Rocking the Boat? Changing the Underrepresentation of Women in Sport Governance

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Much has been achieved in the movement towards gender equity in sport in the last decades. Most of this has focused on the participation of women athletes. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has continuously worked to promote the inclusion of women in and through sport at all levels. The 2016 Rio Olympic Games featured the highest percentage yet of female competitors at 45 per cent. However, women’s participation in decision-making in sport has yet to reach equivalent milestones. In 2015, women comprised only 26.4 per cent of members of the IOC’s executive board. Within the National Olympic Committees’ (NOCs) the number was even lower with women comprising only 19.9 per cent of board members; and this representation was even lower (14 per cent) within International Federations (IFs) boards. This gender skewness is contrary to the IOC’s commitment to the principle of gender equality (Rule 2, para7, Olympic Charter). Rogge (IOC, 2012) has argued that “it is time to match the advancements made toward gender equality that have been achieved on the field of play with progress in management and leadership positions throughout the world of sport” (p. 4).

Research on gender and sport governance contends that the adoption of equity policies requires not just counting the number of women board members but an examination of the thinking (images and values) and actions (practices) of men and women board members of sport organizations (Adriaanse, 2016; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012; Henry and Robinson, 2010; Sibson, 2010). Although the ways board members think about and practice gender has received scholarly attention (e.g., Hovden, 2010; Pfister, 2012) most of this research has focused on ways women are excluded from governance by structural and discursive dynamics. This presentation is part of a larger project which examined strategies used by men and women board members to establish a culture that increases the number of women and makes board membership an experience in which both women and men can flourish. This project explored how dominant thinking about and practices of gender diversity have been challenged and reproduced by both men and women.

As ideas and practices can be contextual and vary across sports, level of governance and country, this project included IFs, National Federations (NF) and their NOCs from different sports and in two countries (Australia and the Netherlands). We used several criteria to select countries and sports: (a) the gender ratio in sport participation and the gender composition of the governing board should be close to balanced, (b) the board should have a goal of attaining gender balanced membership, and (c) we should have access to the organization and permission to work with them in this study. In this presentation we report on results based on a sport that has a positive history of working towards gender balance in their committees and has similar participation numbers for both women and men athletes, providing two comparable pools of women and men from which possible board members were drawn. By including the boards of an IF, two NFs in the same sport and their NOC, we examined how processes of moving towards gender balance are inter-related across the various levels of governance.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with men and women members of the selected boards. The interview schedule was designed to focus on the images/values (thinking) and practices/interactions (actions) of these board members and was informed by Acker’s (1990; 1992) work on the role images and hierarchal values play in the practices/interactions through which an organization or board assigns meanings to gender and vice versa. Therefore, interview questions asked how the interviewees were involved in board related practices, such as recruitment and selection strategies, the assignment of tasks, meeting cultures, professional development opportunities or training/workshops available (and other such related topics) and what they did to facilitate gender balance. The interview schedule also included questions that enabled interviewees to describe organizational relationships and networks and how they use them to facilitate gender balance, individual experiences of selection and promotion opportunities (and other such related topics). All interviews were conducted in English, audio taped
and transcribed, and then analysed using thematic analysis and sequential coding processes.

The findings support various studies that have shown that diversity is a highly important organizational value but the translation of that thinking to practice is complex (Emrick, 2011; Fink, 2016; Knoppers, Claringbould, & Dortants, 2013). Gender diversity emerged as a key value across all boards. Board members’ actions toward establishing and sustaining such diversity were driven primarily by top-down decisions made by governing bodies such as the IOC and NOCs and an awareness that a low number of women tended to reproduce and normalize inequality. The interviewees believed that women are more prepared than ever to take on leadership roles within boards yet wider social and cultural barriers and perceptions about women’s role in sport and society present key challenges. The results also show that although some board members wanted change, they were not always sure how to transform their board to be women–friendly or willing to engage in the work that was required to do so. Practices that were seen as encouraging gender equity included male leaders championing gender equity within their boards in ways that went beyond the recruitment and selection processes of board members. The presentation will offer insight on how processes at the national and international levels of sport governance are similar and different. Furthermore, the presentation will convey the ways the findings in this study can be used to create strategies that enhance gender equity in sport governance and thus contribute to good governance.