension 3: Opportunities for Female Wrestlers

Participants spoke in depth about their opportunities through wrestling, including perceptions of upward mobility, life skills training, and understanding the world in which they live.

Theme 1: Opportunity for upward mobility through participation in wrestling

Sport is often viewed as a potential vehicle for athletes to gain capital (e.g., money, employment, education, social) and a potential vehicle for social mobility (Spaaij, 2009). Social mobility exists in both upward and downward forms, depending on if capital is gained or lost. Given the male-defined nature of wrestling, researchers hypothesized there might be some potential downward mobility in terms of cultural status by the females; however, this was not the case. Participants in this study shared rich stories related to upward mobility as a result of their competing in the sport of wrestling—regarding themselves and/or other female wrestlers.

Ana Maria shared how wrestling can give poor people in her developing country an opportunity for a better lifestyle:

[Wrestling] gives you an opportunity, for example, in our case that the people are poor for have a better lifestyle.

She continued to share a story about a successful female wrestler from her country:

[Name of athlete], she was very poor [shaking her head]. Very, very poor. Ehh, she didn't have money for buy a new jean, for example. And when she won in [large international tournament], the government, ehh give a house, car, and . . . \$1,000 a month, yeah.

Marya, also from a developing country, echoes sentiments related to wrestling's potential to support upward mobility, and highlights the important relationship between wrestling, education attainment, and upward mobility:

Change status . . . wrestling—yes—because I'm not rich. My family is not rich. If you, wouldn't, because of the wrestling I had to continually [hand gestures in circular motion] study a lot to get [hand gestures up] umm better . . . status . . . the wrestling help me for sure to get [hand gestures raises hand] that—that status . . . to get an education.

Marya emphasized how her education, attained through her participating in wrestling, not only affords her work now as an athlete, but further, wrestling will enable her to attain employment when her athletic career ends:

Is the study [education], the possibility to study because of the sports. And then if we stop, we have, we can work and we can have a job [smiles].

Cathy explained stories from difficult times throughout her childhood in a developing country and credits wrestling for opening many doors for her:

. . . before [I] started wrestling seriously [I] was doing house-keeping [since I was 12 years old] and things like this, working, to get by. To get money. So, when [I] started to wrestle, it opened up a lot of opportunities for [me]."

Female wrestlers from developed countries also acknowledge how wrestling allowed them to experience upward mobility through gaining different forms of capital:

I can wrestle for a job now, and I have an apartment, and I can do it as my profession. I don't need to have other jobs.

Theme 2: Opportunity to develop life skills through participating in wrestling

Although sport does not magically teach life lessons (Danish, 2002), participants in this study expressed how they transferred lessons they learned on the mat to improve their lives off of the mat. Mulan explains how acquisition of these skills benefit the lives of women and why males in the wrestling community should embrace female wrestling:

"Wrestling's going to teach her [a female wrestler], you know, character building and discipline and self-reliance

. . . building confidence and work ethic and I think they [coaches] just need to look at that and look at this girl and think this is going to be a woman, you know, in the workforce, or in the world, or have a family and you want her to have these qualities, and wrestling definitely helps foster that."

Talia spoke of how suffering one particular defeat at an international match helped to teach her about living life without fear and how she uses this lesson to believe in herself in all areas of her life:

It [wrestling] taught me, you know, to never doubt because I think I did have a little bit of fear walking into that match.

Reka echoed sentiments related to wrestling's ability to teach valuable life skills:

. . . it [wrestling] teach a lot of things and uh help you through the—the problems of life, you know. To really solve through [them].

Theme 3: Opportunity to understand the world through travel and benefit as individuals from international relationships

All participants explained how international travel through wrestling opened their mind and enabled them to understand the world. They shared how travel and international relationships brought perspective and gratitude to their lives. Interestingly, for Cathy, a participant who experienced tremendous amounts of upward mobility through her participation in wrestling, it was the open-mindedness she received through travel that she credits the most valuable of all she has acquired through wrestling. Cathy explained:

Probably the biggest thing is that [I've] been able to travel through wrestling. So, [I've] seen a lot of Europe, Asia, America and that's—without wrestling—[I] really wouldn't have had this chance and that's brought a lot to [me].

Marya further explained how travel through wrestling has helped her develop a very positive attitude toward life on and off the wrestling mat.

And, ehh, because we can—we can, ehh, we can have last sometimes from different, ehh, cultures and we see the life, it's, is more than sometimes we think little things make us feel sad and we see—we see life is more—more precious than little problems.

DISCUSSION: CONCLUSIONS

The experiences of elite female wrestlers from developing and developed countries are often different, specifically

surrounding upward mobility. Female participants in this study experienced more upward mobility if they were from a developing country. They were able to attain capital (e.g., education, money, employment) directly because of their competing in the sport of wrestling. Participants from developed countries also perceived upward mobility through employment and opportunities in the sport of wrestling, and were eager to share dramatic stories of females they have met throughout their careers from developing countries who have experienced upward mobility.

Interestingly, while wrestling is very accessible in terms of its cost and inclusion of individuals with particular physical disabilities and sizes, female wrestlers have to apply a resilient mindset to overcome challenges that hinder accessibility due to the relative newness of female wrestling in amateur competition (e.g., training options, perceptions of others) and current cultural norms regarding what is acceptable sport options for females. Fortunately, these athletes had advocates who supported their participation so they were able to achieve great success.

The future looks bright for female wrestling as the second generation of female wrestlers is currently competing on the international stage, and opportunities continue to grow. First-generation international female wrestlers are now retired from competition and stories of some coaching the younger generation and serving the sport with the intention to support the growth of female wrestling across the globe emerged from the interviews. Additionally, as one participant reported, the recent and rapid growth of female wrestling is normalizing the practice to the younger male wrestlers and, in turn, making wrestling rooms more welcoming to females by their male peers.

It is clear that wrestling is an avenue for developing a greater understanding of self, others, and the world. While sport does not magically teach life lessons (Danish, 2002) participants of this study were adamant that their experiences on the mat have prepared them for any single-leg takedown that life may throw at them. Wrestling appears to be a sport that can drastically change the course of a person's life through opportunities to create national and global friendships, learn about the world and how to navigate various challenges, and (potentially) elevate one's social status through taking advantage of opportunities and enduring the hard work needed to be successful in the sport at an elite level.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Although rigorous best practice qualitative research methods were conducted, there are several limitations to this study. First, some potential participants lived in very remote areas and were unable to participate in the study because their location hindered their access to a translator, scheduling, and completing the informed consent electronically. Second, ac-

cess to technology (Google Hangout, Skype) was necessary to participate in the interview and not all participants had this technology; therefore they were not able to participate in the study. Finally, the researchers only speak English and thus if a participant who did not speak English was unable to find a translator that she felt comfortable with, the wrestler was unable to participate in the study.

One potential limitation was that this research was funded by the United World Wrestling (UWW) and that might lead to a bias in the results. However, the researchers do not deem this as a limitation as they followed all proper protocol, maintained academic integrity, and were unbiased in the participant selection, interviewing procedures, and data analysis. To ensure steps were taken to minimize bias, no federation representatives were allowed to serve as translators. This way, participants felt comfortable to share their stories and experiences without pressure from outside sources. The researchers are not wrestlers and have never wrestled, and approached UWW because they were eager to contribute to the current gap of literature on female wrestling.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ATHLETES, COACHES AND FEDERATIONS

The purposes of this study was to explore experiences of elite female wrestlers from developing and developed countries, and to determine if elite female wrestlers experienced any social (upward or downward) mobility due to their participation in a masculine-defined sport. The following are recommendations suggested by the findings:

1. Pursue additional, purposeful efforts to explore experiences of more females (especially in developing countries) related to upward mobility through sport. This research should further explore female wrestlers, and also female athletes competing in other accessible (e.g., low-cost, inclusive) sports. Ideally, this research could occur at world championship events to decrease barriers to participation. It would also increase representation from all countries that compete in the sport at the international level in the study, and a mixed-methodology (quantitative and qualitative) study at such a venue could provide more generalizable results and conclusions.
2. Conduct additional research exploring male athletes' experiences in accessible sports such as wrestling to determine if they too experience social mobility.
3. Disseminate information through about wrestling's potential to provide benefits (upward mobility, physical, psychosocial) to inspire more advocates and supporters for female wrestling worldwide. Dissemination can occur through coaching education, peer-reviewed articles, conferences, and competitive events.

4. Recruit female wrestlers as they phase into retirement from competition into mentorship programs on coaching education, program development, and how to grow wrestling at local and national levels.
5. Develop local, national, and international plans to grow the sport of wrestling for all wrestlers in a united approach. Given the accessibility of the sport and the growing trend of increased variance between wealth and poverty in some countries, wrestling growth should occur to increase sport options for all children and youth—not just those who are privileged to live in a socially just environment. The emerging stories related to upward mobility from female wrestlers in developing countries (in particular) further support the need to create and implement plans to grow opportunities for wrestling at both development and competition levels throughout the world.

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