



Report of a Systematic Literature Review on (licensed) female participation in sport federations within the European Union

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1. Introduction

Sport and competitive sport, in particular, is situated as a gendered space (Sisjord et al., 2021). It allows for the reproduction, exhibition, and construction of traditional notions of gender norms (Schaeperkoetter, 2017). Initiatives and regulations have been developed to address disparities for sport participation across gender in the European Union (EU). However, there are still considerable disparities in competitive sports (Bowes et al., 2021). According to the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) only 23.3% of women are in decision-making positions in European sport federations as presidents, deputies, executive heads, or board members. Out of the 28 European sport confederations surveyed, only seven were beyond the 40-50% gender balance zone (EIGE, 2022). A similar pattern is also observed in the management of Olympic sports in the EU. EIGE found that only 25.1% of National Olympic Committee (NOC) presidents, deputies, heads, and Board members are women in the EU NOCs. In addition, 22.7% of presidents, deputies, executive heads, and Board members of the top ten most public funded Olympic sports in EU member countries are women (EIGE, 2022).

The increase in participation of women in physical activity and mass sport is in stark contrast to the representation of women in the management of most followed sports in the EU. About ten EU member countries still lagged below the 10% mark of women's representation (EIGE, 2022). According to Galloway (2012) women in influential positions in sport organisations, commonly find themselves in two positions:

- 1) The so-called glass ceiling stands for the invisible but prevalent challenges that limit the progression of women in the organisation (p.51).
- 2) The so-called glass cliff implies the promotion of women to high positions in the organisation, but these positions will involve greater risks and or greater chances of failure (p.55).

There is an evident lack of support to facilitate the effective delivery of service for women elected or appointed to positions (Knoppers et al., 2021; Organista, 2021). Though gender quotas in sport management were adopted in countries like Norway already in 1987 (Green et al., 2015), adopting this instrument in the EU still poses a challenge. The level of adherence by sport organisations in the different member countries still limits gender quota as a political pressure tool. Legislative reforms to support the implementation of the gender pay gap in sport are limited in many countries because they are not entrenched in the national legislation (Carrick et al., 2021).



Women in competitive sport are more disadvantaged than men in terms of employment relations in European public, for-profit and non-profit sport organisations (Sisjord et al., 2021). This limitation widens in some countries as there are evident differences in the political and sport structures (Knoppers et al., 2021). Limited economic prospects for female athletes at lower competitive levels influence their decisions to abandon their sport careers for their education careers (Anderson & Barker-Ruchti, 2019). There is an evident lack of support for female athletes transitioning from junior to senior levels in competitive sport (Ekengren et al., 2020). In Sweden, for example, the lack of established support structures has forced many female (football) players to retire at the age of 18. They wanted to focus on educational careers because of a lack of social support within and outside the sport environment (Anderson & Barker-Ruchti, 2019).

Women between 10 and 80 years old participate less in competitive sport than men (Green et al., 2015). In most countries and sports across the EU, a license is needed to participate in competitive sport. The number of female license holders is smaller than that of male license holders (Knoppers et al., 2021). Moreover, the determinants of female participation in management and leadership, operations (e.g., coaching, refereeing/umpiring – from herein only referred to as refereeing), and education (e.g., coach education) must also be evaluated to identify participation or non-participation patterns. It is therefore necessary to systematically analyse the state of research on the participation of women in competitive sport.

This systematic review aims to determine the facilitators and constraints faced by women in competitive sport, coaching, coach education, management and leadership and refereeing. In this review's context, women's participation in competitive sport is understood as a gender construct. Gender is a socially constructed process based on cultural and environmental perspectives that define the relationships between men and women (Lee & Cunningham, 2018; Wicker et al., 2022). Gender diversity is desirable from an equal opportunity and business perspective of competitive sport organisations (Wicker et al., 2022). Finally, research found that the more gender-balanced sport organisations are, the more effective they become (Lee & Cunningham, 2018; Wicker et al., 2022).



2. Methodology

A review protocol was developed and registered on the Open Science Framework. A search strategy defining the search string and inclusion criteria was developed. The search string was as follows:

(women OR female) AND (sport organisation OR sport federation OR sport association OR sport media) AND (leadership OR coach OR license OR management OR umpire OR official OR referee OR coach education OR competitive sport).

Five databases (Web of Knowledge, PubMed, ERIC, Spolit and Google Scholar) were utilised. The search was conducted between 10th to 18th November 2022. The reference lists of identified articles were also searched for additional articles to ensure literature saturation.

The inclusion criteria were:

- Peer-reviewed;
- English language;
- Published 2014-2022;
- Focus on coaching, coach education, management and leadership, referees in competitive sport;
- Thematic relevance (exclusion criteria physical activity, recreational sport, athletic skills, youth development and project-based volunteering).

Initially, all review authors independently evaluated the first ten titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria. As high agreement was reached (over 80%), one researcher continued independently screening the remaining articles for inclusion. A form was jointly created to be used to collect the data. To ensure consistency in this regard, calibration exercises were conducted between the researchers.

All identified articles were transferred to SPSS and de-duplicated. An evaluation of the thematic agenda was at the core of the outcomes. This was linked to and evaluated based on the theory and methodological rigour. Evidence levels were evaluated, and an assessment of the risk of bias included. To assess the evidence levels, the proposed levels of evidence for the sport domain as highlighted by Breuer et al. (2016) were adapted for this study.

During this review, 269 articles were identified. After screening and removing the duplicates, 181 articles were excluded. 88 full-text articles were sought for retrieval and of these 83 full-text articles were accessed, retrieved, and screened. Following a further thematic analysis of the articles, 43 articles were removed and a total of 40 articles were analysed for this review.



3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Bibliographic information

The 40 journal articles were published by a total of 108 authors. A peak with 10 published articles was identified for 2021. Most articles were published in management journals ($n=9$), followed by policy and politics ($n=8$), as well as sociology, sport science, and education (each $n=9$). Most articles originated from Europe ($n=29$), followed by North America ($n=7$), or a global perspective ($n=5$).

3.2 Theoretical and methodological approaches

26 articles were based on a theory, framework or model. The use of theories and models was very heterogenous. However, some theories and models were used more than once. These included the social construction theory ($n=4$), Bourdieu's concepts on capital ($n=3$), a feminist theory ($n=3$), and Foucault's concept of power ($n=3$).

Nine studies were conceptual, whereas 31 studies were empirical. Considering the empirical studies, more than two-thirds of the studies ($n=23$) employed a qualitative paradigm, while eight used a quantitative research paradigm. All, but one study was cross-sectional. All studies (except for one) were mono-method. 20 studies used interviews, seven a survey, two were based on secondary data and document analysis, and one was an ethnographic study. Considering the data analysis, 23 studies were analysed by means of content analysis and 8 studies employed statistical procedures. The samples had one all-male, 14 all-female and 14 mixed gender samples in the studies.

3.3 Thematic bases

The thematic analysis is based on the constraints and facilitators faced by women in competitive sport. These core themes are further reflected at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural levels.

3.3.1 Intrapersonal constraints:

The level of differences between men and women in competitive sport generates a certain level of vulnerability for women engaged in different male dominated aspects. The findings of the review highlight that women who get involved in coaching, active participation as athletes, administration or officiating in a certain sport at competitive level are motivated by their love for the sport. However, this could be threatened by the dominant male environment in these



settings. This makes women feel undervalued and like outsiders who need to work to earn their place as a coach, referee, or manager (Drury et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2018).

This leads to the development or adoption of overt masculinity or critical self-reflection to be accepted in the male space and avoid sexism. The collaboration to reproduce the masculinist discourses, in most cases leads to treating other women with these prevailing masculine traits (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2016).

Women in competitive sport, and in coaching in particular, experience more social and psychological pressure than their male counterparts, which is detrimental to performance. Women coaches are expected to be younger than their male counterparts and less likely to marry to be accepted as coaches with a future. Women in male-dominated environments are not only open to the sexualised gaze of men. Yet, they are also forced to adopt non-threatening support roles to the organisation. This self-limiting behaviour leads to lack of trust and disregard for opinion (Schaeperkoetter, 2017).

With regard to employment relations, women are more likely to engage in other part-time or full-time employment alongside their sport engagement. The combination of family, education and work responsibilities with the sport engagement provides work inequalities and contributes to the high premature career retirement by female in high-performance sport. In addition, balancing other activities with sport at high performance leads to challenges such as lack of fitness, stress, burnout, and injuries (Mire et al., 2021).

Though gender quotas seem to increase the number of women participating in high-performance sport, there are downsides to the initiative. At an individual level, it has decreased women's motivation in male-dominated environments due to the level of ignorance of some men about gender equality issues in sport. Furthermore, "sceptic" and "cynics" men brand certain gender equality initiatives as unjust, unrealistic, and unnecessary (Kempe-Bergman et al., 2020; Knoppers et al., 2021).

3.3.2 Interpersonal constraints

Women's participation in competitive sport is still hindered by a high level of double standard manifested by men in managing inclusion in the organisations (Organista, 2021). Unwritten rules reserve certain positions for some men, which disadvantage others, the women. Symbolic violence of male counterparts or instructors are still prevalent in competitive sport. This is manifested by the reproduction of the interests and language of the dominant group, the men (Lewis et al., 2018). Women in competitive sport still face physical violence, sexist comments, insults and clichés in the practice and organisational settings. At board levels,



women are stereotyped as being good at lobbying, politicking, networking while other tasks are reserved for the “heroic masculine” counterparts (Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019, Betzer-Tayar et al., 2016).

In coaching, for example, there is a lack of trust in female athletics coaches' dedication and performance. This leads to challenges in making new friends. The decisions to hire and fire a coach are mostly based on male knowledge of coaching performance which directly disadvantages women aspiring for that position (Fernandez & Ospina-Betancurt, 2022; Knoppers et al., 2022).

To justify some of the stereotypes, men see the constraints faced by women as normal. Some men colleagues draw on traditional gender stereotypes to justify hegemonic actions or play the blame game for lack of interest by women to take up certain responsibilities. Female members in male-dominated sport federations reported more discrimination than women in female-dominated federations (Cibibin & Leo, 2022). In the male dominated sport organisations, meritocracy is mostly replaced by gender power relations.

3.3.3 Structural constraints

At a sport-specific structural level, the concept of inclusion has led to the adjustment of certain roles with gendered substructures. In Equestrian for example, the feminisation of recreational Equestrian and masculinisation of competitive Equestrian limits the number of women in Olympic and Paralympic Equestrian competitions. This is associated with gender traits which assumed that women prefer Dressage as it provides “close partnership” and “care” with the horse than Jumping and All-around competition. Women play important central positions at international competitions while men occupy these positions at mixed in club teams' competitions (Arachtingi, 2020).

Women with more competitive experience still get less opportunities for coaching. If it does happen, they still face low job stability and security, and are not well resourced. The courses' structures require participants to abide by and emulate certain male values, terminologies and ideologies attached to the sport. Women are obliged by the prevailing conditions to either acknowledge or resist men's perceived entitlement of knowledge and expertise in coaching and women's peripheralised status (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2016). In football for example, professional coaching license courses set male football as the norm and are built to privilege male coaches as the experts while female football is built as inadequate. For these reasons, women coach more individual sport than team sports; women are less likely to be head



coaches and more assistants to men. In general, men coach more in clubs while women coach more in schools and recreational sports.

As a woman, having been a successful athlete does not guarantee winning board member elections as prevailing socio-cultural norms on gender influence election into a board. The skills of women are not recognised on equal terms as those of their male counterparts. Boards in sport organisations in competitive sport are still seen as an “old boys’ network or club” which makes it difficult for women to gain or maintain employment at the highest level especially in the non-profit sector (Roberts et al., 2022; Organista, 2021).

This review finds that the lack of gender equality initiatives and adherence to the quota system is mostly blamed on financial burden put on sport organisations. That notwithstanding, men still receive better pay as active athletes, board members, referees, and coaches in competitive sport. This could also be attributed to the limited understanding of the benefits of gender diversity for organisational effectiveness. Women in technical roles in competitive sport tend to perform worse due to gender discrimination in labour market from the recruitment processes to the working conditions (Burton, 2015).

The distinctive feature that re-enforces the stereotypes of women in competitive sport is gender marking of the sports. The “othering” of the female disciplines as “ladies/women’s” linguistically inferiorizes female athletics (Evans & Pfister, 2021). To this effect, gender (being female) and degree of disability have the same negative impact on commitment to the games and the skills of women are therefore not recognised on equal terms (Evans & Pfister, 2021; Greve & Süßenbach, 2021).

The masculine hegemony hinders gender operations in competitive sport organisations. The lack of institutionalising the equal pay initiative in competitive sport provides a way for the justifications of lack of funding, even for state-funded organisations (Burton, 2015). There is an evident lack of funding and adequate facilities for female participants to train and compete. This in turn means limited media attention and sponsorship opportunities for female sports.

Though dual career initiatives offer athletes a more stable future in competitive sport, structured dual career opportunities are limited for women in competitive sport. At the point of transition of the sport careers women mostly opt away (Sisjord et al., 2021). The work environment and organisational structures in competitive sport lacks regulations of work-life balance for women.

Women are constructed as incapable of working at the same level as men and offered a window/opportunity to accept the norms in the organisation. These religious and social constructions are reproduced in the sport setting and presents men as the appropriate



overseers of sport. The social gender stereotypical notions of leadership give preference to appointment of male in sport industry (Zehntner et al., 2021).

3.3.4 Intrapersonal facilitators:

Irrespective of the challenges women are faced with in the different facets of competitive sport, some have been able to challenge the status quo. A successful sport career serves as a strong symbolic capital for women for other roles within the sport. In a nutshell “having a name” is a tool for self-inclusion and gain space as a woman (Sisjord et al., 2021). Having the competence and aspiring for a further challenging environment enhances trust and respect from peers.

Other than embodying a transformative leadership style, most of the women who aspire for certain roles or positions in competitive sport organisations do so for the love of the sport (Wicker et al., 2022). In addition, the fun and rewarding experience in practising the sport motivates some to experience this in other aspects of the sport like in coaching, refereeing or administration.

Being a role model is a key factor why many women aspire for roles in competitive sport. To counter the social and religious stereotypes associated with women assuming certain roles in competitive sport, balancing participation with religious requirements in the context enhances further acceptance (Knez et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2018).

According to Hinojosa et al. (2017), women have more international athletic experiences than men. In aspiring for positions in competitive sport, it is therefore important that women settle for familiar working environments. On the contrary, problematising gendered hierarchy and its micro-politics as an alternative to challenge male superiority serve to wash off the challenges being faced (Knoppers et al., 2022).

3.3.5 Interpersonal facilitators

Access to mentorship by fellow women who offer career advice, guidance and access to professional development opportunities boost the morale of women new in male dominated areas in competitive sport. Mature women weightlifters benefit more from women coaches due to increased mutual support and understanding of challenges. In addition, the mentorships provide and enlarge their network of shared knowledge and experiences. Though male mentorship also proves effective, the effect is higher when women are mentored by fellow women (Mire et al., 2021).



The review acknowledges that there is improved acceptance of women in coaching, refereeing and administration of competitive sport. In addition, the support by male Equity Champions has further strengthened the level of acceptance in various aspects of competitive sport (Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). In many instances, club and team management provide the support and encouragement required by women in unfavourably critical situations and positions in the organisations.

Close social support structures such as family and friends, serve as source of motivation to women in competitive sport. Furthermore, other extended support from teachers, the personal network, influential females in society encourage to take up and remain in coaching and refereeing in competitive sport. Support by fellow women already familiar with the male nature of some sport enhances easy and effective delivery of responsibilities (Taylor, 2020).

Fellow women share the honour in the achievement of fellow women. This is where the effect of role models plays a significant role for younger women in competitive sport. It is important to highlight that it is easier for young women coaches to find a role model in female-dominated sport federations. Role models provide the framework to navigate through their past experiences, professional conduct, and a deeper familiarity with the sport, if its sport specific. These complementary skill sets further serve as key job attractors (Cibibin & Leo, 2022; Pike et al., 2017).

3.3.6 Structural facilitators

Prioritising women-specific coach education, refereeing accreditation courses and mentorship should be part of sport organisations' legislations, policies, and structures. Programmes for the recruitment of aspiring coaches, referees and managers should provide the support system for implementing policies that promote women's participation in competitive sport.

As highlighted in the constraints, women are mostly discriminated in the selection processes into positions and roles. Therefore, sport organisations must add disciplinary measures for perpetrators of discrimination in selection processes to their rules and regulations. In addition, there should be explicit legal prohibitions against gender discrimination, a gender-sensitive language and provisions that mandate the development of women in sport organisations (Samad, 2021).

Stakeholders of sport organisations have a significant role in the promotion of gender equality in sport organisations. They can influence the operations and gender norms within their organisations. They can increase advocacy, challenge patriarchy with alternative structures for the organisation and ensure rotation of Board members to negate the formation of a "boys



club" (Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). Stakeholders can ensure value congruency between the sport and the focus of their organisation.

Sport-specific gender quotas regulations should be developed as political pressure by national authorities for public, for-profit, and not-for-profit sports organisations (Carrick et al., 2021). This will enhance the introduction of a quota system in all sports and embedded in the constitutions. Organisational diversity should be a key value in evaluating the adherence to governance principles of sport organisations. Furthermore, Gender Equality Certificates to be approved by government agency need to be a key funding requirement for sport organisations (Carrick et al., 2021). There should also be specific legal provisions that prohibits discrimination based on pregnancy explicit in the contracts of female athletes, coaches, and manager sign (Samad, 2021).

Positive public support measures should be established for female coaches and managers to promote better balance of power in society between men and women (Fernandez & Ospina-Betancurt, 2022). To empower women in sport, the media should prioritise female idols in media coverages of sport events. As the gender of coach does not significantly impact individual player and team performances, role models in coaching, refereeing and management could be exemplified in society and the media (Fernandez & Ospina-Betancurt, 2022).

The emergence of new disciplines or mixed disciplines is the perfect opportunity to regulate and harmonise the gender equality initiatives by sport organisations. In Equestrian for example, Crossbreeding or "Mixed care" is an opportunity to rethink the rider-horse relationship and gender substructure in Olympic and Paralympic Equestrian (Arachtingi, 2020). This is the opportunity to promote the inclusion of active female minorities marginalised in competitive sport.



4. Conclusion

This review has demonstrated that studies on women’s participation in competitive sport has over the years evolved. That notwithstanding, there still evidence of high number of studies that employ qualitative paradigm and cross-sectional studies. Academia needs to encourage comparative studies between sports to enhance the transfer of knowledge and practices from sports which advances gender equality practices. In addition, longitudinal studies across social contexts needs to be encouraged.

The identified constraints and facilitators demonstrate the need to change from implicit thinking into explicit policy direction. It is paramount to shift the narrative of women’s leadership in sport governance from gender equality to gender equity. National legislative reforms specific to the sporting context can aid in closing the gender pay gap. Legal structural changes to increase visibility should be encouraged and disciplinary measures should be established for failure to adhere to regulations. Incentives should be created for sport organisations that encourage changes in socio-cultural attitudes and the development of family-friendly policies. Hiring managers and selection committees should employ more objective selection criteria and first evaluate the climate of gender bias in an organisation. In addition, public selection policies for board members in sport organisations should be encouraged. Furthermore, sport organisations should develop policies aiming at achieving more egalitarian socio-economic conditions for all athletes irrespective of gender. Organisations in competitive sport should promote more “boom” narratives of women through testimonials and mentoring programmes for younger athletes, coaches, and referees to foster participation.



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