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ARTICLE

Women and leadership: advancing gender equity policies in sport leadership through sport governance

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a multilevel framework to deconstruct the role board members play in advancing gender equity policies in leadership positions in sport governance. Data were collected using in-depth interviews with Triathlon board members of the International Federation and two National Federations. The results show that within the multilevel framework, at the individual (micro) level, male equity champions pave the way for both challenging existing stereotypes at an organisational level (meso) within the boards, and at the sport level (macro) through the introduction and implementation of strategies and policies in the organisations studied, and constitutional changes that encourage women to engage in leadership roles. These strategies and policies display the power of equity champions of change and their willingness and ability to create a gender equitable governance culture. Equity champions of change enable women to feel valued in leadership roles, and further encourage and promote the acceptance of women in the governance of sport organisations.

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KEYWORDS
Equity champions; leadership; governance; policy; sport business; multilevel framework

Introduction

Leadership positions in the governance of businesses in developed western countries are predominantly male, and men are two to three times more likely to be in a senior management position than women (Catalyst 2017). The highly masculine, competitive, and hierarchal nature of the sport industry offers a particularly meaningful context for understanding gender dynamics in the governance and leadership of sport organisations (Adriaanse and Schofield 2013). The Sydney Score Board data (a web-based tool that monitors women’s representation on sport boards globally) shows that gender equality in sport governance remains male dominated with only four out of 44 countries (i.e. Cook Islands, Fiji, Norway, and Sweden) having more than 30% women on their national sport organisations’ (NSOs) boards (Adriaanse and Schofield 2013). Furthermore, the research areas of governance and leadership have rarely been explored as complementary of each other and little is known about the ways these two fields interact (Erakovic and Jackson 2012). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) stated that the ‘Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status’ (IOC 2015, p. 14). In December 2016, the IOC Executive Board adopted the Olympic Agenda 2020 that included not only a goal of female athletes comprising 50% of athletes competing in the Olympic Games but also of supporting the leadership of governance structures...
that enable this (IOC 2016). In March 2018, the IOC’s Gender Equality Project Working Group declared eight gender equality recommendations that related to governance and organisational culture/communication, including gender equality and diversity in leadership (IOC 2018). However, despite several political initiatives designed to establish more gender-balanced leadership structures in sport, women remain underrepresented in all facets of leadership in sport governance (Acosta and Carpenter 2012, Smith and Wrynn 2013).

Research into the marginalisation of women in sport leadership has primarily used a binary categorical approach to gender. Such approaches often position inequality as a women’s issue and fail to challenge the prevalence of men and existing structures as the norm. Furthermore, the majority of this research has focused on women in leadership positions in sport administration and management (see Burton 2015 for a summary) with little critical research on gender and sport governance. Indeed, in a review of women in leadership positions in Danish sport organisations, Pfister (2010b) concluded that individuals focussed on women’s individual choices and resources without placing this in the context of organisational structures or cultures.

This article will explore the relationship between gender, leadership and governance. Specifically, we use a multilevel framework to deconstruct the role board members play in advancing gender equity policies in sport governance. We begin by discussing current gender equality policies used by sport organisations. We then present a review of gender and leadership research using a multilevel framework and end this section with our three research questions (one at each level of the framework). Thereafter, we present the investigation – methods, results, discussion and conclusion.

**Policies on gender equality, equity and diversity on boards**

In 1996, having acknowledged that women were underrepresented in sport governance, the IOC established the target of women holding at least 20% of decision making positions in Olympic sport by 2005. This target was not achieved. Changes have occurred but they have been small, not always sustainable, varied by country and have rarely transformed male dominated organisations into places with a more gender inclusive culture. The policy initiatives by the IOC are examples of a liberal feminist approach to equality. Fundamentally, liberal feminism advocates women’s greater involvement in sport by enhancing their opportunities to join existing institutions and structures. As Hovden (2012) explained, liberal feminist discourses have shaped women’s fight for equality and helped increase the number of female participants in sport. However, whilst the practice of redistributive feminism may increase numbers in certain aspects of sport it does little to challenge or radicalise the gendered culture of sport as an institution.

An approach to balancing boards of directors has been through the creation of women’s groups/commissions within federations (i.e. the ‘Women’s Commission’ may sit alongside the ‘Athlete’s Commission’ and the ‘Technical Commission’), and the identification of gender targets/quotas (Adriaanse and Schofield 2014). In general, the concept of quotas refers to different measures designed to recruit under-represented demographic or social groups. Gender quotas touch on many central themes in feminist and political theory, such as concepts of democracy, representation, equality, fairness and the political meaning of sex and gender. This approach has however had limited results as merely including more women on sport boards and in leadership positions does not change the gender constructs. Feminist scholars argue that this approach retains a focus on women’s disadvantage and fails to highlight men’s privilege. Indeed, this approach appears to perpetuate the idea that gender equality, not gender equity, is the issue and that it only affects women (Sotiriadou et al. 2017). This does not explicitly encourage men to be involved in creating equitable processes nor pay attention to the collaboration of men and women in working on gender equity in sport governance (Knoppers 2016). These highly political processes have been previously examined within the sporting context. Specifically, Schull et al. (2013) study on gendered processes involved in the requirement of an athletic director in athletics...
department at an university in the U.S. have demonstrated that such processes are highly political and favour certain masculinities and male candidates.

In a study exploring gender ratios in Danish sport organisations, Pfister (2010a) explained that the Danes believe that policies, such as targets or quotas, discriminate against women because they imply that women are given positions on account of policy measures not because they are qualified. Moreover, whilst there are numerous laws concerned with gender discrimination, none include sanctions in the event of gender equality not being achieved. Whilst Denmark has an almost equal employment rate between men and women, working patterns and placement differ. As Pfister (2010a) maintained, policy in Denmark focusses on gender equality, which is regarded as having been achieved, gender hierarchies are looked upon as the outcome of individual decisions and therefore proactive measures are not considered necessary which negates the facilitation of gender equity.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) draws a significant distinction between gender equality and equity. Gender equality is equal treatment of women and men in laws and policies with equal access to resources and services whereas gender equity denotes fairness and justice in the distribution of opportunities, responsibilities, and benefits available to men and women, and the strategies and processes used to achieve gender equality (UNFPA 2017). For example, a balanced gender ratio on a board of directors reflects gender equality. In contrast, gender equity is focused on the policies and processes to ensure fairness to meet the possible different needs of women and men. Therefore, a focus on gender equity requires an exploration of what men and women think and do and the practices they engage in to bring about changes (Martin 2003).

In more recent studies, gender equity in the context of sport governance has been replaced with the use of the term gender diversity (Adriaanse and Schofield 2014). This shift in narrative aims to recognise gender equity as a matter of good governance and thus the responsibility of everyone in an organisation rather than only the responsibility of women’s committees (Henry and Robinson 2010). Research, however, points toward the need to be cautious when promoting a gender equity agenda because when responsibility rests with ‘everyone’, there is a danger that it lies with no-one and it can lead to a reduction in calls for equitable gender relations (Bacchi and Eveline 2003, Blackmore and Sachs 2003). To negate such drawbacks, in their proposed policy framework for addressing women’s inclusion in decision-making in sport, Sotiriadou et al. (2017) maintained that both gender equality and gender equity (i.e. leadership role redistribution and cultural transformation respectively) are essential to better understand and redress gender injustice and for this field of research to move forward. As males numerically dominate boards of sport organisations that are at the top level of sport governance, and hold high-level positions, they play an essential role in enabling gender equity. However, relatively little is known about the role men have played, or can play, in changing the gender ratio, advocating for and acting to advance gender equity and equality policies, and achieve gender diversity in sport leadership.

**Gender and leadership in sport organisations**

In a review of leadership research in sport management, Welty Peachy et al. (2015) noted that research in this field has been limited to a single level of examination (e.g. exploration of macro level or meso level factors and not an examination of all three levels at once). Furthermore, in a comprehensive examination of research focusing on female representation in sport leadership, Burton (2015) called for scholars to engage in more complex, multileveled examination of how gender is operating within sport organisations. In their latest scholarly contribution on women and leadership studies, Burton and Leberman (2017, p. 19) offer clarity and draw definitions on their multilevel framework where the socio-cultural (i.e. macro) perspective on women in sport leadership situates ‘sport as a gendered institution, where all processes in sport operate within a shared understanding of sport as masculine’. Second, at the meso-level, organisational perspectives on women in sport leadership help ‘understand how processes contribute to gender inequity and
disparity within organisations’ (p. 21). Organisational factors to consider at a meso-level include structure, governance, policies and various other operations (Burton and Leberman 2017). Last, at the individual or micro-level, researchers focus on ‘how individuals understand and make meaning of their experiences, expectations, and understandings of power, policies, and procedures operating at the organizational level’ (p. 25).

The social construction of gender and leadership in sport helps advance the interplay between the individual, organisations, and structures because it assumes that people are active individuals, who work in groups, and shape and are shaped by organisational structures (Burton 2015). Hence, there is room for individuals to transform, for organisations to revise their stereotypes, and for sport structures to be changed. Acker (1990, 1992, 2006) introduced a processual approach to understand the notion of ‘gendering of organisational processes’. Specifically, she maintained that organisations consist of some invisible processes that could gender an organisation. Even when organisations commit to equality, fairness, and introduce changes on by-laws, regulations and policies, such invisible regimes of inequalities tend to prevail and continue to exist, (re)produce social relations based on gender and remain the norm (see Acker 2006, 2012).

Acker (2012) argued that in conceptualising gender in organisations, researchers should examine ‘four components’ of gendered substructures. The first component of a gendered substructure is created within the organising processes (1st component) where inequalities are built into rules (both implicit thinking and explicit doing), policies, and broader decision-making processes and contexts. These issues represent macro level aspects including job design, distribution of decision-making, and the physical design of work place. Furthermore, gendered substructures are created and reproduced within the organisational culture (2nd component) and through interactions (3rd component) between organisational members. A board culture includes beliefs, images, attitudes behaviours and values, which take shape during peoples’ interactions. This culture/interactions represent a meso level perspective of examining gendered substructures. Specifically, Acker (2012) argued that this gendering occurs at the meso level (a) when women act in ways that would allow them to fit in the organisation/do the job, (b) during informal interactions between employees where gender is always involved, (c) through assignment of tasks that lead to a gendered division of labour, and (d) via the gendering of organisational culture and images. Collectively, these organisational processes describe how work within an organisation is gendered. Last, Acker (2012, p. 216) argued that gender substructures include individual (4th component) gendered identities ‘constructed in the work place, but also brought with the individual into the organisation’. These four components lend themselves to a multilevel approach to examine and deconstruct the macro, meso and micro level factors that advance gender balance in sport leadership.

Knoppers and Anthonissen (2005, 2008) and Claringbould and Knoppers (2007, 2008) have used aspects of Acker’s work to inform their studies on how men and women in senior managerial and governance positions in Dutch sport organisations negotiated gender. In their findings these scholars report that women who served on boards of Dutch NSOs did their best not to be seen as feminist and wished to be seen competent in ways that were defined by the male norm. This resulted in women interacting in ways that they thought would allow them to be seen as acceptable leaders who fit the norm informed by images of men as managers and leaders. These practices tend to construct or reinforce perceived images of who is suitable for a position and reproduce a gendered division of labour (Knoppers 2016) and reinforce the notion that masculine behaviour is the required leadership quality (Shaw and Frisby 2006). Claringbould and Knoppers (2012) found that organisational perceptions of gender neutrality, gender normalcy and passivity contributed to the continued underrepresentation of women in sport organisations. At a micro level, male leaders used their power to maintain boundaries that limited women’s participation, whilst at a macro level they failed to support any policy changes (i.e. macro level changes) that would increase the number of women on those boards (Claringbould and Knoppers 2007).
Besides equity practices, policies, selection criteria and job/task allocation, the overall organisational culture can also nurture hegemonic masculinity and stereotypes that negatively impact women’s experiences and marginalise them (Cunningham 2008). As these cultures become institutionalised they tend to support and perpetuate norms, values, and behaviours that reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Cunningham 2008). Women then are less likely to be considered for positions of leadership, as these positions are perceived to require stereotypical masculine attributes and behaviour (Burton et al. 2009). Even when women have qualifications similar to those of male candidates, they are perceived as significantly less likely or fit to be hired (Burton et al. 2011). Hovden’s (2010) study on Norwegian sports federations’ board members’ views of appropriate gender roles found that women were blocked from leadership positions because these positions were stereotyped as masculine and therefore deemed appropriate only for men. The literature also suggests structural discrimination patterns exist when women are denied access to rewards, resources, or opportunities on the job that they legitimately deserve (Cunningham and Sagas 2007, Aicher and Sagas 2009). Organisational structures, policies and procedures supported by sport organisations can affect women’s family-work balance and further augment constraints including job pressures and job stress, work and hours of scheduled work (Bruening and Dixon 2007). As a result, Dixon et al. (2008) pointed toward the need to create structures that enable work-life balance in order to attract and keep more women in high-ranking positions.

Overall, the literature review suggests that the invisible processes, stereotypes, perceptions of women’s ‘fit’ in sport governance, and narratives on hegemonic masculinity within organisational cultures (i.e. meso level studies) have attracted considerable research focus. What this review also suggests is that micro level studies on individuals championing gender equity in leadership roles and challenging the status quo, as well as studies at a macro level on the structure of sport and the ways that thinking and doing takes place and influences gendered practices are far less understood (Claringbould and Knoppers 2008). Hence, the present study advances a holistic approach to studying a phenomenon at all three levels.

The purpose of the present study therefore was to understand the role board members play in advancing policies and processes of gender equity in leadership positions in sport governance. To achieve this goal, this study employed Welty Peachy et al.’s (2015) multilevel framework in order to advance three research questions (one research question at each level of the framework). Specifically, institutionalised masculinity and a gendered structure is an operating principle at the macro/sport level (Knoppers 2016). Hence, the research question driving this study at the macro level was: (a) What is the ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ of boards of directors about gender and sport governance in triathlon? Then, in order to facilitate the examination of the role of board members at the meso/organisational level, the second research question was: (b) What stereotypes, or gendered organisational cultures, exist in boards or across board member interactions? Last, the research question at the micro/individual level was: (c) What do board members perceive to be the role of males (or females) (i.e. individuals) in advancing (or inhibiting) gender equity policies and processes in sport leadership? Data were collected from both genders across the sport, organisational and individual levels.

Method

This study used a qualitative approach to explore gender equity in triathlon. Ethics approval was obtained from the host University to conduct this research (Human Research Ethics Ref No: 2016/054). Triathlon was chosen as it is a relatively newly established sport (the International Triathlon Union [ITU] was established in 1989) which was set up with a commitment to gender equality and equity. The triathlon national federations (NFS) that are gender neutral are entitled to send more representatives in the ITU delegation. Furthermore, working towards gender balance on field and triathlon’s extensive campaigns targeting the appointment of women to sport boards, initiatives like equal prize money combined with the creation of a Women’s action committee in 1990 paved
the way for triathlon to having the highest degree of equality of any sporting federation (European Commission 2014). In 2018, the ITU was the only Summer Olympic IF with a female president. The two countries were selected because at international and Olympic levels their sport organisations are committed to gender balanced boards (critical mass of 30%). Convenience and access to the three organisations and permission to work with them was also a catalyst. The participating organisations were the ITU, Triathlon Australia (TA) and Nederlandse Triathlon Bond (NTB). Boards at high-level organisations attract global ‘visibility’ and can have a substantial impact on the practice and image of a sport. Therefore, the boards of the participating organisations and their board members were the key participants in this study. We also acknowledge that there may be cultural differences across these countries, and perceptions of gender roles in leadership positions in the governance of sport organisations may vary from country to country due to cultural norms.

**Data collection**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with both male and female representatives of the selected boards. As Table 1 shows there were 14 interviews in total and they were all in English, audio taped and transcribed.

Study scope, terms and definitions were explained and discussed with each interviewee before commencing the interview. Thereafter, the key term used throughout the interview to avoid confusion was gender diversity. The interview schedule was designed to focus on the values, culture and images (thinking) and practices, interactions, and strategies (doing) of these boards. According to Acker (1990, 1992), images and values play an important role in the practices or interactions through which an organisation or board assigns meanings to gender and vice-versa. Therefore, the interviewees were asked questions that were designed to explore both their thinking and doing. These questions were used to understand practices that informed macro and to a certain extent meso level approaches used. For instance, interviewees were asked about practices such as recruitment and selection policies, the history of the board with respect to gender ratios, the assignment of tasks, managerial styles, meeting cultures, organisation and timing of meetings, professional development opportunities or training/workshops available (and other such related topics) and what they do to facilitate gender balance.

Interactions between individuals within organisations and related practices result in processes that may reproduce, normalise and challenge organisational inequality (Claringbould and Knoppers 2013). To understand these practices from a meso level perspective, interviewees were asked questions that enabled them to describe organisational relationships and networks and how they use them to facilitate gender balance, individual experiences of selection and promotion opportunities (and other such related topics). These topics were primarily used as prompts to encourage interviewees to expand and introduce other topics they thought were relevant to gender equitable processes that brought about change in their board. Last, to understand the role board members play in advancing gender equity in leadership positions at an individual/micro level, interviewees offered opinions of the ways individual board members – both men and women – have played in advancing gender equity practices and enabling women to take on leadership roles in the governance of sport organisations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of organisation</th>
<th>Name of organisation</th>
<th>Number of board members</th>
<th>Number of interviews conducted</th>
<th>Number of women interviewed</th>
<th>% of the total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>International Triathlon Union (ITU)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federation (IF)</td>
<td>Triathlon Australia (TA)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Federation</td>
<td>Nederlandse Triathlon Bond (NTB)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*P. SOTIRIADOU AND D. DE HAAN*
Interviews were conducted between September 2016 and February 2017 in locations mutually convenient to the interviewee and interviewer. The function or position of the interviewees is not referred to in this study. The respondents were de-identified using codes that represent their organisation (e.g. ITU, TA and NTB). Due to the relative low and easily de-identified nature of female participants, the research team was advised by the IOC to not indicate gender in the findings. The length of the interviews varied from 45 to 110 minutes. The volume of data collected was adequate to reach saturation of themes, which is the point at which new categories or variations on existing categories cease to emerge from new data (Sotiriadou and Shilbury 2010).

Data analysis

Analysis commenced with close reading of the interview transcripts, which allowed for the identification of emerging categories and codes relating to the focus of the study. Two research members performed the open (i.e. substantive codes), axial and selective coding (i.e. theoretical codes) (Sotiriadou and Shilbury 2010). The results of the analyses and the emerging categories and codes were reviewed, compared and discussed among all research members. Once the research team agreed on the categories and codes, revisions were made as necessary and the codes were tightened up to the point that maximises mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness (Weber 1990). This process allowed the research team to make valid inferences from the text and safeguard the consistency of the coding procedure (Weber 1990). To enhance the study’s trustworthiness, the research team addressed four criteria (see Guba 1981 for details). First, the research team worked collaboratively with each member and with the participants to present a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny to enhance the study’s credibility. Second, to address transferability, the study included interviews with males and females from various organisational levels, two sports and two countries. Details in this section inform dependability and offer details on how to repeat the study. Finally, the research team allowed the findings to emerge from the data and not their own predispositions, in order to enable confirmability.

On the first round of analysis, each category was assigned a level (macro, meso, micro). In subsequent iterations, once the categories and their properties (codes) emerged, a deeper level of data analysis took place. During that stage, the research team observed connections/links and ways that the properties or characteristics of each category influenced (or were shaped by) categories or codes of a category from other level(s). Last, the various relationships between the substantive and theoretical codes were used to identify higher order categories (i.e. the links between levels). These high order categories showed the conceptual relationships and code properties between the macro, meso and micro levels of analysis. Eventually, the three levels of analysis and their subcategories began to become integrated and the links/relationships between levels clear.

As Table 2 shows, the coding process resulted in five themes and 17 sub-themes (and various codes for each sub-theme) that show a relational understanding of the multilevel experience of thinking (values) and doing (practices) of board members at the international and national level in triathlon across two countries; Australia and the Netherlands.

Table 2 provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes that emerged during the data analysis at the sport, organisational and individual level. The most representative and critical quotations at each level of analysis were used in the results to illustrate the findings and allow for data interpretation and discussion. Due to the high volume of data (i.e. the original length of tables was between 5–20 pages) it was impossible to report on all the themes, sub-themes and findings in this paper. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the authors made a conscious decision to isolate and present only the findings that showcase best the ways that using the multilevel leadership analysis framework manifests in strong linkages between the thinking and doing across the three levels of investigation. These linkages allow for a greater theoretical contribution in gender and leadership, and lend themselves to various practical implications that are worth sharing with the academic community in this field. Furthermore, as the next section shows, for space efficiencies, we combine the discussion within the results section, and follow it up with a concluding discussion.
Results and discussion

This section is structured around the three research questions with the results and concurrent discussion and interpretation presented from the macro to meso and micro levels. We then present a framework for a multilevel analysis on gender diversity and leadership in sport governance (see Figure 1) and offer a deeper level of analysis in which various relationships are presented and discussed.

‘Thinking’ and ‘doing’ for gender leadership through the governance of sport

The macro level includes both ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ in relation to gender equity in sport governance. The thinking represents implicit strategies and policies that reflect non-conscious, habitual, and involuntary beliefs, viewpoints and opinions (Xie et al. 2013) on what should be done to create or establish gender equity in the governance of sport. Whilst social cognition studies suggest that the ‘doing’ represents more explicit, conscious, and deliberate actions in the form of strategies (Schröder et al. 2014). Participant ‘thinking’ concentrated on recognising that ‘there is more that needs or should be done’ to improve gender equity, to ‘further engage individuals as equity champions’, and to ‘develop a culture that would sustain and protect gender diversity in leadership roles long-term’. For instance, a common sentiment in relation to ‘room for improvement’ captured by a quote from TA board member was as follows ‘…there’s a lot of programmes in many ways, but I still think there’s more that can be done’ (TA). In addition, a TA member claimed ‘…it is the men who allow the environment for women … You know, fortunately or unfortunately…it requires a mindset change at that level, …I think we are reasonably far progressed’ (TA). Most participants were also thinking of the issue of sustaining positive change in gender representation long-term. An ITU member explained that ‘If you look around the room and you say, ‘Right, if all of these presidents are men, where is the next one coming from?’

Other key aspects of ‘thinking’ related to the perceived value (or lack thereof) of initiatives like the women’s committees and the use of quotas as participants questioned the role, merit and impact of both strategies. A NF board member sums up the general response from those involved in the study when asked about the use of quotas below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis Level</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Macro Sport/Triathlon | 1.1 Thinking (implicit) | ● Room for improving gender equity  
● Need for males to ‘do more’  
● Gender equity sustainability  
● The role of women’s committees  
● Use of quota targets vs skill based selection |
| | 1.2 Doing (explicit) | ● By-laws/constitutional changes  
● Funding/programs  
● Sport changes/structural enablers (whole of sport approach)  
● Good governance (skill matrix/nominations committee)  
● Active approaching, searching, & (s)electing/recruiting |
| 2. Meso/Organisatión Board & Interactions | 2.1 Stereotypes & Invisible Processes | ● Gendered behaviours & abilities/skills  
● Board roles & responsibilities  
● Sexism  
‘Fit-in’ |
| | 2.2 Board Culture & Interactions | ● Critical mass |
| 3. Micro Individual males/females | 3.1 Champions of change | ● Women’s support  
● Men’s advocacy |
Whilst I agree with the outcome that they’re trying to achieve, I think the danger is it’s so often misapplied, or there’s a perception that it is misapplied, as in well you’ve only got on the board because there needed to be 50% women, and this concept or idea or perception that therefore women have been fast tracked, whether or not they’ve got the experience, and whether or not they’ve got the value to add, which unfortunately devalues the many number of women who are there absolutely on merit, and making a great contribution. (TA)

In terms of ‘doing’, there were a variety of explicit strategies and policies that were introduced over time, including changes to the constitution and by-laws, ‘It’s absolutely proactive. I mean, we have requirements within our bylaws for gender equality. [...] We have it in our constitution’ (ITU). Participants also referred to structural changes at the sport level such as equal prize money:

Equally, the rules around the sport have always been this is exactly the same for men and women. When they write about the equipment that you can use, when they talk about the clothing and what you can wear, et cetera, during the sport, they’re very inclusive to make sure that it allow women the ability to wear clothing that’s suitable for them, but still is inclusive enough to make sure that it doesn’t give them an advantage against a man. (TA)

Similar to previous studies (e.g. Adriaanse and Schofield 2014), these results show the political and cultural processes that are playing out in these boards which are illustrative of the power relations and assumptions behind such initiatives. Furthermore, some of the thinking and doing leads to gender equity practices while others result in mere gender equality. One participant referred to the rotation of board members as a strategy to negate the formation of a ‘boys club’ (a term often used to describe a closed network accessed and perpetuated by males) as follows: ‘Rotation of boards keeps it fresh, keeps it alive, makes it feel like it’s not a boy’s club or whatever it may be, like seem to be’ (TA). Overall, the results show that board members actively engaged in approaching, searching, and recruiting female board members as well as introducing governance

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**Figure 1.** A framework for multilevel analysis of women and leadership in sport governance.
practices (such as nominations committees employing a skills matrix) to enable transparency and equity in the appointment to sport boards. ‘When I joined [nation] Triathlon Board, there were no women on the board. […] I’m pretty proud to say in my first couple of years we appointed four women and they have been re-elected, so we have a third of our board is female now’ (ITU). These governance trends are indicative of organisational change in processes that embrace ‘new’ values and adapt organisational process to a ‘new generation of thinking’ that enables gender equity.

**Gender stereotypes and board culture and interactions at the organisational level**

The participants drew on several stereotypes to describe behavioural and skill related differences between male and female directors and leaders. Males were portrayed as ambitious and opinionated with strong egos and confidence, very good at lobbying, politicking and networking. Women were portrayed as emotional, insulated, and lacking confidence. For example, an ITU member referred to the men being better at networking: ‘Men are better at doing networking in that sense than women’. A TA member explained:

> The women might express their feelings, and emotions differently to a man, and that’s acceptable. In fact, it’s to be understood it might well make some of the men on the board uncomfortable, but it doesn’t mean to say that it does not add value. Actually, the women on the board might find something offensive, or uncomfortable, or distressing, and they might emotionally demonstrate that (TA).

However, it is important to note that gender differences were often seen on a positive light:

> …females are more open for looking at themes or issues from both sides. A male can be a little bit like, ‘This is my opinion, and this is how it’s going to be.’ I find that female can always, ‘Let’ have a look at the other ways. […] make a better analysis and to make better decisions. I think it’s more constructive, less cocky, better analysing, more pleasant, I would say. It gives a bit more… It’s a more warm atmosphere. Male can always be very like, ‘This is a business we have to deal with. I come in at 8 and I leave am 10 and I … and they’re gone (NTB).

These results suggest that the inclusion of women in leadership positions is not just a matter of fairness, but gender diversity enables skill complementarity (Hartarska and Nadolnyak 2012). A study on gender differences on skills and leadership styles revealed distinctions in the behaviours between women and men, and how these differences influence and shape decisions on boards, better decision-making and organisational efficiencies (i.e. Commonwealth Secretariat 2013). The prevalence of these stereotypes means that even when sport organisations strive for gender equality by focusing on reducing the male to female ratio, they continue to (re)produce social relations based on gender (Knoppers 2016). These results also highlight that the discourse of heroic masculinity (Hovden 2000) is present even in sports organisations that are at the forefront of gender equity, such as triathlon.

As leaders of the board, male directors were perceived as dominant, assertive and results-oriented: ‘I think sometimes men may feel that their only way to be heard is to pound their fits on their chests. I think maybe women have a different way to get to point’ (ITU). Whereas women were seen as combining leadership with sensitivity, passion and realism: ‘She combines leadership with sensitivity with passion and realism; she’s a real good leader’ (ITU). Women on boards were described as analytical, constructive and generating a warm atmosphere. Because of the perceived differences, women are not a threat to male leaders and, if anything, women ‘help’ dominant males maintain their status quo precisely because they are not a threat and protect male leaders against other dominant males. A quotation illustrating this point was as follows: ‘I think the previous president was so dominant that he probably didn’t surround himself with alpha males. That he surrounded himself with good quality people that weren’t after his position. Three of those happen to be women’ (ITU).

What these results also imply is that women have traits that tend to complement their male counterparts. This skill complementarity advances the notion of increasing the presence of women
at the senior management levels on the basis of the benefits that complementary skill bring to organisations (Pfister 2010b). The possibility of skill complementarity and the ways it may be applicable to sport represents a significant finding as it highlights the importance of gender equity in sport governance and the recognition of women’s unique input on boards. Participants seemed to assume that the presence of this complementarity influences the board culture. For example, women were seen as an asset to a board because their presence could make the board a friendlier place and reduce the competitiveness of and between some men. Consequently, the inclusion of women in leadership roles is not just a matter of fairness but as previous research supports (e.g. Hartarska and Nadolnyak 2012) gender diversity and skill complementarity may result in better decision-making and organisational efficiencies. Other studies on women in leadership and the stereotyping of women have also led to the conclusion that women are friendlier and less selfish compared to men (Acker 2012). Of particular importance in conceptualising these findings is the social construction of leadership constructs which emphasise the interactions (Pearce 1995) of and between board members as well as the construction of social reality that emphasises the cognitive products (perceptions of these board members). Based on the findings, these interactions and perceptions view women in more positive framing than men and contribute to the view that women contribute to the governance of sports organisations in ways that complement men.

As the following quotation shows, during board meetings, processes are followed in a formal fashion but the interactions between members tend to be informal and casual: ‘[…] I’d say the structure is formal and respected but the actual atmosphere is very relaxed, very open to discussion.’ ITU ‘…when everybody arrives the first day there’s a lot of hugs and kisses.’ (ITU) However, data also point toward evidence of sexism and a tendency for women to be treated differently to men: ‘[…] if you ask a man, “how was the meeting?” They might come up with the only negative was the woman. I’ll go, “I’m sure there was plenty of other that was quite critic, that didn’t like the idea or something”. They go, “Oh, yeah you’re right”. But he remembered the woman.’ ITU ‘They [men] stick together they talk together, they discuss items, you don’t get welcomed in that much. […] it’s not like they say, “Come on S. let’s go and sit over here and let’s talk about something”. No, but they welcome you if you walk up to them and you sit down.’ (ITU).

Furthermore, there was the notion that women had to adjust their behaviour to ‘fit-in’ with the board culture: ‘Often in my experience, […] they’re often working harder at the job than the equivalent man, to basically prove themselves and make sure that they are a success, and that they are an absolutely high value, high valued board member’ (TA). However, as one respondent noted who has experience on many different types of boards, this ‘fitting in’ behaviour was less noticeable within this specific sport board: ‘There’s an acceptance that actually their value is in being women, and therefore they will demonstrate that in a very different way to the men.’ (TA).

Overall, there was evidence that some women did not feel welcome and tended to work harder to prove themselves, and behaved like men to be accepted. The ramifications of such behaviours have been previously reported. Most research suggests that these cultures lead to what Sartore and Cunningham (2007) called self-limiting behaviours of women feeling lesser than they are worth or having to try harder to prove themselves as worthy of their role, and resort to adjusting their behaviours to be more male-like in order to ‘fit in’. By contrast, the data point toward a very different experience for women on boards in the presence of more than one woman. The following quotation sums up the impact of moving beyond a token women in the room: ‘[…] if you look upon the room on the congress, you will see more women than other sports have. They see if they can do it, we can do it. The women are supporting of each other.’ (ITU). These findings reflect the notion of critical mass, which can be traced back to Kanter’s (1977) seminal work as to how organisational experiences will change as the number of women increases. ‘Should never be one woman around table of 10, no. Always two.’ (ITU), ‘it would be more pleasant if she has, at least one other female at the board so she doesn’t have to at least have the idea that she has to fight up against five or six males. I think I can imagine that that would be more pleasant for both females in
this case.’ (NTB). The effects of critical mass included an acceptance that women and their values are a welcome addition to the board, and what they bring to the board is important.

It’s an atmosphere where, you know we have people from all different cultures and some gentlemen that may be pushing 60, 70 but they’re very respectful towards the women on the board as well because, [...] there’s always been a good representation of women so ...it doesn’t feel like, ah well we have to shoehorn in a couple of women or a couple of men to make sure that we’re fitting into the Constitution. (ITU)

Last, there was a strong sentiment that it is harder for women with young families to balance their careers and time. However, besides flexible meeting times and convenient locations that suit directors regardless of gender, which in the context of voluntary sports organisations may represent a significant shift, there was no evidence of any measures to lift such burdens or offer an enabling culture (Claringbould and Knoppers 2012, Burton 2015). An interesting finding was that instead of taking active measures to negate some of these recognised barriers, perceptions on time constraints and family commitments led the participants to believe that women were not fit to do the ‘top job’ and chair a board as this role is too demanding and too strenuous on a woman’s time: ‘I think for them [women], obviously when you are chairing the board it’s more strenuous on your time.’ (NTB). This finding may help explain why there are significantly more male chairs in sport boards (Henry and Robinson 2010) even when there is good gender diversity and female representation. The high proportion of women in lower level positions in sport organisations and men in higher positions, including chairing boards, is a reflection of the difference in power that exists between the sexes. That women are not able to do the top jobs because of time constraints appears to be an assumption that is made about women and is reinforced by those whose interests lie in keeping women out of sport’s hierarchies (Nielsen and Huse 2010). An assumption that is made about women and is reinforced by those whose interests lie in keeping women out of sport’s hierarchies.

**The role of individuals in advancing gender equity in sport leadership**

The micro level analysis of the role individuals play on gender diversity revealed that it is both men and women who have taken on an active role to support other women in taking up leadership roles (or to mentor and promote women’s interests). In the following quotation, we see how one female participant was encouraged to join the board by an existing female NTB member:

> There was an empty space at the triathlon board, and so she tipped me, and she said well, I would like that you apply there, so I did a phone call, and they invited me, and then we had a talk, and then after that, they decided to invite me to be a member on the board.

In addition, the next quotation shows how a past male chair of the IF played a significant role in recruiting female board members: ‘He is the one to thank our sport that we have women on the board today and women leaders’ (ITU). In reviewing the data at the individual level, we were also able to identify that both genders offer support and mentoring for women. However, in addition to support and mentoring, males can play a significant role in advocacy for women’s inclusion, and for women to be heard on gender equity issues on the playing field and in the boardroom as the following quotations show: ‘All men stood down from the race and said they wouldn’t race unless they paid equal prize money. That was in 1989. It happened. It’s been that way ever since.’ (TA), ‘They’re [board members] actually pushing quite heavily to give women more opportunity within the sport, and that’s actually backed up a lot of the time by the men who go, yah, it adds value’ (TA) It is quite likely that this active and pro-active positioning of male equity champions has enabled triathlon to reach 60% female representation on the ITU board. This finding is illustrative of the importance and impact of engaging male leaders as equity champions can have in the gender equity.
**Multilevel analysis of gender diversity and leadership through sport governance**

Figure 1 illustrates the key findings (themes and codes) and the ways the identified themes and codes interrelate. This section builds on the findings presented in this paper to discuss a framework for a multilevel analysis on gender diversity and leadership in sport governance (Figure 1). Inter-relationships (i.e. within and across levels of analyses) are identified in Figure 1 with bold arrows (black for strong relationship and grey for partial links) and pinpoint the theoretical contributions of this work to gender leadership in sport governance.

**Micro to meso – undoing stereotypes (arrow A)**

Various studies (e.g. Claringbould and Knoppers 2007, Hovden 2010) have found that men control boards by framing the process of recruitment and selection in a manner that reinforces a male-dominated culture of the board. Similarly, Kihl et al. (2013) and Schull et al. (2013) have demonstrated the ways gendered processes within sport organisations can favour male stereotypes and selection of male directors. However, the findings in the present study suggest that men’s advocacy at the micro level plays a significant role in, what Claringbould and Knoppers (2008) called the ‘undoing’ of gender meanings and behaviours, which are present at the micro level and ultimately influence the meso level (See arrow A). Specifically, as a by-product of male advocacy at the individual level there is recognition of skill complementarity and the sense that women add value. Furthermore, agents of change bring about behavioural changes at the meso level that improve males’ respect for women and support the notion that women make the board culture more pleasant. Hence, equity champions of change have the ability to influence, and even undo stereotypes that are present at the meso level and promote a gender friendly culture where having women on boards ‘doesn’t feel forced, it feels like something that’s natural and the people who are there are the best people for the job’ (ITU). This quote represents an old yet common way of undermining gender equity as it implies that the issue is not ‘real’ until it’s part of the culture, and we can only do that if we have ‘the right people for the job’, regardless of gender (Pfister 2010b). Implicitly, this often means ‘the same white, straight, males that we’ve had doing the job for the past x years, who have developed ‘the job’ in a way that ensures that only they, or their similar peers, can be ‘the right’ person. In this way, gender equity constantly struggles to be ‘part of the culture’ and therefore struggles to ‘become real’ (Knoppers 2016). Furthermore, this finding should be considered with caution as critics of the notion of equity champions suggest that this approach to change undermines gender equity in the sense that having the right people to do the right job. Invariably, this may mean the same white, straight, males that have been doing the job for years can be the right person. Consequently, establishing gender equity and changing the organisational culture is a struggle and the problem is never real (Adriaanse 2016).

**Micro to macro – individuals as champions of change**

The engagement of individuals at the micro level in meaningful support and advocacy has a constructive influence at the macro level ‘doing’ where there is evidence of active approaching, recruiting and (s)election of women on boards (See arrow B). Previous research has indicated how males can act as change agents (Claringbould and Knoppers 2008) and this study shows how women too, when they hold positions of power, can support gender equity practices. In particular, strategies include active approaching, selecting and recruiting of women on boards, as well as adopting a whole of sport approach where equity is dispersed through all aspects of the sport (from sport participation, to coaching, events and prize money). These strategies display the power of equity champions’ of change and their willingness and ability to create a gender equitable culture. Unlike the use of quotas that are a useful self-regulation tool to gender equality (Adriaanse and Schofield 2014), this micro to macro influence promotes gender equity practices. Such practices enable skilful women to be identified and approached to take on roles in ways that are
not merely tokenistic (Adriaanse and Schofield 2014), promote good governance through skill diversity (Ferkins and Shilbury 2012) and increase organisational efficiency through skill complementarity (Hartarska and Nadolnyak 2012).

**Meso to macro – unconscious stereotypes leading to implicit thinking (arrow C)**
Evidence in the present study shows that some of the thinking reflects stereotypes identified at the meso level. To draw an example and illustrate this link, stereotypes that represent heroic masculinity portray men as confident and results driven. Women on the other hand lack time, and as leaders they show emotion and often try to behave like men to fit in. All these stereotypes are reinforcing mechanisms that generate a sense of the need for men to support women to ‘make it to the board’. A representative quotation states: ‘That’s why I’m saying it needs to be the man for promoting the women, because some women need, they think they need to be like a man in order to be accepted’ (ITU). These implicit stereotypes are then evident at the macro level in the form of implicit thinking such as the need for males to take action and that there is more that needs to be done to improve gender equity (see arrow C). Hence, as Baron et al. (2014) suggested, implicit stereotypes can lead to implicit automatic and unconscious thinking.

**Macro to meso – the gendering of board cultures and tasks**
The influence of macro level thinking on meso level stereotypes (see arrow D) was also evident, yet to a smaller extent and only in relation to (a) board roles and responsibilities, (b) the burden of balancing family with other commitments, and (c) the capacity of women to do the ‘top job’ (i.e. be a chairperson). These links show that heroic masculinity and essentialism are still prevalent in the gender leadership narrative. Previous studies help explain these links and suggest that attitudes and beliefs (macro thinking level) often lead to the formation of social stereotypes at the meso level (Burton 2015). Gender stereotypes represent peoples’ beliefs about men versus women’s attributes, traits, behaviours and roles within an organisation. The influence of such macro level thinking on stereotypes that emerged in this study is illustrated when males at the macro level think things like: ‘We have to develop women who are confident to put up their hands and who could do the job’ (ITU). Then, at the meso level, these beliefs manifest in stereotypes on women’s time, availability and suitability to do certain tasks (or inability to do the ‘top job’). These beliefs can result in board member interactions that are toxic for women in sport organisations and result in self-limiting behaviours (Sartore and Cunningham 2007).

**Macro to micro – the ‘whole of sport’ approach to gender equity (arrow E)**
Triathlon is a relatively newly organised sport. The ITU was founded in Avignon, France in 1989, and the same year the first official world championships were held. In 2000, triathlon featured for the first time at the Sydney Olympics in Australia. Since its inception, the sport’s leadership made a conscious decision to offer equal prize money, participation, leadership, coaching opportunities, event rules and other structural arrangements throughout the sport to encourage gender balance. The study participants claimed that because of ‘new thinking’ since inception, gender equity and promoting male equity champions have become culturally ingrained (see arrow E). In the past, studies have illustrated how organisational cultures that value gender equity have more positive results on providing women the support to enable them to have a meaningful engagement in sport leadership (e.g. Spoor and Hoye 2013). What the findings of this present study add to our understanding of gender culture is that new organisations do not have a gendered tradition and history to battle with, so they can be innovative and enable gender equity across the sport rather than isolated to a level of participation or engagement.
Within macro: the relationship between thinking and doing (arrow F)

Psychologists Higgins and Kruglanski (2000) suggested that the thinking and the doing are complementary motivational systems. When people use the thinking system they reflect on ideas and beliefs, and that is called diverging. At other times, people evaluate those ideas and reflect on which ones are best and this is called converging, and it requires the activation of the doing system. The use of quotas or targets, for instance, was evaluated as highly problematic (e.g. tokenistic and self-limiting for women). This evaluation lead to an activation of the doing system as these thoughts converged into action at the explicit strategy level (e.g. the use of skills matrix and nominations committee) (see arrow F). These strategies in turn reflect principles of good governance such, as diversity and skill complementarity (Lam 2014), as board members are selected based on skills with a conscious mind on maintaining gender diversity.

Within meso: the relationship between gendered behaviours and task allocation (arrow G)

Gender stereotypes (i.e. on gender behaviours and skills, see Figure 1) are recreated and permeate organisational settings through everyday interactions (Shaw and Hoeber 2003, Jost and Kay 2005). Simply being aware of stereotypes serves to bias the interactions with and behaviours towards members of the board and the board culture. The findings within the meso level suggest that stereotypes on women’s availability and traits could result in situations where women are less likely to be considered for certain positions (e.g. the top job) that are perceived to require masculine attributes and behaviours (e.g. Aicher and Sagas 2009).

Conclusion

The framework for women and leadership in sport governance advances some key learnings that represent theoretical contributions in sport leadership, have practical implications for sport policy and governance, and offer direction for future research in gender equity. The theoretical contributions of this study are threefold. First, at a more abstract level, the framework shows how research on gender equity in sport leadership complements and advances the notion of ‘good’ governance. This connection emerged naturally in this study and illustrates how the two fields of study intersect and interact. This interaction represents a key theoretical advancement because the research areas of governance and leadership have rarely been explored as complementary of each other and little is known about the ways these two fields interact (Erakovic and Jackson 2012).

Second, the emerging framework represents an original advancement from Welty Peachy et al.’s (2015) multilevel analysis in the area of gender equity and sport leadership. With the exception of Burton (2015) who also used a multilevel analysis to perform a literature review of research in the area of leadership, the present study is the first attempt to apply multilevel analysis in the area of women’s leadership in sport governance. Furthermore, the present study expands on Burton’s (2015) study as it empirically examines women in sport leadership specifically deriving a framework for the analysis of women and leadership in sport governance, which should provide guidance for future research in this area.

Third, the proposed women and leadership framework suggests a shift of analytical focus from macro and meso levels to the micro level, replacing attempts that discern ‘what sports organisations do’ to study ‘what specific individuals do’ that can enable gender diversity in sport organisations. This shift represents a key deviation from current research that dominates the interplay between meso and macro level analyses that explore stereotypes and the ways they are shaped by macro level influences or how macro level factors shape and reinforce heroic masculinity. What is worth noting in Figure 1 is the pervasion of the impact of individual action and the equity champions of change have at all levels of women leadership and sport governance in undoing stereotypes and passive resistance, and using the power of individuals to create equitable conditions and climate. Therefore, this inverted flow of influence from micro to other levels of the
framework is illustrative of the role of males (and females) on gender equity and advocacy for leadership.

The findings in this study reveal several practical implications. Converging implicit thinking into explicit policy direction and doing has the power to shift the narrative of women’s leadership in sport governance from gender equality to gender equity. The presence of governance trends like the use of a skills matrix and nominations committee, as well as efforts toward achieving ‘good governance’ through gender diversity are indicative of changes that embrace ‘new’ values and adapt organisational processes to a ‘new generation of thinking’ enabling gender equity. A key recommendation in the governance of sport organisations is the review of the raison d’être of policies such as the women’s committees and the use of quotas as mechanism to increase the number of women in leadership roles. Furthermore, through the direction setting function, and policy formation, boards of sport organisations should embrace and adopt a whole of sport approach to gender equity. This policy enables equity changes to be diffused through all aspects of a sport from sport participation, to coaching, events, competitions and prize money rather than on isolated efforts targeting a single layer of women’s engagement. Last, but not least, the role of skill complementarity and the possibilities for organisational efficiencies and better decision making as well as the impact that a critical mass of women represents to good governance should be further embraced in the sport management domain.

It is important to note that triathlon represents a relatively newly established sport. This meant that the prize money, the competitions structures, and leadership and governance of the sport were set up from a position of greater gender equity and equality. This may in in stark contrast to more established male dominated organisations. Older federations might present a more challenging environment for a gender diverse board and deeply ingrained stereotypes that would be harder to shift. These organisations warrant inclusion in such future studies to build depth to our understanding of women’s leadership through sport governance. Hence, in order to continue advancing gender equity policies in sport leadership through sport governance, further examination is required of such sports and the macro, meso and micro level dynamics and stereotypes that exist. The participants in this study represent countries that are well advanced in human rights and sensitive to gender equity and equality issues. Even though the results in this study demonstrate that there is an awareness of the need for change, the need for gender diversity and a broader recognition of women’s skills, this might be different for countries where women’s rights are culturally neglected. Repeating the study in other countries and across a wider range of sports would help further appreciate context related nuances and shape a deeper understanding of the barriers to women’s leadership in the governance of sport. In doing so, we recommend addressing a further limitation of this study and collecting data from annual reports or audits on women on the boards or chairs to cross reference with the interview data and establish trends over time. Last, the findings and resulting strategies in this study are only preliminary ideas that we recommend with caution. The implementation of the proposed ideas for action should ideally be longitudinally tested and evaluated using action research. Such research would enable a better understanding of what interventions and under what contexts result in gender equality and equity (i.e. leadership role redistribution and cultural transformation respectively).

Disclosure statement

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