



Report of a Focus Group discussions on (licensed) female participation in sport federations within the European Union

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Disclaimer

The information in this independent evaluation report is deemed correct at time of publication (July 2023) but the author cannot be held responsible for any errors or omissions.



1. Introduction

Women aspiring for a high-performance sport setting are faced with jeopardizing factors that hinder their career progress. Though there has been a steady increase in the participation of women in general, there are still huge factors that limit this in some areas, particularly in high performance sport (Borrueco, et al., 2022). For example, though there is an increase the proportion of women athletes in high performance sport, there has been a decrease in the proportion of women in coaching in high performance sport (Serpell, et al. 2023).

There are also age-specific variations on the participation of women in different roles. Furthermore, the tenure of women coaches in high performance sport is shorter than that of men. Other areas of women's participation in sport like volunteering are still significantly low due to inherent challenges women are faced with in sport (Scharfenkamp, Wicker & Frick, 2023; Serpell, et al. 2023).

Other than a secure working environment, a high-performance environment should be composed of networking opportunities, mentors, and sponsors to enhance the performance of the people working within. Opportunities with these critical stakeholders are limited for women in sport (Serpell et al. 2023). In many sport settings, gender is not generally seen as a complex set of social relations that requires constant dialogue between the interacting parties. This to a large extent requires constant feedback to accommodate for all parties and build better relations (Levi, et al., 2022).

Steady rise of women in professional sport is due mainly to some deliberate European Union (EU) and government policies in the EU. To this regard, it is important to understand the factors that still limit the participation of women in other areas of sport. In addition, it is significant to also recognise the different factors that enhance the participation of women in different areas of sport.

2. Methodology

Four focus groups were planned to evaluate the perception of the participation of women in sport. Three focus groups were held in Spain, Italy, and Luxemburg. The questions were drawn from a literature review conducted in the context of the GAP-Women Erasmus+ project. The questions were further developed based on the factors (constraints and facilitators) that influence women's participation in sport. Other than the background information of the participants that was requested, participants were given the opportunity for additional information at the end of the main questions of the focus group discussions. The composition of the focus groups were open to male and female as well as a wide representation of different roles in sport. The discussions were also held at community level, regional level, and European level. All three focus group discussions were held between 22nd February and 15th April with 8 to 12 participants with participants age ranging from 18 to 50 years. In addition, they all had a duration of between 60 to 90 minutes. The focus groups were all translated to English for analysis.

Analysis

A qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, was used to analyse the focus group discussions individually and collectively. The facilitators and constraints were used as main



codes. Interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural facilitators and constraints were used as sub-codes under each factor, respectively (See Code Book). Additional pertinent sub-themes were identified and added.

Other codes were created based on the issues that were discussed during the focus group discussions such as roles, emotions, topics that were talked about, location of experiences discussed and the sport event in which the experience occurred. Finally, another code was created where participants “responses to inadequate comments” in their experiences was recorded.

For the focus group discussion that was held at the local level in Italy, most of participants were between 20 and 30 years old; only 25% were over 30 years old. 61% of them were required to hold a licence to compete. Participants were from the following sports: Artistic swimming, climbing, judo, rock climbing, skiing, sport climbing, swimming, synchronized swimming, volleyball, judo, water polo.

The regional level focus group, participants were from federated and non-federated sports. The participants were: instructors, trainers, competitors, diving guides, referees, and sport delegates. The sports the participants were involved include underwater sports and fin swimming, taekwondo, judo, swimming, running and padelling. It is also important to highlight that participant in this focus group also included individuals with other career professions outside sport, among which were maritime transport officers, biologists, students, social media managers/communications specialists, attorneys, and coordinators of sport centre.

The sport-specific (table tennis) and European level focus group also had participants who hold various roles in table tennis which include semi-professional players, professional players, coaches, executive board members of international federation, presidents of national federations, referees, and employees of federations. Among these were also participants that had other professions beside the sport activities which included being a community manager, student, digital marketing expert, nutritionist, sales expert, or an attorney.

3. Word cloud

Words that featured most in all three focus group discussions and relevant to the project were identified among the Word Cloud and presented below (Figure 1). The word “men” ($n=166$) appeared more than any other word.



European Union Regional level FG

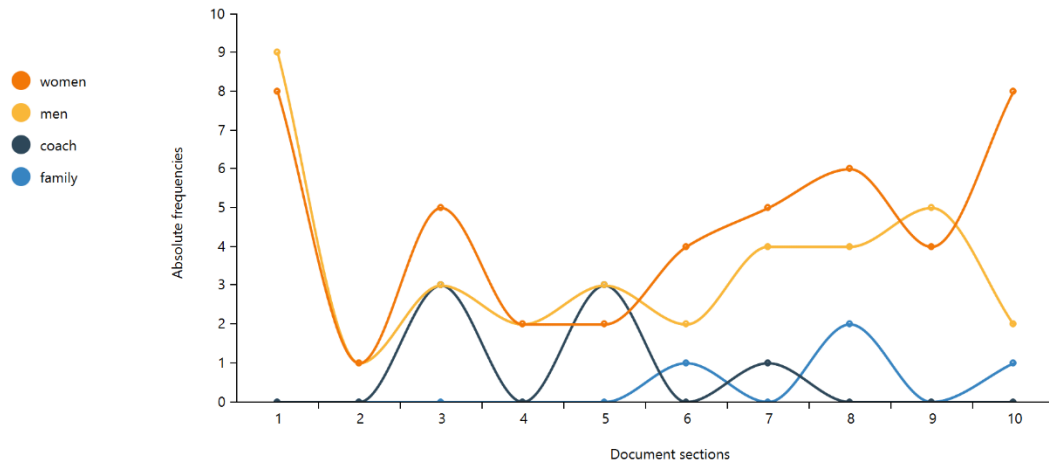


Figure 3: Word Trends of Regional Level FG discussions

European Union Sport-specific FG

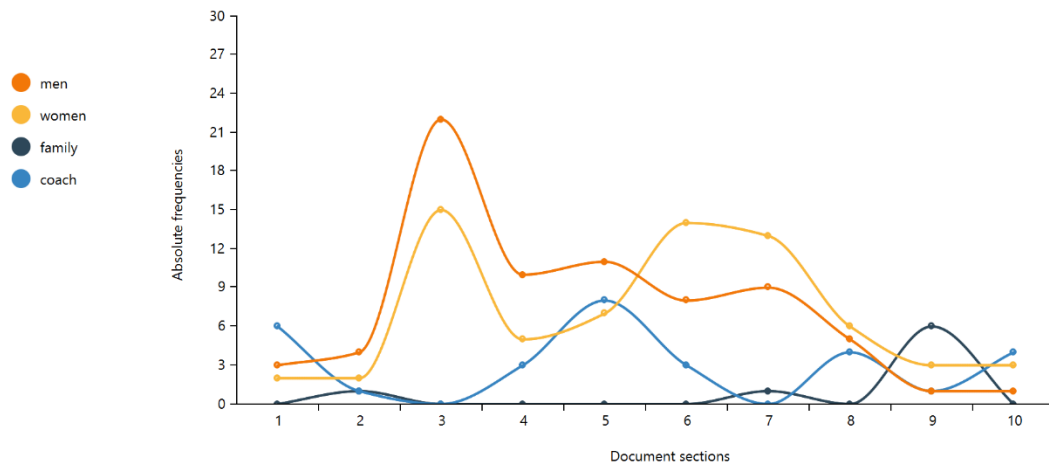


Figure 4: Word Trends of European Level Sport-Specific FG discussions



5. Hierarchical Relations

A hierarchical relation of the subcodes for constraints and facilitators was also extracted.

Hierarchisches Code-Subcodes-Modell

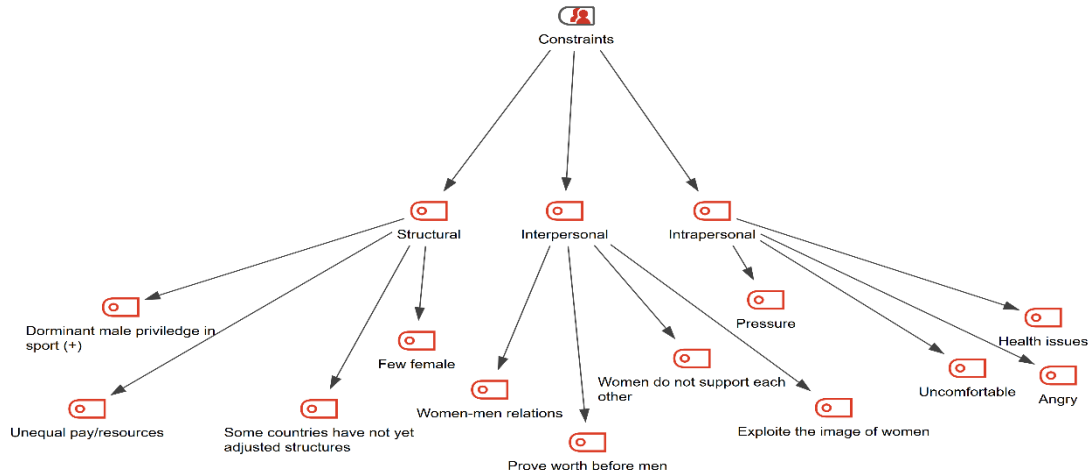


Figure 5: Hierarchical relations of subcodes for constraints

Hierarchisches Code-Subcodes-Modell

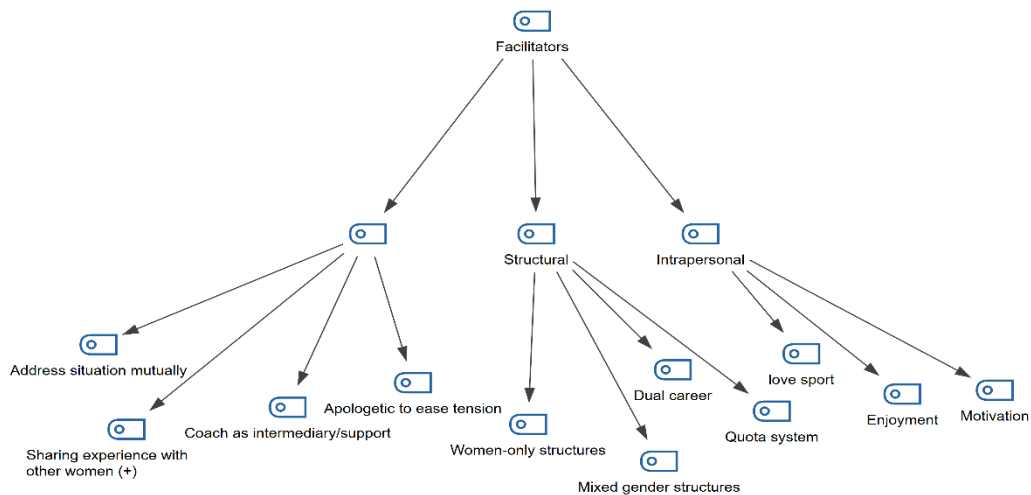


Figure 6: Hierarchical relations of subcodes for facilitators



6. Code Relations

Code relations show the relationships between the statements/words and the respective codes or sub-codes. The thickness of the relationship demonstrates the strength of the relationship. In this case, the facilitators are in blue and the constraints in red.

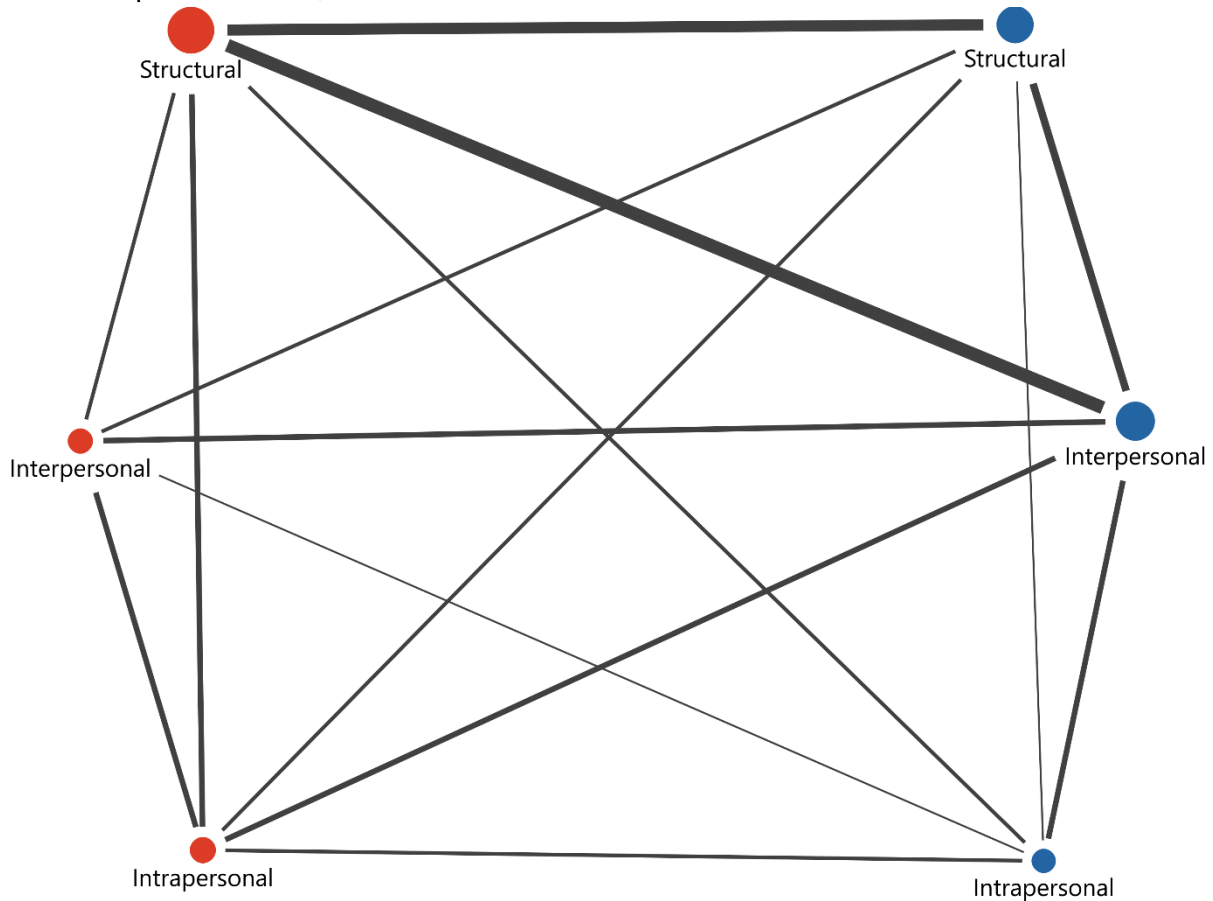


Figure 7: Code relations of constraints and facilitators



7. Code book: Report of the Focus Group discussions on the participation of (Licensed) women in sport

Theme	Sub-code	Sub-codes	Description	Examples/Quotes
Facilitator	Intra-personal	Motivation	Occurs within the individual mind	"Want to give back something to the sport."
		Love sport	Expressions of love for sport that influence participation in sport	"Well, if I can say, I just really love table tennis. I've grown up with it like my family. So, I learned to love it very much."
		Enjoyment	What the participants considered as enjoyment and how they experienced it in their sport	"The interaction, the people I met, the memories from the team events, all the success and sharing the happy moments with the people, is nice. It's special because you share the happiness with someone, so for me it's all about life, the moments, the people you meet and all that."
	Inter-personal	Sharing experience with other women	Relationships and communications between women in the sport or focus group discussion	"I am also in the coach's commission. So, we prepare seminars for the coaches, and I choose the topics that I want the coaches to learn. And I stay in the sport because I have the feeling that I need to give back something."
		Apologetic/supportive men	Experience or support received from men in promoting gender equality in sport	"I believe that the male figure must be present to achieve equality. Both parties need to be educated. We must involve the female by also involving the male. I don't see it bad that a man promotes female successes, if the man gives real support and doesn't do it for pinkwashing."
		Coach as intermediary/support	Experiences with supportive coaches	"I was lucky that my coach was helping me if I had to study. I wouldn't practice in the afternoon while I was planning my studies."
		Address situation mutually	Experiences with instances of how situations were mutually addressed	"I address the situation there. This is my motivation to succeed in the position that I have now. It starts maybe from negative experience, but it helps you so much, it makes you stronger."
		Structural	Quota system	Relating to forms or part of the organisational structures



		Mixed gender structures	Effect of mixed gender structures as expressed by the participants	“Yes, the acrobatics (in synchronized swimming) would be insane if they would do a mixed team routine. It would make the sport (synchronized swimming) more dynamic perhaps, and altogether, maybe more popular. It's the acrobatics that people who don't do the sport are most interesting in.”
		Women-only structures	Impressions on women-only structures	“Actually, I'm quite lucky. I never had the issue. I moved back from Germany where we were just a group of women for a long time just practicing within women.”
		Dual career	Challenges in managing dual career opportunities alone	“I started school in September, and I stopped my career. You know in the transition movement it is difficult to organise. I had five years without school. Actually, it was bad because I couldn't go out of my sport, and I thought I could start something new but it takes a lot of time. And you need to manage both.”
Constraint	Inter-personal	Women do not support each other	Constraints that occur within the individual mind of women in relation to their participation in sport	“Those women who managed to get inside a federation, were already the women working for the clubs of the province. They are the always the same women, they do not give opportunities to new women.”
		Exploit the image of women	Experience of participants on how they feel the women's image is being exploited in sport structures without concrete internal initiatives	“How can you come to the board? Because if you come we will get more money? So, what will I do? or do you choose me because I'm useful and I can bring something, or do you choose me only to put me in a corner and you receive more money?”
		Prove worth before men	Impressions of women in need to prove worth to be accepted in sport	“It's true that from the beginning you have to prove maybe a little bit more.”
		Women-men relations	Women's experiences with men in different roles in their sport	“I had the same situation, but with a coach, a coach on national team that would always say that we cannot play any sports, especially table tennis. That we were wasting our time. So, it was so difficult to defend ourselves because he was in a powerful position. So, we would feel always under a lot of pressure because we



				needed to show him that we were able to play, and we deserve to be there.”
Intra-personal	Uncomfortable	Constraints that women are confronted with in their relationships and communications with others in their participation in sport		“You know we train with boys, of course, and we have “Neva”, the techniques on the ground. And, you know there are some techniques where you have a boy between your legs. For somebody who doesn't know Judo, it's uncomfortable, even for us.”
	Health Issues	Health issues that women experience due to coaches' or other stakeholders' lack of knowledge in women issues		“He wanted to put me on some kind of dieting pills, which I really didn't want to, because I was a young woman going to puberty, and I didn't want to take any kind of pills. So that really bothered me because I got stressed with my body image for a long time. Even today I'm a bit stressed about it. So, I would say coaching is the biggest problem in swimming, especially male coaches.”
	Pressure	Pressure on women to practice sport and fulfil responsibilities in roles		“The coaches have same expectation from the men and women, but the women are spending four hours per today on other things. So, it's also to understand that yes, today I studied two hours I went to practice, I ate, I even didn't have time to sleep, I have period and I'm tired, but I still need to like give my 100%. The schedule is also changing day by day and you need to adapt to that, so men have less to care about.”
Structural	Unequal pay/resources	Constraints that relate to or form part of the organisational structures of sport and hinders women's participation in sport		“I would say the biggest difference is more in the clubs, because then they will tell you, Oh, but the men's team is bigger and gets more sponsors, so this money goes there.”
	Dominant male privilege in sport	Expressions of experiences of dominant male privileges		“I once said to the Spanish Association sports director, like you're not hiring women for coaching. And he said he would hire me on whatever coaching role. And I was like yeah, but I'm overqualified for a coaching position. You know, I have been four times Olympian, so that's what it takes for you to hire a woman. You have seven mediocre guys that were just



				mediocre players, and you just put them there because they are men and for women, you say, oh, you have to be you, somebody excellent otherwise, you don't hire even a mediocre woman.”
		Some countries have not yet adjusted structures	EU level or national regulations that challenge effective female participation in sport	“The swimmers, when we had to carry out concentrations from the application of the Bologna Plan, we could not miss the university. They directly suspended us if we did not attend the studies. In my case, I failed exams because I couldn't reconcile swimming with university studies. The teachers did not offer me solutions, they directly suspended me for not attending, even with justified reasons.”
		Few female	Evidence of lower number of women in sport structures	“And in the Finish Executive Board, I have been the only female member for 20 years.”
Roles	Coach/Trainer		Reference to a coach irrespective of the gender and level of coaching	“I also started as player and then I was a trainer and then I wanted to be at a higher level because as player and trainer, I was nothing. I decided to become an umpire.” “So, I try to make the sport better as a trainer so that other girls may not experience the things that I experienced.”
	Board member		Statements expressed as Board members or in experiences with Board members in their sport	“They could make political strategies so that there is a minimum number of women on the boards of directors. They could also encourage jobs filled by women with more responsibility or in departments where female representation is lower.” “I think that the boards of directors which are already made up of men are not interested in seeing this change take place. There are many situations of machismo that have been hidden because the presidents are machos.”
	Athlete		Athletes are active participants or reference to active participation in the sport.	“When I was a player and being always surrounded by men, male players that looked down on me, because of the way I play table tennis. It was something that made me feel shy, and uncomfortable.”
	Family		Issues related to constraints or facilitators that participants	“But I think this is an important reason why we don't have gender equality. How a woman for example, can't have a long career, even if she wants to have a break to have a family or house.



			expressed regarding managing sport roles and family responsibilities	<p>She can't be a trainer, if she has a family, and needs to travel all over the world at the same time because she is required to raise a family."</p> <p>"With family, especially if they have small children. It's normal that the mother to stay at home with the children and the father can travel around coaching. I don't know maybe some also prefer to stay home when the children are small."</p>
	President		Statements expressed in relation to the position of president or experience with people holding this position in the organisation	"Management positions are always monopolized by men, and it is difficult for women to reach the position of president. This is a problem that goes beyond gender. There are many personal interests that cause the formation of structures that are very difficult to destroy."
	Course instructor		Motivation of women as course instructors	"I'm involved in the courses, and I tried to give my little contribution as an instructor."
	Referee		Experiences of women as referees or Umpires	"For some years now that we try to have webinars for female umpires, and we try to have role models. So, we have some more women but is it because of the role models? Or is it because we inform the Federation and we proposed names and then they say, okay, I will go, we don't know."
	Director		Director of a sport organisation at all levels	"In my case, at the few meetings that I have been able to attend related to the world of sports, I have not met many female managers. I have met many men and, for the most part, over 50 years of age."
Topics	Sexism		Topics related to sexism highlighted by the participants	"But I remember I heard some girls say that some coaches used inappropriate language when they were demonstrating the technique. Like they said, okay, and then you put your balls like here near, you know, between the legs. And I was like, what?"
	Sponsors		Relations with sponsors and how these affect participation of women in sport	"It's the mistake of the club's with how they treat the money of the sponsors and how they present it to the sponsors. They say this goes to the female team, but in reality, there are no female coaches coaching in the Swedish first league."



	Media		Impressions and experience of participants with women and media in sport	<p>“We have the same results, like for 20 years, but nobody hears about it because nobody wrote about it.”</p> <p>“I want to highlight factors related to image, especially on social networks, when promoting swimsuits. They don't take the same photos between men and women. Girls are sexualized a lot.”</p> <p>“But one journalist told me that he wanted to make a male star out of judo. He was very good looking also and very talkative, but he didn't have such good results, but this journalist could also make it from women, but he did not.”</p>
Location	Sport hall		Locations of incidences as indicated by participants	“If somebody approaches me with sexism in sport, either it's in the hall or somewhere, then I'm just gonna be like, if you really don't find anything else to attack me on, then I feel really bad for you.”
	Pool		Incidents experienced in and around the pool	“Then you go to the pool, then all of the girls doing swimming, drums, all the nice things, and guys who are usually aggressive, give you all the nasty comments about your physical appearance.”
Emotion	Troubled		Emotions expressed by participants during the focus group discussion	“When you have young girls who only start to practice, they can't do those figures. They won't be able to do them for a couple of months, maybe years. It will take them a year to handle some of the more complex ones, maybe after a few months, you will be able to see like some of the really simple ones. So, it's something that you can't just jump into the water and try to do it.”
	Frustration		Sentiments of frustration expressed during focus group discussion or relating to a frustrating experience	“It kind of feels like a cult because once you get in, you can never leave. People do give up, but people who stay really stay for a long time. And it's really difficult to explain because it's hard. You don't get the recognition you deserve and still you push on.”
	Joy		Expression of joy over a situation	“She's like ridiculously good, like one in a generational talent, I would say.”
Responses to inadequate	Questioning		Situations that have been questioned	“Men are not doing that in my age. They're younger and going to school because they have to, or they don't because they have enough



uate com- ments	what was said		during the focus group discussion or a related experience	money. And they don't prepare the future maybe?"
	Neut- ral		Gender neutral statements expressed by participants	"I do not have a clear answer. In the world of taekwondo, all the leaders are very old. In our sport, communication is very bad, it is not managed correctly, and we are not promoted enough."
Events	Festiv- al		Complementary event to celebrate women in sport	"Another thing that we do now through this festival is that having an exclusive female activity is helpful. We bring also all our female coaches that we have here, and they will start there."
	Cham- pion- ship		Spaces where male dominance is evident	"If you say well football world championships or ice hockey, it's always men, you always think about men but in table tennis we use quite a lot the women's singles, men's singles, and world championships is for both genders at the same time."
	Leag- ue		Leagues that adopt gender neutral names	"I know in Finland, for example, they nowadays avoid writing for example, the men's handball league, they'd only talk about handball league, and then you have to read the text to know if they're talking about men or women."



8. Conclusions

The Focus group discussions demonstrates that among the sources of motivation that keep women in their respective sport is the desire to do something for their sport and help other women. This was also obvious as among the important icebreaker words that women used to describe the word “women” in their sport are “companionship”, “community”, and “friends” etc. This is also coupled with the love for their sport which creates an important level of emotional attachment to the sport and people around the sport.

Consequently, there is a clear difference between individual sport and team sport in terms of women’s participation. Individual sport is generally more gender equal based on their nature and not by design. However, what remain a challenge is that equality in practice as athletes does not translate into other roles in the sport. It is important to consider this when developing gender equality policies and strategies.

Coaches plays a significant role in the trajectory of female athletes. In the focus group discussions, coaches’ roles included managing gender related conflicts and an immediate support system for the athletes. The coach’s relationship with the female athletes also influence the decision of the athletes to assume coaching as a career, assuming other roles within the sport after retiring as an active athlete. However, the coach also influences the athlete’s decision to drop out of the sport.

The more equal gender representation there is, the more women feel comfortable in their positions and sport. To maximise this effect, it is important to have role models within the structures of the sport organisation. In addition, other support structures such as networking opportunities also play a significant role in the retention of women in sport or transition from athletes to other roles in the sport. Furthermore, as men are the main obstacle to increase the participation of women in sport, it is important to include “Male Equity Champions” in initiatives that promote the participation of women at different levels of sport.



9. References

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