

Redefining Leadership in Sports:

Women as Leaders in the Sport Industry

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Objective of this project: investigate the successful paths of women in decision-making roles within the sport environment, aiming to uncover the processes and experiences that lead to top-level roles.

- participants' cultural background and career experiences
- shared behavioural patterns of female leaders in the sports industry
- recommendations of these accomplished women

Practical guide for
aspiring women
leaders

Challenge
conventional
leadership structures

Promote institutional
changes that support
gender diversity and
inclusivity

Critical literature review

Achieving leadership positions within the sports industry is challenging, especially for women (Step Up Equality, 2020).

'commitment, dedication, and sacrifice'

(Hartzell and Dixon, 2019).

- More obstacles for women than men to reach top-level positions (Hancock, Darvin, and Walker, 2018).

Since the 1980s, the underrepresentation of women in senior governance and leadership roles in sport has been recognised.

Efforts have been made to improve gender equality, but progress has been slow.

Some latest studies have found a notable increase in women occupying positions of responsibility over the past decade, however the percentage of women in these roles remains notably limited.

'Is gender on the international agenda? Gender representation and policy in international sport governance.'

Study by Matthews & Piggott (2021)

•**Focus:** Assess gender equity in international sport governance and provide insights for UK Sport's 2021-25 strategy.

Gender imbalance in top-level positions within international sports organisations across 60 global sports bodies.

•**Key Findings:**

- Women hold only **22% of executive board positions** across 60 major international sports bodies.
- Just **7% of president or chair roles** are held by women.



The dominance of traditional masculinity norms and remarkable underrepresentation of women, prevent and lessen their climb to the higher professional levels in the sports industry.

Table 1. Percentage and number of women in senior decision-making positions across six different groups of international sport organisations

| | Women on the highest governance body | | Women in the highest governance position | | Women in the highest leadership position | |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----|--|---|--|----|
| | % | n | % | n | % | n |
| International Multi Sport Organisations | 32% | 26 | 17% | 1 | 33% | 2 |
| Continental Olympic Associations | 20% | 19 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 |
| Continental Paralympic Associations | 24% | 8 | 0% | 0 | 33% | 1 |
| Summer Olympic IFs | 22% | 181 | 6% | 2 | 26% | 8 |
| Winter Olympic IFs | 17% | 15 | 14% | 1 | 14% | 1 |
| IPC-recognised IFs | 26% | 10 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 |
| OVERALL AVERAGE/TOTAL | 22% | 259 | 7% | 4 | 21% | 12 |

Matthews & Piggott (2021)

METHODOLOGY

To explore these women's experiences, a qualitative approach has been employed for this study.

- **Sampling Method:** Non-probability sampling to specifically target high-ranking women in decision-making roles within sports organisations.
 - **Rationale:** Enabled access to a difficult-to-reach population, providing first-hand, relevant insights.
- **Participant Criteria:**
 - Women in leadership positions for **at least 6 months**.
 - **No restrictions** on qualifications, age, ethnicity, family status, or years of experience.
 - Selection from a **variety of sports** organisations at both national and international levels.

To collect the data for this study, an *in-depth semi-structured online interview* for each participant was conducted.

Participants

- **Recruitment Process:**

- LinkedIn used to identify and contact potential candidates.
- Participants were invited via a detailed message, followed by a **Participant Information Sheet (PIS)** and **Voluntary Consent Form (VCF)**.
- Snowball sampling helped expand the participant pool.

- **Sample Size:** 11 women, aged **20 to 55**, representing diverse roles (managerial, operational, and leadership) in organisations such as the **Olympic Committee, Rugby World Cup, Football Association**, etc.

- **Ethical Approval:** Research approved by the **Abertay Ethics Committee (EMS 7493)**.

- The heterogeneity of participants' roles brings a broader perspectives and adds a unique aspect to the study

| Name | Role | Organisation | Country |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|---|----------------|
| Federica | Operation Associate | International Basketball Federation FIBA 3x3 | Switzerland |
| Daisy | Associate Manager | Canadian Olympic Committee | Canada |
| Alice | National Club Manager | Scottish Athletics | Scotland |
| Roberta | / | Canadian Olympic Committee | Canada |
| Jessica | Equity Officer | Scottish Football Association Club | Scotland |
| Jasmine | Country Coordinator | International Olympic Academy Participants Association | Greece/Qatar |
| Margaret | Senior National Development Manager | The Football Association | England |
| Lily | Head of Network | Special Olympics Great Britain | Great Britan |
| Laura | Senior Teams Operations Manager | Australian Olympic Committee | Australia |
| Catherine | Executive General Manager | Rugby World Cup Australia | Australia |
| Emma | National Community Impact Manager | Scottish Athletics | Scotland |

Findings

The key themes highlighted during the analysis process.

Challenges that Women have faced in Past Experiences

- Age, gender and Obstacles
- Imposter syndrome

Decisions that help them advaced

- Key actions and behaviours
- Practical work experience
- Port passion in career paths

Advice

- Education and career achievement, what eally matters
- Mentors and network
- Building own brand
- Reccomendations for future females leaders

□ Challenges that women have faced in past experiences

■ **Gender, Age, and Obstacles:**

- **Negative Impact of Gender and Age:** being female and young hindered participants' careers, requiring them to work harder for lower pay compared to male colleagues.
- **Credibility Issues:** Younger women struggled to be taken seriously in leadership roles, with their ideas often overlooked until reiterated by male counterparts.
- **Resilience and Growth:** women exhibited resilience, reflecting on personal growth stemming from their experiences.

'I was the youngest one...I was the only woman in the office and even though I was doing a really good job, I was doing maybe like three times more than the other would do, and for a third of their salaries, just because I am young and I'm a woman. ... this was a bit tough, and it is actually one of the main reasons why I left because I was not feeling valued'

'I actually carry clothes in my car for different meetings I go into because I need to find, I feel like I get different respect depending on what I'm wearing.'

■ **Imposter Syndrome:**

- **Self-Doubt and Inadequacy:** Women frequently experienced imposter syndrome, feeling unqualified due to unsupportive environments.
- **Role of Mentorship:** Supportive mentorship was identified as crucial in helping women overcome self-doubt and build confidence.

□ Decisions That Helped Participants Advance:

■ Key actions and behaviours

- **Stepping Out of Comfort Zones – Risk-taking:** Leaving secure jobs, relocating, or assuming new roles led to pivotal career moments.

■ Practical Work Experience:

- **Hands-On Opportunities:** Internships, placements, and volunteer work were crucial for career growth.

■ Sport Passion in Career Paths:

- **Beyond Passion:** while all participants shared a passion for sport, dedication to organisational objectives and practical experience were deemed more vital for leadership success. Passion drives commitment but must be complemented by leadership skills for long-term achievement.

‘My personal philosophy has always been ‘I need to gain more experience than everyone else around me if I wanted to progress ... What do I bring to the party that they don't have? I will always go and try and get more experience than necessary. I think experience is really, really important’.

‘I had a lot of voluntary experience, which obviously is being the main driver to me getting the job’.

□ Mentorship and Networking for Career Advancement

■ Education and career achievement, what really matters

- There is no direct correlation between education level and positions held; only three participants have master's degrees
- Most participants agree that experience is more crucial than formal education for achieving leadership roles in the sports industry

■ Mentors and network

• Role of Mentors:

- Participants unanimously stress the significance of having mentors.
- Mentors provide guidance, support, and help boost confidence.

• Building Connections:

- Participants advocate for cultivating networks within the sports industry through conferences, boards, and community involvement.

'I think the relationship piece can't be underestimated, especially as a female. I think having a great network around you is also important because that would really help'.

■ Recommendations for Aspiring Female Leaders

- Focus on gaining practical experience and developing skills.
- Pursue mentorship and networking to enhance career prospects.
- Create a personal brand and advocate for oneself within the industry.

Table 2 – Education and Role of Participants

| Name | Years in the sport industry | Education |
|-----------|-----------------------------|---|
| Federica | ~6 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Science in International Hospitality Management Master of Business Administration - MBA, Sports Management |
| Daisy | ~8 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Arts, Communication and Media Studies |
| Alice | ~4 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Laws |
| Roberta | ~16 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Arts, Recreation Administration |
| Jessica | ~17 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Science, Sports Development Bachelor of Business Administration, Business Management and Leadership |
| Jasmine | ~8 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor, Geography and Cartography Engineering Master of International Olympic Academy |
| Margaret | ~17 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Science (Hons), Sports Development and Coaching Sciences Master of Arts, Education Early Years |
| Lily | ~4 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MA (Hons), International Business Management with French |
| Laura | ~17 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Management, Sport and Exercise |
| Catherine | ~20 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Arts, Leisure Management |
| Emma | ~8 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor (Hons), Sport Development |

‘It’s almost like a seesaw. So, if you’ve just got your degree, but you’ve got no experience, you’re going to struggle massively, whereas if you’ve got lots of experiences and you’ve got a degree, that’s probably the best place to be in’.

Future objectives

- **Expansion of Research:** extend the study to include a broader number of participants, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of the experiences of women in the sports industry.
- **Investigating Societal Impact:** investigate the social and economic effects of the challenging pathway to leadership roles that women face.
 - **Creating a Mentorship Platform:** establish a platform that facilitates mentorship between experienced professionals and aspiring women in the sports field. This initiative will provide concrete support, fostering collaboration and guidance to empower the next generation of female leaders.

Thank you for your attention

ANY QUESTIONS?