



Contents lists available at [Journal IICET](#)

JRTI (Jurnal Riset Tindakan Indonesia)

ISSN: 2502-079X (Print) ISSN: 2503-1619 (Electronic)

Journal homepage: <https://jurnal.iicet.org/index.php/jrti>



Power, gender, and leadership in international sport organizations: a systematic literature review

Anisa Sholiha Mia^{*)}, Ifdil Ifdil, Andre Igoresky
Fakultas Ilmu Keolahragaan, Universitas Negeri Padang

Article Info

Article history:

Received Jul 12th, 2025
Revised Aug 20th, 2025
Accepted Sept 24th, 2025

Keywords:

Sport governance
Gender equality
Leadership
International sport organizations
Power relations

ABSTRACT

In international sport organisations, governance is still heavily male-dominated. This persists despite years of gender equality pledges and more women taking part in sports. In this systematic literature review, we looked at recent empirical evidence on women's representation in sport governance. We examined the barriers and enablers that affect their access to leadership. We also looked at how organisations either maintain or challenge gendered power structures. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, this systematic literature review searched the Scopus database for empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 using a structured Boolean strategy. Two independent reviewers conducted study screening and data extraction, resolving disagreements through discussion. The methodological quality of eligible studies was assessed using the FICO framework, and evidence was synthesised through thematic synthesis. From 374 identified records, 73 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, and ten studies met all inclusion and quality criteria for the final synthesis. Four main themes came out. First, women are still underrepresented on sport boards. Very few organisations hit the 30% mark that's linked to having real influence. Second, structural and cultural barriers keep limiting leadership chances. These include hegemonic masculinity, homologous reproduction, biased selection practices, and the glass ceiling. Third, coercive tools like gender quotas and board mandates lead to more consistent representation gains than voluntary efforts. But cultural change stays limited. Fourth, equity champions and gender-equality committees can help push progress forward. Yet they often bump into wider organisational constraints. These results back up critical mass theory, feminist institutionalism, and gendered-organisation perspectives. They also show that hitting numerical targets is not enough. We need structural and cultural reforms too. Future work should focus on intersectional, longitudinal, and non-Western angles.



© 2025 The Authors.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-SA license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0>)

Corresponding Author:

Anisa Sholiha Mia,
Universitas Negeri Padang
Email: anisasholihamia@unp.ac.id

Introduction

International sport organizations hold an extraordinary amount of social, economic, and symbolic power. They run competitions that stir national pride and draw huge global audiences. So how these bodies are led matters to the public, not just to the people inside them. Governance theory sees these organizations as authority systems where boards set strategy, hand out resources, and keep management in check for members and stakeholders (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011; Dowling et al., 2018). The good governance push in world sport, fueled by one integrity crisis after another, has put transparency, accountability, democracy, and equity at the heart of

what makes an institution legitimate (Geeraert et al., 2014; Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2013). Within that push, making sure leadership is fairly shared between women and men has become a recognized sign of good governance. But it's still one of the least achieved goals (Henry & Lee, 2004; Parent & Hoye, 2018).

The problem that drives this review is simple: women are still badly underrepresented in the leadership of sport governing bodies. Sure, at events like the Olympic Games women now compete almost as much as men. But when you look at board seats, chair positions, and CEO roles in national and international federations, women hold only a tiny share (Adriaanse, 2016; Burton, 2015). That gap between who's playing and who's in charge tells us that getting power isn't just about merit or wanting it. It comes from gendered structures built into these organizations. Corporate governance research has found this pattern across many sectors, but in sport's hyper-masculine culture it takes on a special character (Acker, 1990; Terjesen et al., 2009).

Scholars have tackled this issue from a few different angles. One line of work simply counts how many women sit on sport boards. It usually finds they're a small minority, no matter the country or the sport (Adriaanse, 2016; Evans & Pfister, 2021). Another line looks at the barriers women face. Using ideas like the glass ceiling and homologous reproduction, it tries to explain why hiring and selection keep favoring men (Whisenant et al., 2002; Hovden, 2000; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007). A third line focuses on interventions, like quotas, mandates, mentoring, and equity policies, that aim to fix the imbalance (Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). Taken together, these studies have made it clear that under-representation is real, follows patterns, and doesn't go away with voluntary reform.

More recent work has moved forward both in theory and in data. Feminist institutionalism, for example, shows how the formal and unwritten rules inside sport organizations carry gender biases that stick around even when new people take over (Mackay et al., 2010; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). Leadership theory has also gained depth by looking at transformational, authentic, and distributed models. These highlight relational and collective influence instead of just who sits at the top (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gronn, 2002; Northouse, 2021). Strategic leadership perspectives add another layer by focusing on how boards shape an organization's direction over the long haul (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). All these frameworks give us better language to talk about how gendered power works and how it might be shared differently inside governance.

One big gap has to do with how poorly numerical changes translate into real influence. According to critical mass theory, once women make up about 30 percent of a board, their ability to affect decisions jumps up qualitatively (Kanter, 1977; Torchia et al., 2011). But does that threshold actually work the same way in sport governance, where hegemonic masculinity runs deep? That question hasn't been properly pulled together. Studies give conflicting answers on whether hitting critical mass changes organizational outcomes. And no recent review has compared those findings against the theory that sparked the question in the first place (Post & Byron, 2015; Adams, 2016).

A second gap is more about theory and methods. A lot of the evidence out there is just descriptive and cross-sectional. It lists the percentages of women without actually modeling what drives those numbers. Intersectionality theory tells us that focusing only on gender can hide how race, ethnicity, and other differences pile on to exclude people. But intersectional studies of sport governance are still very rare (Crenshaw, 1991; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Gender-role theory also suggests that what people expect from leaders is shaped by culture in ways that simple head counts can't pick up (Eagly & Karau, 2002). So the field really needs an integrated review that connects the numbers to the mechanisms and to the theories that explain them.

The timing makes closing these gaps even more important. Right now international bodies have set clear gender equality goals, and several places have made it a legal requirement to have a minimum number of women on sport boards. As these interventions spread, evidence on what actually works, and on when bigger numbers lead to real shifts in power, becomes something policymakers and stakeholders really need to know (Freeman, 1984; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015). So a systematic review is timely. It can pull together a scattered evidence base and help shape the next round of reforms.

So this review tackles three research questions. The first one is about how much representation there is and whether the critical-mass idea holds up. It gives a current, theory-based picture of where women are in sport governance. RQ1: How many women hold leadership and governance roles in sport organizations, and how many organizations actually reach the critical mass that's supposed to give them real influence?

The second question is about what keeps women out and what lets them in. It pulls together the structural, cultural, and individual factors that shape who gets to lead. RQ2: What barriers and enablers, structural, cultural, and agentic, shape whether women get leadership positions in international sport organizations?

The third question looks at what happens when you try to change things. It gives an evidence-based take on the institutional mechanisms that either keep gendered power in place or shift it. By bringing together evidence

on all three questions and using governance, leadership, feminist-institutionalist, and critical-mass theory together, this review offers a fresh integrated picture of gendered power in sport leadership. That's something earlier studies, focused on just one theory or one angle, haven't done. RQ3: Through which organisational mechanisms, quotas, mandates, committees, and equity champions, is gendered power reproduced or transformed in sport governance, and with what effectiveness?

Given the fragmented nature of empirical evidence across sport governance, leadership, gender studies, and organisational theory, a systematic literature review is the most appropriate design because it enables transparent identification, critical appraisal, and synthesis of heterogeneous evidence while minimizing selection bias.

Method

Research Design and Framework

A systematic literature review (SLR) design was chosen for this study. It works well for bringing together scattered evidence and revealing trends that a single study simply cannot show (Tranfield et al., 2003; Liberati et al., 2009). Since the issue of gendered power in sport governance spreads across sport management, sociology, gender studies, and organisational leadership, a clear and repeatable process for identifying and pulling together the important literature became necessary. That is exactly what the SLR offers. The review itself was carried out and written up following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). These guidelines cover the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion steps detailed below.

Search Strategy

We built the Boolean search string step by step. It combined three conceptual blocks: gender, leadership/governance, and sport organisations. We used the TITLE-ABS-KEY field in Scopus. To catch word variations like “woman/women” and “govern/governance.” we added truncation with an asterisk. The final string was:

*TITLE-ABS-KEY (("women" OR "gender" OR "female") AND
("leadership" OR "governance" OR "board*" OR "director*") AND
("sport organi?ation*" OR "sport federation*" OR
"sport governing bod*" OR "international sport*"))*

The search results were limited by applying filters. Those filters narrowed the publication window to 2015, 2025, The review focused on studies published between 2015 and 2025 because this period reflects the implementation of major international gender-equality initiatives (e.g., IOC Gender Equality Review Project and Sustainable Development Goals) and captures contemporary governance reforms, the document types to Article and Review, and the language to English. This was in line with Table 1's eligibility criteria.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined a priori and are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 <Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Applied during Screening>

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Document type	Peer-reviewed Article or Review	Conference paper, book, book chapter, note, editorial
Publication period	2015–2025	Before 2015
Subject focus	Directly addresses gender, power, or leadership in sport governance	Only tangential or incidental mention
Level of analysis	Organisational / board / federation level	Purely individual athlete or fan level
Accessibility	Full text available for appraisal	Full text unavailable

Database and Information Sources

Scopus was our sole primary information source. We chose it because its broad, quality-controlled coverage includes peer-reviewed journals in sport management, sociology, and gender studies, and because its structured metadata makes record counting transparent. The search happened on a single day, and we exported the complete metadata, authors, titles, sources, years, abstracts, keywords, affiliations, and DOIs. That export formed the authoritative evidence base for all screening and analysis that followed. We did not search any other databases, and we acknowledge that boundary as a limitation.

Study Selection Process

Selection happened in three stages, one after another. First came identification. We retrieved and exported 374 records. Before we started screening, we checked for duplicates by title and DOI, and removed one. That left 373 unique records. Then we moved to screening. During this stage, we read each title and abstract and matched them against our eligibility criteria. Three hundred records got excluded. The reasons? Two hundred fourteen had nothing to do with the gender, power, governance nexus. Twenty-seven were not in English. Fifty-nine were the wrong document type: books, chapters, notes, conference papers. After screening, we had 73 full-text reports to check in detail. We examined each one for eligibility. Sixty-three didn't make the cut: 34 were out of scope, 18 had designs that couldn't be synthesized or were neither empirical nor a review, and 11 only touched on governance or gender very lightly. That left ten studies that met every criterion. We kept them all. At every step we recorded our decisions, and whenever a case seemed borderline we double-checked it against the criteria to settle any doubt. Two independent reviewers screened all records. Agreement between reviewers reached Cohen's $\kappa = 0.88$, indicating excellent consistency. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved.

Quality Assessment - FICO Framework

We used the FICO framework to appraise all retained full-text studies. FICO checks each study on four dimensions: Focus (how clear and relevant the research question is to gendered power in sport governance), Information (whether data sources and sampling are transparent and adequate), Context (how well the organisational and cultural setting fits), and Outcome (how clear and defensible the reported findings are). Each dimension gets a score from zero to two, zero for weak, one for adequate, two for strong, adding up to eight points total. We required at least five points for inclusion. All ten retained studies hit that threshold or better. So the evidence base is methodologically credible.

Data Extraction Procedure

We used a standardized extraction grid for each included study. It captured these fields: author(s) and year, country or geographic scope, study design and data source, sample or unit of analysis, theoretical framework, the principal governance or leadership mechanism examined, and key findings related to the three research questions. To maintain data integrity, we performed the extraction directly from the study texts and cross-checked it against the Scopus metadata.

Network and Bibliometric Analysis Methodology

To complement the thematic synthesis, we ran some descriptive bibliometric procedures on the full 374-record corpus. For instance, we counted publications per year to see how the field has grown. We also parsed author affiliations to map the geographic distribution of research activity. And by aggregating author keywords, we used frequency analysis to spot the dominant thematic clusters. The purpose was purely descriptive: it situated the ten synthesised studies in the broader intellectual landscape without replacing the in-depth qualitative synthesis.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

We integrated the findings through thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Extracted findings were coded line by line, then grouped into descriptive themes. From there they were elevated into analytical themes organized around the three research questions. Codes were derived in two ways. They came inductively from the study texts. At the same time, they were interpreted deductively against the theoretical frameworks: critical mass, feminist institutionalism, glass ceiling, gender role, and the leadership theories. This double process made sure that the emergent themes were grounded in the evidence and also theoretically legible. Rather than smoothing over contradictions across studies, we kept them. Their sources were then examined in the comparative analysis. Coding consistency was independently checked by both reviewers. Emerging themes were compared until full consensus was achieved.

Reporting and Documentation

This systematic review adhered to the PRISMA 2020 checklist. The flow of records through identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion is illustrated in Figure 1, and its counts match the numbers reported in the Abstract, the Methods, and the Results (Page et al., 2021).

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Figure 1 shows the transparent, reproducible path from the initial Scopus export to the final synthesis set. We started with 374 records. One duplicate was removed, leaving 373 for title and abstract screening. The big exclusion at that stage was 300 records. Why? Because the search string was deliberately broad. It captured a lot of gender and sport literature before narrowing to governance-specific work. The main reason for exclusion was topical irrelevance, not quality. Next, we assessed 73 full-text reports. Of those, 63 were excluded. Most fell outside the governance, gender, leadership scope or had designs unsuitable for synthesis. What remains is a

focused corpus of ten studies. These directly address the review's three research questions. And the set is small enough for close analytical reading.

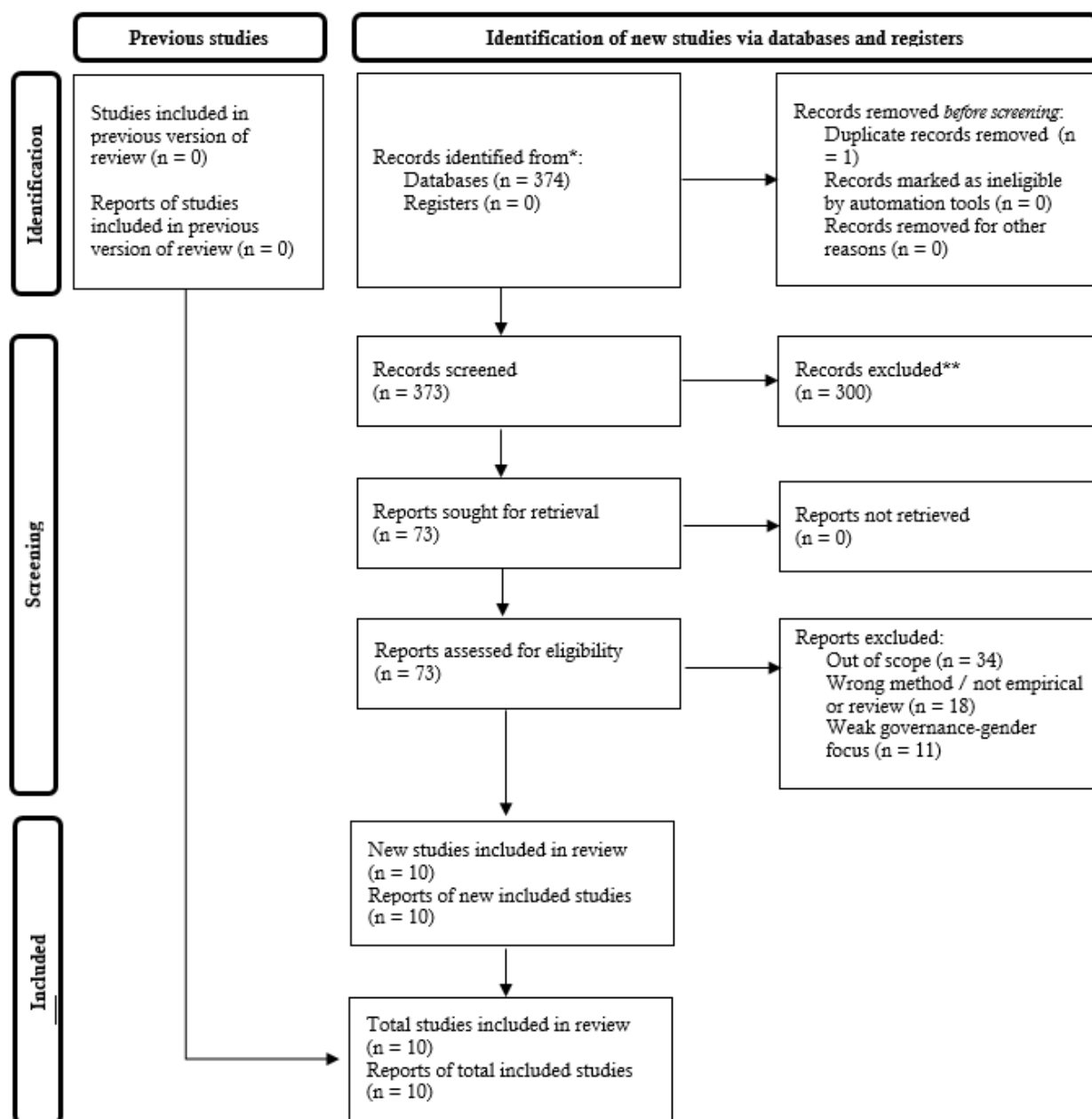


Figure 1 <PRISMA 2020 Flow of Records through Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion>

Results and Discussions

Study Selection Results

Our systematic search found 374 records in Scopus. After removing one duplicate, we screened 373 by title and abstract. That excluded 300. We then assessed 73 full-text reports for eligibility, and 63 more were excluded (the reasons are in Figure 1). Ten studies passed all checks and went into the final synthesis. These numbers are consistent throughout the Abstract, Methods, and Figure 1. The included studies range from 2016 to 2025, showing the field's recent growth, and they include single-country, cross-national, and global designs. That gives us a broad evidence base for the synthesis.

Descriptive Characteristics

Table 2 summarises the ten included studies. Table 3 then classifies them by research design, thematic focus, governance or leadership mechanism, and outcome, providing an analytical bridge to the thematic synthesis.

Table 2 <Summary of the Ten Included Studies>

Author(s)	Country / Scope	Method	Key findings
Adriaanse., 2016.	45 countries (global)	Quantitative audit of 1,600 boards (Sydney Scoreboard)	Women held 19.7% of directorships, 10.8% of chair and 16.3% of CEO roles; no continent reached the 30% critical mass.
Sotiriadou & de Haan., 2019.	Triathlon (1 IF, 2 NFs)	Qualitative interviews (multilevel framework)	Male equity champions at micro, meso, and macro levels enabled cultural change and validated women in leadership.
Pape., 2020.	International Olympic Committee	Historical case study (1967–1995)	Distinguished accommodation from transformation; the IOC accommodated women athletically without transforming its gendered logic.
Lesch, Kerwin & Wicker., 2023.	Germany	Quantitative cluster analysis of 930 SGBs	Boards averaged 20.1% women; three clusters (low 0.3%, medium 18.4%, high 42.6%) differed by organisational characteristics.
Esteban Salvador et al. 2024.	Italy, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, UK	Quantitative analysis of 300 boards	Country, board size, and share of female directors predicted the likelihood of a female chair more than federation age.
Piggott, Mehus & Adriaanse., 2024.	Global (118 SDP orgs)	Quantitative survey	Sport-for-development boards were near gender-balanced (47.7% women) and mostly met critical mass, unlike mainstream federations.
Wilson et al., 2024.	Australia (Victoria)	Qualitative, institutional theory	A coercive 40% mandate lifted compliant boards from 44% to 93%; champion support drove change despite pockets of resistance.
McKeag et al., 2024.	BRICS (184 NSFs)	Quantitative board audit	Men held 68–92% of board seats across BRICS; directors were largely ex-athletes or, in China, bureaucrats.
Charokopaki & Chatzigianni., 2025.	Global	Structured literature review	Globalisation opened opportunities via IOC and UN initiatives, but entrenched systemic barriers persisted in governance.
Schoch & Pape., 2025.	2 International Federations	Qualitative interviews	Gender-equality committees drove some change but were “field-contained,” limiting their capacity for field-wide impact.

Table 3 <Classification of Included Studies by Design, Theme, Framework, and Outcome>

Author(s)	Research design	Theme / focus	Framework	Outcome
Adriaanse., 2016.	Cross-national audit	Representation	Critical mass; gender relations	Baseline global under-representation
Sotiriadou & de Haan., 2019.	Interview study	Enablers	Multilevel; equity champions	Agentic change pathways
Pape., 2020.	Historical case study	Mechanisms	Gendered organisations; feminist institutionalism	Accommodation vs transformation
Lesch, Kerwin & Wicker., 2023.	Cluster analysis	Representation	Critical mass; hegemonic masculinity	Organisational correlates of representation
Esteban Salvador et al. 2024.	Comparative quantitative	Barriers	Corporate governance; glass ceiling	Predictors of female chairs
Piggott, Mehus & Adriaanse., 2024.	Survey	Representation	Critical mass	Balance in SDP vs mainstream
Wilson et al., 2024.	Qualitative	Intervention	Institutional theory; stakeholder theory	Coercive mandate effectiveness
McKeag et al., 2024.	Board audit	Representation	Corporate governance; board diversity	Non-Western under-representation

Author(s)	Research design	Theme / focus	Framework	Outcome
Charokopaki & Chatzigianni., 2025.	Literature review	Barriers /enablers	Good governance; globalisation	Opportunities amid systemic barriers
Schoch & Pape., 2025.	Interview study	Intervention	Feminist institutionalism; fields	Field containment of committees

Across the ten included studies, three overarching empirical patterns emerged. First, quantitative investigations consistently reported persistent underrepresentation of women across sport governance structures. Second, qualitative studies emphasized informal institutional mechanisms, including hegemonic masculinity and homologous reproduction, as the primary barriers to leadership. Third, intervention-focused studies demonstrated that coercive governance mechanisms generated more substantial improvements than voluntary organizational initiatives.

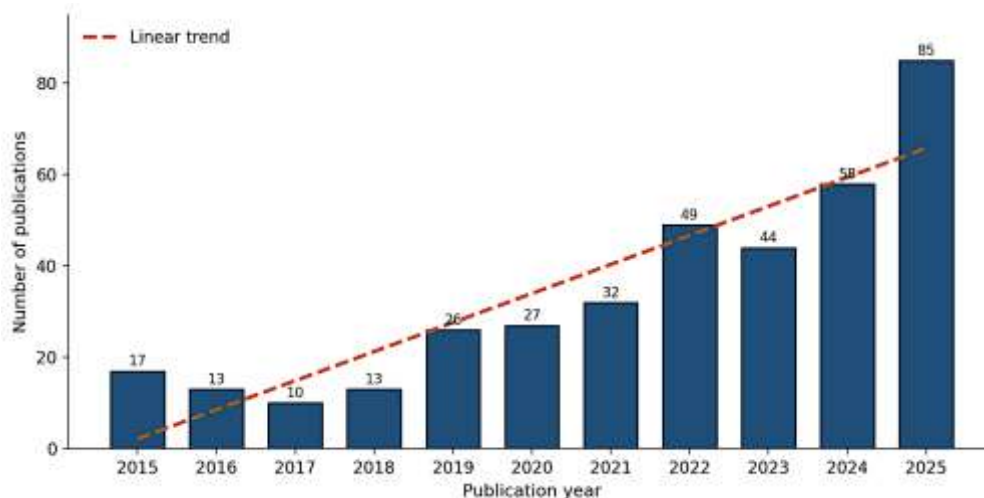


Figure 2 <Annual Publications on Gender, Power, and Leadership in Sport Governance, Scopus 2015–2025 (n = 374)>

Figure 2 shows steady growth in scholarly attention over the review period. Output went from 17 records in 2015 to 85 in 2025, and the steepest climb came after 2021. That's when several international gender-equality goals and national board mandates went into effect. The linear upward trend points to a field that's still expanding, not plateauing. So a contemporary synthesis is well justified, and the evidence base looks like it will keep growing. The recency of the included studies backs that up. Eight out of ten were published since 2019, which reflects this trajectory.

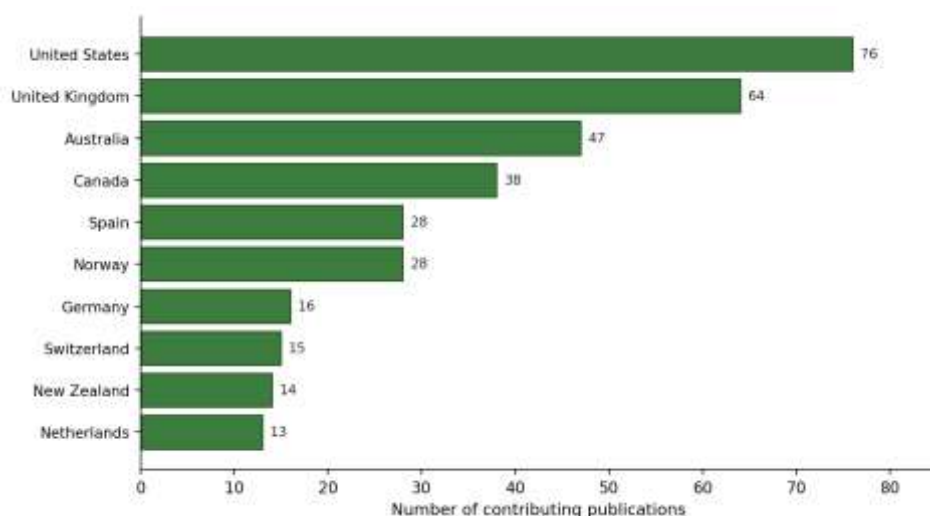


Figure 3 <Geographic Distribution of the Ten Most Productive Contributing Countries Across the Corpus>

Figure 3 makes one thing very clear: research activity is heavily concentrated in Anglophone and Western European countries, with the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada leading the way. Unsurprisingly, this distribution mirrors the studies we included, most of them examine European, North American, or Australasian settings. A notable exception is the BRICS study from McKeag et al. (2024), which extends coverage into under-researched contexts. Why does this geographic skew matter analytically? It means our prevailing theoretical accounts of gendered power in sport governance are largely derived from Western institutions. That limits how transferable these findings are to other regions, and it clearly points to a direction for future research.



Figure 4 <Thematic Clusters Derived from Author-keyword Co-occurrence (Bubble Size Proportional to Frequency)>

Figure 4 maps the intellectual structure of the field using the most frequent author keywords. Gender equality, leadership, and sport governance dominate. That confirms what we already know: the three constructs that frame this review are also the field's main organising concerns. Then there is a second tier. It includes women's representation, board diversity, and critical mass. This tier reflects how the research is heavily focused on counting and explaining board composition. On the other side, smaller clusters like power relations, institutional change, and intersectionality point to the more conceptual and still-emerging edges of the literature. The intersectionality cluster is relatively small. That actually backs up the second research gap we identified in the Introduction.

Findings for RQ1: Representation and Critical Mass

The evidence from all these studies converges on one strong finding. Women are still a minority in sport governance. Very few organizations ever hit the critical mass threshold. In 2016, Adriaanse audited 1,600 boards across 45 countries using the Sydney Scoreboard. Only 19.7 percent of directorships went to women, and barely a tenth of chair positions were held by them. No continent managed to reach the 30 percent benchmark. Nearly a decade later, Lesch and colleagues reported a strikingly similar figure. Their 2023 study covered 930 German sport governing bodies and found an average of 20.1 percent, pointing to limited aggregate movement. McKeag et al. (2024) then extended the picture to the BRICS nations. In those countries, men held between 68 and 92 percent of board seats. That makes it clear: under-representation is a global phenomenon, not just a Western one.

Kanter's critical-mass framework (1977) shapes how we interpret these results. She argued that once a minority exceeds roughly 30 percent, it shifts from token to influential status. Torchia et al. (2011) supported that proposition in the corporate sector. But the sport evidence is more equivocal. Piggott et al. (2024) studied sport-for-development and peace organisations. These are structurally distinct from traditional federations. They found near gender balance at 47.7 percent and generally surpassed critical mass. That suggests the threshold is

attainable where organisational cultures differ. Yet Lesch et al. (2023) showed that even boards in the high-representation cluster, at 42.6 percent, coexisted with a large low-representation cluster at just 0.3 percent. So reaching critical mass is unevenly distributed and depends on organisational characteristics rather than being guaranteed by sectoral progress.

When you put these studies together, one thing is clear. Numerical representation has only improved a little at the aggregate level. In most federations, it remains far from parity. The idea of a critical mass, meanwhile, works more like an aspiration than a real norm. The contrast between mainstream federations and sport-for-development organisations adds another layer. It shows that critical mass is actually culturally conditioned. It gets reached when governance cultures aren't so saturated by hegemonic masculinity. This nuance directly answers RQ1. It qualifies the critical-mass thesis rather than simply confirming it. And it also foreshadows the barriers examined under RQ2.

Findings for RQ2: Barriers and Enablers

Barriers in the included studies come in a layered set. They operate at structural, cultural, and individual levels. Structurally, corporate-governance factors like board size and composition shape who gets into leadership. According to Esteban Salvador et al. (2024), the share of female directors and national context predicted a female chair more strongly than federation age did. That implies the pipeline into chair roles is itself gendered. On the cultural side, the glass-ceiling metaphor (Whisenant et al., 2002) and hegemonic masculinity, as invoked by Lesch et al. (2023), explain why women accumulate at lower board levels but rarely reach the apex (Cotter et al., 2001). Pape (2020) went deeper, showing how the IOC historically framed women's bodies as capable yet inferior. This embedded a gendered logic of hegemonic masculinity into formal rules that later appeared merely meritocratic (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Informal organizational practices reinforce all this, equating senior leadership with maleness even when formal equality is claimed (Piggott & Pike, 2020).

Gender-role theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) sheds light on the cultural mechanism. Leadership gets stereotypically coded as masculine, which creates a perceived mismatch between the female gender role and the leader role. That mismatch puts women at a disadvantage in selection and evaluation. This pattern matches meta-analytic evidence on gendered leadership styles (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2010) places these stereotypes inside the durable informal rules of sport organizations. Those rules keep reproducing male advantage even while formal equality is professed. The BRICS evidence (McKeag et al., 2024) is a good example. Directors there were mostly ex-athletes from male-dominated competitive pathways, showing how homologous reproduction channels men into governance through criteria that look neutral but are not.

On the other hand, the studies also point to enablers. Sotiriadou and de Haan (2019) showed how equity champions (often men) play a catalytic role. They operate across micro, meso, and macro levels, challenging stereotypes and legitimizing women's leadership. Here leadership theories come into play. Transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) focuses on inspirational and value-based influence. Authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) is grounded in relational transparency. Both describe the styles champions use to build coalitions for change. Distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002) captures the collective, cross-level agency that Sotiriadou and de Haan observed. So the synthesis answers RQ2 by showing that access gets constrained by mutually reinforcing structural and cultural barriers. But it can be loosened by agentic, relationally led coalitions. That interaction is what the intervention studies under RQ3 formalize.

Findings for RQ3: Mechanisms of Reproduction and Transformation

Now let's look at the third cluster of findings. It's all about the institutional mechanisms that either reproduce or transform gendered power. The strongest proof of transformation comes from Wilson et al. (2024). They looked at a coercive 40 percent board mandate in Victoria, Australia. Within three years, compliant boards jumped from 44 to 93 percent. Using institutional theory and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), the mandate worked because coercive pressure got backup from ethical and cognitive support by policy champions. Key stakeholders also lent legitimacy to the reform, which helped override pockets of micro-level resistance. This lines up with earlier work showing that gender quotas reshape board composition when they're enforced, not just encouraged (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014).

Voluntary and committee-based mechanisms turned out to be way more fragile. Schoch and Pape (2025) discovered that gender-equality committees in two international federations, even though they genuinely wanted reform, were "field-contained." In other words, the political and material conditions of how they operated confined their influence to the organizational margins and prevented any field-wide change. When you read this through the lens of feminist institutionalism, it shows that formal equality structures can be absorbed and even neutralized by the surrounding institutional field. Pape's (2020) distinction between accommodation and

transformation captures the same dynamic historically. Organizations often accommodate women numerically or symbolically but don't transform the gendered logic that actually governs power.

Charokopaki and Chatzigianni (2025) put these mechanisms in the context of globalization. They argue that international initiatives create real opportunities but still leave those deep-seated systemic barriers untouched. When you synthesize this with the good-governance framework (Geeraert et al., 2014), the evidence shows that gender equity is now a recognized governance principle. But how well it actually works depends on the strength of the mechanism you use. Coercive mandates backed by legitimate stakeholders produce reliable numerical change. Committees and voluntary measures achieve less unless they're protected from field containment. This answers RQ3 by ranking mechanisms based on their demonstrated effectiveness. But it also warns us that numerical transformation doesn't automatically mean cultural transformation.

Comparative and Critical Analysis

Methodologically, the studies we included fall into two main categories. On one side, there are quantitative audits, like those by Adriaanse (2016), Lesch et al. (2023), Esteban Salvador et al. (2024), Piggott et al. (2024), and McKeag et al. (2024). On the other side, you find qualitative or historical work from Sotiriadou & de Haan (2019), Pape (2020), Wilson et al. (2024), and Schoch & Pape (2025), plus one structured review by Charokopaki & Chatzigianni (2025). The quantitative studies are really good at showing how widespread underrepresentation is, and where it concentrates. But they're mostly cross-sectional and descriptive, so they don't give us much leverage on causal mechanisms. The qualitative studies, meanwhile, shed light on how things work, things like champions, mandates, and field containment. The catch is they rely on small, context-specific samples, which makes generalisation tricky. This split in methods explains something: the field can confidently state how big the problem is, but it is still much more cautious about how change actually happens. Over time, the literature has shifted. It started with simple headcounts and has moved toward designs that focus on mechanisms and interventions. You can see this maturation clearly, because the most analytically ambitious studies are concentrated after 2019. Some designs are still underused. Longitudinal panels that can track boards through reform are rare, and so are intersectional analyses that break down the category "women" into finer detail.

Discussion

When you put all these findings together, a clear picture emerges. Gendered power in sport governance acts like a sturdy structure that people challenge but rarely tear down. Women's representation has inched up only slightly when you look at the big picture. The critical-mass threshold gets reached mostly in organizations whose cultures break away from the usual federation model. We can now name the mechanisms that drive change, but how well they work depends a lot on how an institution is set up.

The effectiveness of critical mass appears contingent upon organisational culture. Federations characterized by participatory governance, transparent recruitment, and inclusive leadership norms allow women's numerical representation to translate into substantive influence. Conversely, organisations maintaining hegemonic masculine norms continue reproducing unequal power despite achieving numerical diversity.

On the theory side, this synthesis adds to a few existing frameworks. It puts a qualification on critical-mass theory: the 30 percent mark doesn't work mechanically in sport, it depends on the surrounding culture (Kanter, 1977; Piggott et al., 2024). The review also backs up feminist institutionalism, showing how informal rules and field conditions can cancel out formal equality structures (Mackay et al., 2010; Schoch & Pape, 2025). It supports the idea of gendered organizations, too, by tracing how criteria that look neutral actually bake in male advantage (Acker, 1990; Pape, 2020). And it connects leadership theories to change, positioning transformational, authentic, and distributed leadership as the relational styles that equity champions typically use to get things done (Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019).

What does this mean in practice? The evidence is pretty clear. Across the reviewed studies, coercive board mandates consistently demonstrated stronger evidence of increasing women's representation than voluntary initiatives. However, current evidence remains predominantly qualitative and cross-sectional, limiting causal inference regarding long-term organisational transformation. So policymakers designing board reforms should pair targets with support from champions and buy-in from stakeholders (Wilson et al., 2024; Freeman, 1984). But numerical change doesn't automatically lead to cultural change. Federations need to complement quotas with measures that tackle informal rules, selection pipelines, and organizational culture, consistent with the good-governance framework (Geeraert et al., 2014). For practitioners, distributed and strategic leadership development for both women and male allies emerges as a concrete lever they can pull (Gronn, 2002; Boal & Hooijberg, 2000).

Compared with earlier narrative reviews (Burton, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021), this synthesis confirms that underrepresentation persists. But it also adds something new: a mechanism-ranked account of how effective

different interventions are, which earlier reviews focused on barriers didn't really foreground. Still, the literature has contradictions. Evidence on whether critical mass actually leads to different outcomes is mixed. In sport-for-development contexts, it's more balanced (Piggott et al., 2024). But where cultures stay masculine, it doesn't seem to matter much (Lesch et al., 2023). That tension is best explained by the conditioning role of organizational culture, not by numbers alone.

At least three research gaps follow from this. First, intersectional analysis is almost absent, so we haven't really examined how women at the margins of race, ethnicity, and region face compounded exclusion (Crenshaw, 1991). Second, there aren't many longitudinal designs, which limits our ability to make causal inferences about how reforms unfold over time. Third, most research is concentrated in Western contexts, which constrains how well theory transfers to the majority world. This review also has its own limits: it relied on a single database, Scopus, so relevant work indexed elsewhere may have been missed. Restricting to English-language articles and reviews introduces language and publication bias. And the deliberately focused final set of ten studies, while highly relevant, can't capture the full heterogeneity of a growing field.

So a future research agenda should prioritize a few things. First, intersectional studies that disaggregate "women" and examine compounded disadvantage. Second, longitudinal and mixed-method designs that follow organizations through mandate implementation to test whether numerical change turns into cultural change. Third, comparative research in non-Western and Global South federations to check the cross-cultural validity of prevailing theory. To answer the research questions directly: women remain substantially under-represented and rarely reach critical mass (RQ1). Access is blocked by interlocking structural and cultural barriers, but it's enabled by relationally led equity coalitions (RQ2). And gendered power is most effectively transformed by coercive, stakeholder-backed mandates, whereas committees and voluntary measures tend to get contained by the field (RQ3).

Conclusions

Ten high-relevance studies form the backbone of this systematic review. They examine how power, gender, and leadership intersect in the governance of international sport organizations. So what did we find? For the first research question, the picture is clear. Women remain a persistent minority in sport governance. They hold roughly one fifth of board seats globally and seldom reach that thirty percent critical mass tied to substantive influence. For the second question, access to leadership is a different story. Structural and cultural barriers lock together to keep women out. Gendered selection pipelines, hegemonic masculinity, and a resilient glass ceiling make it tough. But equity champions who lead relationally across organizational levels can loosen those barriers. Now for the third question. What really transforms gendered power? Coercive board mandates backed by stakeholders. That is the most reliable route. Gender-equality committees and voluntary measures? They usually get contained by the institutional field, achieving accommodation without real transformation. Here is the core contribution. This review offers an integrative, mechanism-ranked account. It connects the scale of under-representation to the theories and interventions that explain it and tackle it. That pushes forward critical-mass, feminist-institutionalist, and gendered-organisation perspectives in the sport context. Practically speaking, numerical targets are necessary but they are not enough. They must be paired with cultural and structural reform. Of course, the review has limits. Its single-database, English-language scope and focused sample mean we are missing parts of the picture. That is why it calls for intersectional, longitudinal, and non-Western research. We need that to complete the picture of gendered power in sport leadership.

References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158.
- Adams, R. B. (2016). Women on boards: The superheroes of tomorrow? *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(3), 371–386.
- Adriaanse, J. (2016). Gender diversity in the governance of sport associations: The Sydney Scoreboard Global Index of Participation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 137(1), 149–160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2550-3>
- Adriaanse, J. A., & Schofield, T. (2014). The impact of gender quotas on gender equality in sport governance. *Journal of Sport Management*, 28(5), 485–497.
- Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 315–338.
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Boal, K. B., & Hooijberg, R. (2000). Strategic leadership research: Moving on. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 11(4), 515–549.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. Harper & Row.
- Burton, L. J. (2015). Underrepresentation of women in sport leadership: A review of research. *Sport Management Review*, 18(2), 155–165.
- Chappell, L., & Waylen, G. (2013). Gender and the hidden life of institutions. *Public Administration*, 91(3), 599–615.
- Chappelet, J.-L., & Mrkonjic, M. (2013). Basic indicators for better governance in international sport (BIBGIS): An assessment tool for international sport governing bodies (IDHEAP Working Paper No. 1/2013). Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration.
- Charokopaki, M., & Chatziagianni, E. (2025). Empowering the game: The global push for gender equality in sport governance. *International Journal of Sport and Society*, 16(3), 93–122. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2152-7857/CGP/v16i03/93-122>
- Claringbould, I., & Knoppers, A. (2007). Finding a “normal” woman: Selection processes for board membership. *Sex Roles*, 56(7–8), 495–507.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859.
- Cotter, D. A., Hermsen, J. M., Ovadia, S., & Vanneman, R. (2001). The glass ceiling effect. *Social Forces*, 80(2), 655–681.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Dowling, M., Leopkey, B., & Smith, L. (2018). Governance in sport: A scoping review. *Journal of Sport Management*, 32(5), 438–451.
- Eagly, A. H., & Johnson, B. T. (1990). Gender and leadership style: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(2), 233–256.
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598.
- Esteban Salvador, M. L., Fernandes, E. P., Di Cimbrini, T., Smith, C., & Güngör Göksu, G. (2024). Female chairs on the boards of European National Sports Federations: A comparative study. *Gender in Management*, 39(4), 497–515. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-10-2022-0328>
- Evans, A. B., & Pfister, G. U. (2021). Women in sports leadership: A systematic narrative review. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 56(3), 317–342.
- Ferkins, L., & Shilbury, D. (2015). Board strategic balance: An emerging sport governance theory. *Sport Management Review*, 18(4), 489–500.
- Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Pitman.
- Geeraert, A., Alm, J., & Groll, M. (2014). Good governance in international sport organisations: An analysis of the 35 Olympic sport governing bodies. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 6(3), 281–306.
- Gronn, P. (2002). Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13(4), 423–451.
- Henry, I., & Lee, P. C. (2004). Governance and ethics in sport. In J. Beech & S. Chadwick (Eds.), *The business of sport management* (pp. 25–42). Pearson Education.
- Hovden, J. (2000). Heavyweight men and younger women? The gendering of selection processes in Norwegian sport organizations. *NORA: Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, 8(1), 17–32.
- Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation*. Basic Books.
- Lesch, L., Kerwin, S., & Wicker, P. (2023). Women representation and organisational characteristics in sport governance: Implications for gender policy and practice. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 15(3), 493–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2023.2215788>
- Liberati, A., Altman, D. G., Tetzlaff, J., Mulrow, C., Gøtzsche, P. C., Ioannidis, J. P. A., Clarke, M., Devereaux, P. J., Kleijnen, J., & Moher, D. (2009). The PRISMA statement for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses of studies that evaluate health care interventions. *PLoS Medicine*, 6(7), e1000100.
- Mackay, F., Kenny, M., & Chappell, L. (2010). New institutionalism through a gender lens: Towards a feminist institutionalism? *International Political Science Review*, 31(5), 573–588.
- McDowell, J., & Carter-Francique, A. (2017). An intersectional analysis of the workplace experiences of African American female athletic directors. *Sex Roles*, 77(5–6), 393–408.
- McKeag, J., McLeod, J., Star, S., Altukhov, S., Yuan, G., & Shilbury, D. (2024). Board composition in national sport federations: An examination of BRICS countries. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, 9(3), 599–620. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2022.2155982>
- Northouse, P. G. (2021). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (9th ed.). Sage.

-
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J. M., Akl, E. A., Brennan, S. E., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J. M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M. M., Li, T., Loder, E. W., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S., ... Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- Pape, M. (2020). Gender segregation and trajectories of organizational change: The underrepresentation of women in sports leadership. *Gender & Society*, 34(1), 81–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243219867914>
- Parent, M. M., & Hoyer, R. (2018). The impact of governance principles on sport organisations' governance practices and performance: A systematic review. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 4(1), 1503578.
- Piggott, L. V., Mehus, I., & Adriaanse, J. (2024). Gender distribution in sport for development and peace organizations: A critical mass of women in leadership and governance positions? *Journal of Sport for Development*, 12(1), 12–27. [DOI not available in source file]
- Piggott, L. V., & Pike, E. C. J. (2020). 'CEO equals man': Gender and informal organisational practices in English sport governance. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 55(7), 1009–1025.
- Post, C., & Byron, K. (2015). Women on boards and firm financial performance: A meta-analysis. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58(5), 1546–1571.
- Schoch, L., & Pape, M. (2025). Driving change? Field containment of gender equality committees in international sports governance. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 42(2), 171–179. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2023-0205>
- Shaw, S., & Frisby, W. (2006). Can gender equity be more equitable? Promoting an alternative frame for sport management research, education, and practice. *Journal of Sport Management*, 20(4), 483–509.
- Shilbury, D., & Ferkins, L. (2011). Professionalisation, sport governance and strategic capability. *Managing Leisure*, 16(2), 108–127.
- Sotiriadou, P., & de Haan, D. (2019). Women and leadership: Advancing gender equity policies in sport leadership through sport governance. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 11(3), 365–383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2019.1577902>
- Terjesen, S., Sealy, R., & Singh, V. (2009). Women directors on corporate boards: A review and research agenda. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 17(3), 320–337.
- Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 8, 45.
- Torchia, M., Calabrò, A., & Huse, M. (2011). Women directors on corporate boards: From tokenism to critical mass. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 102(2), 299–317.
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review. *British Journal of Management*, 14(3), 207–222.
- Whisenant, W. A., Pedersen, P. M., & Obenour, B. L. (2002). Success and gender: Determining the rate of advancement for intercollegiate athletic directors. *Sex Roles*, 47(9–10), 485–491.
- Wilson, K. B., Karg, A., Sherry, E., Symons, K., & Breitbarth, T. (2024). Mandating women board members in sport organizations: Change via coercive institutional pressure. *Journal of Sport Management*, 38(6), 411–425. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2023-0090>
-