

Original article

Understanding Barriers to Women's Leadership in Sport and the Pathways to Change

Gerasimuk Dagmara*¹

¹ International Biathlon Union, Salzburg, Austria

Abstract. Although women's participation in organized sport has grown substantially, their inclusion in leadership and governance roles has advanced more slowly. This article examines two prominent case studies—the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Biathlon Union (IBU)—to assess how institutional reforms can promote gender equity in sport leadership. As of 2024, the IOC has achieved 40.6% female membership, 30% representation on its Executive Board, and 50% female participation across its 33 commissions, with 42% of those chaired by women. These outcomes reflect the implementation of the IOC's Gender Equality Review Project and Olympic Agenda 2020+5, which together set out structural goals and cultural strategies to embed gender inclusion. The IBU, meanwhile, has taken a similarly comprehensive approach. Through the adoption of gender quotas, mentorship programs, unconscious bias training, and funding initiatives, it reached 30% female representation on its Executive Board and Technical Committee by 2022. Beginning with the 2026 Election Congress, the IBU's Constitution mandates gender thresholds across all key governance bodies, including Congress delegates, the Athletes' Committee, the Technical Committee, and the Executive Board. These case studies illustrate that when gender equity policies are linked to enforceable structures, measurable outcomes are achievable, even in traditionally male-dominated sports.

Keywords: gender equality, sport leadership, women in management, organizational barriers, biathlon, role congruity theory, intersectionality, governance reform

Introduction

Despite the growing presence of women as professional athletes, their representation in sports leadership remains disproportionately low. In every region of the world, women occupy only a small minority of top-level positions in sports organisations. Across global contexts, women remain significantly underrepresented in sport leadership positions, regardless of the country's level of gender policy advancement. Even in Canada, often considered a progressive model, only 14% of senior leadership roles and 2% of board seats in professional sport properties are held by women (Cosentino et al., 2021). These figures confirm a global trend: women's participation on the field has not been matched by equitable access to leadership off the field.

A lack of ability, experience, or aspiration among women cannot explain the gap. Instead, research attributes this imbalance to a constellation of cultural, structural, and institutional barriers. These include stereotypical beliefs about leadership qualities, exclusion from informal professional networks, and male-dominated recruitment practices that replicate existing hierarchies (Cosentino et al., 2021; Pfister & Radtke, 2009). In many contexts, women are evaluated against leadership models built around male biographies, rendering their careers "atypical" or "less suited" to advancement (Pfister & Radtke, 2009). Such norms are reinforced by organisational cultures that undervalue relational or inclusive leadership styles—styles often associated with women (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008).

*Corresponding author: dagmara.gerasimuk@ibu.at

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Crucially, these barriers are not uniform worldwide. Regional and cultural contexts influence both the shape and severity of gender inequality. For example, in Malaysia, researchers note that self-limiting beliefs among women coexist with deeply ingrained patriarchal structures and role incongruity, making it particularly difficult to fulfil formal quotas for female leadership (Aman et al., 2018). In South Africa, persistent patriarchal norms, compounded by intersectional inequalities, continue to impede the implementation of progressive policies intended to promote gender equality (Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023).

This article synthesises current empirical research and case studies to provide a critical overview of women's roles in sports management. The analysis is structured around five core components:

1. Theoretical perspectives that explain the persistence of gender inequality in sport leadership.
2. Global and regional trends in the representation of women in governance roles.
3. Cultural and institutional barriers that restrict advancement.
4. Policy interventions and reform strategies adopted by organisations and governments.
5. A focused case study of the International Biathlon Union (IBU), which has implemented targeted equality policies.

This work aims to demonstrate that advancing women's leadership in sport is not only a matter of justice or visibility, but also a matter of equality. It is also crucial for effective governance, organisational legitimacy, and the sport's ability to serve as an inclusive social institution.

Theoretical Frameworks: Gender and Leadership in Sport

Understanding the persistent underrepresentation of women in sports leadership requires a critical examination of the theoretical paradigms that illuminate how gendered dynamics operate within organisational contexts. Three key frameworks—role congruity theory, homologous reproduction theory, and intersectionality—offer particularly powerful lenses through which these dynamics can be analysed. Role congruity theory posits that prejudice against female leaders arises when there is a perceived mismatch between the qualities traditionally associated with effective leadership and those culturally assigned to women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Leadership, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as sports, is often constructed around traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness—traits that are culturally aligned with traditional notions of masculinity. As a result, women in leadership roles may be evaluated less

favourably because they deviate from both the feminine norm and the conventional leadership prototype.

This incongruity places women in a “double bind”: if they conform to feminine norms, they may be seen as too passive to lead; if they display agentic traits, they may be penalised for being “unfeminine.” Such tension is particularly salient in sport organisations, where leadership is often associated with male-dominated practices and competitive aggression (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008). As empirical studies have shown, women are frequently judged not only on their performance but also on whether their leadership “fits” within the gendered expectations of their environment (Pfister & Radtke, 2009).

Homologous reproduction theory suggests that those in power tend to select and promote individuals who resemble themselves in background, values, and style—thereby reproducing a homogeneous leadership culture (Stangl & Kane, 1991). In sports, where men have historically held most leadership positions, this dynamic contributes to the ongoing exclusion of women from senior roles. The pattern is self-reinforcing: male executives recruit and mentor those they identify with, perpetuating a cycle of gendered continuity. Whereas role congruity theory explains the cultural dissonance between femininity and leadership traits, homologous reproduction focuses on institutional selection mechanisms that perpetuate male dominance within leadership structures. Studies from Canada and the United States confirm that informal networks, which are often closed to women, play a decisive role in the appointment and advancement of sport leaders (Cosentino et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2001). Even when women possess equal or superior qualifications, their limited access to such networks can render them invisible in succession planning and organisational politics.

While gender alone can be a barrier to leadership, the intersection of gender with race, class, and other social identities produces compounded forms of disadvantage. Intersectionality, articulated initially by Crenshaw, has been increasingly applied to studies of women in sport to account for the multiple, overlapping forms of exclusion that some women face (McDonald & Shelby, 2018). For instance, Black women in North American sport contexts report being marginalised not only because of their gender but also because of racialised stereotypes and expectations (Norwood, 2019).

The concept of intersectionality is particularly crucial when examining global disparities in leadership. In South Africa, for example, research shows that race and gender jointly shape access to sport leadership, with Black women experiencing both gendered and racialised forms of exclusion (Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023). Without

attention to intersectionality, efforts to promote women's leadership risk benefiting only the most privileged women—those whose race, class, and social capital already align with dominant structures of power.

Global Trends and Regional Disparities in Women's Sports Leadership

Despite increased participation of women in organised sport across the world, leadership positions remain overwhelmingly male-dominated. Empirical studies from diverse regions confirm that while athletic inclusion has improved, access to executive and decision-making roles has not kept pace with this progress. The extent of the disparity, however, varies significantly by region and organisational type, reflecting the influence of local political systems, cultural norms, and institutional histories.

Multiple studies from both developed and developing countries have documented the consistent underrepresentation of women in sports management. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, a regional analysis revealed that men held 96.3% of managerial roles in sports organisations, and 62.9% of these organisations had no women in leadership positions at all (Ljubojević et al., 2024). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, only 1% of national sports associations were led by women, with most female professionals relegated to administrative or support roles (Masocha, 2015).

Even in countries with advanced gender equality legislation, women continue to be underrepresented in sports governance. In Canada, only 14% of senior leadership positions in professional sport properties are held by women, and just 2% occupy board seats (Cosentino et al., 2021). In Poland, research indicates that 88% of leadership positions and 89% of secretary-general roles in national sports federations are filled by men (Organista, 2020).

These figures suggest that systemic underrepresentation is not limited to one cultural or economic context—it is a transnational pattern deeply embedded in the institutional architecture of sport. A narrative review of the literature confirms that patriarchal selection norms, male-dominated succession planning, and gendered evaluations of competence are structural features of global sports governance (Evans & Pfister, 2020).

While the pattern of exclusion is global, the specific challenges and countermeasures differ across regions. In Southeast Asia, for example, traditional gender roles often reinforce women's exclusion from decision-making. A study from Malaysia found that women often experience "role incongruity" when pursuing executive positions, where their leadership styles are perceived as

incompatible with expectations of authority (Aman et al., 2018). Despite the introduction of a 20% quota for women on boards, compliance remains inconsistent and symbolic rather than substantive (Aman et al., 2018).

In contrast, Scandinavian countries have made notable progress through governance reforms and formal equity mandates. However, even in Finland and Norway, case studies from national football organisations reveal that structural bottlenecks and cultural inertia continue to limit women's ascension to senior roles (Mikkonen, 2022). Informal gatekeeping and limited succession planning create environments where women are perceived as exceptions rather than standard candidates for leadership.

In Africa, the underrepresentation of women in sport is compounded by deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies and a lack of enforcement of equality policies. In South Africa, despite national and international commitments to gender equity, women remain "rare" in decision-making positions. Research highlights not only structural barriers but also the intersection of gender with race and economic marginalisation (Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023). Similarly, in Ghana, women working in professional sports organisations report persistent cultural prejudices and limited access to mentorship and sponsorship opportunities (Nkrumah et al., 2023).

In Eastern Europe, resistance to gender equality in sport is sometimes framed through meritocratic rhetoric. For example, in Poland, many male leaders argue against quotas based on merit, reinforcing a leadership culture in which women are seen as insufficiently qualified or "not ready" for senior positions (Organista, 2020). At the same time, researchers have documented the emergence of alternative narratives and gender awareness initiatives led by both women and male allies seeking to shift these assumptions.

Across multiple contexts, researchers have highlighted the use of gender quotas as a tool to promote women's leadership in sport. Quotas of 20% to 30% have been introduced in countries such as Malaysia and Romania, as well as at the international level within sport federations, including the IOC. While these targets have raised awareness and increased the visibility of women in leadership, several studies caution against treating quotas as a panacea for achieving gender equality. Without simultaneous cultural and organisational change, quotas may lead to tokenism or superficial compliance (Albu & Grigore, 2020; Aman et al., 2018).

Instead, successful gender integration appears to depend on a combination of numerical benchmarks, institutional accountability, and support structures such as mentorship programs, flexible career pathways, and transparent recruitment practices (Cosentino et al., 2021;

Martel, 2007). Where these factors align, as in some Canadian and Nordic organisations, women report greater satisfaction, clearer advancement pathways, and improved organisational cultures.

Institutional Barriers and Cultural Norms

Despite regional efforts to improve gender representation in sports leadership, institutional and cultural barriers continue to systematically exclude women from decision-making roles. These barriers manifest at multiple levels—individual, organisational, and societal—and often interact in complex, mutually reinforcing ways. Empirical studies from various countries document consistent themes, including gendered stereotypes, hostile or exclusionary organisational cultures, work-life imbalances, and the lack of mentorship and support systems.

Although the contexts of exclusion differ across regions and sports systems; specific categories of barriers recur consistently in the literature. Table 1 below distils these into six thematic types, ranging from external organisational structures to internalised psychological responses. By identifying these overlapping constraints, the table underscores the multidimensional nature of exclusion from sports leadership and clarifies why piecemeal reforms often fall short. This typology provides a conceptual foundation for evaluating the strategies discussed in the next section.

One of the most enduring obstacles to women's advancement in sports leadership is the persistence of gender stereotypes that associate leadership with masculine traits such as assertiveness, authority, and competitiveness. In many national contexts, women who exhibit these characteristics are viewed as violating gender norms, while those who conform to feminine stereotypes are seen as lacking leadership potential. This “double bind” is particularly acute in male-dominated sports such as football, hockey, or athletics (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008; Aman et al., 2018).

Studies in Poland and Canada illustrate how such stereotypes are embedded in hiring and evaluation processes. In Polish sports federations, women leaders are often perceived as “symbolic exceptions,” whose presence does not challenge the underlying male leadership model (Organista, 2020). Similarly, in Canadian professional sport properties, senior women report that they must continually prove their legitimacy, often facing scepticism about their competence and authority (Cosentino et al., 2021).

Beyond formal hiring and promotion criteria, many sports organisations operate through informal networks and unspoken norms that often favour male candidates. This phenomenon, known as “homologous

reproduction,” occurs when leaders select successors who resemble themselves, typically men with similar backgrounds, values, and experiences (Stangl & Kane, 1991). The result is an organisational culture where advancement depends less on merit and more on access to exclusive male-dominated circles. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, most sport organisations lack transparent recruitment structures, and nearly two-thirds have no women in any leadership position (Ljubojević et al., 2024). In Ghana, women in sports leadership describe informal gatekeeping by male executives as a significant barrier to career progression (Nkrumah et al., 2023). These environments not only inhibit women's advancement but also discourage their long-term participation, creating a revolving door effect.

Another widely reported barrier is the tension between the demands of sports leadership and expectations placed on women in their personal lives. Leadership roles often require long hours, irregular schedules, and frequent travel—conditions that are difficult to reconcile with caregiving responsibilities, which disproportionately fall on women. In Malaysia, many women reported turning down leadership opportunities because they conflicted with family obligations or lacked flexible scheduling (Aman et al., 2018). In Romania, despite formal equality policies, few organisations offer structural support such as childcare, part-time leadership roles, or parental leave accommodations. As a result, women leaders often rely on informal family support systems or are forced to self-exclude from career advancement (Albu & Grigore, 2020). The consequence is not just reduced female participation but also the entrenchment of male-dominated leadership as the unquestioned norm.

Importantly, many of these barriers are internalised over time, leading to self-limiting beliefs and behaviours among women themselves. This is particularly well-documented in studies from Canada, Malaysia, and Ghana, where women expressed hesitancy to pursue leadership roles due to fear of failure, a lack of confidence, or anticipation of gender-based resistance (Cosentino et al., 2021; Aman et al., 2018; Nkrumah et al., 2023). These psychological effects are not the cause of inequality but rather its consequence—evidence of how deeply structural barriers penetrate individual decision-making and identity. As research shows, overcoming these internal barriers requires more than personal empowerment. It demands visible representation, access to mentors and sponsors, and cultural environments where women's leadership is not an exception but a norm. In contexts where such support systems exist, women demonstrate strong aspirations for leadership and higher retention rates (Martel, 2007).

Table 1. Typology of Barriers to Women's Leadership in Sport

Barrier Type	Description	Sources
Gender stereotypes	Women are perceived as less competent, too emotional, or not assertive enough to lead	Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008; Aman et al., 2018
Organisational culture	Male-dominated norms, informal networks, and exclusion from decision-making spaces	Cosentino et al., 2021; Stangl & Kane, 1991
Lack of mentors/sponsors	Limited access to leadership guidance and advocacy	Nkrumah et al., 2023; Martel, 2007
Structural inflexibility	Rigid work expectations, scheduling conflicts, lack of support for caregiving responsibilities	Aman et al., 2018; Albu & Grigore, 2020
Internalised constraints	Low self-confidence, fear of failure, and hesitation to seek leadership roles	Cosentino et al., 2021; Nkrumah et al., 2023
Policy-practice disconnect	Gender equality policies are not enforced or lacking implementation structures.	Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023; Ljubojević et al., 2024

Policy Interventions and Reform Strategies

While the structural and cultural barriers to women's advancement in sports leadership are significant, a growing body of research highlights practical interventions that have shown measurable promise. These include legal mandates, organisational reforms, targeted mentoring programs, and equity-focused leadership development. Yet the effectiveness of these measures depends on political will, institutional accountability, and the degree to which they are embedded in organisational culture rather than imposed from above. Building on the typology of barriers, the following Table 2 compiles the most frequently cited strategies aimed at improving women's access to and retention in sports leadership. These strategies span structural interventions (such as quotas and statute reforms), cultural shifts (including male allyship and awareness campaigns), and relational supports (such as mentorship and sponsorship). Presented thematically rather than geographically, this synthesis highlights the interdependence of these tools and underscores the need for coordinated, multi-level action to achieve lasting organisational change.

Gender quotas—either mandated by law or voluntarily adopted—have become a central mechanism for increasing women's representation in sports governance. In countries like Malaysia and Romania, formal targets have been introduced, typically aiming for 20–30% female representation on sports boards (Aman et al., 2018; Albu & Grigore, 2020). In some contexts, these quotas are tied to public funding eligibility or compliance with broader diversity and inclusion frameworks.

However, several studies warn that quotas alone are insufficient. Without structural and cultural change, quotas may lead to tokenism or superficial compliance. In Poland, for example, resistance to quotas is often framed in terms of “merit,” reinforcing assumptions that leadership should be earned rather than assigned, without

acknowledging the systemic obstacles that skew meritocratic processes (Organista, 2020). Still, when implemented in conjunction with mentoring and professional development, quotas can serve as powerful accelerators of change.

One of the most consistently cited strategies across empirical studies is the creation of structured mentorship and sponsorship programs. In Canada, senior women leaders in sport emphasized that access to mentors, particularly those in powerful positions, was essential for navigating organizational cultures and overcoming barriers to promotion (Cosentino et al., 2021). These mentors not only provided guidance but also served as gate-openers within exclusive networks.

In Ghana and Malaysia, women in sport management echoed this finding, noting that mentorship and sponsorship were often the only means of accessing decision-making spaces dominated by men (Nkrumah et al., 2023; Aman et al., 2018). Sponsorship, in particular, was described as a distinguishing factor: unlike mentorship, it involves senior figures actively advocating for women's advancement and recommending them for leadership opportunities.

Networking initiatives also play a crucial role, particularly in mitigating the exclusionary effects of male-dominated informal networks. Women's leadership conferences, targeted training programs, and inter-organisational partnerships have all been shown to enhance visibility and foster career progression (Martel, 2007).

Internal policy reform—particularly when aligned with national gender equality frameworks—can institutionalise equity. For example, the integration of gender equality clauses into organisational statutes, the introduction of gender audits, and the implementation of transparent hiring and promotion processes are all steps documented in studies from Romania, South Africa, and Canada (Albu

Table 2. Strategy to of Barriers to Women's Leadership in Sport

Strategy Type	Description	Sources
Gender quotas	20–30% female representation mandated or encouraged	Aman et al., 2018; Albu & Grigore, 2020
Mentorship programs	Support and guidance from experienced leaders	Cosentino et al., 2021; Martel, 2007
Sponsorship	Active career promotion by powerful allies	Nkrumah et al., 2023; Aman et al., 2018
Awareness training	Gender sensitivity workshops, bias recognition	Organista, 2020
Policy reform	Gender clauses in statutes, gender audits, transparent recruitment	Albu & Grigore, 2020; Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023
Male allyship	Active involvement of men in promoting women's leadership	Martel, 2007; Adom-Aboagye & Burnett,

& Grigore, 2020; Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023; Cosentino et al., 2021). Nevertheless, researchers repeatedly note that the implementation of such policies remains inconsistent. In South Africa, for instance, despite formal policy commitments to gender equity, a “disconnect” between institutional rhetoric and practice remains a persistent problem (Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023). A clear example can be found in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where only 11.1% of surveyed sport organisations reported having formal gender equality policies, and even fewer had mechanisms in place to evaluate or enforce them (Ljubojević et al., 2024). Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, only 11.1% of the surveyed sport organisations had formal gender equality policies, and even fewer had mechanisms to evaluate or enforce them (Ljubojević et al., 2024).

A growing body of literature highlights the importance of cultural change, shifting norms, attitudes, and assumptions that underpin exclusion. Awareness-building, gender-sensitivity training, and the promotion of alternative leadership narratives have emerged as central strategies (Organista, 2020). In Canada and Poland, women leaders emphasise the importance of challenging dominant discourses and fostering cultures that value diverse leadership styles, rather than enforcing a singular, masculinised ideal (Cosentino et al., 2021; Organista, 2020).

Crucially, this cultural shift cannot be led solely by women. Several studies emphasise the role of male allies—leaders who use their positions of power to advocate for structural change, challenge sexist assumptions, and actively sponsor women into leadership roles (Martel, 2007; Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023). Without this form of solidarity, gender equity efforts risk remaining marginal or siloed.

Women in Olympic Governance Structures

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has undergone a notable transformation in its internal gender composition over the past two decades, positioning itself as a global benchmark for institutional gender equality in sport governance. As of January 2024, women represented 40.6% of the IOC's 106 active members,

reflecting a steady increase since the first female members—Flor Isava Fonseca (Venezuela) and Pirjo Häggman (Finland)—were co-opted in 1981. Female participation on the IOC Executive Board reached the 30% target set in 2016, a goal officially achieved in July 2020. Five women currently serve on the Executive Board: Nicole Hoevertsz, Nawal El Moutawakel, Mikaela Cojuangco Jaworski, Kristin Kloster, and Emma Terho (IOC, 2024).

Further advances have been made within the IOC's commission structures. As of October 2023, women held 50% of all commission positions and chaired 14 of the 33 standing commissions (42%). These figures mark a significant institutional shift and illustrate the success of sustained gender equality strategies, including the IOC Gender Equality Review Project (2018) and the adoption of 21 Gender Equality and Inclusion Objectives under Olympic Agenda 2020+5 for the period 2021–2024. These objectives span five domains—Participation, Leadership, Safe Sport, Portrayal, and Resource Allocation—and are integrated across the IOC's three spheres of responsibility: as an organization, as owner of the Olympic Games, and as leader of the Olympic Movement.

A landmark moment in Olympic leadership was reached in March 2025 with the election of Kirsty Coventry, a seven-time Olympic medallist from Zimbabwe, as the first female—and first African—President of the IOC. Her election signals a significant shift in gendered leadership dynamics at the highest level of sport governance and reinforces the IOC's institutional commitment to gender parity and diversity (IOC, 2024).

Gender Equality in Olympic Games Management Roles

While progress in governance structures has been substantial, gender disparities remain evident in operational leadership roles at the Olympic Games. In both the Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022 Games, women were significantly underrepresented among key personnel, including coaches, technical officials, and

team directors. At Tokyo, only 13% of accredited coaches were women, and this number dropped to 10% in Beijing. Similarly, women accounted for 32% of international technical officials in Tokyo and 38% in Beijing. These figures contrast sharply with the near gender parity achieved in athlete participation at the Games themselves: women represented 47.8% of all athletes at Tokyo 2020 and an estimated 50% at Paris 2024 (IOC, 2024).

The representation of women among National Olympic Committee (NOC) Chefs de Mission remained low, with just 20% at Tokyo and 21% at Beijing. However, more inclusive practices were evident in ceremonial representation: 91% of NOCs at Tokyo and 73% at Beijing selected female athletes as flag bearers for the Opening Ceremony (IOC, 2024). While such symbolic visibility is essential, it does not substitute for structural inclusion in high-level leadership and decision-making roles.

To address these disparities, the IOC has integrated gender-focused reforms into Games planning, quota adjustments, scheduling, and media portrayal. Gender-balanced event design (e.g., mixed-gender competitions and equal medal events) and support for female coach development remain priority areas. Nonetheless, the gap between on-field equality and behind-the-scenes leadership persists, highlighting the need for more vigorous policy enforcement and investment in leadership pathways for women beyond the athlete pipeline.

Case Study: Gender Equality in Biathlon Leadership

The International Biathlon Union (IBU) offers a compelling case study of how a global sports federation can proactively address gender inequality in leadership through structured reform. Historically, biathlon, like many other Olympic winter sports, exhibited gender parity in athletic participation but not in governance. Well into the 2010s, women remained underrepresented on executive boards, coaching commissions, and decision-making committees within the IBU (International Biathlon Union [IBU], 2021). In 2019, the IBU openly acknowledged the gender disparity within its leadership structures and convened its first Gender Equality Seminar in Warsaw. The event brought together stakeholders from national federations, technical officials, and athlete representatives to diagnose the scale of inequality and formulate collective solutions. This public recognition of the problem signalled a shift from passive acknowledgement to proactive engagement (IBU, 2021).

Subsequently, in 2021, the IBU published a comprehensive Gender Equality Strategy and Policy, a document outlining both its philosophical commitment and operational roadmap. The policy articulated clear goals: achieving at least 30% female representation in all governance structures, expanding access to coaching and officiating roles for women, and embedding gender sensitivity in all aspects of organisational decision-making (IBU, 2021).

One of the IBU's most significant innovations was integrating gender equality into its Development Support Program, which allocated financial resources specifically for its National Federations' projects advancing women in biathlon leadership (IBU, 2022). IBU's members were encouraged to apply for targeted funding to host women's coaching clinics, establish mentorship programs, or support the advancement of female technical officials.

By coupling strategic vision with resource allocation, the IBU moved beyond symbolic statements to tangible institutional change. This financial commitment reduced entry barriers for underrepresented women and signalled to member federations that gender equality was not optional—it was an expected standard of modern governance.

The IBU also emphasised cultural and psychological dimensions of inclusion. In 2021 and 2024, it held an Unconscious Bias Seminar for national federation leaders, aiming to challenge gendered assumptions in hiring, nominations, and recognition practices (IBU, 2021, 2024). Such initiatives reflected an understanding that changes in mindset and culture must accompany structural reform.

In parallel, the IBU launched formal mentorship programs to support women aspiring to leadership. Senior officials and experienced professionals—both men and women—were paired with emerging female leaders across coaching, officiating, and administration. This effort directly addressed one of the most cited barriers in the literature: the lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities for women in sport (Cosentino et al., 2021; Martel, 2007).

Although this achievement is significant, critical mass theory suggests that 30% representation is only a threshold for influence, not a guarantee of equal participation or decision-making power (IBU, 2022). This milestone was not merely symbolic. Research on critical mass theory suggests that achieving 30% female participation marks a tipping point, at which women's presence becomes normalised and influential within decision-making bodies (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

To ensure gender balance across its governance bodies, the federation has adopted binding provisions

that will come into effect beginning with the 2026 Election Congress. According to Article 1 of the IBU Statute, if a National Federation (NF) Member nominates two or more delegates to a meeting of Congress, the delegation must include at least one delegate of the male gender and at least one of the female gender. Article 25.2.1 stipulates that the Athletes' Committee shall consist of five elected members, including at least two of the male gender and at least two of the female gender. In cases where the candidate pool does not allow for this minimum, Article 25.2.2 provides that every effort must be made to include at least one member of the minority gender. Gender representation is further addressed in Article 3, which specifies that the ten members elected by Congress to the Technical Committee must be citizens of different countries and must include at least three men and three women, assuming there are at least three candidates from each gender. Finally, Article 4 introduces similar requirements for the Executive Board, which is composed of the President, Vice-President, Treasurer, and six additional persons referenced in Article 17.1.1. Beginning in 2026, the Board must include at least three representatives of each gender, provided sufficient candidates are available. These provisions reflect a structured commitment to gender equity, embedding representational thresholds directly into the federation's electoral framework (IBU 2024).

A Historic First: Kirsty Coventry and the Gender Transformation of Olympic Leadership

Kirsty Coventry's election as the 10th President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in March 2025 marks a historic breakthrough in the evolution of global sports governance. As both the first woman and the first African to lead the IOC, Coventry's appointment reflects a long-awaited disruption of entrenched gender and geopolitical hierarchies within the Olympic Movement. A celebrated swimmer from Zimbabwe and seven-time Olympic medalist, Coventry secured the presidency with 49 out of 97 votes in the first round of balloting, defeating prominent candidates including Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr. and Sebastian Coe (Reuters, 2025). Her ascent to the IOC's highest office builds on over four decades of institutional reform aimed at addressing gender disparities. Since the co-option of the first female IOC members in 1981 and the adoption of gender equity provisions into the Olympic Charter in 1996, the IOC has made incremental progress in diversifying its governance structures (International Olympic Committee, 2024).

Coventry's leadership is expected to focus on several interlinked priorities: enhancing the protection and rights of athletes, strengthening the IOC's gender equality and inclusion agenda, and expanding Olympic participation across the Global South, particularly in underrepresented African contexts. Her presidency comes at a moment when the IOC has begun to approach gender parity in key governance metrics: as of 2024, women make up 40.6% of IOC members, 50% of commission positions, and 42% of commission chairs. Moreover, the Executive Board has maintained a 30% female composition since 2020, in line with targets set by the Gender Equality Review Project and the Olympic Agenda 2020+5 strategic framework (International Olympic Committee, 2024). Coventry's election is therefore not just a symbolic milestone, but the outcome of sustained institutional commitments to change—proof that efforts to embed gender balance into electoral rules and leadership pipelines are beginning to yield transformational results. At the same time, her presidency will be closely watched as a litmus test for the depth and durability of these reforms, to determine whether they reflect temporary gains or signal a lasting shift in the power structures of international sport.

Conclusions

This article has examined the persistent underrepresentation of women in sports leadership and the complex web of structural, cultural, and institutional factors that sustain it. Drawing from diverse international contexts, it has become evident that while policy frameworks and gender equity initiatives have proliferated, implementation remains inconsistent, and progress is uneven. Theoretical lenses such as role congruity, homologous reproduction, and intersectionality provide insight into why women continue to be excluded from decision-making roles, despite advancements in athletic participation.

Case studies, such as those of the International Biathlon Union, demonstrate that institutional transformation is achievable when actionable strategies, inclusive leadership, and robust monitoring are in place to back commitments. This redefinition includes moving beyond hierarchical, masculinized models of authority toward inclusive, collaborative, and empathy-driven forms of leadership — approaches that value diversity of thought and lived experience. However, such examples remain exceptions. In many regions, notably where cultural and political will are lacking, achieving gender parity remains a distant goal. Real and lasting progress requires more than compliance—it demands the redefinition of leadership itself, the dismantling of exclusionary cultures, and the investment

in structures that elevate and sustain diverse voices in governance.

Key Takeaways

1. Representation requires systems, not symbols. Tokenistic inclusion is insufficient. Achieving lasting gender equality requires building it through structural reforms, inclusive policies, and leadership pipelines that extend beyond surface-level representation.
2. Context matters, but some solutions are universal. While local cultures shape the expression of gender inequality, strategies such as mentorship, quota systems, male allyship, and leadership development have broad applicability across settings.
3. Institutional accountability is essential. Organisations must not only adopt gender equity goals but also track, resource, and evaluate their implementation. Progress is not self-sustaining—it must be governed, measured, and enforced.

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