Analysis of career pathways of British postholders in international sport governance

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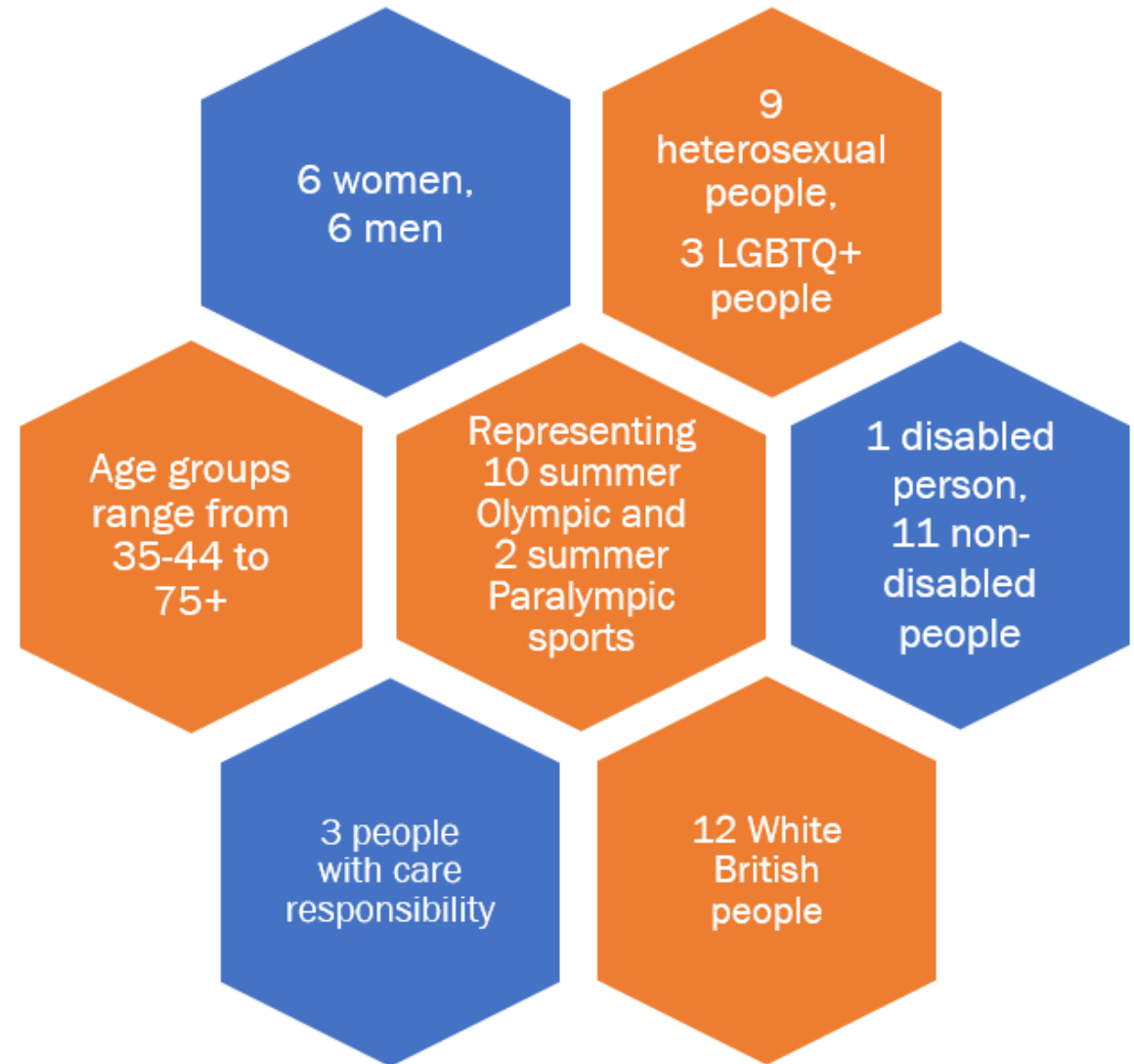# What we did

Online survey (Jul-Aug 2022)

136 Brits who hold snr and jnr positions in international sport were contacted

55 people completed the survey

(40%; 35m/20f)

Three sections: demographics, career pathway, experiences of leadership

Interviews (Jan-Apr 2023)

6 women, 6 men

9 heterosexual people, 3 LGBTQ+ people

Age groups range from 35-44 to 75+

Representing 10 summer Olympic and 2 summer Paralympic sports

1 disabled person, 11 non-disabled people

3 people with care responsibility

12 White British people

Some key findings

1. The implications of the demographics of the sample
2. Challenges and enablers experienced during the career pathway
3. The role and impact of networking
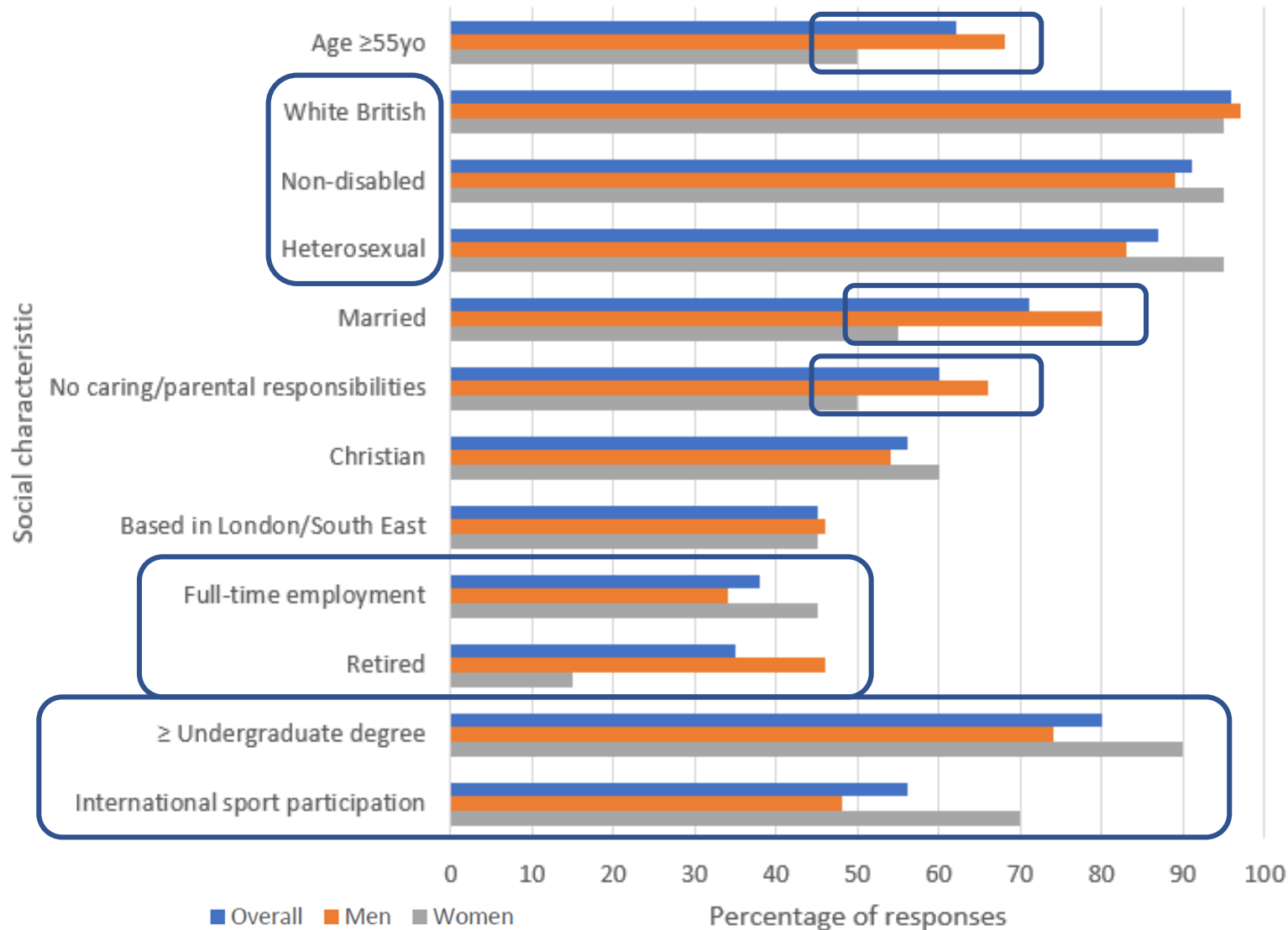
Social characteristics of the survey sample by gender (%)

Demographics

- The uniformity of British postholders seen in this sample is problematic for the future of (international) sport

- Women must be more qualified or experienced than male counterparts to be positioned as equal in their competence and suitability for sport leadership and governance roles (Piggott, 2019)

The role and impact of networking
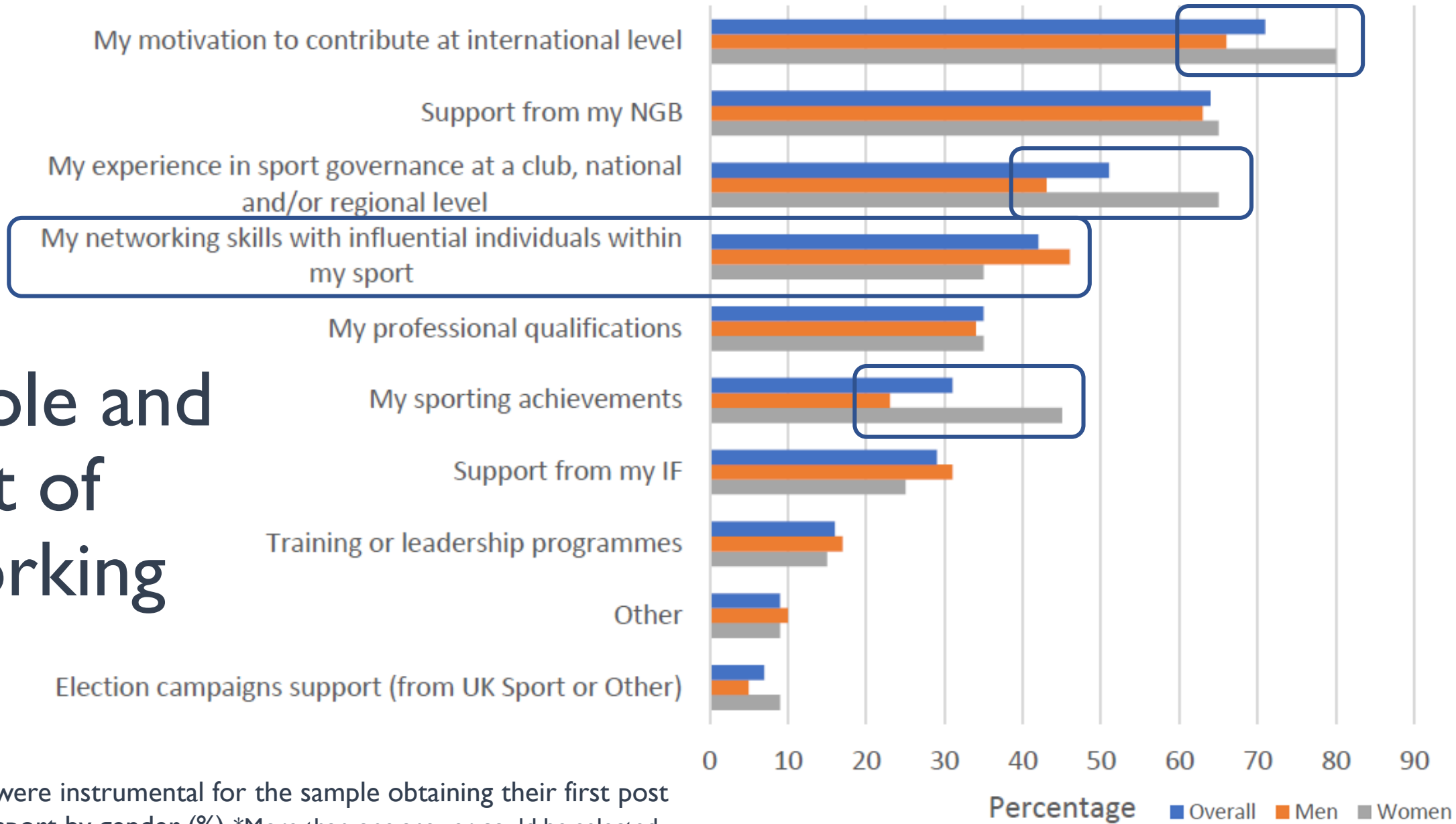
Key factors that were instrumental for the sample obtaining their first post in international sport by gender (%) *More than one answer could be selected

Chart categories (top to bottom):
- My motivation to contribute at international level
- Support from my NGB
- My experience in sport governance at a club, national and/or regional level
- My networking skills with influential individuals within my sport
- My professional qualifications
- My sporting achievements
- Support from my IF
- Training or leadership programmes
- Other
- Election campaigns support (from UK Sport or Other)

Percentage axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90

Legend: Overall, Men, Women

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The 5 P's model for successful networking in international sport federations (Piggott, Matthews & Adriaanse, 2023)
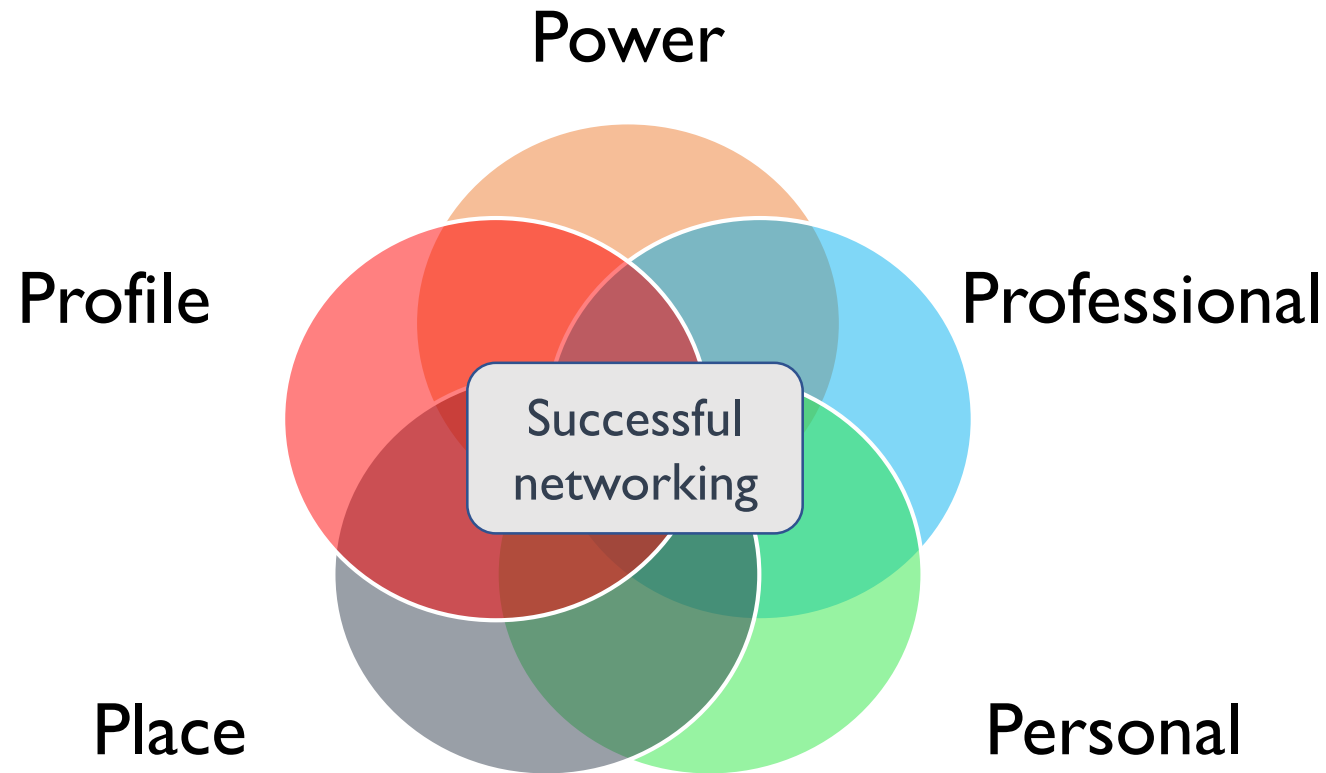
Power

It is important to know who the key influencers are and focus networking efforts on these individuals with power.

One's own prestigious role may also influence opportunities to network

"You can spend all your time networking and getting to know somebody, but if they've got no influence in the body that you're trying to influence yourself, you've wasted your time. … You have to understand who the key runners and riders are. Time spent observing… is a key skill to distil that a little bit." (Fiona)

Profile

The importance of building a strong networking profile contributes to being successfully elected to a senior post, and subsequently having influence once in post

"I [experienced] no problems with the [election] process [because] … the fact that I've been on the circuit for [my sport] for many years, most people know me, and that makes a big difference. … I think people vote for people they know." (James)

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

Professional

The importance of professional skills when engaging in successful networking: being strategic to achieve a good outcome, promoting an agenda, sharing good practice, and knowledge, expertise & commitment to an important issue

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

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

Personal

The need for certain skills and personalities that enable interaction with others on a personal level

"You've got to learn how to talk to people, how to pick up people who are not talking to anyone, how to leave a conversation and join another conversation." (Rebecca)

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

- Networking opportunities, experiences, and challenges are <u>different</u> <u>for different individuals and social groups</u>.

"There's been less females, and I think we migrate together sometimes. I would [see] the other woman, give her a nod, 'we're the two women in the room', and then end up talking; whether it's a passing remark at the sink washing your hands or in the coffee-line." (Sarah)

"Networking is quite difficult in a physical sense… as a wheelchair user. That eye-line thing. It's such a big thing. You also then have that whole perception of how someone reacts to me: do they kneel down? Do they sit down? Do they bend over? How do they react with me? … It's cultural, you might see a group of wheelchair users sitting together. But I think you see gender as well. I think it probably creates spaces of comfort."

Place

The importance of accessing networking places and spaces, such as congresses and major championships or events, to build a large and influential network

"If I look at the travel schedule for the 3-5 day [IF] meetings … in Asia … Either I'm going to spend seven days apart from my [baby], which for me is not OK right now ... Or I'm going to spend £3,000 shipping my daughter and my mother out there to spend seven days with me for a volunteer position. People tell you that women are not committed, but that's really the choice when you lay it on the line. … At this point in time I can't see myself continuing at the IF level until she's of an age where I feel comfortable with taking that time away. … They don't have policies in place to cover this kind of thing." (Fiona)

- Much of the influential and strategic networking <u>occurs outside of formal meeting spaces</u>, leading to questions about the exclusivity and democracy of the decision-making process

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

- Informal, casual conversations that happen around meetings involve <u>drinking alcohol at the bar</u> (often within the hotel)

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

"…buying drinks is important and being the last person in the bar means that you get to hear everything and people aren't stabbing you in the back. There's an awful lot of that in international sports politics as well." (Phillip)

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

Problematic practices create cultures where women and marginalised communities can feel othered, unwelcome, and unsafe.

If these cultures help to form important sites for successful networking, this will likely contribute to a reproduction of male (white, heterosexual, non-disabled) dominance in terms of both representation and influence, and continue the gender imbalance in international sport organisations (see Matthews & Piggott, 2021)

Recommendations

Embed the 5 P's model into training

Review financial support for travel expenses

Open a dialogue about inclusivity in informal networking spaces

Ensure support throughout the pathway, not just the start

Invest in governance Talent ID programmes for female athletes

Thanks for your engagement

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