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Analysis of career pathways of British postholders in international sport governance

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KEY DEFINITIONS

Junior position in international sport: A subordinate role to the senior decision-makers of the organisation, such as being a chair or member of a committee, commission or working group.

Senior position in international sport: A decision-making role such as a president, vice-president, secretary-general, or member of an executive board.

1. INTRODUCTION

There continues to be a significant underrepresentation of women within decision-making positions in international sport organisations (Adriaanse, 2016, 2019; Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016; Henry & Robinson, 2010; Matthews & Piggott, 2021; Schoch & Clausen, 2019). Since the first research studies about gender exclusion and inclusion appeared in the 1980s (Theberge, 1984; White & Brackenridge, 1985), a growing body of knowledge has developed to try to explain the continual lack of significant change in gender ratios in sport leadership and governance positions. Findings have revealed barriers, obstacles, and processes that lead to the exclusion of women, such as the preference for men as leaders, the use of male-oriented selection procedures, the prevalence of sexist acts and talk in sport departments and organisations, and the changes that women face in combining motherhood and a career in sport administration (Burton, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021).

Few studies have focused on the backgrounds, career paths, and experiences of individual sport leaders. Studies that have adopted this focus have been positioned at the national level, and have found that male and female leaders are influenced by gender-specific experiences, attitudes, and evaluations, and that gender-related issues with power, prestige, and conflict are common reasons for individuals to leave national sport leadership positions (e.g., Pfister & Radtke, 2006, 2009).

As far as we are aware, there is no existing research exploring the gendered experiences of individuals progressing from national to international sport governance. Instead, the focus has been *either* at the national *or* international level. Drawing on existing research, it is recognised that female candidates and postholders likely face additional barriers that may affect their ability or willingness to put themselves forward for election or appointment, their rate of election success, their ability to influence change or form key relationships within their organisation, and their enjoyment and sense of achievement within their roles.

This report presents findings from a two-phase mixed method project.

The research objective for the first phase was to survey all UK postholders within international sport organisations and collect and analyse data about their demographics, backgrounds, career pathways, and leadership experiences. The social characteristics from a sample of 55 UK postholders in international sport organisations are presented and we identify social groups that are underrepresented amongst this group of leaders. Additionally, (gendered) trends are identified in relation to the career pathways of British postholders, both in terms of the influence of sporting and non-sporting roles/sectors on their current post-holding. Furthermore, the experiences, perceptions, facilitators, and challenges of British postholders are discussed from a gender lens, highlighting examples of both gendered and non-gendered findings. These findings influenced the next part of the research.

The second phase of the research aimed to provide an in-depth exploration of the career pathways of British postholders in international sport governance, including an examination of gendered differences, intersectional barriers, and factors for success.

Twelve people (six men and six women) were interviewed about their career pathway and journey into sport governance, and their experiences and challenges of getting into and maintaining a position in international sport governance. Using insights from the first part of the research, the importance of networking was also asked of the interviewees. Our findings demonstrate the impact of a myriad of formal and informal processes at personal, organisational, and sectoral levels throughout the journey to obtaining a position. Gendered experiences are noticeable, though we were keen to take an intersectional approach and have identified where other factors have been important. Nevertheless, we are acutely aware that the demographics of British postholders are overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, and non-disabled.

Our findings are separated across eight sections and, when combined with the recommendations listed at the end of this document, are intended to be used by UK Sport, national governing bodies, and other stakeholders to inform applied practice in the sector to improve gender equality and support more women into senior leadership roles in international sport governance.

2. METHODOLOGY

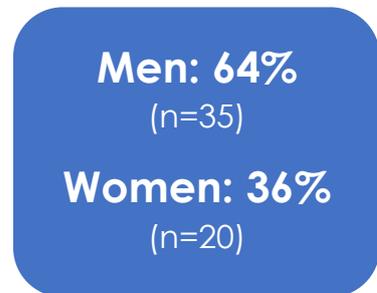
This study had a two-phase, mixed methods design: 1) an electronic survey and 2) in-depth interviews.

2.1. Electronic survey

2.1.1. Research sample

The research sample for the electronic survey was drawn from a database maintained by UK Sport that keeps a record of all British individuals serving as president, an executive board member, and/or a member of a committee of international federations (IFs) and European federations (EFs) for Olympic or Paralympic sports where the respective UK national governing body (NGB) is receiving World Class Programme or Progression funding from UK Sport. As such, this database is solely comprised of sports that UK Sport invests in.

In total, 136 individuals who hold senior and junior positions in international sport were emailed the weblink for the online survey. Fifty-five people responded, meaning a response rate of 40%. Just under two-thirds of the respondents were men (n=35; 64%) and just over one-third were women (n=20; 36%). No respondent answered 'non-binary/gender-fluid', 'other', or 'prefer not to say'.



2.1.2. Data collection process

The survey was administered and analysed using Jisc software. A draft of the survey was created with feedback and input from UK Sport. The opening pages of the survey included an overview of the project and a consent form for ethical purposes. Thereafter, the survey was split into three sections and comprised multi-choice and open-answer responses:

1. *The demographics section* included questions on the participants' age, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship status, family/caring responsibilities, race/ethnicity, impairment/disability, religion or belief, geographic location (area of the UK), employment status, current occupation sector, and highest educational qualification. The purpose of this section was to provide an overview of the social characteristics of UK postholders in international sport governance and identify social groups that are underrepresented amongst this group of leaders.
2. *The career pathway section* encouraged respondents to detail their current leadership role(s) and responsibilities, previous sport leadership roles and responsibilities, and previous non-sporting professional roles and responsibilities that were most influential in helping them to obtain their current position. This aimed to highlight common trends in the routes that individuals take to get to leadership positions, including any potential gendered impacts.
3. *The leadership experience section* asked questions on the extent to which participants feel qualified, valued, and supported in their role, their career

aspirations, barriers to their progression, challenges they have overcome, and ways they could be better supported in their international sport leadership journey. This was to enable a critical analysis of the impact of gender norms and expectations, and organisational power dynamics, policies and procedures on the leadership experiences and opportunities of these individuals.

The survey went live in June 2022 and reminders were circulated by UK Sport in July 2022 to encourage completion. The survey closed at the end of August 2022.

2.1.3. Data analysis

Data were downloaded from JISC into a master spreadsheet and analysis was split into four parts. For some of the analysis, cross-tabulations were performed using the JISC software.

Firstly, a descriptive analysis of the social characteristics from section one of the survey was undertaken. Data were subsequently cross tabulated according to whether the respondent occupied a senior or junior position and, separately, by their gender. This analysis identified underrepresented social groups amongst the sample.

Secondly, a descriptive analysis of the responses to the multi-choice questions in sections two and three of the survey was conducted via comparisons between genders, a cross-tabulation of gender and position, and a cross-tabulation of gender and notable characteristics that had arisen in the first phase of analysis such as ethnicity, disability, age, and sexuality.

Thirdly, the qualitative responses to questions in section three were split according to gender and thematically coded. The codes were then analysed to explore (gendered) trends and anomalies in the experiences, perceptions, facilitators, and barriers of British postholders in international sport.

Finally, an analysis of responses to questions asking about the career pathways of the respondents was undertaken. Each answer was chronologically ordered before a descriptive analysis was undertaken of the type and level of roles occupied within and outside of sport. (Gendered) trends in career pathways were then identified and discussed.

2.2. In-depth interviews

2.2.1. Research sample and recruitment

Purposeful sampling was used to identify and recruit participants from the survey respondents who had indicated that they would be happy to take part in an in-depth interview. The sampling criteria was:

- 1) The individual holds or has previously held a senior post within an international federation.
- 2) The overall sample is gender balanced.
- 3) The overall sample is as heterogeneous as possible (in terms of social characteristics)

We contacted 16 individuals via email to ask if they would like to participate in an interview. Attached to each email was an information letter that provided full details of the project, the interview process, and how data would be used/handled. We received positive responses from 13 individuals. One participant had to drop out of the interview process due to a personal issue. Our final sample was thus 12 British senior postholders:

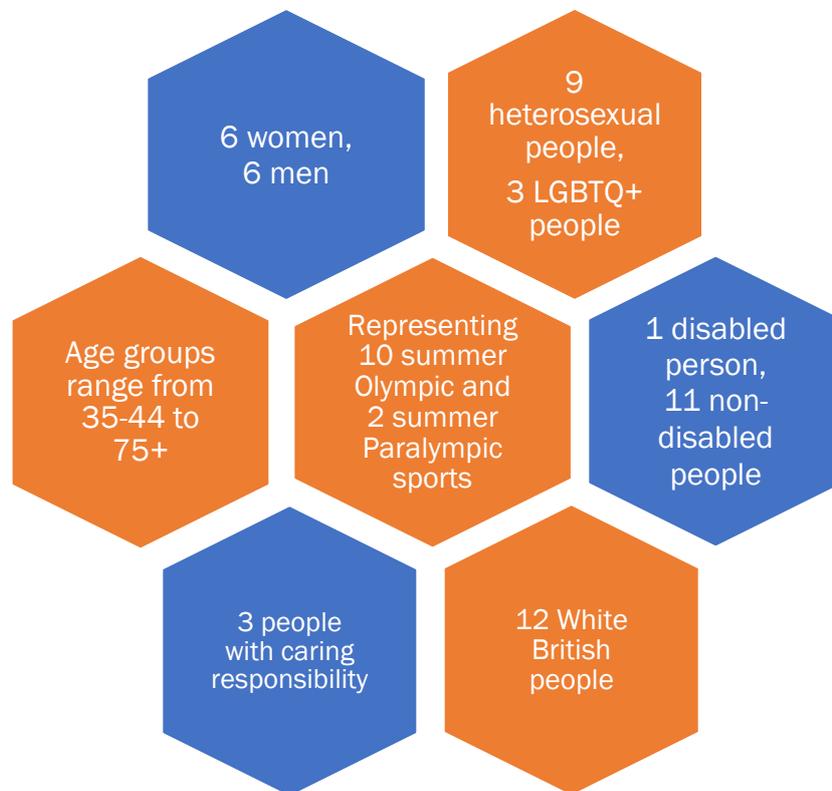


Figure 1: Sample characteristics

All the women within the interview sample have a university degree, and two of them have postgraduate degrees, showing they are highly educated. In comparison, four of the men have university degrees. One man completed further education whereas another left school at sixteen years old.

The women interviewees either had, or currently do work for, a sport organisation as their full-time paid role. For some they have always worked in sport, and others have come into sport from other professions (IT, law, and science). In contrast, three of the men's occupations related to sport (commercial, fundraising, and law). One had a background in the military, and the other two had worked for corporate and financial companies.

The women all had a background in sport and five of them have either competed or worked (coaching/refereeing/officiating) at an international level of sport. This was different to the men given that four had participated at national level in their sport and two were recreational. As such, many of the women had high sporting capital.

2.2.2. Data collection process

Due to both the sample and research team being in diverse geographic locations, the interviews were conducted online (via Zoom). An interview guide was developed prior to

the interviews taking place which was informed by the survey findings. The interview guide was comprised of five sections: 1) Introduction, 2) Career pathway and journey into sport governance, 3) Networks, 4) Sport governance experiences and challenges, and 5) Debrief. Within the debrief section the participants were informed of next steps, including how the data would be handed and analysed. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The interviews took place between January and April 2023, and were between 55 minutes and 1 hour 56 minutes long. Each interview was conducted by two members of the research team (Piggott and Matthews) and, with the consent of the participants, were all recorded via Zoom. An administrator external to the research team transcribed the interviews verbatim after signing a confidentiality agreement.

2.2.3. Data analysis

All interview transcripts were shared with the participants via email to allow them the opportunity to check for accuracy and withdraw any parts of the transcripts they did not feel comfortable with. Interview data was then thematically analysed using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software. Inductive coding took place, with codes being drawn from the empirical data. The women's and men's interviews were analysed separately to aid the examination of gender differences across the data and themes. Several levels of themes were developed, with the main themes being: 1) background, 2) journey, 3) motivations, 4) barriers and challenges, 5) enabling factors, and 6) recommendations.

During the analysis process, all participants and accompanying quotes were anonymised, ensuring that neither the individuals nor the organisations could be identified. This included refraining from naming the positions, organisations, or sports that the individuals represented. This is particularly important as sensitive and confidential topics were discussed within the interviews. We decided against the use of pseudonyms to further ensure participants could not be identified by linking more than quote to the same person.

Within the report, interview quotes are presented in italicised orange text, whilst qualitative survey responses are presented in italicised blue text.

3. FINDINGS

We present our findings according to the following sections:

- Sample characteristics/demographics
- Career pathways
- Obtaining an international post
- Inclusivity in international sport governance
- Challenges faced
- Enabling factors
- The role and impact of networking
- Support received

3.1. Sample characteristics/demographics

This section is relating to our survey sample, which also includes the 12 individuals who took part in the interviews.

There was a notable lack of diversity amongst the survey sample of British postholders in international sport (from which the interview sample was also drawn). Figure 2 demonstrates the dominance of certain characteristics amongst the sample whilst indicating differences between men and women.

The dominant descriptors include most of the sample being White British (96%; n=48), non-disabled (91%; n=50) and heterosexual (87%; n=48). Regarding ethnicity, this finding mirrors insights provided by an analysis of boards of UK Sport and Sport England-funded bodies in 2019 (Sport England & UK Sport, 2019). Thus, it is not surprising that a lack of ethnic diversity at national level extends to international sport governance. The report also states that 13% of the UK population are from diverse minority ethnic communities, meaning that British postholders of senior governance positions within international sport are not representative of the British population. However, the picture is different for sexuality. With nine per cent of our sample identifying they were LGBT+¹, this is significantly higher than the British average of two per cent and the three per cent of national board members (UK Sport/Sport England, 2019).

For other characteristics, many have an undergraduate degree or higher (80%; n=44), are married (71%; n=39), are aged 55 years or older (62%; n=34), and do not have caring/parental responsibilities (60%; n=33). Over half of the sample (56%; n=31) have competed in sport at international or Olympic/Paralympic levels. A small majority responded that they were Christian (56%; n=31) over having no religion (40%; n=22). Nearly half of the sample (45%; n=25) reside in the South-East or London, and 38% work

¹ Two respondents (four per cent) answered 'prefer not to say'.

full-time (n=21) compared to 35% who are retired (n=19). Of those who work, they predominantly do so in a sporting occupation (59%; n=16).

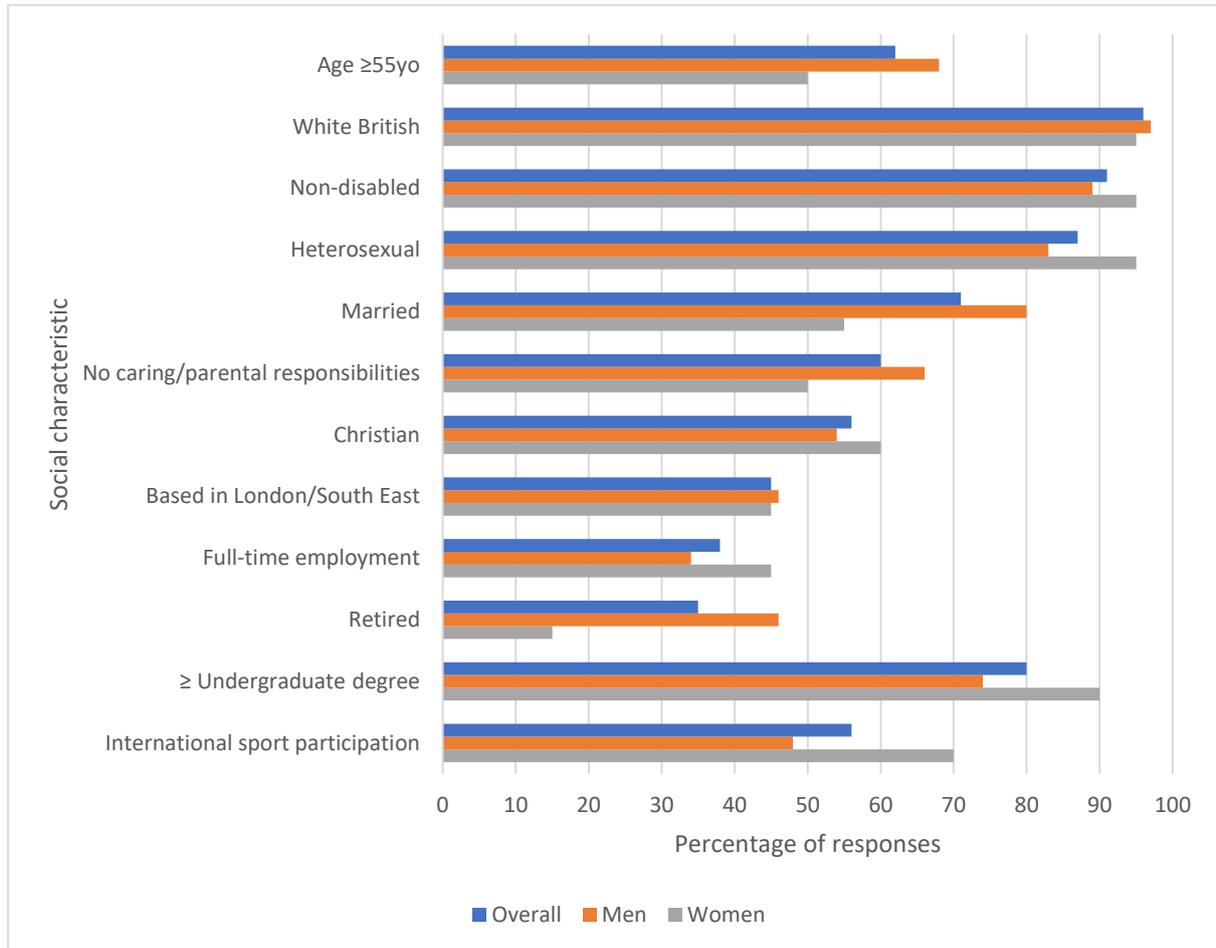


Figure 2. Social characteristics of the sample by gender (%)

When the analysis of social characteristics is split by gender, differences can be noted from Figure 2. Men in the sample were older; over half (68%; n=24) were fifty-five years and older compared to half of the women (50%; n=10). Moreover, most men in the sample were married (80%; n=28) compared to just over half of the women (55%; n=11). Interestingly, there is more diversity in the responses to sexuality amongst men than women. Seventeen per cent (n=6) of men in the sample are asexual, bisexual, gay, or preferred not to say. Only one woman stated she was not heterosexual. More women were educated to a higher level than men: 96% (n=18) of women have an undergraduate degree or higher, whereas 72% (n=26) of men have the same. Women also competed at a higher sporting level, with 70% (n=14) competing at international or Olympic/Paralympic levels compared to 48% (n=16) of men. This aligns with findings from previous research that has found that women must be more qualified or experienced than male counterparts to be positioned as equal in their competence and suitability for sport leadership and governance roles (Piggott, 2019). When it came to caring and parental responsibilities, 45% (n=9) of women had either parental or caring responsibilities compared to 34% (n=12) of men. Only one person in the sample, a woman, had both parental and caring responsibilities. A greater prevalence of men (46%; n=16) are retired than women (15%; n=3), though 25% (n=5) of women are self-employed compared to no men.

There were no significant differences in ethnicity between the genders, perhaps mostly due to such an overall underrepresentation of ethnic minorities. Finally, whilst men and women predominantly resided in London and the South-East, elsewhere, there was a greater geographic spread amongst men than women.

Figure 3 indicates that the social characteristics of the sample do not significantly differ when analysed by senior or junior position². Across the sample, 21 individuals (38%) hold senior positions, including President, Vice-President, Secretary-General, and Chair/member of a Council or Board³. Thirty-four individuals (62%) hold junior positions, such as being a Chair or member of a committee only.

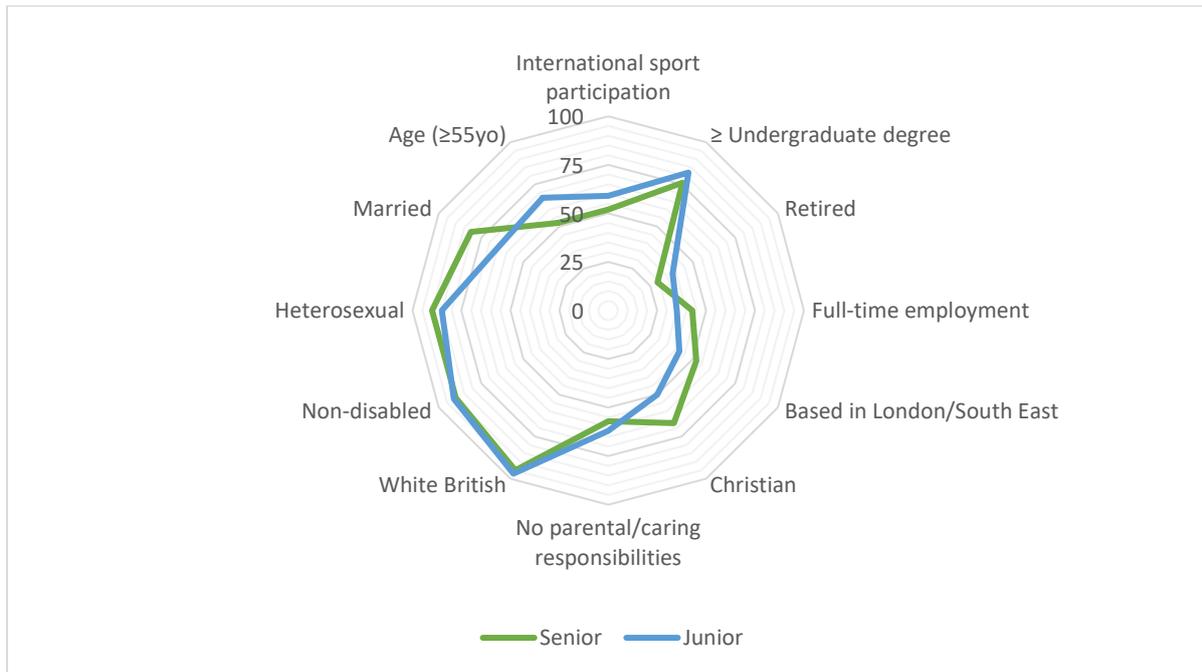


Figure 3. Percentage of social characteristics of the sample by position (%)

The most significant differences occur between age, marriage, religion, and employment. Over half of those in senior positions (52%; n=11) were aged 55 years or older compared to two-thirds of those in junior positions (67%; n=23). Eighty-one per cent (n=17) of those in senior positions were married compared to 67% (n=22) of those in junior positions. Those in senior positions (67%; n=14) stated they were Christian more than those in junior positions (50%; n=17). For employment, more of those in senior positions were in full-time employment (43%; n=9) compared to retirement (29%; n=6). In contrast, more of those in junior positions were retired (38%; n=13) compared to full-time employment (35%; n=12). This data indicates that those in junior positions are older and have more flexibility with their time. This finding is somewhat surprising given the significant time commitment required for senior roles.

Analysis by gender and position reveals men (40%; n=14) in our sample frequent senior positions slightly more than women (35%; n=7). It is worth noting that there are differences

² Six individuals answered that they hold a position at European level. Their data is included in analysis.

³ Some of these individuals may also hold membership or be a Chair of a committee.

in the roles of these positions. Men in the sample (n=7) occupied the roles of President, Vice-President, and Secretary General whereas just one woman stated she was a Vice-President. Everyone else in a senior position was a member of a Board or Council. This reflects previous research that has found vertical gender segregation to exist in international sport organisations: the higher the level/seniority of role, the fewer the women (Matthews & Piggott, 2021).

For junior roles, there are slightly more women (65%; n=13) than men (60%; n=21). Importantly, however, men sit on a greater number of committees than women whilst dominating certain types of committees. For example, men vastly outnumber women on Classification or Rules (10 men to 2 women), Events (7 to 3), Technical (9 to 2) and Umpiring/Referee/Officials (8 to 1) committees. Research has demonstrated how women may occupy roles on committees considered as 'soft', such as those focusing on sport development, child safety, and equity, whereas men occupy roles on 'harder' committees, such as performance-related roles and roles related to the management of sport organisations (Velija et al., 2014).

The uniformity of British postholders seen in this sample is problematic for the future of sport governance. As discussed by Clayton-Hathway (2022), a range of scholars both inside and outside of sport have argued that gender balanced and diverse boards can achieve both democratic and meritocratic outcomes, including a fair distribution of power, decision-making that represents both organisational stakeholders and the wider population, increased organisational legitimacy and reputation, increased sensitivity to stakeholders' needs, and improved organisational performance.

3.2. Career pathways

This section is predominantly comprised of data from the survey before ending with a brief overview of the interview sample.

Survey respondents were asked to provide information on their current post(s) in international sport, before listing up to seven previous posts **in international, continental, and/or national sport** that had been most influential in helping them to obtain their current position(s). They were also asked to state how many years they were in each role and their age when they obtained the role. Data were problematic given the varying level of detail provided by respondents. As a result, it was not possible to provide a clear and consistent picture of the career pathways of the entire sample. Therefore, an overview is provided of an analysis of the available data.

From the available data, it appears that people serving in a decision-making or administration capacity at a national level form the pipeline for international governance. This finding is unsurprising yet highlights the importance of continued inclusion and diversity work at the national level. Thirty-eight people (69%) stated they had national-level experience, with two-thirds (68%) of these noting their experience was in a senior position.

Twenty respondents (36%) said they had continental-level experience and half of these were in a senior position. Fourteen people (25%) in the sample had both national-level and continental-level experience, whereas 18 people (33%) skipped a continental role and moved from a national role to an international role. As a result, it is clear that there are multiple routes into international sport governance. A processual direction from national to continental and then international level is no guarantee of securing a role. Finally, 12 people (22%*) only provided information about international level experience⁴. Some provided multiple roles at this level, many of which were their current roles, whereas some only provided one role and gave no other history.

Table 1. Most influential roles in helping respondents to obtain their current position by gender.

Role	Men		Women	
	n	%	n	%
National	23	66	15	75
National (senior position)	19	54	7	35
Continental	10	29	10	50
Continental (senior position)	5	14	5	25
Both national and continental	6	17	8	40
Skipped continental	11	36*	7	39*
International-only	9	29*	3	17*

⁴ Any percentages marked with an asterisk (*) are calculated according to a sample size of 49 rather than 55 owing to the reduction of people who stated their current role was at continental-level (n=6).

Table 1 shows, by gender, the respondents' most influential roles in helping them to obtain their current position. Women identified a greater prevalence of national experience (75%) than men (66%) and continental experience (50%) than men (29%). Further, more women had both national and continental experience than men, but the number who reported skipping from national to international was very similar. More men (29%) stated they only had experience of an international role than women (17%). As such, this data indicates that women identified a more processual journey of influential roles that helped them to obtain their current position, whereas men pointed to positions of particular significance.

On average, men in the sample were 46 years old when they achieved their first post in international sport governance whereas women were slightly younger at 44 years old. This somewhat counters conventional wisdom that women are older than men as they progress to more senior roles in international sport governance, often owing to career breaks and/or having children.

Finally, almost the entirety of the sample only had experience of one sport, including its parasport version. It was rare to see someone with a variety of sports in their career journey. This indicates the insular nature of international sport governance whilst further acknowledging the importance of networking to learn of other experiences and ways of working. Section 3.7 highlights the significance of networking in this research.

Respondents were also asked about any roles **outside of sport** that were influential in helping them to obtain their current post. The sample responded very evenly here, with twenty-eight (51%) stating that roles outside of sport were influential, whereas twenty-seven (49%) answered that their role outside of sport had no influence on gaining their international role. The gender split was also near-identical. Thus, having a professional background can help but is not a requirement. Men mentioned a broader array of professions, including legal, marketing, defence, technology, management, and retail. Women stated medicine, healthcare, law, pharmaceuticals, and IT and consultancy. In some cases, it appears that the individual has directly achieved an international/continental role due to their relevant professional background. For example, a man answered that he was a member of a legal commission for an international sport organisation yet had no other experience within sport governance but was a Director of Legal Services for a not-for-profit organisation. Another example is of a woman who has an extensive history in medicine but her only stated sport governance experience was as a board member of an international sport organisation.

Interviewees somewhat disrupted the patterns identified from the survey. All six men had their first governance position in sport at NGB-level. There were various positions mentioned: CEO, secretary general, independent non-exec director, board member, and legal and technical committee memberships. More variety was seen amongst the women interviewees. For three women, their first role in sport governance was for NGBs, whereas the for the other three women it was at IF-level. Further details of their career pathway are not provided given it would put the anonymity of the interviewees at risk. However, replicating the survey findings about the insular nature of sport governance, all interviewees only had experience of working within one sport.

3.3. Obtaining an international post

Becoming aware of their first post in international sport

The survey data suggests that women and men become aware of their first post in international sport in different ways. Men appear to benefit more from their personal networks (whether that be from the IF, other existing networks, or being already aware of the post) whilst women are more supported by their NGB. Generally, this is repeated when asked what the influential factors are in obtaining their first international role. Men identified networking skills and IF support whereas women highlighted their experience, motivation, and achievements. This is further evidenced when analysed by position and age.

Figure 4 shows how the survey sample became aware of their first post in international sport. Respondents could select more than one answer, thus figure 4 indicates the percentage of the sample to select that answer as well as the percentage by gender. Accordingly, there are some differences in the responses by gender.

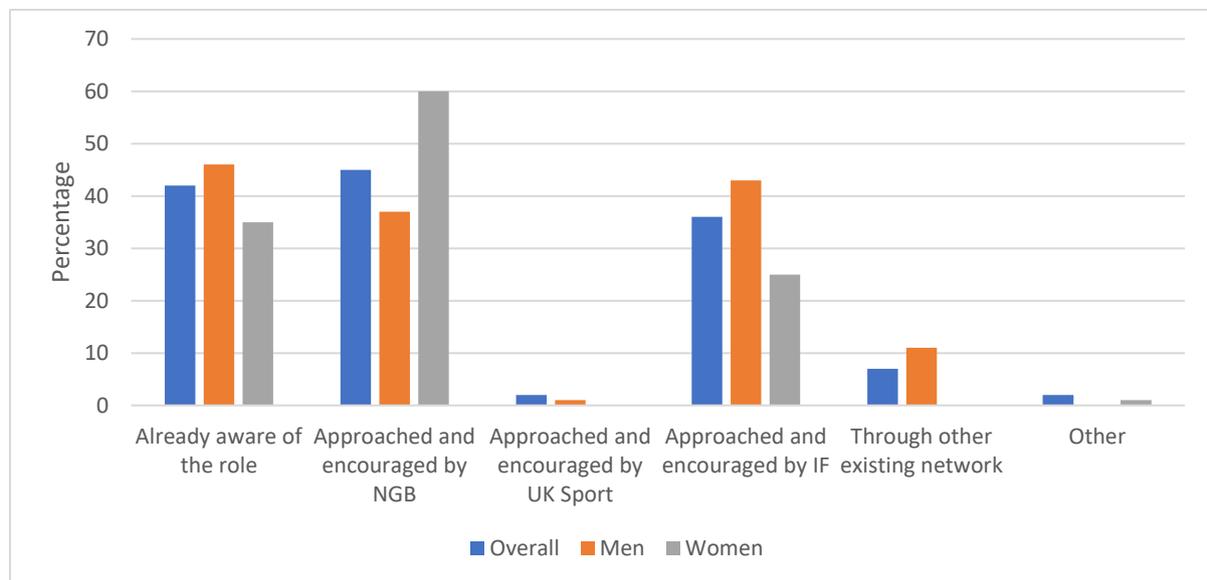


Figure 4. Percentage of responses overall and by gender for how the sample became aware of their first post in international sport.

Nearly half (45%) of the sample stated that they were approached and encouraged by their NGB. However, women amplify this total given that 60% selected this option compared to 37% of men. Indeed, when analyses were conducted via gender and position, it was noticeable that the group with the highest response rate in stating that they were approached and encouraged by their NGB were women in junior positions (77%; n=10). This may indicate the impact of the emergence of leadership and governance pipelines being developed for women in sport, as women are identified and put forward for such opportunities by their NGB.

The opposite occurs for those approached and encouraged by their IF. Overall, the total was 36%, yet a higher proportion of men (43%) selected this option than women (25%). This finding further supports the development of strategies such as internal ‘gender equity champions’ to increase IF support for the recruitment of talented women. Men also

benefitted from other networks. Nearly half of men (46%) said they were already aware of the role compared to just over a third of women (35%). Moreover, 11% of men had heard through other existing networks compared to no women. Thus, the significance of networking in becoming aware of an international post should not be underestimated. Section 3.7 explores the impact of networking in more detail.

Key factors in obtaining their first post in international sport

Figure 5 demonstrates the key factors that were instrumental for the sample obtaining their first post in international sport. As with the previous topic, respondents could select more than one answer.



Figure 5. Percentage of responses overall and by gender for key factors that were instrumental for the sample obtaining their first post in international sport.

The most frequent response across all survey respondents was their motivation to contribute at an international level (71%).

The interviewees provided further detail about what motivations exist when working in sport governance. Many referred to making a difference and “giving back” to their sport, as represented in the quotes below.

My motivation was entirely to shake it up, to change it, and because it was boring and stagnant and nothing was happening, and it's a train wreck that you can see, miles in the distance and you can see it coming where there's a group of people who are getting older and older and less effective. And then there's no one to come in and fill the gap, creating a vacuum, and so it was really obvious that something needed to happen and so that was my motivation. (Male postholder)

I really enjoyed being able to drive the agenda, to come forward with proposals to be responsible for the direction of travel. ... if I link it back to my professional career, realising that you can really make a difference, that was also very motivating for me in terms of "I want to continue doing this". (Female postholder)

You're doing it for your membership, and you're doing it because people need to ... play [sport]. So, you do have to just keep being able to just go back to that. (Male postholder)

Other motivations included finding governance 'interesting', 'fascinating', enjoyable, 'a great privilege', and having the opportunity to work with great people. Generally, the passion for their role, despite challenges associated with volunteerism, was clearly apparent during all interviews conducted.

Figure 5 also shows that nearly two-thirds (64%) of survey respondents selected support from their NGB, demonstrating the key role these organisations have in nurturing colleagues into the international arena. Experience of sport governance below international level was seen as instrumental by just over half of the sample (51%). Networking skills (42%), professional qualifications (35%), sporting achievements (31%) and support from their IF (29%) followed thereafter. Fewer responses were seen for training or leadership programmes (16%) and election campaign support (7%). Later in this section, we use insights from the interviews to explain how similar factors influence election processes.

Some important gendered differences in the responses can also be seen from Figure 5. Women acknowledged their motivation to contribute to international level more than men (80% women compared to 66% men). The same occurred with their experience of sport governance below international level (women: 65%; men: 43%) and sporting achievements (women: 45%; men: 23%). Three women gave examples about how their careers as elite athletes directly led to their engagement with junior positions in international sport governance:

In [early 2010s] we hosted a European Championships. ... There was going to be a dinner for all these dignitaries and ... someone had said, "could you come along to the dinner because we've got lots of guests and [it is] good for them to see a couple of athletes". I think that that was probably part of the process, easing people into that kind of thing to come along, turn up, speak to people, see how you go, and then it starts very gently from there, gets you sucked in. That's where it started for me to put myself forward. (Female postholder)

Up until [early 2010s, being an athlete] was essentially my full-time job, so that was my first connection with [governance] structures ... and it was also my pathway. ... I initially joined the Athletes Commission when I was still playing. ... I was essentially recruited into that by ... another player who went on to be the chair for the first period that I was a member of the Commission. ... I thought to myself, "well, why not? This is somebody I respect". And there were a lot of challenges at that time for athletes. We didn't really feel like we had a voice. It didn't really feel like we understood the system that we were operating in either, we were just turning up to tournaments and playing the event. It didn't feel like we understood the bigger picture in which we sat. (Female postholder)

I put myself forward to be the athlete representative for [my sport]. ... I was the [discipline] women's rep, we had a little group of four that were elected or, actually, to be honest, few athletes wanted to do it so I stuck my hand up. ... I would drive up to UK Sport and sit there and learn about sport. I think it was a great way of learning. (Female postholder)

Men identified networking skills (46%; women: 35%) and support from their IF (31%; women: 25%) more than women. This is significant because of the established role of networking in advancing opportunities for individuals, predominantly men, to ascend and succeed in sport governance (Piggott, 2021). This data is also important because women note their sporting achievements to a greater extent than men, indicating that this form of legitimacy in international sport governance is becoming more equitable for women given the continued advancement of women in sport.

Analysis also demonstrated significant differences in the responses between women in senior and junior positions. Women in junior positions reported the influence of networking skills (46%) and sporting achievements (54%) to a much greater extent than women in senior positions (networking: 14%; sporting achievements: 29%). In contrast, women in senior positions selected support from their IF much more than women in junior positions (57% compared to 8%). This indicates that instrumental factors shift as women progress within international sport governance and that support is not only required by NGBs and IFs in obtaining international positions, but also in transitioning from junior to senior roles. There were fewer notable differences for men of different positions.

The figures between men and women in senior positions are quite similar aside from networking skills (men: 43%; women: 14%) and support from their IF (men: 29%; women: 57%), once again demonstrating the significance of networking for men. At junior level, women identify motivation (85%; men: 71%), experience in sport governance (69%; men: 43%) and sporting achievements (54%; men: 29%) differently to men. In contrast, men in junior positions identify support from their IF (33%) more so than women in junior positions (8%).

Finally, analyses with other social characteristics point to younger women (<54 years old) identifying support from their NGB (70%) more than younger men (46%) and for sporting achievements too (40% to 18%). However, younger men identified networking skills more (46% to 30%). Older women (≥55 years and older), more than older men, identified experience (90% to 46%), motivation (80% to 67%), and sporting achievements (50% to 25%).

Election processes in international sport

During the interviews, more insight was generated about the election processes in international sport governance. We split this information across junior and senior positions and, where possible, we indicate whether the interviewee is referring to their election to a junior or senior position at the end of their quote.

Generally, the various responses seen in Figure 5 for how postholders obtained their first position align to reflections by the interviewees about obtaining their junior and senior positions. There does not appear to be a uniform approach to obtaining a position and there are differences in the formality of election processes in international sport governance. However, there is merit in a supportive and influential NGB that will identify

and aid an individual through an election process. Depending upon the position sought, voting may occur within a committee, amongst hundreds of member representatives at Congress, or the individual may in rare circumstances be uncontested, as was mentioned by two interviewees. To ensure success, the individual will employ an array of strategic endeavours, as outlined later in this section.

Figure 5 shows that there was little gender difference when referring to **NGB support**. These are influential organisations because senior postholders at NGB level (and European Federation level) form pipelines for senior IF positions. Men and women both alluded to how their NGB was important and influential during their election experiences. This extends beyond ‘encouragement’ to go for a position because the following quotes indicate other ways that NGBs operate in this process. One male postholder’s NGB had to employ a careful political strategy to secure his appointment, whilst a female postholder was proactive in approaching her NGB who supported her thereafter.

It wasn't easy because there was another Brit who became the chair of the legal committee, and it was a bit of an argument apparently, before I knew about it, that “should two Brits have the positions?”, but I think Britain said they would only put the other guy forward if I was also accepted because they didn't really want him to go forward. (Male postholder)

I had to ask my Member Association [NGB] to back me. ... I had to do an interview with them to say why I wanted to do it and to a certain extent it's always about timing and luck because they didn't have a candidate that they would prefer to put forward. They were very happy to support me going forward. (Female postholder)

There were also examples cited where **the NGB had a lack of influence or support** in the election process. One male postholder reflected upon a lack of understanding about the role he was being directed toward, whilst a female postholder stated the lack of training and development available, and another recounted how her NGB misunderstood her eligibility and nearly cost her a nomination.

The NGB wanted me to stand for it, but I must admit, I was completely naive. I had no idea how the international organisation ran. I wasn't exactly sure what my role was and I was a committee member of that. There wasn't a lot of expectation. (Male postholder)

There could also be your member association [to offer support], so whoever has nominated you for these positions. ... Again, I've never had any discussion around training or support from that perspective. (Female postholder)

I wanted to get on to the [IF] Athletes' Commission. What was quite interesting, you had to get on it within four years and I think I got on it three years after I retired. The [NGB] didn't want to put me forward. I put myself forward. [The NGB] said I wasn't eligible but they had misunderstood. (Female postholder)

Therefore, we believe it fruitful for NGBs to have better knowledge and be more aware of the requirements and procedures involved with nominating and supporting an individual to a position in international sport governance. As we found in our earlier UK Sport-supported research (Matthews and Piggott, 2021), there is much variety in the formal actions of IFs when it comes to election and recruitment processes. Each sport should

attempt to learn more about what IFs require and liaise with UK Sport accordingly to build a better picture of election processes within international sport governance.

This may include the role of **gendered election rules and processes**. Below, two female postholders explain their experiences of gender election rules and processes and how it is unlikely they would have obtained their position without them:

As those seats moved, I landed as a casual vacancy into Chair and went on to Council. One year later I went through Congress, nobody stood against me and I was elected as the elected representative/Chair. I never went head-to-head to get on to Council. ... The previous incumbent was male and the person who was expecting to go into that position was male but, actually, I think on reflection because the [IF] was very keen to ... increase the number of women in the mix, they did the casual vacancy approach, to make sure they could predict the outcome. ... I wouldn't say this publicly, but I do think very clearly that they wanted to increase the percentage of women in their governance structure. Therefore, they were steering how it happened. They weren't breaking the rules because that was totally within their rules, but they were negotiating to make sure that women were in the senior positions. (Female postholder)

I can honestly say it's not been an easy process. It's not an easy process whether you're male or female, but it's an extremely difficult process if you're female. ... I've been on [the European Federation] for over ten years now on the board. They have a set amount of nominated people from the board that they can place on [the IF] every four years and never once have I been appointed through that process as a female. In fact, they've never appointed a female. I had to get on to [IF] through the process of another election via gender of minority and was fully supported to go for that from [the European Federation], but that was the only option that appeared to be available to me. ... I definitely think Europe could have supported me better, especially when there was a need for someone of my skill level and experience and knowledge of how boards governance works (Female postholder)

It is clear from these quotes of the importance of not only looking at the structures, cultures, and practices of IFs, but also influential external organisations. This is briefly discussed further in section 3.6.

Notwithstanding the role of NGBs in election processes or the formal procedures set out by IFs, ultimately it appears that **success rests upon the effectiveness of the individual, and in some cases their support team, to engage informally with the voting membership to endorse them.**

This includes building a profile, lobbying for support, and enhancing existing networks to ensure success. For example, interviewees reflected upon the hard-work they had invested in making themselves known, how they used their sporting prowess to leverage support, and how existing networks were useful. As shown in section 3.7, networking was highly influential for both men and women.

I started the quite difficult process of 1) getting known in that world, 2) getting the nomination process to be actually nominated, and 3) actually going for election. ... I'm really glad I've done this because it's an easier stepping stone onto that world stage when you're appointed through your confederation, and now I have the knowledge that I've had

to work really hard and I've got it on merit and it's not just because I'm the friend of the president or my federation's the neighbour of a big federation. (Female postholder)

The player body, not the member associations, elects the core of the Athletes Commission. Essentially what happened was they ran elections at two events and you just had to say: "I'm a [nationality & sport] player. I'm running for the Athlete's Commission because I believe that we should have a greater voice, etc". At the time it's relatively basic, it is speaking to other players and saying "I'm running for this, would you support me? And would you make sure you vote?" (Female postholder)

Often the people on the national teams, the team manager, the coaches are also very influential back at home in terms of when they speak, they might also have dual roles. They might also be the president and Secretary General. You'd have direct influence by working with the national team. I think I was known within the sport and through those various roles that I've talked about previously. (Male postholder)

Only 7% of survey respondents mentioned election campaign support as crucial to obtaining their first position. The interviewees appeared to place more emphasis on its importance, most probably because they had had multiple positions. The **campaigns and manifestos** mentioned below include seeking out and lobbying influential people, some of whom might not be known. This is an important distinction to the previous point about men relying on the power of existing networks. As can also be seen, there are different ways of approaching this. Some postholders detailed manifestos and campaigns whereas others appeared more basic:

In terms of a campaign, I actually did that with UK Sport assistance and I created a manifesto, which I know within our sport had never been done before, but I thought it was really important to actually put it to the Members that, "if you're electing me, this is what I'm going to try and achieve and in four years' time, if I'm seeking re-election, I'm going to hold myself responsible to that manifesto". In some ways it gives you the mandate to go ahead and do these things along with your strategic plan. ... Working with [international relations advisor] ... who works across many sports and brings a wealth of experience from other sports ... is definitely of value, and they brought in a couple of consultants, which was useful. We had an afternoon together and we shaped the manifesto in terms of how it should look. (Male postholder)

I've made my manifesto leaflet, had it translated into three other languages. And we're basically just campaigning, contacting the federations to explain what we want to do, why I should be the General Secretary, hoping they attend that Congress. We've got one of those lists of "We think this is a sure 'yes', this is a sure 'no', these one's we don't know." And then we have to refine that in the couple of days before the Congress once we know who actually attends and who actually registers. (Female postholder)

There was a case of attempting to run some form of election campaign [for the IF Council], but essentially I didn't have a manifesto or anything along those lines. (Female postholder)

Another female postholder also detailed her successful strategy for election. Interestingly she gave insights into **the inner-workings of election processes** and how votes may be secured. Little research has been conducted about such relationships:

Because I was elected online, it was very difficult. It was just at the end of the pandemic. ... I made sure prior to election that [my statement] was sent out to all the confederations and that I had a personal online meeting with all those Confederation Presidents. I outlined why I should be on the board and I asked them for their personal support. ... It was 3-4 months out from the election. It was a lot of online meetings at that time. Many countries were saying, "if we vote for you, what are we going to get?" That was often a question and I said, "well, you'll get me. That's what you're voting for. I'm not going to offer you anything because I can't". (Female postholder)

These comments seemingly indicate the continued influence of informal politics and decision-making within international sport governance, despite high-profile examples of scandals based upon a lack of transparency and rigour in voting and election processes. The fact that these conversations and deals still occur raises significant implications for sport governance.

A few interviewees mentioned that there appears to be heightened expectations and standards for *re-election* too. That is, more is expected of the campaign:

I became more sophisticated with the approach. ... It was more mine to lose than mine to win, if that makes sense. It was more like if you don't do your lobbying, if you don't call up people, they're going to get annoyed that you've not called them because you're already a representative and you should. I didn't feel like if I was not elected, it was because somebody else did better or was more preferred. It was because I did a bad job of doing my lobbying. (Female postholder)

Finally, two interviewees provided unique insights into **the complex, political, and tough world of elections and voting in international sport governance**. A male postholder shared his experience of how he had previously been unsuccessful in his election to a prestigious committee within his IF, so decided to stand again. A female postholder reflected upon the moment she heard that she was unsuccessful.

My position within [the European Federation] was stronger. The way it worked traditionally in [the IF] was that there would be a list of names. My name was on the list and when they decided to put someone back on ... they just tipp-ex'd my name out and put this other person back on. So, I didn't get on. I thought I'd give it one more crack [in the mid-2010s] ... and sure enough, turned out lucky, I got on [the committee]. (Male postholder)

That desire to go on Executive [Council] - I think if I got asked, I'd have to think quite hard whether I'd say "yes" now. Whereas I think, at a time I wanted to go on, I was ... a couple of times pushed back, didn't win those votes and they're very personal. There are twenty of you standing in a room writing someone's name on a piece of paper and putting it into a hat, and you're in the same room as those twenty, and then the scores read out, how many votes everyone got - it's quite ... brutal. (Female postholder)

This section has demonstrated the myriad ways that people have become aware of their first international role, obtained this first role, and experienced election processes within international sport governance. There is no apparent template or blueprint for achieving a position, though we are acutely aware of the impact that the demographics of the overall sample may have in providing particular experiences. However, it appears that being motivated and passionate about progressing their sport is one universal factor for all. The

benefits of NGB support and having knowledge of when IF positions become available should not be underestimated. But what is clear is that within these processes, especially those which are informal, there are gendered trends. Women identified their competencies and sporting experience more than men. Men acknowledged the importance of existing networks more than women. This section has also provided greater insights into election practices, including the importance of strategic planning, building a profile, developing a manifesto/campaign, and utilising networks for influence.

3.4. Inclusivity in international sport governance

Within this section, we first present quantitative survey data on the extent to which postholders believed international sport governance is inclusive, before discussing qualitative findings from both the survey and interviews on the different factors that influence inclusivity within IFs. Within this second qualitative part, we split factors into formal and informal elements to demonstrate the different ways in which organisational dimensions play out.

One of the most definitive findings from the survey data was respondents' perspectives on the inclusivity of international sport governance. Figure 6 shows that **over half of the sample (56%; n=31) responded that it is not inclusive enough**. There were no significant differences in responses by gender here, given that 57% of men and 55% of women believe it is not inclusive enough. Men in senior roles (72%) and women in junior roles (70%) answered most negatively (not inclusive enough; not at all). Senior women (57%) were the only group whereby over half of the responses were positive. This could be influenced by the positionality of these women being success stories within the international sport system to have reached such senior posts. Younger women (<55 years old) were most vocal when it came to stating 'not inclusive enough' (80%; n=8), with older men (≥55 years or older; 63%; n=21) not too far behind. When cross-tabulated against other social characteristics, there is no evidence to suggest that a minority group overwhelmingly feels that international sport governance is not inclusive.

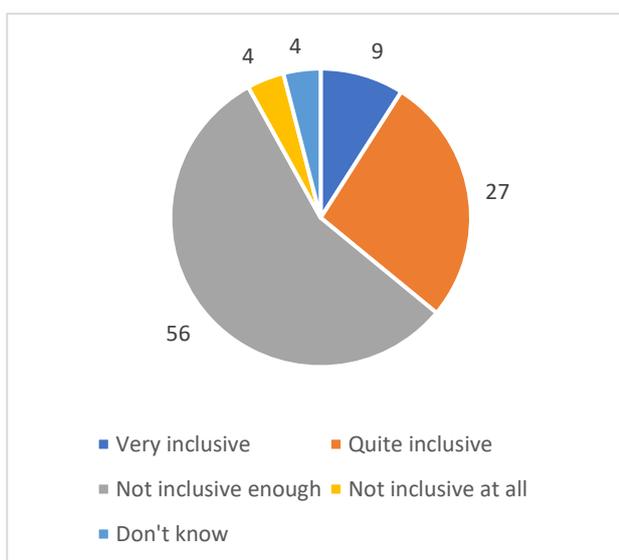


Figure 6. The extent to which international sport governance is inclusive to all (%).

Qualitative survey responses and discussions within interviews mirrored the quantitative findings in acknowledging that **international sport governance requires progress to be more diverse:**

It is still very white, western, male dominated. There is a need to increase the pool of available talent from other groups. (Male survey respondent)

International sports governance is still a predominantly male environment. Within the top level of the organisation I am involved in, there are only two women ... of 19. (Female survey respondent)

With kids, there's quite a good balance between the number of boys and girls doing the sport ... and then as you get further up into adulthood, the women's numbers drop and then leadership positions there's very, very few women There are also other persons of colour, disabled people, there's other minorities that are also not as well represented as they probably should be. (Female postholder)

There needs to be gender balance at our Congress ... Their argument is that not enough women step forward for these roles, and my argument is not enough women are encouraged or supported to step forward for these roles. (Female postholder)

An important observation expressed within qualitative survey responses was that some organisations are performing well in some areas of diversity (e.g., geographic and cultural diversity) but not in other areas (e.g., female and para representation). A better understanding is needed on whether this is a trend across IFs where certain social groups face more severe underrepresentation than others.

There was significant diversity in the factors reported across both the survey and interviews in contributing to the lack of inclusivity within IFs at the organisational level. We found it useful to split these across formal and informal factors. Formal factors can be documented or textualized, such as written rules, organograms, job titles, and statistics, as well as logos or uniforms. This can include ways of organizing work, formal job requirements, job descriptions, and organizational structures and hierarchies. Informal factors are more nuanced and include interactions, symbols, and attitudes. These practices are not easily documented and often lack visibility (Korvajärvi, 2002).

Formal factors reported in the survey included:

- the need for strategies and initiatives such as quotas and term limits
- the need for a more diverse pipeline
- a lack of governance support for IFs
- biased recruitment practices
- a lack of organisational understanding of top-down governance practices
- limited positions providing limited opportunities for change.

Some of these issues were also discussed in more depth within the interviews. For example, some male interviewees discussed **challenges in translating top-level (IOC/IPC) gender equity policy into practice** at the IF level:

The IF looked at the people who administered their sport, who create the field of play, and thought this is a group of middle-aged white guys from Europe. ... So I guess the people with the most experience would be within that demographic, but it doesn't fit with the IOC's push to try and create more diversity and equality and encourage youth as well.

IPC have this rule now where they would like to see gender balance on the board. But I think what you should really be trying to see is activities and interventions that support that and support the pathway of women.

The IOC will say you must have ... 50/50 [gender representation amongst officials]. ... Is the instruction that we must pick officials who are not good enough to do the Olympic Games on the basis of their gender? The answer to that is inevitably ... 'No'. ... What we need is the base of the pyramid to be far more open and get more females in. Or any diversity. ... You can't just pick people. We've had examples where very new and inexperienced officials have been picked ... she does badly because she's completely out of her depth officiating wise. No one supports them. ... That helps nobody.

In line with Geeraert (2019), this demonstrates how top-level policy can be challenging to translate to organisational practice when there are voluntary and/or non-voluntary reasons for organisational compliance. This includes if the cost of demanding governance principles are perceived to outweigh the benefits, or a lack of financial, technical, or administrative resource to implement governance principles, or a lack of clarity of the requirements of the principles (Geeraert, 2019).

Two female interviewees spoke of the **resistance they faced in attempting to introduce new rules or statutes** that would guarantee increased female representation and align with top-level policy:

I was angry once because [the Council] voted against [a] 30% gender equity [quota] and then told us it was our fault because actually a bunch of men should have put forward the proposal, because if the men had put it forward it and not the women in Council ... it would have [been] voted through.

Twice we have tried to change the gender balance at Congress as a statute. It got voted down.

This suggests that, for some within their organisations, these rules or statutes didn't have the support of senior leaders and/or member nations.

A key formal factor discussed across the interviewees that was perceived to influence inclusivity in IFs was election processes. For example, some interviewees reported how **ineffective or biased election processes** can be significant organisational barriers in recruiting a diversity of qualified individuals in line with IOC/IPC policy:

In selecting people for their roles, inevitably, you're going to pick people for the roles who might not be there for the right reason. ... Certain promises have been made in the election campaign. (Male postholder)

[In order to have more people with disabilities on the board] we need to do more work on the interventions that drive through that in the same way that I saw by having a thriving women's programme, we saw more women coming to our board from not just as athletes. We also don't have an external election process. You have to come through nominations of the membership. (Male postholder)

I see some people get voted in and I sit back, and think are they there for a political tick in the box? Are they actually going to do anything? Have they actually got any power? Do they really know people? Do they even care? Because I reckon about 60% of the people that get voted into International Federation positions do absolutely nothing. They do it, they add it to their CV. (Female postholder)

Election processes will be discussed in more depth in section 3.3.

Furthermore, a **lack of qualified women in the pipeline** for IF governance positions was seen to be a recurring recruitment issue by male (but notably not female) interviewees:

A lot of people blame the [international federation] for various things, but if national federations don't put women forward then it's very difficult. It's not the [international federation's] fault that there aren't enough women on the board. It's that people aren't being put forward.

Finding women who were in that [leadership] position is difficult. Even if you look at the composition of national teams, athlete teams, very often you'll find there are more men than women. Certainly in emerging sports and now the national federations are working harder to try and sort this out.

This aligns with existing research that has found that a 'fix-the-woman' approach is often taken within sport organisations. This approach locates the 'problem' in women and stereotypically assumes that women have not been socialised to compete on the same level as men, and therefore must be taught the skills that their male counterparts have learnt (Ely et al., 2011).

Gender inclusive recruitment issues were found to be **even more challenging for IFs governing Paralympic sports**, demonstrating how strategies and initiatives to create more diverse and inclusive IFs can be significantly influenced by individual organisational resources and capacities:

As always, you have to just look at your organisation, look at your individual challenges, which that organisation is going through, and they're probably shared. Particularly within the Paralympic movement. ... What do I mean by that? It would be a lack of funding. ... There were skills on the board but very inward looking. It was only people with [sport] backgrounds and not independent positions or looking outside the sport for example. (Male postholder)

The number of women playing disability sport is a lot less than men and proportionally as well and historically because women weren't as stupid as men in breaking their backs and doing silly things that men would do. ... you can't change society, you can't all of a sudden say, right, more women need to go and break your backs. You've got to understand the landscape you're working in to be able to do what you can as best as you can. (Male postholder)

This reflects Piggott and Matthews' (In Press) research, which found that, despite women clearly remaining marginal group members within Paralympic organisations, there was a lack of proactivity amongst these organisations in implementing gender and governance actions as strategies to improve female representation within their governance. The authors concluded that a lack of SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) top-down governance principles, combined with fewer resources to implement them, can negatively impact the opportunity for gender-inclusive actions to be embedded within the governance of international Paralympic organisations.

Informal factors reported in the survey include:

- IFs failing to recognise the value of diversity
- the existence of old boys' clubs
- traditional ways of working
- an overall lack of inclusive culture.

Again, these were expanded upon within the interviews. **Problematic informal practices** were reported to **create cultures where women and minorities can feel othered, unwelcome, or unsafe**. For example, one female interviewee spoke of how she has

experienced a **'laddish' culture** within her IF that she finds problematic for the inclusion of women leaders:

[My sponsor] made very clear there was a very laddish culture. When I first joined as a young female there were a few things said that were pretty inappropriate. ... but these types of comments can have an impact on people in many, many different ways. ... For other females who don't have that perspective that could be really a barrier for them that there is this type of culture. ... This type of laddish environment can be very intimidating for certain people and that shouldn't be allowed to continue.

A male interviewee also spoke of an occasion when **problematic gender stereotypes led to the degrading of women within his sport**:

I read a report once, why don't more women get involved in [the sport's] rules? And the committee, which was a blazered men committee, actually wrote in it "because [the sport] is a complicated rule sport, and women may have trouble understanding it." Which of course is bonkers.

Furthermore, two women spoke of how **dress codes continue to unquestioningly align with men and masculinity**, and in turn marginalise women leaders:

When I became chair, it was very funny because we talk a lot about the Blazer Brigade and we were actually given money to buy a blazer together with a set of buttons to put on it ... All the new females actually sort of have had conversations as the females on the board you know - how on earth do you comply? What did you?

There's things like where we go to some event and everybody gets a gift and it's a tie. What is the tie going to do for me - there's sometimes a lack of consideration for what people's needs may or may not be. Maybe there's men there that also don't want the tie, but it's a gift that's given traditionally for men. And I would get it as well and I think it's made the men think more about what they do and how they engage with women.

Existing research has found that such problematic informal practices can reinforce gendered structures that privilege men and masculinity, and naturalise the position of men as leaders (Piggott & Pike, 2020). A male postholder spoke of how such **'insiderness' is determined by one's relationship to key individuals within positions of power**:

There is an unofficial etiquette, ... you have to give respect to the President, for instance. ... If you don't, or if you upset him, you can be 'not close' to what's happening.

Problematically, there can be gender differences in the opportunities to get close to such powerful individuals based on their own gender. Networking has historically been found to be gendered within sport organisations, with 'old boys' clubs' having power to disrupt and overturn decisions made by formal democratic processes (Shaw, 2006), as well as being particularly resistant to change (Pfister & Radtke, 2006). We will further discuss the opportunities and challenges of networking within section 3.7.

Most concerningly, a female postholder spoke of how she felt that informal practices and behaviours mean that **some IFs are not safe spaces for young women**:

The president and I sometimes talk about this. We're quite nervous about putting young women ... into an international relations space because the behaviours that we put up

with ... would be completely unacceptable in the UK. We can only do so much to change the behaviours of all the people in the International Federation. ... It's almost like the higher up you go in some weird way the worse people treat women, but also they can pick on other people too. ... And honestly, I'd love it all to be safe spaces, but I don't think that is possible. I don't see that being possible for a very long time.

Previous research has similarly found that gender trends exist in the extent to which sport administrators feel psychologically safe. For example, Walker and Melton (2015) found that top level female athletic administrators in the United States reported lower psychological safety than men, and lesbian administrators reported the lowest level of psychological safety.

The same female postholder also spoke of how wider practices and cultures within her sport influence organisational practices such as those discussed above:

The problem historically is that ... the people who end up in these positions are a bit like friends of friends, because it's always the same old blokes who are friends with the same old blokes. And in part, that's because women's [sport] was so small compared to the men ... When I started, ... there were a lot more men doing [sport] and a lot more men in power. ... It's weird because sport is like this thing where people get away with things they wouldn't get away with in normal life.

This highlights how organisational culture is influenced by forces outside of the organisation itself, and so in order to work towards a more inclusive organization 'top management must perceive very well the internal context of the organization, its external situation, and especially, the dynamics of the external forces' (Marcu, 2014, p. 678)

The diverse range of formal and informal factors reported by our survey respondents and interviewees highlight the complexity of both the issue of inclusion and how to best address it.

3.5. Challenges faced by individual postholders

Within this section we draw on survey data to present the wide range of challenges discussed by survey respondents, before drawing more heavily on interview data to highlight the complexity, depth, and nuance of some of these findings. Again, we found this useful to separate into formal and informal factors that caused challenges for the respondents.

Both female and male postholders reported a diversity of challenges faced in their international sport governance careers.

Formal factors reported as challenges in the survey included:

- the volunteer structure
- travel requirements and family responsibilities
- financial costs
- lack of support
- Covid-19
- term limits
- poor management/leadership practices

Interviewees discussed some of these formal factors in more depth. For example, both male and female interviewees spoke of **how the volunteer structure meant that their workload and travel requirements were challenging to manage:**

I quite often take on too much so therefore I can't be as effective as I want. ... I [also] struggle time wise in terms of getting holiday ... away from it. ... Because we get grants for flights ... you'll go at really bad times, and you'll go for cheap flights, and you'll end up being really knackered and ill. ... This is why I think I've got to the ceiling of where I'm going because I don't think I can do much more. I think I don't want to get ill like that. I've got to come back and do a job that's hard enough as it is, let alone do this sort of stuff. (Female postholder)

Sports governance requires a lot of personal energy and time. Everyone who's involved in sports governance [have] got their own work and their own family and things. ... It's very pressurized, especially when you're working full time. (Female postholder)

I think one of the biggest challenges has been getting a work life balance. That's been a huge, huge challenge. ... There are no set hours obviously - you can just work and work endlessly, because there's always things to be done. (Female postholder)

The commitment of time [is a challenge] - it's three or four meetings a year. ... I'm not paid to attend the meeting. ... I have my expenses and my travel covered and my accommodation, but I still had to take 3 days off work. I had to take three days away from my family and it's not easy to do and I think that's possibly as well why a lot of people can't do it or don't want to do it because it's too much commitment. (Male postholder)

This was **particularly challenging for those with small children:**

I became a mum last year and I tell you it's much more complicated now. ... If I look at the travel schedule for [the IF's] 3-5 day meetings ... in Asia ... Either I'm going to spend seven

days apart from my [baby], which for me is not OK right now ... Or I'm going to spend £3,000 shipping my daughter and my mother out there to spend seven days with me for a volunteer position. People tell you that women are not committed, but that's really the choice when you lay it on the line. ... At this point in time I can't see myself continuing at the IF level until she's of an age where I feel comfortable with taking that time away. ... They don't have policies in place to cover this kind of thing. (Female postholder)

This woman's experience highlights how it is not only the challenge of managing travel requirements with a young family that is problematic, but also the lack of policies or practices in place within her IF (and presumably others) to support individuals who are facing these challenges whilst volunteering their time within international sport governance posts.

The above quotes also touch upon another challenge that was discussed by other male and female interviewees - **financial challenges**:

When UK Sport say they won't pay for the flight for you to attend Congress, all the people with money pay for their own flights and the people you really want to get there can't get there because you can't afford to pay for them and they can't afford to pay for themselves. You're likely to get [that] more of the wrong rich people can go because they pay for themselves. ... We still are in an industry where people don't value my skillset. They will give money to athletes, they will give money to coaches, they'll often give money to consultants, they will give money to UK Sport and will employ a lot of people. But when you look at how the grant system works, it doesn't seem to value administration and governance particularly highly and therefore we are treated poorly by everybody. (Female postholder)

I think there needs to be more done when you are considering that it's a volunteer position. ... I would count myself as being pretty committed. The fact that I would pay for my mother and my daughter to come with me, when it's short haul, I'm essentially paying to do a volunteer position, so a lot more needs to be done there. (Female postholder)

I think there are these barriers which people don't always realise because if you tend to be older and more well off, then obviously you can afford more easily to go there for longer, or even at all. Some people don't come, they just can't afford it. There's been people in my committees who I've never seen because they can't afford to come. ... I've got a well-paid job. If you haven't got those attributes, there are people who share hotel rooms at a conference. They can only stay for a very limited period of time, and I'm sure those of us that can stay for longer, can get more done because we can network with more people, we can influence more things. Rather than, people could literally fly in for their meeting, arrive the night before a turn of the meeting to find the deal's being done behind their backs and they can't do anything about it. And then they fly out the next day. (Male postholder)

People have got to be able to fund themselves. I'll get my expenses paid if I travel and so on but ... I would say it probably costs me a lot of money and a lot of time. And this is where it might be difficult for some people and that obviously has an effect probably. They'll be very good candidates, but can't afford to do it, financially or time wise. (Male postholder)

When asked if either his national or international federation was doing anything to try and reduce such financial barriers, this male postholder replied: “Not that I'm aware, no.”

These quotes highlight how financial and time requirements to be a committed senior postholder within an international federation create an unlevel playing field where only those with enough economic capital can afford the time and/or cost of travel. This means that good candidates may be excluded from international sport governance solely based on their socioeconomic status. It is worth noting that at the national level in the UK, there continues to be a gender pay gap across both national sport councils and national governing bodies (Velija, 2022). Based on this gender pay gap, and the fact that a significant proportion of our overall sample work in the sport sector, it could mean that women are more negatively influenced by the financial barriers of IF requirements than men.

One female postholder spoke of how **it wasn't just the requirements of the governance positions within her IF that generated such barriers, but also the wider structure and culture of the sport:**

Our sport isn't financially diverse, so we tend to pick up at the elite level ... those who have wealth. ... Our national federations in Africa are not dominated by colour they are dominated by wealth.

Having the ‘wrong’ people within positions of power as a result of financial constraints can lead to poor governance practices within IFs. Such **poor governance is something that was discussed by several interviewees as being problematic** in their everyday working lives within the IFs:

Even now we'll have an agenda that's sent out, but we don't have any names against who's presenting. I've got to present something verbally, and I'm on the phone, driving in my car because I had not known that I was presenting. (Female postholder)

One of the challenges is that some people in governance positions don't have in-depth knowledge of governance. ... At times [sport governance] lacks depth. ... Basic principles of corporate governance, which have worked for donkey's years, are ignored by sport governance. And in the long run, that will be to sport governance's detriment. (Female postholder)

Our statutes are archaic and they're not right for modern organisation. (Male postholder)

Governance can often be seen as a burden. ... You've got to write the policy ... and ... there can be a negative bit to that. Having a checkbox doesn't necessarily mean you've got a strong policy or good governance, so that for me is how I would summarise it. ... If you've got those [governance] structures in place it feels like it underpins everything you do. It actually feels like you can get on with ... the important business, which is going out there and trying to engage with partners, engage with your membership and all of that, because all of that work is underpinned by some strong governance. (Male postholder)

Poor governance practices in sport is something that has received much media and scholarly attention in recent decades, and our findings demonstrate that British postholders continue to find poor governance practices challenging in effectively carrying out their senior roles in IFs.

Female (but not male) interviewees also spoke about how **international federations operate at a very slow pace of change**, which makes it difficult to have any short-term influence within their sport:

It takes four years before anyone speaks to you and eight years before you can influence people. ... I realised very quickly that things happen slowly, and if you push them too fast, the doors slam in your face really quickly ... Coming out of the private sector, I'm constantly amazed about how long it takes us to do anything, because I think if you run your own business, you can make a decision. Whereas I can never make a decision without it going through to a board of people that get voted in because their friends are the right people.

If you want to be an IF, you're looking at 20 years, 30 years. If you think you're going to do something in 10 years, you're not going to even scratch the surface. ... I think I have struggled with the fact that I want change faster and that IFs are slow, really slow. And that annoys me. ... I feel I'm banging my head against a brick wall. We'll spend an hour talking about the minutiae of Olympic timetable and I'll say, "right, hang on, we need to talk about the strategy of [sport discipline]", and they'll say, "you've got 5 minutes".

If you're not in this for the long run then don't start at all, because it takes a long time for change to happen.

I have learned that it's sometimes a bit like playing a game of chess. You have to move slowly and you have to think and things can take quite a long time because you're trying to balance the right people and get them to see your point of view.

Scholars have found that when female representation within organisation boards meets a critical mass (around 30%), it has a positive impact on board performance, including that boards can become more collaborative and innovative (Joecks et al., 2013; Konrad et al., 2008; Torchia et al., 2011). Given that IFs have been critiqued by our interviewees for having such a slow pace of change, it is therefore possible that one way of increasing IF efficiency is by increasing diversity amongst their decision-making.

In the meantime, within existing male dominated and inefficient sport governance systems, the above quotes demonstrate the importance of not only supporting women (and other underrepresented groups) to access sport governance positions, but also to *maintain* sport governance roles for periods of time that are long enough to have genuine decision-making influence within their sport.

In addition to formal factors, a range of **informal factors** were also reported in the survey, including:

- navigating politics
- power conflicts
- navigating cultural differences
- marginalisation
- abuse/harassment
- maintaining motivation
- lack of self-confidence
- developing skills and knowledge

Within the interviews, there were some themes that were discussed by a diversity of interviewees, and some that were clearly influenced by the specific positionality of the individual.

For example, both male and female interviewees spoke of **challenges that stemmed from lacking knowledge and/or experience** when first being elected into their position:

I didn't even know what Council was. I'd never been to a formal meeting with agendas and papers at this stage. ... I was learning as I was doing, and I made one spectacularly bad error. I was trying to do the right thing trying to find a solution, but just had no clue about the context of sport, politics or the relationship between the IOC and [IF]. Otherwise, I might have actually kept my mouth shut. (Female postholder)

I never really was told when I first joined what the wider dynamics of the role are, how our processes work. It would be 2-3 years, four years later, some would say, "X said Y, but X is only saying Y because of ABCD&F", and at the time, nobody tells you that. You think, "X thinks Y? Well, that must be what he thinks". Well, there's obviously a whole political story behind it. (Male postholder)

This demonstrates a greater need for training and support for all newly elected senior postholders in better understanding their roles and requirements as well as the broader IF and sport governance landscape.

Additionally, both female and male interviewees discussed at length the **challenges of navigating politics, which was deemed to be highly influential in the success of one's international governance career:**

In this political wilderness, this political storm, ... you can lose friends and you can lose colleagues quite easily and quite quickly. (Female postholder)

Although I'm very used to it now, I was quite taken aback at the politics and the skulduggery. My very first meeting at our Congress, someone said something really rude to me, or dismissive, and afterwards at the lunch break came up and said they had reflected on it and they were wrong. I thought "oh, that's great". And I was very happy until one of my delegation afterwards said, "criticise in public and apologise in private, he's not going to apologise to the meeting, is he?". (Male postholder)

If you want to be successful, you do to an extent have to play the game, and that's not always palatable. But I am a great believer that you can't influence change unless you're sat at the table. (Male postholder)

Whilst we have not included details related to specific events/occurrences to maintain anonymity, several of the interviewees spoke of occasions where they and/or others had **experienced political personal attacks that have undermined them and their role:**

I think certainly the most areas I've struggled are personal attacks and no one ever attacks you to your face. ... Certainly, the younger delegates I've seen come into our delegation have struggled when they suddenly realise how vicious or nasty some people can be for absolutely no reason at all. (Male postholder)

The greatest challenge is there are lots and lots of very unpleasant people out there, mostly the unpleasantness is based on threat and jealousy. So, build up your network of trusted friends, confidants. (Male postholder)

The high frequency of politics being reported as an issue and its continuous nature highlights the **need for more work to be done in making international sport governance more transparent and ethical and have more integrity**. Research within the field of political science has found a strong association between the share of women elected to office and lower levels of perceived corruption (e.g., Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2019). Therefore, male dominance within the sector is likely to have an influence on problematic politics, and in turn increasing female representation is likely to positively influence a reduction in problematic politics and corruption within the sector.

Whilst some of the informal challenges faced by interviewees seemingly lacked gendered or other social trends, some issues were specific to the social characteristics of those interviewed. For example, **female survey respondents and interviewees discussed personal experiences related to an underrepresentation of women and experiences of marginalisation or, worse, harassment:**

“At our last meeting I was addressed by an international male colleague inappropriately, in an undermining and patronising way. This was tactical on their part due to their position and done to show the room that he could put in my place, however it caught me off guard and I didn't know how I should/could respond - This shouldn't be tolerated at any level.” (Female survey respondent)

“Being ... female. You have to work hard to earn respect of some men from other nations.” (Female survey respondent)

And then it is sometimes you just would catch yourself thinking, I am the only woman here. ... I had always had that being in the minority throughout my working career, but you do catch yourself thinking there's no other women. (Female postholder)

When you go into international relations, you have to put up with a whole bunch of rubbish. They think I'm your friend and would sleep with you. ... I don't put myself in any compromising positions. ... It's never as simple as being sexually assaulted by your work colleagues because that's cut and dried now, isn't it? It's never that simple anymore. It's like how am I going to denigrate you? How am I going to patronise you? How I'm going to exclude you, but every single one of those little micro things, I think it's really difficult to call out. And if you do complain, you sound like you're causing trouble. ... I remember, one guy wouldn't stop texting me. ... You give someone your work number, which happens to be your personal number, and then the messages start getting a little bit fruity. ... No one really prepares you for that one, do they? (Female postholder)

I remember in one of the first two years I was there. ... You have these U-shaped rooms, right where everybody sits with their laptops. You have the plugs in the middle of the floor. I remember going down to put the plug in the floor and someone saying something like, “she's on her knees”, and obviously the innuendo is sexual, and I can kind of laugh that off. But now when I say it back to you, excuse me but that was just terrible, that someone would say that. ... They would say things like that and find it funny. I don't even think they ever said it to be hurtful. It's just that that was the type of culture. (Female postholder)

Experiences of sexual harassment are the most concerning challenges reported by our interviewees. They demonstrate that some IF cultures are not just exclusionary for women, but unsafe. Safeguarding measures tend to be focused around the safety of athletes, but these examples demonstrate that safeguarding also has to extend to ensuring the safety of administrators within organisational spaces.

Due to the overall lack of diversity across our sample of women, intersectional experiences or reflections were mostly absent. This is problematic in understanding the challenges and needs of a diversity of women in international sport governance.

No men spoke of gender-related issues that they had experienced. This suggests that international sport governance continues to be associated with dominant men and masculinity, which can lead to the positioning of women and minorities as incongruent with the requirements for success in decision-making roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Other social characteristics also led to unique challenges for some interviewees. For example, a female postholder spoke of how **coming from a small national governing body within her sport** means that *“there was prejudice there”*. Additionally, a male postholder spoke of how **being under the age of 40 can be challenging for individuals rising through the ranks of international sport governance**:

I think if you're in that age range up to about 40 and you're reasonably successful, the people [who are] 40 to 55, [in the] the middle-aged band, see you as that enormous threat [and] really make it an unpleasant experience for lots of people.

Furthermore, two of our interviewees spoke about their experiences of being LGBTQ within international sport governance (genders omitted to maintain extra anonymity):

The other Brits who were involved in other committees were very concerned because I am openly gay, and they were very concerned that that wouldn't go down well with the blazer-wearing 70-year-olds. I've never experienced a problem, but they were very worried about it when I first started. ... How would people take it when they found out at some point?

I've been an out gay [person] since the beginning of the 90s. I think that was also a bit of a problem for certain people in the leadership, particularly the former Executive Director. ... My partner [and I] both have said that we believe that being gay at some point in our professional and my sporting career has held us back. That said I've now achieved the pinnacle of what I wanted to achieve in sporting terms, so maybe it might have happened a bit earlier. ... [When needing to travel to] Russia, some of the Middle East, we have robust discussions around the dinner table about me going to visit some of these countries. But in the end, my view is the only way that we can influence change is by going and visiting. And I do not hide who I am ... I'm not sure it's necessarily true of everybody and not everybody's experiences will be the same but ... I've been to some tough countries and different regimes and all of that, but I've never really experienced any discrimination or abuse.

For both of these individuals, being LGBTQ had not resulted in direct discrimination or abuse but had led to concerns from either them or their British counterparts over how they may be received by delegates from other countries or when visiting countries that are not LGBTQ friendly. This demonstrates an extra layer of complexity for these individuals in navigating regional and cultural differences both inside and outside of their organisations.

There is an overall lack of research on the experiences of LGBTQ sport leaders, highlighting a topic that needs further enquiry to understand the extent to which IFs are LGBTQ-inclusive spaces. This is particularly important when inclusivity can be experienced differently by different LGBTQ people depending on other aspects of their social identity (such as their race, ethnicity, disability status, or social class).

As a result of the challenges discussed in this section, some of the male and female interviewees spoke of feeling a lack of energy or motivation to continue in their roles:

There are challenges with the job and then there's my personal challenges – feeling that my motivation and energy to remain in this job is diminished, and that's been a challenge to keep myself going with that because I'm an all or nothing person and I just wake up one day and go right, I'm done with that. (Female postholder)

I've done it now a long time and I think there comes a point when you ask, is it what I want to do anymore? ... I think that there's a few people who started this at the same time as me at a similar age and we certainly had conversations of, do we still want to be involved? ... It would be interesting as the profile of people getting involved gets younger whether people burnout quicker? Because they've done it for 10-15 years and they're like, "why do I want to do this anymore?" It definitely does take its toll. (Male postholder)

We talk about stress, there's a huge amount of stress with a role such as the one I've got. You do have to question all of those things and I suppose ultimately you can manage them for a period of time and that's why it's not healthy to stay in these roles, from the organisation's perspective and an individual perspective, for a long time. (Male postholder)

These quotes demonstrate the real-world consequences of the diverse challenges that both male and female British postholders experience in international sport governance positions: burnout and dropout. As with athlete safeguarding, more attention is being paid toward protecting athletes from burnout, but this does not extend toward those who occupy governance roles. In section 3.8, we identify what support was wished for by the interviewees, which may work to alleviate fatigue.

3.6. Enabling factors

The interviewees discussed a range of enabling factors that positively influenced their experiences in international sport positions. This section is split into two parts: personal experiences and experiences at the organisational level. Survey data is only presented in one part of this section.

Personal experiences

We have coded the personal experiences into the following seven parts. It is striking to note that, for many, each of these enabling factors have not come easily and are the result of significant time, commitment and energy to sport:

- Respect and integrity
- Hard work, resilience, and the volunteer ethic
- British identity, use of language, and governance
- Sporting capital
- Identity
- The role of mentors and sponsors
- Gendered differences

Respect and integrity were a confidence that others recognised their values and skillset. As a result, a relationship of trust was formed.

Being able to demonstrate you've got the right skills in a practical way, in many ways, is better than trying to influence somebody over a glass of wine or a sandwich or whatever. One certainly should always seize the opportunity when it presents itself. (Male postholder)

In terms of influencing internationally, the best way for me to do that is to become a trusted person. (Female postholder)

I guess they wanted someone ... who's going to drive change from within. I think that 'within-ness' is really important because quite often you get, people have got really big ideas and they're creative, but they do it on their own. They do it outside of the system. And I think that was that trust that they saw in me. (Female postholder)

Women, particularly, noted how they utilised specific skillsets to contribute to the IF. In doing so, this also made them less replaceable:

I've chosen something that I care about it, but secondly, I've also made sure that I am one of the subject matter experts in the [IF] so that, yes, they can decide they don't like me, and they politically might want to get rid of me, but currently they'd be getting rid of somebody with expertise that they ... would struggle to replace in the short term.

I've done various educational governance and business management [courses] and ... up-skilled my degree and things like that for this role. ... What I had to do was demonstrate that I had the professional standards and the experience from everything that I've done previously.

Generally, interviewees also identified how their professional background can be important in terms of skills and experience. Some women reflected on how working in male-dominated environments prior to their sporting roles benefitted them, such as:

[I] definitely I think it did help. ... I was quite used to being in an environment where the majority were males.

Another way of gaining trust and respect is through **working very hard and learning to be resilient** when encountering negative experiences. The interviewees framed these in a positive sense because these elements have been achieved or overcome and were something to be celebrated as part of their pathway to success. However, it is clear that in some scenarios, these have required considerable effort that may go unnoticed:

I just started reaching out and making connections and once it was seen that I was prepared to work, and was prepared to sit on committees, take minutes, just very slow basic things that you need to do to make a committee. Then I think my reputation grew as someone who was a hard worker, someone who wanted to be involved. (Female postholder)

I think it was really, really important in terms of culture to ensure that you are getting up really early. "What's the first bus out? What's the first car out?" ... You know, that hard work, that real commitment to the sport. If something needs being done, sticking your hand up. I'd come back from these events absolutely knackered, I certainly wasn't going on a jolly. I think that was the culture of what's expected from the postholders. ... for me was all about hard work, about professionalism. ... At the end of the day, if you want to get into a position, what we say again and again is that people need to trust you because they really, really care about this, about the sport and they really care about the decisions. ... It's about proving to the establishment that you warrant their trust in you. (Female postholder)

When discussing strategies for overcoming marginalisation and discrimination within the survey, it was notable that (where a response was provided) all the female postholders discussed individual-led strategies: determination/perseverance (n=2), developing relationships (n=1), qualifications (n=1), training (n=1), developing experience (n=1), demonstrating value (n=1), and hard work (n=1):

"The only way to overcome is to show you can do it. Sometimes I have to do things under the radar or bully my way in" (Female survey respondent)

"Getting a qualification. Doing UK Sport ILP. Using examples from outside my IF or even my sport to show I know what I am talking about!" (Female survey respondent)

Conversely, male respondents had a greater tendency to discuss organisational strategies, such as developing clear organisational strategies, efficient work distribution, board restructure, targets for volunteers, and technological developments.

This indicates that women place the burden on themselves to overcome challenges they face within international sport governance rather than the system and culture. This places significant burden on individual women leaders and raises the question as to how many women fail to apply or drop-out because this burden is too great.

Indeed, the forthcoming examples of resilience amongst the female interviewees highlight how a career pathway in international sport governance is non-linear, with highs and lows a common feature. Academic research has theorised how focusing on the self during such reflections works to neglect the role of systems and cultures in determining these outcomes, especially for women (Gill et al., 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2018).

I've had more knocks and this was my third attempt at the election. You have to be able to say, "right, I'll go again. And this time I'll show them why they should have picked me the last time". You just pick yourself up.

I'm strong enough character to just shove these things off. I don't care about them. It's not going to impact me.

Another element of hard work leading to benefits of trust and respect can be seen in the **role of volunteer work**. It is well-established that, in some areas of the world, a volunteer ethic forms the foundation to many sports systems. The extent to which this exists in international sport governance is reflected upon below by both a male and female postholder. Both recognise the benefits and constraints of relying upon goodwill in governance. Indeed, across the interviewees, the passion for their role and their sport was unwavering, leading many to recount examples of going 'over and above' to ensure the success of their organisation.

If you're someone who is prepared to get stuck in and actually do work, then you get involved in more and more projects. And then you become known as someone who's prepared to do the work ... [but] you eventually get to a point where you're not doing a good job because [if] you're not that interested and you don't have the time, you're going to step back from it because you don't want the label of being associated as somebody who doesn't do the work. (Male postholder)

We are very, very reliant on volunteers to be able to deliver. And I think that's what [senior leaders] are afraid of – getting duds in spaces. Because the system will break down, and when they have had duds in those spaces, they've had to work really hard to move them on without upsetting anyone. (Female postholder)

Language is a form of cultural capital and, as seen in the previous set of quotes, can be used as a resource to generate power (Bourdieu, 1986). Interviewees also referred to their **sporting capital** to describe the respect and benefits afforded to the cultural significance and embodied practice of having been an elite athlete within the sport. Some of the interviewees identified how having been an athlete provides significant profile within their sport.

Because I'm an athlete, there's a recognition. People are like, "we know who you are" ... and in some sports, it really helps. (Female postholder)

I think the fact that I had worked on the field of play at multiple Olympic Games, World Championships, gave me a credibility. (Male postholder)

Further, because the athlete had previously demonstrated a commitment to the sport, there appears a connection between that individual being perceived as credible to the sport's future.

A lot of our post holders are incredibly successful athletes. That's seen as quite high currency within [IF], having an Olympic medal definitely has helped me climb through that process. ... I think because if you're an athlete, [the IF] know that you're committed to the sport for the long term. (Female postholder)

I would be seen in a very positive light that if I'm given the role of as a custodian of the sport, then as a former athlete, I'm going to be probably a safe pair of hands because I'm an athlete and understand the sport. (Male postholder)

Notwithstanding, one female postholder was more sceptical of the competencies shared between former athletes and those in leadership roles.

Others were rocking up with Olympians and gold medals and that's a big thing at international level, but it doesn't mean to say you're going to be good [in a leadership position].

As per comments made in section 3.3, this is another example of the lack of rigor that exists within sport governance. A heavy reliance on athletes, rather than independent directors, for example, can ignore whether athletes have the required experiences or skills for such roles.

Interviewees also identified different parts of **their identity** as being positive enablers in their career pathway. Gender forms a key component, but intersectional differences based on age are also apparent.

A male postholder stated how his age has benefitted him when entering sport governance.

Your age shouldn't really matter. There is this tendency to find a young person: "Quick, we must have them because they will improve statistics". And essentially, I think I benefited from that and certainly the age profile of who's on committees has improved, moved enormously since I first started. I think the first time around that's why I got it.

Female participants felt that their gender had had a big influence in their election in their IFs wanting more women in those positions.

It did also make a difference that there were no other females, so people were looking for a female candidate. ... It was very obvious that I was so different to the other Council members. I was about 2,530 years younger. I was female.

Because we're quite a conservative federation, people tend not to stand against each other in a public vote. I wouldn't say this publicly, but I do think very clearly that they wanted to increase the percentage of women in their governance structure. Therefore, they were steering how it happened, they weren't breaking the rules because that was totally within their rules but they were negotiating to make sure that women were in the senior positions.

The role of mentors and sponsors are influential not only in supporting their election to IF positions, but also in accessing powerful informal spaces once in position.

It's been really helpful for somebody to actually say "I think you would be good at this" or "I think she would be good at that". And I think that given that people do say that women

tend to be less confident and tend to see why they shouldn't apply for something instead of why they should apply. I think that's really, really important. (Female postholder)

Making allies, female allies within the [Commission] have been really helpful. For example, [female postholder], who came through the [Commission] with me and then having a 'He for She' championing me was being really helpful. (Female postholder)

I developed a mentor-mentee relationship, but I think it was more sponsor relationship with one of the Council members. It completely naturally came. He was the president of [the European sport federation] at the time. And he was very conscious of the fact that they needed greater diversity, not just at [IF] level, but also within Europe. ... He advocated for me being involved when I wasn't in the room and that's probably how I would define a sponsor. ... A lot of opportunities came from that because he had such a prestigious role. He was also very well respected within the Council at the time. (Female postholder)

I think, historically, certainly within [my sport and my IF], there's been a huge change in leadership structure and governance. It really was if your face fitted whom you'd lobbied the most and that sort of thing. I recognised that there were two [non-UK] people who were going to be fairly influential. And they were both supporters of mine, much more than the NGB were at the time, and they were movers and shakers around the tables and the bars of [the IF]. And I think they promoted me well. ... I just kept close to [one of them] because I knew that he was an international influencer with a fairly significant role. ... I think we've lost an era of people who helped me, there was a generation of people who helped me. And somewhere along the line, that generation or that group of people doesn't exist. I certainly want to be part of that again for the future. (Male postholder)

Above, the male postholder explains how he benefitted from influential sponsors in his sport and their positions within the IF. Later in the interview, he noted how he was determined to fulfil such roles for the next generation of men and women coming through:

I was really upset about one of my colleagues from [country], she is one of the world's best [position] in my opinion. I've mentored her over many years and I really wanted her to join the [IF] Committee this time round. But because of international politics for various reasons at a higher level, she didn't make it. I was sitting having a sandwich lunch with the new executive director at [the IF] and I said, "we missed an opportunity with not having her on the committee", and he said, "why?" And I explained and he said that was politics and he wrote her name down and said there'll be an opportunity and I'll make sure that it comes her way. ... I think it's important for me to say to people "I think he's a good guy," not say, "he's my successor", "he's a good guy and when there's an opportunity, we should consider him", and I think it's perhaps the softer promotion that we need to be better at rather than that whole self-promotion piece and networking.

It is clear from these experiences that mentors and sponsors play an important role in progressing individuals through international sport governance. Section 3.7 explores the role of networking and influencing in more depth whilst section 3.8 discusses what further support is called for in terms of mentoring.

The data presented so far indicates that men and women both allude to an array of similar enablers. However, it was clear from the interviews that women were more generally reflective of the elements that have benefitted their journey into and through international sport governance. This is not to imply that the men do not have relevant skills and experiences, but that they were not as reflective or aware of the privilege that their gender is afforded in this space. Indeed, the women identified far more nuanced ways of ensuring they were respected by peers, utilising specific skillsets, and better embedded into their sport system.

By extension, **gendered differences** were noticeable given that half the men referred to good fortune on multiple occasions as reasons for their successful journeys. They claimed they were 'lucky' to be where they are, before offering, often without realising, reasons such as who they knew, their sporting capital, and their hard-work. This indicates a lack of awareness of the challenges sought by those who do not share their identity.

Biggest challenge? I almost feel like I haven't had any. I was lucky, because of the pathway that I've followed. [For my success factors], I would like to say respect, seen as somebody with integrity, passion for the sport, great knowledge of the sport. All of the things that you would expect me to say. There is an element of me who believes that actually it's just luck.

I was fast tracked and got a bit lucky in terms of the appointments I got and then the national governing body support[ed] me.

I do a part time job on purpose because I'm lucky enough that we can afford that, and it means that I can do more time with [sport].

Organisational-level experiences

Aside from personal experiences, the interviewees also spoke of positive enablers located at the organisational-level. Here, women predominantly noted the positive influences of gendered actions within formal and cultural organisational settings. Men also noted this, but provided examples of where they may benefit from informal and weak governance.

Interviewees recounted various examples of **gendered strategies aiming to benefit gender equity in the organisational structure**. Other actions, such as events and seminars that share news of gender efforts from around the world were also mentioned. These appear very powerful in terms of the visibility of women within the organisation.

Interviewees spoke of gender rules and strategies being implemented which have positive impacts but these were not without struggle, as was discussed in section 3.4.

What we did was we put something to Congress that if you wanted three [representatives], one of them had to be a woman. And that got kicked back twice so that took us eight years at best to get that through. But that's now through ... if you want three, one of them has to be a woman. What you're doing is making sure that there are women coming to Congress, when they go back to their own country, they'll see that women can get elected and how the process works because sometimes it is a little bit of a dark art if you don't have access to the information. ... We've got to keep our quotas up and I think if we don't actively do it, it will fall. (Female postholder)

I currently am involved in a working group or a steering group with female leaders and representatives in [IF] to actively have that name changed. Because I find it quite degrading, 'election through] gender of minority', you could have colour of minority - there's many things that could be related to that. (Female postholder)

The process of IFs engaging with gendered governance actions, often over time and after significant struggle, was praised by the women interviewees.

Four years later, to have five [women on the IF Board], and it's five really competent, really intelligent women, that do the work and make change, it's been really good for our board. It's really changed the dynamics of the board. (Female postholder)

[We have] more females in positions that are of influence, and a recognition that there has to be change and conversations at that table, which allows that change to happen. I think that's the biggest thing, because 8-10 years ago you weren't even at the table, and now we are. (Female postholder)

It's not like you're pulling from a low position, you're pulling from a point where there are a lot of women in that space. (Female postholder)

Another female postholder noted the importance of **looking for women beyond the confines of her own sport because of the external knowledge and expertise** they may bring. She acknowledged the perception that not having knowledge of the sport (another form of sporting capital) can be perceived as a disadvantage, but felt that with some support, that could be overcome.

We've also tried to push that if a federation doesn't have women that are '[sport]' women with those skills, to go with non-[sport] women to bring in people from other areas: ... women who are mothers, who are educators, who are sport administrators, even if they don't know about [sport]. We're putting together a package to explain to them about [sport] and how it works and what it's all about. Because if [the IF] hasn't got women with the competencies or are from [sport], use women that are not from [sport]... with the competencies. The [sport] 'bit' can actually be learned to a level that you can manage the governance part.

Strategies, actions, and formal procedures offer some opportunity for change amongst IFs. However, as seen in Section 3.5, there remain significant barriers at cultural level of these organisations. Notwithstanding, a female postholder explained how some **welcoming environments already exist for women:**

I was quite apprehensive when I was voted on to the [IF] Board. I wasn't very sure what to expect, but from the minute I joined it, an example I can give you is that at my very first meeting I asked to make a point and I was given all of the time I was required to do. There were no issues and it was followed up immediately. I felt valued, I felt included and therefore I wanted to do more. ... I have never experienced any gender bias. I feel welcome there. I feel included.

The impact of more women in international sport governance roles was also noted by a male postholder. One of the reasons that he saw **women's involvement as positive was because they may disrupt the status quo** into a more collaborative, respectful culture:

I think women generally create an environment where it's less confrontational and I base that on my experience on the board. ... I think that women do disarm. Not all women; we've seen women that are more like touchpaper, more than men, but I think it can be quite disarming being the other sex.

A female postholder also alluded to how the behaviours of men have shifted due to the presence of women:

I think at the beginning the men weren't wary, but they were more conscious of their behaviour than they would have been if I hadn't been there. That's just my perception. I don't know if that's a reality and I'm not suggesting that they're swearing, derogatory people but I do think at the beginning they were more considerate of what they were doing and what they were saying than they maybe they would have been if there hadn't been a woman in the room. Now, as the other women were brought on, it's a really nice dynamic, everybody's open, everybody's communicative, everybody's respectful of each other. It's really quite good. And I think the men appreciate the value that the women have added to the board.

To summarise how **strong, or improved, governance can benefit individuals**, a male postholder's quote praises the way it can reduce workload:

Having some strong governance in place was absolutely necessary and the way I look at governance and probably always have is, if it's not in place, then I always felt you were reactionary. ... Once you start to get that governance in place, then you can start to be more proactive and that's that. ... Having a checkbox doesn't necessarily mean you've got a strong policy or good governance, so that for me is how I would summarise it.

3.7. The role and impact of networking

One theme that repeatedly emerged from the survey data as being influential in the experiences and successes of postholders was networking. A network can be defined as a pattern of relationships among individuals (Seibert et al., 2001). Furthermore, the act of networking can be conceptualised as ‘the building and nurturing of professional and personal relationships to create a system of support, information, and contact crucial for career and personal success’ (Wells & Hancock, 2017, p. 130). Within sport, networking has been discussed as being particularly important because of its nature as a competitive and tight-knit industry (Wells & Hancock, 2017).

The repeated mentioning of networking within the survey responses led us to explore this topic in more depth within the interviews. In analysing the interview data, we developed a ‘5 P’s’ typology for the requirements reported by interviewees for successful networking in international federations:

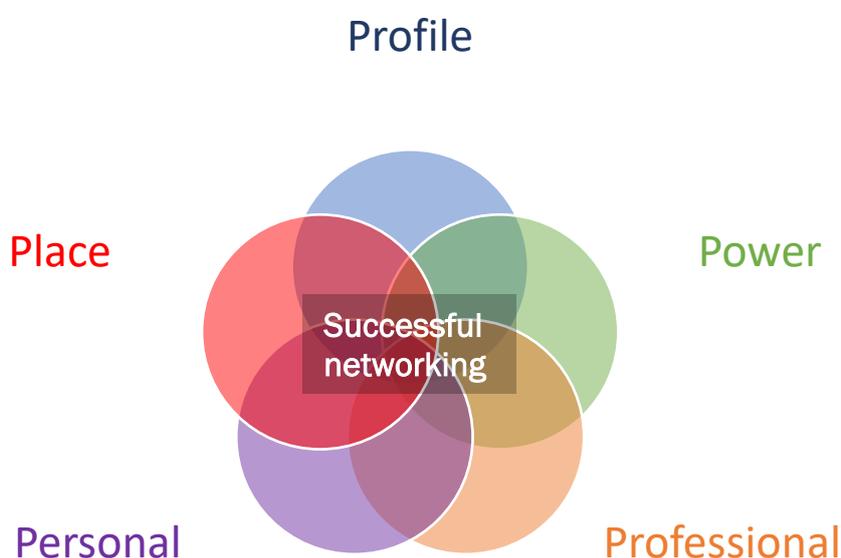


Figure 7: The 5 P’s typology for successful networking in international federations

As can be seen within Figure 7, all ‘5 P’s’ are required to achieve successful networking, and all five are interrelated.

Profile

Interviewees spoke about **the importance of building a strong networking profile** in being successfully elected to a senior post, and subsequently having influence once in post. That is, it is important to be well-known within the IF to stand a good chance of being voted into a senior role. No difference was seen in the needs or experiences of female and male interviewees in this regard. For example, one female postholder spoke of how:

It predominantly is about making sure that you have the right personal contacts and networking to make sure that when it comes to an election time that you're not just a face.

Similarly, when talking about her successful election experience, another female postholder discussed how important it was that:

I had a relatively good network. ... There's a whole series of events and opportunities where you meet people, and you build a network.

Furthermore, a male postholder reported that he experienced “no problems with the [election] process” because:

The fact that I've been on the circuit for [my sport] for many years, most people know me, and that makes a big difference. ... I think people vote for people they know.

Another male postholder had similar reflections on why he was successfully elected to his role:

I think I have presence in terms of people knew me. ... My network is reasonably significant to the point where ... [I] can pick up a phone and speak to someone in an Olympic sport, Paralympic Sport, IPC, whatever.

It is clear from these quotes that a strong networking profile continues to be a vital component of successful election campaigns for senior IF positions. This aligns with existing research that has found that ‘a significant predictor of career success is an individual’s network and the size of the network’ (Wells & Hancock, 2017, p. 130).

Place

To build a large, strong network, **participants spoke of the importance of accessing networking places and spaces**, such as congresses and major championships/events, to build a large and influential network. Interviewees spoke about how major events in their IFs’ calendars enabled them the opportunity to engage in strategic networking:

Definitely what does speed [the networking process] up is going to major championships ... because everyone goes to major championships. ... Next week, for example, [I'll be attending] the Junior Championships, which of course then allows me also to do my networking. Because I'm in the space of “go grab a coffee. How are you? How are you doing” and then allows me to promote whatever governance agenda [I'm working with]. (Female postholder)

That first Congress was five days, and by the end of it I had invited myself to several meetings that I hadn't been on schedule for, but I recognized that there were really important things and that [my country] had to be part of them. And that was how I learned ... that in order to make things happen and to have change happen, you have to be at the table. You have to be in meetings. ... [It was] a lot of personal time given up to travel, to go to a meeting that you knew wasn't going to be particularly good, but you had to attend, because if you weren't seen to be there, you wouldn't be in the mix. (Female postholder)

We have a congress every year. ... It's like this crazy festival of democracy. ... You meet and chat to people that you know, or you don't know in your committee. ... If something's happened in one meeting and you need to stop it or get it reversed, wherever you've got to go in between the corridor chats to meet the person and get hold of them, have a drink in the bar. Sort it all that way. I think the ability to network like that is very important and the face time is very important. (Male postholder)

The above quotes highlight how such events are not only strategically important for the individual postholders in progressing their governance careers, but also for pushing the agendas of NGBs. From a UK Sport perspective it is, therefore, crucial to have British representation at such events to promote British agendas on the international stage.

At formal organisational events, postholders discussed how **much of the influential and strategic networking occurs outside of formal meeting spaces**. For example, interviewees spoke of how most influential conversations have already happened prior to arriving at the meeting (either in person or on the phone), and so being available to capitalise on opportunities for casual, informal conversations is important:

75% of your work on influencing takes place outside the meeting. ... Generally I would have done most of my lobbying before. ... I would take time to speak to people and say "this is where I'm going with this. Are you on the same page?" Because it's very rare now that a topic comes up in a meeting where I suddenly feel like I have to speak out and I'm not sure what other people are thinking or what the key people are thinking. It doesn't mean you're always going to get your way ... but at least you know the positions. ... Because of that experience ... I will always make sure to make the effort to go and, even if you're just having one drink or even if you don't drink anything, to have a coffee, sit there and talk to people in a casual context. (Female postholder)

Quite often we're putting stuff through the agenda that you wouldn't necessarily have a lot of time to deal with a lot of the things that we're coming through. We literally may have a 10-minute conversation on a quite an important point. And if you haven't spent the time getting those guys to understand why that vote is, they may vote it out in Council. (Female postholder)

I'm not sure it's about networking, it depends how you define as networking. Quite often networking is seen as big forums with 300 people and all of that, and actually I think the networking strength influence is much, much better when you have the opportunity to talk to somebody one-on-one outside of a political environment where you can stake your claim, sell yourself. (Male postholder)

If you have got 200 people staring at you when you speak, are you really going to say what you think? No. What really happens is the day before the committee goes and sits in the hotel room, the 20 of them chat and decide what the outcome is going to be, and then they rehearse the whole thing again the next day, so a lot of the work is done informally. ... The formal meetings, certainly in the bigger political committees, the decision is done and dusted before you even get there. If you're not involved and you haven't found your way in, you'll find it very difficult to influence the outcome. (Male postholder)

In addition to this final point, a female postholder also discussed how **these informal decision-making processes could be exclusive for the most influential individuals** within the Council:

I think that generally they do a bad job of being inclusive in that decision-making process because ... you have a group of people who are the most influential within a Council having a sub-informal meeting. Three deciding everything going into the meeting. And because they're the most influential, it's already done. Doesn't matter if other people stick up their hand. And so I found myself in that group by virtue of this guy who was my sponsor. And I

can see it still operates today. Sometimes some of the other female representatives or even representatives who are not included in that group, male or female, might say something that's a valid position, but it's just dismissed because it's already been pre-decided. ... I think you are going to struggle to eliminate that.

As highlighted, informal networking spaces can be exclusionary and undemocratic in that not all elected representatives are included in decision-making. With men continuing to be overrepresented in the most powerful sport governance positions (Matthews & Piggott, 2021), For the female postholder, these experiences align with existing research that has found that homosocial male networks can reproduce male dominance in terms of both representation and influence (Hartmann-Tews, 2019; Karacam & Koca, 2019; Piggott & Pike, 2020; Shaw, 2006).

Other interviewees spoke more specifically about how **much of the informal, casual conversations that happen around meetings involve drinking alcohol at a bar** (often within the hotel):

[It is] really a lot of sitting late nights drinking gin and tonic and getting to know other people from other organisations. (Female postholder)

[Networking conversations are] normally in the bars in the hotel. ... What those conversations give you is a better understanding of what's going on, because even in board meetings, not everything is shared. (Male postholder)

When I started my international career, [my mentor] said, "You'll be fine. But my one recommendation is, make sure you're always the last person in the bar, stand your ground and be the last person". So buying drinks is important and being the last person in the bar means that you get to hear everything and people aren't stabbing you in the back. There's an awful lot of that in international sports politics as well. And it was good advice, because you've got to talk to everybody. (Male postholder)

One male postholder also reflected on why he thinks the bar environment is conducive to the ways in which men engage in personal networking and gives some insight into why some men continue to have a preference for socialising and networking within bars:

Men will talk shoulder to shoulder. They won't talk face to face. And that's where I think influencing at a bar works because you're looking at your drink, you're not looking at each other necessarily.

As highlighted above, to thrive within the influential bar networking environment, there is an expectation to buy drinks for other postholders. A male postholder expanded further on this:

But you could be standing a tab in the bar, this was 20 years ago, and spend £50, £60, £70, and not just once. [My NGB] would say, "you have to make a claim, but we'll give you some money towards it", and of course, it's your hobby, it's your past time, so you're prepared to put your hand in your pocket.

This again exposes **inequalities in who can capitalise on important informal networking opportunities** based on the financial status of individuals. And again, this can have

gendered implications. Furthermore, some of the interviewees discussed issues and **challenges related to networking occurring within hotel bar settings:**

Annoyingly, it does happen a lot in the bar which is a bit frustrating. I can't hold my alcohol very well, but it's that thing of balancing, trying to have one drink that you nurse for a very long time. It's a funny culture. It's very old fashioned. (Female postholder)

It wasn't always that inclusive; people weren't specifically making sure that the women come along. ... I think that there is a responsibility on the organisation, particularly the leadership of the organisation, to recognise that and ... to find a compromise position. ... It doesn't require huge changes. You don't need to suddenly as a female, start acting like an alpha male or as a male to stop having your social drinks or whatever. But it requires the leadership to identify that they have a diverse team here. I need to create spaces where they can come together and exchange in comfort. (Female postholder)

These (gendered) experiences of discomfort in the bar environment highlight the need to achieve a balance between supporting women and other underrepresented or marginalised groups to effectively engage in influential informal networking spaces, and to work to change these spaces to be safer and more inclusive for all. In relation to the latter option, one female postholder did discuss an example from her organisation where a strategy had been implemented to try to develop more inclusive networking spaces:

What we actually tried at [my organisation] for some time was having a common room where people were encouraged to go after the meetings rather than sitting, for example, in the hotel lobby or the hotel bar. It was like, everybody should go to the [IF] room and have a relaxing time together. So everybody was included because it was one space that was just for you. I think that was actually quite successful to be honest, provided people respected it and didn't just break off into their own groups.

Additionally, a male postholder spoke of how he has individually tried to make informal networking spaces more inclusive:

“Several of my colleagues don't drink alcohol, but always are part of the group who are in the bar and this personal experience is that we actively encourage everybody to socialise, whether it's in the bar or it's having a coffee. I will typically get back from a morning competition session and I'll go and buy everybody a coffee in the coffee shop or whatever and socialise in that respect.

These are inclusive practice that other IFs could also learn from to reduce negative (gendered) outcomes from exclusive networking spaces.

When accessing networking places to build a networking profile, interviewees spoke about different qualities needed to conduct successful networking. In our analysis, we grouped these into personal and professional factors.

Personal

In relation to personal factors, interviewees spoke about **the need for certain skills and personalities that enable interaction with others on a personal level:**

First of all you need to be the type of personality that is willing to stand up, introduce yourself, etc, which I don't take for granted because I have met ... many people who are

way more intelligent and talented than I am who are not able to do this, who are not able to introduce themselves, have a basic conversation, not drive the agenda immediately. ... I think some parts of it, like the people skills, are natural. I think I've learned the listening and analysis part and that can be trained. ... I cannot underestimate how helpful it is for me that I can talk to almost anybody about anything and I can listen to people who have completely different points of view to me and not write it off, not try to shame them but to try to find if there is a common ground that we can find here and that type of approach has really stood me in very, very good stead. (Female postholder)

You've got to learn how to talk to people, how to pick up people who are not talking to anyone. You've got to learn how to leave a conversation and join another conversation. All these things, which are really, in fact, very simple. (Female postholder)

You've got to just know the person first. I suppose that's what I try and do because there's always the business bit, but I want to know what the person's like so are they a good person? Someone that you feel you can engage with and work with? That always helps. (Male postholder)

I do think that the ability to speak to people, to understand different points of view, to not be too overtly judgmental, even though inside you're saying, "what the hell am I listening to?" And those are skills. (Female postholder)

On a personal level, networking is all about making sure that the person you're talking to recognises the value in you. That's where that connection works. (Female postholder)

Additionally, a male postholder spoke about how family is an important topic to connect with others on a personal level, particularly in some regions:

There was a World Championships ... and actually my wife came along ... with my first daughter [and] it allowed more conversation with certain groups you normally wouldn't necessarily have. ... For instance, a referee ... who I'd never really met before ... came straight over to see my daughter. That was the start of that relationship, and latterly, a vote if she voted. ... If you want to influence [certain countries], it's around family rather than the business relationship. Then I think that it broke down some barriers that may not have been there, but it definitely opened my door.

For some interviewees, **networking on a personal level was heavily influenced by their gender or other elements of their social identity:**

We do talk about the women thing. Trying to say, "right, we've got to make sure to get this [statute or rule] through". And I don't think it's frowned upon. I don't think the guys are threatened at all if all the women go and have a talk in the corner. It comes back to that critical mass. If I was to say where do the groups come from: there's the Anglophone group and there's the French group, and then there's the women's group. (Female postholder)

Language drives a lot of it. The French speakers will naturally come together because you can just speak in French and not perhaps have to be using that second language? (Male postholder)

There's been less females and I think we migrate together sometimes. I would migrate more just to the other woman, give her a nod, "we're the two women in the room", and

then end up talking or whether it's a passing remark at the sink washing your hands or in the coffee line or as well, sometimes you get commonalities, don't you? Like a hearing an accent? And you'd immediately go, "oh, how are you? Where are you from? What do you do?" That kind of thing. It's interesting what attracts you to certain people in a crowd. But there obviously is some trigger. ... Obviously you do have an automatic attraction to some people that you don't have with others. (Female postholder)

One postholder (gender anonymised) conceptualised these 'migrations' as 'spaces of comfort':

It's always fascinating to see networking happening ... in the groups. Often, it's cultural, it might be disability, you might see a group of wheelchair users sitting together. Culturally you'll see that, but I think you see the gender as well. I think it probably creates spaces of comfort.

They further discussed their experiences of challenges of networking as a wheelchair user:

When I'm in a networking environment, what I find interesting is a wheelchair user in a room of able-bodied people is at a different height to everyone. I'm always looking up. You can't engage in the same way, can't move around the room the same way, so I can't see someone on the other side of the room to go and say I'm going to speak with him. Networking is quite difficult in a physical sense. To do so you can understand the importance of, as a wheelchair user, that eye-line thing. It's such a big thing. You also then have that whole perception of how someone reacts to me. Do they kneel down? Do they sit down? Do they bend over? How do they react with me? If I go and sit with two or three other wheelchair users straight away, there's an understanding. We're all actually on the same eye level and we perhaps all appreciate the challenges, but also the opportunities, because now we're all speaking at the same level, which of course is then replicated as you know some individuals able-bodied stood together, you're all engaging at similar height for instance, so that that's a very physical component.

This postholder's reflections on networking as a wheelchair user demonstrates how **networking opportunities, experiences, and challenges are different for different individuals and social groups**. However, such experiences and challenges often go unseen or unspoken within spaces that continue to privilege and normalise non-disabled people.

When asked what could be done to make networking spaces more inclusive to wheelchair users, the interviewee responded:

I suppose that's education, which I do as an individual and it's always really good. I do think you find this now with people that they're often willing to ask, actually, "what's the right way to chat to someone in a wheelchair? Is there etiquette or whatever?" And you can say, "don't feel you have to bend down or kneel down". Does that have to happen? But actually, "if we want to have a good chat, if you pull up a chair and sit next to me, on the chair, that'll really help". Or actually, "if you want to kneel down, that's not a problem". You can kneel down and it might sometimes be seen as a patronising or something. What you're doing is physically coming down to the eye level, which is such an important thing. So expanding that, being open and asking when someone is open and asked questions about disability, they want to do that in an understanding way, then I'm very, very open to that.

‘Migrations’ to ‘spaces of comfort’ with others who share similar identity components appear to be coping strategies for individuals to feel a sense of belonging within IF settings. However, such spaces of comfort can also work to isolate or silo underrepresented groups within the broader IF environment. This can work to further normalise the dominant position of white, heterosexual, non-disabled men within senior IF positions, and restrict networking across social groupings. This highlights the importance of IFs developing inclusive networking cultures that enable cross-cultural and cross-identity networking to equalise opportunities to enjoy the benefits that networking can offer.

Professional

In addition to personal qualities, interviewees also spoke of **the importance of professional skills when engaging in successful strategic networking**. For several interviewees, professional networking is related to promoting a particular agenda, which could be, for example, on behalf of an organisation, nation, group of athletes, or gender:

I have a list of targets in my head. ... I think a lot of people don't do it in a calculated fashion and I think a lot of people do not look at the room. ... You've got to think through what are your strengths which will enable you to influence? I work with my strengths. Other people will work with their strengths. (Female postholder)

I do try and help young women when they're coming in. But at the same time ... I've also got to go and selfishly achieve some other objectives which I also hope will help them in the long run, which is changing our statutes to create more opportunities for women. (Female postholder)

You've also got to have a reason to be going and talking to people. What is that reason? Is that reason the fact that you want to change something in the sport? Is that reason that you don't like something that they've done in the sport? Is that reason that you want them to think about improving their safeguarding or improving their umpiring or improving the technology. (Female postholder)

I think when it comes to the networking if you know you need to get an outcome for something, you have to be very careful about how you approach it. How is every person going to perceive it? I have to know who's the other person they're going to talk to about it afterwards. (Male postholder)

It feels like you've got to make sure you carry on and make every opportunity count. When you go into an environment, be aware that it is networking and how important that is because, you know, sometimes it almost gets used in a flippant way, doesn't it? "I'm attending this thing - it's networking, you know? Well, actually it's just a bit of a jolly". But if it's just a jolly, then you're not really adding any value. Making sure you make the most of every opportunity to meet people. (Male postholder)

Given that more women than men discussed agenda-driven networking, our findings contrasted those of previous research which have found men to be more instrumental in their networking (i.e., task and goal oriented), and women to be more relational (Macintosh & Krush, 2014).

Furthermore, these quotes demonstrate the need for collaboration between individual postholders and the individuals, groups, or organisations that they are representing to

ensure that there is an understanding of the mutual direction in pushing for change. From a UK Sport perspective, collaborations with individual postholders to discuss national interests and strategies could be useful to aid British influence across IFs. Such discussions and collaborations could be particularly fruitful with regards to having a clear and common agenda for progressing gender inclusion within IFs. We consider this further in section 3.8.

One male postholder spoke about how **agenda-driven networking needs to be strategic** to ensure the best chance of achieving a favourable outcome:

It is always good to have something to lose. So we would always at a Congress always have something that we were quite happy to lose, something soft, ... and we'd then compliment them on their arguments ... so that you show a level of humility. This makes me sound like a real manipulator, doesn't it? I think it's politics. It's the strategy to try and it's what's worked so far anyway.

For others, **'professional networking'** is also linked to **sharing good practice and transfer of knowledge** to improve sport governance:

I think successful networking is sharing good practices and transferring of knowledge between people because you don't know what you don't know. You don't know if there's something that your sport could be doing better, but you might just by chance talk to somebody while you're in a queue for a coffee and they start to talk to you about something, and then you realize we could do that. Or you give them something. ... I think is successful networking. Things that benefit your sport, things that benefit your operational practices. (Female postholder)

You gain experience about how other people handle issues. There are similar issues for everybody. (Female postholder)

Continued opportunities for senior postholders to engage in networking is, therefore, important to continue to promote the sharing of good practice across IFs. Furthermore, it is apparent from our findings that both personal and professional networking skills need to be expanded within mentoring training for prospective international postholders.

Power

Finally, *power* was something that many of the interviewees considered when discussing the components of successful networking. For example, several spoke **of the importance of understanding who key influencers are**, and in turn focusing their networking efforts towards these individuals in order to maximise resultant benefits:

You can spend all your time networking and getting to know somebody, but if they've got no influence in the body that you're trying to influence yourself, you've wasted your time. ... You have to understand who the key runners and riders are. Usually I would say that requires a little bit of time spent observing and probably observation is a key skill to distil that a little bit. (Female postholder)

I've also built relationships with key people within the structure to get things done. (Female postholder)

If you want to influence people, you have to talk to the right people. (Female postholder)

A female postholder also discussed the importance of the influence or prestige of an individual's own role in their opportunities to network:

I think your actual role has some relevance. Our Secretary General ... is a woman who is extremely powerful. She has, on occasion, asked me to do something to influence somebody. And I suspect that is because, and I think quite rightly, she perceives that she's so powerful that whatever she says will be seen as dictating as opposed to actually bringing somebody round.

This demonstrates how holding powerful positions can have both positive and negative influences on networking opportunities, which requires careful navigation to achieve the most favourable outcomes.

Overall, networking is an important source of power for both individuals' careers and organisational success. Our findings show the complex and nuanced ways in which networking plays out in IFs across the '5 P's', which makes it a challenging practice to effectively carry out. Such challenges can be more difficult for some individuals and social groups than others because of exclusionary networking cultures and practices. This demonstrates a need for this complexity and nuance to be addressed within networking training for prospective international postholders, to not only benefit individual postholders and organisations, but also make international sport governance more inclusive as a whole.

3.8. Support received

We begin this section by using survey data that outlined the need for different sources and forms of support to be available to all prospective and current senior international postholders regardless of their organisation and social background. Thereafter, we focus attention toward support received from UK Sport and what respondents suggested was needed in terms of future support from the organisation.

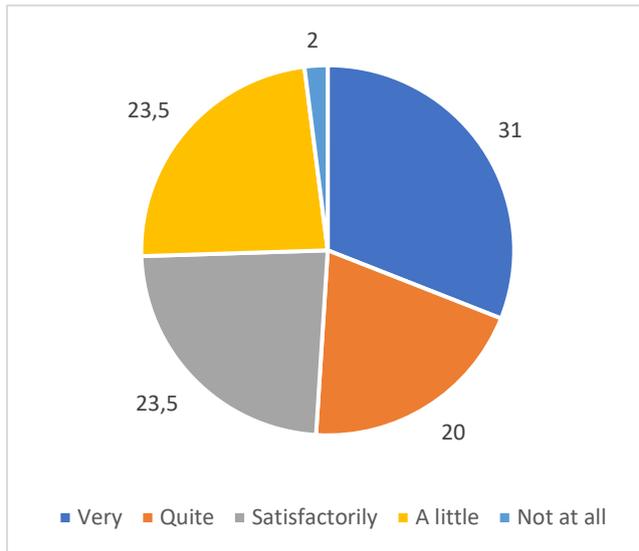


Figure 8. The extent that respondents feel supported in their current role in international sport (percentage).

There was a mixed picture from the survey when it came to the extent that respondents feel supported in their current role in international sport. Nearly three-quarters of the sample (74.5%; n=41) responded positively here ('very', 'quite', or 'satisfactorily'), as per figure 8. This was mirrored when analysed by gender, with near identical results provided per answer by men and women.

It appears that seniority of position and age are important to consider here. Men in senior positions (86%) felt supported more than men in junior positions (67%). However, the opposite occurs for women, with women in junior positions (85%) feeling supported more than women in senior positions (57%). Elsewhere in the

analysis, older men and women (≥ 55 years and older) felt supported more than their younger peers⁵. Thus, more support is needed for younger individuals and women in senior positions. Further insights can be seen in sections 3.2 and 3.3.

Three of the four disabled respondents answered 'satisfactorily', with the remaining other selecting 'not at all'. Of the seven non-heterosexual respondents, three felt they were quite supported, three felt satisfactorily supported, and one a little. However, these individuals' subsequent qualitative responses offered little more explanation other than the level of support provided to their organisation. Generally, this data indicates that minority groups require more support. There were few noticeable gendered trends when discussing positive and negative factors related to support.

Support received from UK Sport

The interviews afforded a greater opportunity to expand upon the positive responses made by ten respondents in the survey in terms of support received from UK Sport, which included:

⁵ It is noteworthy that of all the interviewees, only two men stated they did not require any further support because 'at this stage internationally, I get the support I need' and 'I can't think of anything that would help from external support'.

“UKS most supportive on all aspects leadership and personal development to attain international position and status.” (Male survey respondent)

“I have a great relationship with individuals at UKS who have been enormously generous with time, insight and resource to enable me to use networks and knowledge gained at national level at international level.” (Female respondent, Junior and Senior Positions)

“UK Sport international influence team are very supportive.” (Female survey respondent)

Three elements stood out from the interviews:

- The International Leadership Programme (ILP)
- International Relations (IR) funding to influence agendas
- Strategic support and development of individuals

Firstly, **the ILP was praised** by the interviewees. Launched in 2006, over 120 people across ten cohorts have completed the ILP. According to UK Sport (2023), the ILP ‘helps representatives from UK NGBs and other national partners to build their knowledge, expertise, skills, and relationships to operate effectively in, and make a tangible and positive impact on, the development and governance of international sport’. The comments below attest to this mission.

It was incredibly helpful, still use it today, not only in international sport, but also in my day-to-day job and working with volunteers and volunteer groups, it's important. (Male postholder)

I thought that programme was fantastic. I learned a lot. And also I built a UK network, which I'd never had before, so I'm still in touch with quite a few people from our cohort. (Female postholder)

The ILP was really, really helpful. And then the network I had through that for a period of time was really helpful. (Female postholder)

As a group of people, my cohort, we've done pretty well in getting positions. ... It is the best training programme I've ever done in my whole career. (Female postholder)

Some interviewees were able to expand upon why **particular components of the ILP were beneficial** to them:

I think had I not done [the ILP], then I would have been very blind to how British people could be perceived. ... That really opened my eyes that Brits sometimes ..., even though we all think we're acting fair with a straight bat, some countries don't like that, and you have to be a bit careful about it. I think had I not known that, I could have fallen into some traps. (Male postholder)

I joined the UK Sport ILP where I had an amazing mentor. (Male postholder)

There was a really fantastic session on the ILP around networking within different cultures and that it is something that I have really learned on the job and I wish I'd known more about when I started. (Female postholder)

Training wise, what was really, really valuable for me was when we did different cultural training and, again, talking to other women who have gone through that. (Female postholder)

Secondly, both the survey respondents and interviewees acknowledged **the benefits of IR funding by UK Sport to influence agendas** within IFs or international sport more broadly. The funding is used for important projects within international sport and supporting others toward positions of significance.

The indirect financial support we receive from UK Sport has enabled us to get the organisation going and to deliver many high impact projects over the last 10 years. (Male survey respondent)

UK Sport IR funding is an absolute godsend. It is not a lot of money, but it absolutely enables us to create strategies around putting forward different people to positions of importance. ... if you take that out of the equation jobs will just revert to the boys and there will be no strategy and there needs to be a strategy around that. (Female postholder)

That's where UK Sport has been absolutely brilliant - is being able to allowing us to use £1000 here, £1000 there to help fund a project that has made a massive influence. It's been really helpful for the IF in achieving something. But also has allowed the person who's brought the idea and that little bit of funding to open doors and have credibility and usefulness and influence. I think they're doing a really good job. (Female postholder)

Finally, there were personal recollections of how **UK Sport strategically supports and develops individuals**. Funding is likely to underpin these efforts, but we felt it important to highlight this strategic development separately given how valued it appears it is by some of the interviewees. For example, a female postholder stated *“the emphasis at UK Sport of a very thinking, planned approach to developing people and trying to put people in the right position has been hugely beneficial to me”*.

A male postholder offered an extensive reflection of the targeted support available for those going for senior roles, or, as he claimed, those which UK Sport see as especially significant. His two-part reflections show that support appears to have been long-term and was manifested through different phases as he progressed to becoming President of his IF. If there is not already, UK Sport should consider the equity and transparency afforded to this process to ensure people of different identities benefit from such support. The postholder described how he received some funding through their NGB's international relations strategy which receives funding from UK Sport:

This is a pot of money that gets provided to the NGB to fund post holders or potential candidates into positions on international bodies. ...It was recognised that as a governing body we didn't have influence within the IF, so we created a strategy to try and deal with that and part of that was engaging me to attend international events with the IF. For instance, I might have attended a [major] event with the then President and Secretary General of the IF. I could attend as an observer because I was funded separately and it gave me a really good insight into what was happening within the [Movement]. I did that for about four or five years and I would definitely stress that that's had a significant impact on my capability to put myself forward for the position of President.

Working with [UK Sport IR representative] is definitely of value, and they brought in a couple of consultants, which was useful. We had an afternoon together and we shaped the manifesto in terms of how it should look and I obviously brought the ideas to the table but it was shaped with these consultants. I also asked for an individual that I knew, but that in a way was independent from me, to be a campaign manager. That individual brought a lot to the table. ... Within our sport, [the manifesto] had never been done before, but I thought it was really important to actually put it to the Members that, "if you're electing me, this is what I'm going to try and achieve and in four years' time, if I'm seeking re-election, I'm going to hold myself responsible to that manifesto".

Suggestions for greater support from UK Sport

Interviewees also offered insights into how UK Sport can better support them. We split these into two parts: training and development, and, strategic and resource adjustments.

Training and development

Nearly half of the interviewees identified areas where the ILP could be revised and enhanced. The majority of these offered ideas toward how the content of the programme could better reflect greater awareness of what is important to other cultures.

I think a lot of theory in the UK Sport ILP was great. But I think I'm not sure that it's practical enough ... I think people who want to be successful would do well to have the opportunity to talk and to listen more to people who've been on the journey, rather than just be talked at by people who work in the civil service or international relations in that respect. ... I suspect in having talked with lots of my colleagues, all of our journeys are so unique. It's quite easy to just try and say this the perfect model. (Male postholder)

Teaching people how to liaise with different people from different cultures and learning when to say stuff and not to say stuff ... because it is extremely hard. (Female postholder)

When I looked back on the international leadership course, if you want to influence Spain, Italy, some of the [Asian] countries, Korea, it's around family. And Brazil, it's around family rather than the business relationship. (Male postholder)

I think learning more, maybe understanding more about reading the room – maybe a bit more information about that from somewhere. (Female postholder)

Below, a female postholder questioned whether the structure of the ILP could be repackaged as an alumni mechanism, which may also act as a platform for CPD and knowledge exchange.

This guy I mentioned from [another IF], if I have an issue I will call him up and say, are you dealing with this here and what where are you going with it? I have a better broader perspective outside of the goldfish of my own sport. I think those networks need to be cemented, crystallised in some way. I don't know whether it's facilitating one session per year where that cohort re-meets or it's with a bigger cohort. Everybody that's been a part of the leadership programme then does one CPD session per year on an optional CPD session.

UK Sport launched its most recent cohort in June 2023, so there is scope to implement these considerations for the next iteration of the ILP.

Strategic and resource adjustments

For the second form of support that UK Sport could be stronger in implementing, we have grouped various items under the umbrella of strategic and resource adjustments. The intention here is not to reinvent the wheel but to identify how reorienting current practice may yield greater benefit. This includes following-up with postholders, strategic information sharing, talent identification and succession planning, role models and mentoring, and financial resource.

There appears to be a **lack of follow-up to postholders by UK Sport** once they have achieved their position.

It was such a focus on getting people into the position ... once they're in position, what the hell do we do next? Because actually, there probably wasn't a massive thought about what do we do next. (Male postholder)

If [UK Sport representative] says to me the next week, "once you get the campaign finished, that's it finished", then I would actually say as a recommendation that UK Sport should continue to mentor support and help. (Female postholder)

It's interesting because I was very much supported through the international relations strategy when I went on the first steps of trying to get onto the international board. Then once it was achieved, this is a bit controversial, but I don't think there's been any real recognition of that - not just for me as a person, but actually for this organization. It's huge for an organization this size to have someone at that level. I'm not sure UK Sport even know that I am on that level of governance. ... I personally think they should do a wee bit of a mapping exercise and a wee bit of a check-up and just see. They invested in these people. Where are they now? Did it work or did it not work? (Female postholder)

This final point resonates with five of the six qualitative comments to the survey about a lack of support received from UK Sport. These refer to being unknown and unvalued by the organisation.

"I receive no support from UK Sport or the National Governing Body." (Male survey respondent)

"While my federation supports, I have no contact with UK top sport. Not sure if they even know what I do." (Male survey respondent)

"I appear to have rather flown under the radar of most people at UK Sport/BOA and have had relatively little contact over the years bar the ILP and more recently when I started pushing for additional contact." (Female survey respondent)

Therefore, the suggestion of a mapping exercise is pertinent. We are aware that UK Sport have an iteration of this document already but, given the responses above, we feel it needs to be strengthened and promoted amongst junior and senior postholders. This extends to the ILP alumni too. Further, UK Sport should consider how it interacts with its postholders to ensure a sense of belonging and support.

Three women interviewees offered detailed suggestions about **strategic information sharing**. There was a desire here to have more information available and leadership about the most contemporary and political topics. Each recognised that this knowledge exists

amongst the UK Sport network and its postholders but wished for a mechanism to share this knowledge.

[UK Sport] are doing these webinars but they're infrequent and ultimately, the critical thing here is having in-person opportunities, in-person networking. So even for me who's non-resident, I would make the effort if you have 1.5 days where it's half a day, CPD, then some kind of dinner where you discuss and then a day brainstorming around these critical topics. ... I know it's expensive, but it could be for example one session a year, it doesn't need to be more than that. ... Whether you put budget against it or not, I think there has to be an annual touch point and I would see it as part one, training; part two, talking about hot topics.

It would very much look like somebody like UK Sport who has their people heavily involved at the highest levels for instance. Letting you know of what the trends are within the IOC within the IPC, what they perceive to be current issues and sport governance, etc. ... I think, organise some form of update thing. So, you need a Zoom call where you talk about current issues at the IOC or what's happening at the highest level in safeguarding or whatever.

It was pleasing to see the interviewees consider **talent identification and succession planning**. Often, this was unprompted, meaning there is an inherent recognition of their temporal role in the process of governance. Half the men who were interviewed were keen to stress the importance of looking to the future.

An important part is making sure that the next person that comes in can do it and you've got to be able to go out and find that person. So that's not about well, "I'll stay here until someone comes along", because that's the wrong approach. Its succession planning isn't it? It's so important.

Currently I'm trying to lead by example by leaving the [Committee] myself, so I still work for the IF, but I'm not active anymore and I'm hoping that some of the other old guys will see the fact that when they say, "aren't you working this year?" And my answer is, "I would love to work this year, but if I work, what about all these new young people who need to come into the sport to continue to breathe life into it?" ... It's not something that I think that you should do forever. It has to have a beginning, but it has to have an end.

I remember being appointed to the [continental committee] and the Chief executive of [NGB] saying, "we need to find your successor", and I thought, "hold on - I've only just got my feet under the table and you want my successor?". But he was right because it is going to take some time and the last thing you want is somebody to walk away, die or whatever, and the next person hasn't been well prepared. ... I'm not going to be doing this when I'm 70 and if you haven't got people to replace you, who's going to do it? And there's going to be a need - there's lots of great people out there with passion, skills and all of that, so anything I can do to help that.

Women held similar views, though offered strategies and ways to achieve this, including the importance of a talent identification approach.

If it's a clear strategic policy of UK sport that they a) want international representatives on these top governing bodies and b) want them to be diverse, then there needs to be a much

greater investment in pathways talent identification. I mean, I don't want to put myself in the category of 'talent', but when you have someone who's young and interested in sport governance, there's not that many of them.

Because it takes such a long time, it's a long career thing, you want to grab [athletes] as soon as they've retired from the actual sport.

I think we need to be more communicative about who's out there. It's not jobs for the boys, but it is jobs for the boys because "I know him and he knows him" and then that guy comes in, but he might not be the best person.

I think younger people need to be cultivated. ... Don't just look at who you've got now, which are inevitably in a lot of cases towards the older age of the scale. Look to bring on people. The Germans do it absolutely brilliantly. There is a guy who will probably be Secretary General of the [IF] one day and he has been through years of a planned progression. ... He was sent to do the equivalent of an MBA, he was sent into various federations across the world to work for periods, he's then been pushed along a route of ever-increasing higher levels within the governance hierarchy, and he will and should be [in those roles]. We could do that.

Therefore, UK Sport may wish to revisit its approach to attracting and nurturing people into sport governance. This may include how athletes are cultivated when they begin to consider their post-career options, how talented individuals are supported and developed within the sport system to make a difference, and how sport governance is positioned as an attractive proposition for those external to sport.

It is worthwhile noting that in June 2023, UK Sport launched a new International Leadership Mentoring Programme. Ten experienced women leaders will work with ten future women leaders over nine months. This programme will no doubt have helped women like those in our interview sample who recognised that **role models and mentoring** would have benefited her earlier in her career:

You don't need to do everything alone. There's support there and I wish now somebody had given me that information or seen that I was taking on everything, not saying "no". ... I'd like to pass that information to younger women and men in sport to say, "there's these things that can really help you get good balance in life" and "look after yourself first before helping others". Those have been absolutely invaluable pieces of information.

Finally, **financial resource** was considered by the interviewees. Unlike many of the topics mentioned in this section, this did appear to be gendered. Below, two women reflect upon how funding to attend conferences or congresses often enabled men to continue to consolidate their power. Therefore, they suggest UK Sport continue to lobby and influence national and international sports to reflect upon how these processes contribute to gender imbalance and inequity.

And I think in some sports, when they get some of their funding to be able to allow for their post for the member Federation to go off and fly and go to Congress or go to wherever the decisions or the influencing takes place, that they should ensure that the member federations, the national governing body will take a man and a woman. Because visibility

is everything. And then once it's visibility, it's repeated visibility. And then once it's repeated visibility and got your leg in the door, it's then what do you bring?

There's a real gratitude that UK Sport recognises that space does need funding because that allows diversity to come in. ... Who pays for themselves to go? The people who recognise that's where power is to be gained. And more often than not it's the old white men in blazers who can afford to pay for themselves, and it really annoys me.

A female and male postholder stated how supporting family members to travel with them when working abroad is important, especially after talking with people from other countries where such values are held in much greater esteem.

If you did have a young baby, the fact that could you fly your partner to do the babysitting while you can do the meetings would be really, really helpful. (Female postholder)

I think it's an important factor for UK Sport to consider. People will say we're taking the kids on holiday. [Actually] you don't see them very much. ... it's certainly a conversation piece with the Koreans and they're very family orientated. And the Italians certainly are. It is a topic. (Male postholder)

Another female postholder reflected upon the time and travel demands that came with her position in international sport governance and asked if there was anything 'UK Sport could do to help us negotiate with our employers to ... claw a bit of work time back [so] you can have a holiday'. Such examples of financial support would make a significant difference to the lives of those with young families or significant time constraints due to their work outside of sport. As mentioned in Section 3.5 and 3.6, the wealth of some individuals enabled them to sustain this lifestyle but was exclusionary to others.

4. SUMMARY

This mixed methods study aimed to analyse the career pathways of female and male British senior postholders in international federations. The first objective was to survey all British postholders and collect and analyse data about their demographics, backgrounds, career pathways, and leadership experiences. There were fifty-five responses to an online survey and just under two-thirds of the respondents were men (n=35; 64%) whilst just over one-third were women (n=20; 36%).

The second objective was to provide an in-depth exploration of the career pathways of British postholders in international sport governance, including an examination of gendered differences, intersectional barriers, and factors for success. Twelve people (six men and six women) were interviewed about their career pathway and journey into sport governance, and their experiences and challenges of getting into and maintaining their position.

Overall, there was a significant lack of diversity across our sample, with queer gender identities, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities being notably underrepresented. This is indicative of the social challenges that international sport governance faces in relation to inclusion and diversity. It also demonstrates the need for more research exploring the reasons for such underrepresentation across minority and marginalised groups, as well as ways of meaningfully and sustainably increasing representation and recognition of these groups.

With a historic underrepresentation of women and minority groups in international sport governance, it is important to understand the paths that postholders take to reach influential positions. There were multiple routes into international sport governance, though our empirical evidence supports the notion that individuals will have national experience prior to an international role. Amongst survey respondents, women tended to state their national and continental experience more than men, who noted their international experience as most influential. Generally, respondents were siloed in one sport throughout their career pathway.

A further purpose of the study was to examine gendered perceptions and experiences of British postholders in relation to obtaining an international post. We found that women and men became aware of their first international sport posts in different ways, as well as different factors being important in obtaining their first post. Across both genders, it was clear that successful election processes required strategic planning, building a profile, developing a manifesto/campaign, and utilising networks for influence. From the survey responses, networks emerged as an important influencer for men throughout the election process, whilst NGB support was particularly important for women. NGB support and networking were also factors that were discussed repeatedly by both female and male interviewees as being important through all stages of the pathway to being a senior postholder. NGB support before and during elections can have a substantial influence on whether a candidate is successful or not in recruitment, demonstrating the importance of strong relationships between international candidates and NGBs. The strong position of many British NGBs in the international sport governance landscape was seen to be a factor

in this, as well as the formal requirement for NGB support during election processes for most IF senior roles. Election to athletes' commissions was one example of a role where NGB support was less influential and, interestingly, athletes' commissions was the pathway that several of the female interviewees took to eventually holding a senior role. This demonstrates the importance of nurturing this key pipeline of female British athletes.

Our findings indicate that many of those working in the sector (both male and female) are very aware of its lack of inclusivity, with a majority (60%) of the survey sample reporting that it is not inclusive at all or not inclusive enough. A diverse range of factors were reported by both survey respondents and interviewees as contributors to the lack of inclusivity across both formal and informal organisational dimensions. Formal dimensions such as organisational structures and practices are easier to identify and address due to their documented or textualized nature. This can be seen in how most strategies to work towards gender balance in IFs are formalised or documented rules or practices such as quotas, targets, strategies, working groups, or formal development programmes. However, informal factors, such as traditional or exclusionary cultures and practices or a lack of value attributed to diversity, are more challenging to both identify and address because of their very informal and less visible nature. On the one hand, it is problematic that informal practices continue to create cultures where women postholders can feel othered or even unsafe. However, on the other hand, it is positive that both male and interviewees have reflected on these practices, as without this consciousness such practices will never be identified as problematic and, in turn, challenged. It is important that such practices and their implications are acknowledged and understood across all levels of IFs, so it is not only those who are marginalised by them that are aware and challenge them.

As well as organisational challenges, we also explored challenges that postholders experienced at the individual level, again distinguishing formal and informal dimensions. From the survey responses, we found that male respondents mostly discussed challenges related to their role, organisation, or external factors, whilst women more frequently discussed challenges related to their positionality or social position, such as marginalisation, discrimination, abuse, or harassment. Within the interviews, a complex range of formal and informal challenges were discussed. Formal challenges discussed by both men and women included travel requirements, financial restraints, and poor governance practices. Some informal challenges were more unique to particular individuals and social groups. For example, only women discussed issues relating to marginalisation, discrimination and harassment, and some individuals discussed how issues relating to age, sexuality, and representing a small sporting nation affected them uniquely. Overall, our findings show that different people across different sports experience challenges in varied ways, and so one-size-fits-all strategies are unlikely to be effective.

When discussing enabling factors to overcome challenges, female survey respondents tended to report individual-led strategies for overcoming marginalisation and discrimination, such as having determination and perseverance, working hard, and developing experiences and qualifications. This combination of women reporting challenges related to their social position, and individual-led strategies to combat such challenges, demonstrates the significant extra burden that women leaders experience in this regard compared to their male counterparts. This burden is likely enough for some

women leaders to either refrain from applying for sport international roles or drop out once in position.

Within interviews, postholders discussed a range of enabling factors that had positively influenced their development into and experience within international sport governance positions. This included personal experiences, such as gaining respect and integrity, showing hard work and resilience, and the role of mentors and sponsors. There were also notable gender differences in that several of the male informants put their success down to luck, which is perhaps symptomatic of examples of invisible privilege that they have experienced throughout their governance careers. For women interviewees, positive enablers at the organisational level mostly focused on formal gender strategies that benefited gender inclusion within organisations, such as the implementation of quotas or gender election rules. Men also discussed these, as well as the positive impacts of good governance within IFs. Interestingly, some men also discussed how poor governance practices had benefited them, through informal election processes leading to their re-election or influence. No women discussed this, which suggests that existing poor governance structures can benefit dominant men over others.

One further enabling factor identified in our research was effective networking. The definition of successful networking throughout the career pathways of British postholders was found to be multi-faceted and multi-layered. We developed the '5 P's' typology to clearly demonstrate the different factors that were reported to be important by interviewees: profile, place, personal, professional, and power. We discussed how a strong networking profile is vital for being elected into senior posts as well as having influence once in post. To obtain a strong networking profile, access is required to influential events such as congresses and major competitions, which are important networking hubs. When at these events, it is informal spaces before, in between, and after meetings where most decision-making takes place, with the hotel bar being identified as a particularly important space. Interviewees discussed how the hotel bar can be more suited to male than female postholders, identifying a need for developing more inclusive informal networking spaces for all. To successfully build a networking profile within influential networking places. We discussed how both personal and professional networking skills are required to firstly interact with people at a personal, relational level, but also engage in strategic networking with a clear agenda to achieve specific individual or organisational targets. At the personal networking level, it was reported that groups with similar identities tend to migrate together to provide 'spaces of comfort', but which can lead to underrepresented groups becoming further peripheralized. Additionally, particular challenges were found to influence individual networking related to social identity, such as wheelchair users experiencing challenges with the physical act of networking in spaces where most others are standing. Overall, there is a need for the complexity and nuance of networking to be addressed within networking training for prospective international postholders, to not only benefit individual postholders and organisations, but also make international sport governance more inclusive as a whole.

From the survey findings, no gendered trends were noticeable in the sources and types of support provided to British international postholders. These sources of support were varied, and were mostly from NGBs, UK Sport, IFs, colleagues and networks, senior figures, and leaders. Within the interviews, we focused on support that has been received from UK

Sport as well as the types of support that postholders would like to receive in future. Three forms of support from UK Sport stood out as being most beneficial to the postholders: the international leadership programme, international relations funding to influence agendas, and strategic support and development of individuals. Areas where postholders would like to see more support from UK Sport included training and development, strategic information sharing, and increased resource allocation. In the next section, we have identified recommendations for UK Sport to better support the career pathways of British postholders in international sport governance. In addition, these recommendations are intended to improve gender equality and ensure that female candidates have the same opportunities to impact the international sporting system as their male colleagues.

5. LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Share UK Sport's database of British postholders in international sport organisations with all postholders to provide opportunities for these individuals to connect (with the consent of all postholders).
2. Establish a talent identification programme and pathways for senior (female) athletes interested in pursuing a career in sport governance to ensure a clear succession of UK athlete representatives in international bodies.
3. Create a bank/dataset of forthcoming opportunities in international sport governance (e.g., end-of-terms for positions and committee membership) with a mechanism to circulate and promote these to individuals who have indicated an interest in such positions.
4. Collaborate with NGBs and European Federations to review what support is being provided at the national and European levels to prospective and current IF postholders. Where a lack of support is found, provide guidance to NGBs and EFs on how to better support candidates (using examples from this report as guidance where needed).
5. Regularly share information and resources with senior postholders to help them make informed decisions on strategic issues such as international relations, transgender inclusion, anti-doping, integrity, major event hosting, term limits, conflicts of interest, third party event organisers, athlete relations and representation at Board/Council level, safeguarding, diversity and inclusion etc.
6. Regularly disseminate information on key governance policy and trends within the international sport landscape (e.g., new IOC or IPC policy or announcements) to British international postholders.
7. Expand/update the ILP to:
 - a. Include more content on cultural differences and challenges within IFs.
 - b. Consider the '5 P's' of successful networking discussed by postholders.
 - c. Avoid one-size-fits-all training that fails to appreciate difference amongst postholders.
 - d. Involve ILP (female) alumni as facilitators to provide role models who can speak from personal experience.
 - e. Include ILP 'refresher' modules for alumni
8. Consider expanding financial support for postholders to include young children and their carer to remove parental barriers.
9. Consider ways to ensure that NGBs use UK Sport funding to send gender equal delegations to congresses and other important events.
10. Support British international postholders in navigating safeguarding issues (e.g., reporting forms of discrimination and abuse) when IF safeguarding policies are either absent or not fit for purpose.
11. Ensure that support offered to postholders does not stop once in post but continues throughout their sport governance career.

12. Have dialogue with NGBs and IFs about how to create inclusive and safe spaces for informal networking to take place.

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