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Gendered networking in international sport governance

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ABSTRACT

Research question: We aim to develop a deeper understanding of gendered networking in international sport governance. Specifically, we examine the perceptions and experiences of networking amongst women and men senior postholders within international federations (IFs).

Research methods: We draw on interview data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with six men and six women British senior postholders across 12 different Olympic (n = 10) and Paralympic (n = 2) IFs.

Results and findings: Networking was reported to be an instrumental factor in obtaining and maintaining a career in international sport governance. We present and discuss a '4 p's typology' that reflects and represents interviewees' perceptions and experiences of the roles and mechanisms of networking: profile, place, purpose, and preference. We found that the roles and mechanisms of networking were complex and multi-faceted, spanning individual goals and strategies and group/organisational aims and processes. Furthermore, whilst men and women interviewees were mostly uniform in their perceptions of the roles and mechanisms of networking, there were clear gender differences in their experiences of, and outcomes from, networking.

Implications: Overall, the findings from this paper demonstrate how influential and important networking is for both individual career advancement and organisational agendas and decisions. Given this, our findings on the gendered nature of networking can be problematic if already underrepresented women benefit less than men from valuable networking activities. We end the paper by providing some recommendations for future research and concrete short-term strategies that can be implemented to work towards gender-inclusive networking.

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Introduction

Over the past 40 years, a growing body of research has found that men experience more opportunities and fewer barriers in career advancement in sport governance compared to

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women. This is demonstrated not only by trends of vertical gender segregation within and across sport organisations (i.e. the more senior the position and more powerful the organisation, the fewer the women), but also formal and informal gendered structures, rules, norms, and practices that continue to privilege men and masculinity (Burton, 2015; Elling et al., 2019; Evans & Pfister, 2021; Velija & Piggott, 2022). Yet, academic insight has had limited influence on changing gender ratios and practices on the ground, with contemporary research continuing to find that women are underrepresented and undervalued in both national and international sport governance (Piggott et al., 2024). It is, therefore, important to gain a deeper insight not only into *what* is happening to reproduce gender trends in sport governance, but *how* this is happening (i.e. the mechanisms of gendered practices).

'It's not *what* you know but *who* you know' is a commonly used phrase that highlights normalised beliefs around the greater influence of networking than ability, knowledge, and experience in career advancement (Gibson et al., 2014). As a result of its perceived power, networking has been a key research interest for management and organisation scholars examining the gendering of organisations (e.g. Benschop, 2009; Berger et al., 2015; Castilla, 2022; Ozkazanc-Pan & Muntean, 2017; Socratous, 2018). Furthermore, as women have historically lacked access to important organisational contacts, and in turn knowledge and information, networking has been positioned as a potential strategy to help facilitate the advancement of women into senior leadership positions (Forret & Dougherty, 2004).

With a few notable exceptions that we will discuss further in our literature review (Katz et al., 2018; Wells & Hancock, 2017; Zdroik & Babiak, 2017), there is a distinct lack of research that provides in-depth analyses of gendered networking in sport organisations, and how this may influence the gendering of sport governance. Where empirical studies on the role and nature of networking in sport organisations have taken place, this has only been at the national level within the United States (US) context (Katz et al., 2018; Zdroik & Babiak, 2017). Networking is particularly interesting to examine within the sporting context due to the tight-knit nature of the industry (Wells & Hancock, 2017) and previous findings on the existence and rifeness of 'old boys' clubs' as a barrier to women in sport organisations (Pfister & Radtke, 2006; Piggott, 2022; Shaw, 2006). Whilst research highlighting and problematising the prevalence of 'old boys' clubs' in sport organisations has been important in developing awareness of this influential gendered practice, we agree with Katz et al. (2018) that these studies 'did not explicitly look at networks or structural patterns of relationships', nor 'examine or analyse networks of sport leaders to highlight networked gender bias in sport' (p. 136).

We aim to develop a deeper understanding of gendered networking in international sport governance. Specifically, we examine the perceptions and experiences of networking amongst women and men senior postholders within international federations (IFs). IFs are defined as international non-governmental organisations that are recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and/or International Paralympic Committee (IPC) for administering and governing one or more sports at the world level. The research questions that underpin this work are:

1. What are the dominant roles and mechanisms of networking in international sport organisations?
2. To what extent are these roles and mechanisms gendered to result in different experiences and outcomes for men and women leaders?

To address these research questions, we use data from in-depth interviews with 12 British senior postholders across 12 different IFs. Before outlining our methodological approach, we will first provide an overview of existing research on (gendered) networking in sport and non-sport organisations before explaining our theoretical framework: Rao et al.'s (1999) theory of exclusionary power. We then present our findings and discussion before, finally, our conclusion.

Gendered networking in organisations

Conceptualising networking has proven to be a challenging task for scholars, with a lack of consistency or consensus in defining the practice. Building on existing scholarship in this field (Berger et al., 2015; Durbin, 2011; Gibson et al., 2014), we define networking as a form of conscious or subconscious goal-directed behaviour that operates formally and informally both inside and outside of an organisation, and is focused on creating, cultivating, and utilising interpersonal relationships. This conceptualisation is underpinned by five key themes that feature across the networking literature (Berger et al., 2015; Durbin, 2011; Gibson et al., 2014):

1. Networking involves actively meeting new people for an ultimate purpose or goal (e.g. career advancement, exchange of information, influence, and access to resources).
2. Networking relationships exist on a continuum in terms of quality and usefulness.
3. Networks can be both formal and informal.
4. Networking is a social practice that goes beyond intentional behaviours to also include taken-for-granted activities.
5. Networking behaviours exist inside and outside of organisations.

Networking research is multi-disciplinary and diverse, spanning fields such as economics, geography, organisational studies, sociology, management, political science, and marketing (Pittaway et al., 2004). Research on the topic of gendered networking is most relevant to present in line with the research questions that underpin this article. Due to limited existing research specifically on gendered networking in sport organisations, we will first present research that has been conducted in non-sport organisations and then turn our focus to the sporting context.

Gendered networking in non-sport organisations

Participation in networking activities has been found to be an integral part of career advancement for both men and women in management and leadership positions. Beneficial effects include access to resources, social support, information/knowledge sharing, career benefits, increased job satisfaction, and improved work performance (Durbin, 2011; Gremmen et al., 2013). Yet, across a range of organisational contexts, networking contains inequalities along gendered lines because 'networks produce … advantages for insiders only, demarcating organisational insiders from outsiders' (Gremmen et al., 2013, p. 298). Within gendered organisations where organisational logic favours men and masculinity over women and femininity, 'contemporary demands to network, self-promote, and be visible in organisations have further amplified masculine

ideal worker expectations' (Mickey, 2022, p. 389). This is because men can engage in celebrated masculine practices such as male bonding, (sexualised) banter, and socialising in male-dominated spaces to reinforce their status and authority, whilst women are mostly excluded from such opportunities.

A continued barrier for women leaders has been the persistence of informal 'old boys' clubs' that control 'gateway network[s] that ultimately control resources' (Durbin, 2011, p. 91; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Ibarra, 1992; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2010). These high-status, male-only networks have historically been key spaces to develop implicit strategic knowledge within organisational settings (Durbin, 2011). They can help men to circumvent formal processes to achieve career advancement and increased professional status (McGuire, 2002). Such networks tend to be formed of men who have worked together for a substantial period and meet socially as well as professionally (Wajcman, 1998). The informal nature of old boys' clubs has been central to their exclusionary nature due to there being no formal criteria to join these groups that are 'built upon sameness or maleness' (otherwise known as homophily) (Durbin, 2011, p. 99). McGuire (2002) describes such informal spaces as 'the shadows of formal organizational life' and found that, even when women do hold jobs that control resources and access to high-status informal networks, they tend to receive less career-related support from this network (p. 304). One influential factor in this is that women are rarely at the centre of these work-based networks (McGuire, 2002).

Conversely, women-only networks tend to be formal networks that are officially established within an organisation or sector to meet a particular purpose or accomplish a certain task (e.g. to support more women into leadership positions). Whilst women-only networks can work in resistance to old boys' networks, their effectiveness has been a topic of debate. For example, Pini et al. (2004) reported benefits of women-only networks such as identity development, gaining access to women role models and mentors, and having a safe space to discuss experiences and challenges. Yet the authors also critiqued all-women networks for being divisive, taking attention away from other key policy issues, and being discriminatory (i.e. privileging dominant white women) (Pini et al., 2004). It can be challenging for women leaders to network informally with other women leaders due to the lack of women working at the same level within their organisations. Therefore, it is often formal opportunities that allow women leaders to identify and network with other senior leaders in their field. It is important to note that scholarly discussions on gendered networking have overwhelmingly addressed this issue from a one-dimensional perspective that fails to address the intersectional experiences of men and women engaging in networking activities. More intersectional research is needed in this field to better understand the diverse networking experiences of both women and men.

Gendered networking in the sporting context

Despite networking being identified as particularly important in the sport sector due to its nature as a competitive and tight-knit industry (Wells & Hancock, 2017), few scholars have examined the mechanisms of gendered networking in sport organisations. One issue that has been discussed in the extant literature is the prevalence of 'old boys' clubs' (homophilous networks) and how they can exclude women from key decision-

making arenas within sport organisations (Hartmann-Tews, 2019; Karacam & Koca, 2019; Pfister & Radtke, 2006; Piggott, 2022; Shaw, 2006; Valiente, 2019). For example, Shaw (2006) found that 'old boys' clubs' within English national governing bodies were gendered, exclusionary, and able to disrupt and overturn decisions that had been made by formal democratic processes. The absence of women from these networks meant that they were excluded from access to knowledge and marginalised from decision making. Similarly, decision making within the boards of Dutch sports organisations has historically been determined by dominant groups of men, particularly with regards to recruitment and selection processes (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007). Problematically, Pfister and Radtke (2006) found 'old boys' networks' within German sport organisations to be resistant to change for fear of losing power.

Some research has also critically explored the workings of women-only networks in sport organisations. At times, this research has had contrasting or changing findings. For example, whilst Shaw (2006) reported that 'old girls' networks' were prevalent in English sport organisations to provide safe spaces for women leaders, Piggott and Pike (2020) later found that women leaders in English sport organisations were reluctant to engage in homophilous networks due to beliefs that they exacerbated gender differences and were viewed negatively by men counterparts. Additionally, Pike et al. (2018) found that women-only networks were an important outcome of a women's sport leadership development programme as they created safe, secure, and non-threatening environments where women could share and discuss diverse challenges and issues. Yet, they were simultaneously critiqued by graduates of the programme for heightening dichotomous relationships, recreating divisions between men and women, and excluding men leaders who hold most power and influence within sport organisations.

A very limited number of studies have conducted in-depth analyses of networking structures, mechanisms, and practices within sport organisations. The little research that has been undertaken on this topic has been situated within the US national context (Katz et al., 2018; Zdroik & Babiak, 2017). For example, Katz et al. (2018) used quantitative network analyses to find that women leaders in US National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I institutions had fewer social ties (e.g. having studied together or previously worked together) and less cohesive networks compared to their men counterparts. Women leaders were also found to hold peripheral positions within affiliation networks, which aligns with aforementioned findings on the workings of 'old boys' clubs'. Consequently, women leaders were less likely to have access to information flow, job openings, and insider information than men leaders, all of which negatively influenced their career advancement opportunities.

Zdroik and Babiak (2017) adopted a qualitative approach to better understand gender differences in networking practices and experiences across 34 men and women executives working in Olympic level sport organisations in the US. They found that men and women had differing perceptions on how to build, use, and maintain networks. Women leaders tended to focus on building strong social relationships via networking, while men leaders instead viewed networking as a tool and platform to promote themselves and create opportunities. Furthermore, women reported logistical barriers such as time constraints and knowing how to access networks, whilst men tended to refer to strategic barriers such as identifying the most influential people and mastering strategic decision making in networking practices. Overall, it was found across these two

studies that men and women engage in different types of social relations that result in different networking approaches and structures, leading to different levels of networking effectiveness and ultimately fewer career advancement opportunities for women sport leaders. Within the next section we will outline our theoretical framework and how it will aid our analysis of gendered networking practices and outcomes within international sport governance.

Theoretical framework: exclusionary power

Rao et al. (1999) built on the work of prominent gender and organisational scholars to theorise on the 'deep structure' of organisations. Broadly speaking, the deep structure of organisations conceptualises 'the collection of values, history, culture, and practices that form the unquestioned, 'reasonable' way of work in organisations' (Rao & Kelleher, 2003, p. 143). Rao et al. (2016) extended this theorising to also focus on interrelated discriminatory social norms 'that are manifestations of structural hierarchies and inequalities' (p. 144). They discuss how discriminatory social norms and the deep structure of organisations work in different ways in different settings, yet share several qualities, including being multi-layered, often-invisible and taken for granted, and highly resilient to change (Rao et al., 2016). Rao et al. (1999) emphasise the need to make visible and address such assumptions and practices that are normalised and perpetuate gender inequality within organisations. One central concept they developed to examine this is exclusionary power, which will form the basis for our theoretical framework.

Rao et al. (1999) introduce exclusionary power as an umbrella concept to examine how power works to exclude women's interests and perspectives in organisational settings. Five overlapping sub-concepts are presented as key contributors to exclusionary power: positional power, agenda-setting power, hidden power, power of dialogue, and power of conflict. First, *positional power* conceptualises 'the authority derived from an office or title in an organisation' (Rao et al., 1999, p. 6). Specifically, this refers to the power that holding certain positions can enable in deciding who is employed (or not) within an organisation, how an organisation is strategically, structurally, and culturally developed, and what is featured on organisational agendas. Rao et al. (1999) emphasise that positional power runs throughout the organisation, not just at the top of the hierarchy, because every post holds some positional power through 'the function entrusted to it' (p. 7). In line with findings that network attractiveness is linked to an individual's structural location within an organisation (positional power) (McGuire, 2002), it can be assumed that the gender segregation of roles and women's historical underrepresentation in positions of power within sport organisations (Adriaanse, 2024) creates a perpetuating cycle. That is, gender segregation and a lack of positional power leads to poor networking opportunities and outcomes for women, which in turn results in continued segregation and lack of positional power for (prospective) women sport leaders.

Second, *agenda-setting power* refers to which issues are discussed and prioritised within organisations, and who can influence what is included or excluded from the agenda (Rao et al., 1999). This is interrelated with positional power, as the demographics of those holding decision-making positions influences whose interests are most prioritised and privileged. Networking is an important part of agenda-setting, particularly at the board level where decisions are often made on both the inclusion/exclusion and

outcomes of agenda items in informal spaces prior to formal meetings taking place (Stevenson & Radin, 2015). This means that it is particularly important to understand how gender inclusion/exclusion operates in these spaces.

Third, *hidden power* conceptualises unquestioned, normalised, and naturalised values, norms, and practices that are accepted by both dominant and oppressed groups within an organisation. Hidden power can be both an influencer and outcome of gendered networking practices. For example, normalised gendered organisational logics that privilege male bodies, experiences, and expectations/stereotypes can result in networking places and practices also privileging men and masculinity (Piggott & Pike, 2020). This can include networking taking place in male-dominated spaces such as golf clubs and certain bars/pubs where masculinised behaviours are promoted, such as heavy drinking (Agarwal et al., 2016). In turn, such informal networking practices (i.e. old boys' clubs) can remain hidden from women due to their very informal and exclusionary nature.

Fourth, *power of dialogue* refers to whose voices are heard or silenced within organisational settings. This includes the extent to which an individual feels empowered to raise issues that are important to working experiences and outcomes. As discussed in the previous section, the development of women-only networks is symptomatic of women historically feeling disempowered to have a voice within their organisation (Pini et al., 2004; Shaw, 2006), and so these networks have been developed to, amongst other things, provide safe spaces for women to share their experiences and challenges. Such networks can, however, be ineffective in creating change due to their often-isolated nature.

Finally, *power of conflict* highlights Rao et al.'s (1999) argumentation that naturalised ways of working must be challenged and change strategies must combine confrontation with compromise. Rao et al. (2016) further discussed how successful change stories are often reliant on 'the creation of spaces to hold reflexive conversations that bring groups of change agents together to analyse the gender regime they are facing and strategize ways of taking action' (p. 195). They also emphasise the importance of both horizontal and vertical accountability to move beyond top-down measures and link both systemic and individual change. This indicates that, where gendered networking practices are both present and problematic, there is a need for raised awareness of the key issues, the implementation of concrete measures, and a collaborative effort to confronting problematic practices from men and women *across* sports organisations.

Overall, Rao et al.'s (1999) umbrella concept of exclusionary power will aid our examination of the extent to which current networking norms and practices within IFs result in different experiences and outcomes for women and men, and the potential for change to make networking practices more inclusive. This builds on the work of others who have used this theory to understand the problematic relationship between gender and power in sport organisations (Preston & Velija, 2022; Sibson, 2010; Velija et al., 2014). For example, Sibson (2010) applied exclusionary power to aid an understanding of how and why women leaders within Australian grassroots sports organisations continued to lack visibility, voice, and recognition despite holding positional power. Additionally, Velija et al. (2014) used the framework to analyse how power operated along gender lines before, during, and after a merger between the English Women's Cricket Association (WCA) and England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) in 1998. They found that women's cricket was excluded from agendas and decision-making, leaving the women's game marginal and invisible (Velija et al., 2014).

Methodology

This research emanates from a broader project that analysed the career pathways of British postholders in international sport governance (Piggott et al., 2023) and was formed of a two-phase, mixed methods design comprised of an electronic survey followed by in-depth interviews. The survey was completed by 55 British people holding junior or senior posts within IFs, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 British individuals holding senior IF posts. We define junior posts as roles that are subordinate to senior decision-makers of the organisation, such as being a chair or member of a committee, commission, or working group. Senior posts refer to decision-making positions such as president, vice-president, secretary-general, or member of an executive board.

Within this paper, we draw only on interview data due to its greater depth and qualitative richness that importantly provides insight on the *mechanisms* of networking and their influence. It should be noted, however, that networking became a particular topic of investigation within the interviews because it developed as a key theme from the survey data. Forty two percent of the survey respondents highlighted networking skills as a key factor that was instrumental in obtaining their first post in international sport, with a slightly higher proportion of men (46%) reporting this than women (35%) (Piggott et al., 2023).

Interviews

Participants were purposively selected from the sample of survey respondents who had indicated that they were willing to participate in an interview. We wanted to ensure as gender-balanced and heterogenous sample as possible. Sixteen individuals who occupy or had previously occupied a senior position in international sport governance were identified and contacted. We focused our sampling on senior positions as they tend to be most centrally embedded within the governance of organisations, and thus have the most insight on organisational structures, cultures, and practices. After three non-responses and one withdrawal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 people via Zoom by the first and second authors between January-April 2023. The choice to have the same two researchers (one man and one woman) conducting the interviews was highly intentional. We firstly felt this would raise the quality of the interviews by having two researchers of different positionalities develop 'on-the-spot' follow-up questions when interesting discussions arose. We also considered interview dynamics, as the interviewee was always the majority gender within the interview. This seemed to create a more comfortable environment for interviewees to speak truthfully and deeply about their experiences. Interviews were 55–116 minutes in duration. The sample consisted of an equal number of men (n = 6) and women (n = 6); nine heterosexual people and three LGBTQ + people; one disabled person and eleven non-disabled people, and age-groups ranged across 35–44 (n = 2), 45–54 (n = 6), 55–64 (n = 3), and 75+ (n = 1). All interviewees were White British[1] and three people stated caring responsibilities. Ten Olympic sports and two Paralympic sports were represented.

Interviewees were not asked questions specific to their survey responses. Instead, an interview guide was followed and was constructed of three core sections bookended by an introduction to the research and a debrief opportunity for the interviewee. As well as questions focusing upon their career pathway, journey into sport governance, and

experiences and challenges within international sport governance, we were keen to further explore survey responses that had referred to the role of networking. A dedicated set of questions were asked about the definition of networking, opinions about successful networking, influential factors associated with networking, and what support was needed, if any, to network more effectively.

Interviewee identities have been anonymised within the article, ensuring that neither the individuals nor organisations can be identified. At the request of the research funder, pseudonyms have not been used and we do not provide specific details for individual postholders to further ensure participants cannot be identified by linking quotes to the same person. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (ref. 576786) and ethical approval was gained from the University of Chichester.

Data analysis

Experientially-oriented reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun et al., 2023) was applied as an analytic approach for the interview data. Combined inductive-deductive RTA was used, with our analysis initially being grounded in the data before drawing on existing theoretical concepts and literature to deepen our analytic interpretations (Braun et al., 2023). We followed six non-linear phases in our analysis process (Braun et al., 2023).

The first phase, *familiarisation,* involved the first and second authors getting to know the data. This started during the data collection phase, with the researchers staying on the call after each digital interview to share thoughts on interesting and important discussion points. Again, we experienced benefits of having both a man and woman researcher engaged in this task to bring different gender perspectives and reflections. This process also helped in determining 'information power': whether the data provided a sufficient basis for the proposed analysis (Braun et al., 2023). We then each read through all the interview transcripts, making further notes and sharing thoughts on things that came through as interesting and that should be further explored.

During the second phase, *coding,* the dataset was split according to gender. Using Nvivo, the first author (a woman) closely read the transcripts from interviews with women postholders, noting interesting features with code labels, and the second author (a man) did the same with transcripts from men postholders. The purpose of separating the data by gender at this stage was for gender differences to come through more clearly and aid a comparative approach. We decided to split the analysis in line with our own gender identities as we felt that insider gender status would be more valuable than outsider status to allow an initial deeper understanding of, and familiarity with, the gendered experiences and perceptions discussed within the datasets.

In phase three, *initial theme generation,* codes from the previous phase were clustered into themes on Nvivo. At this stage, the first and second authors copied their themes and related interview quotes to large tables within Microsoft Word documents to enable easier sharing of the coded data. Each researcher reviewed the other's analyses and an online meeting took place to further discuss these. At this stage, the benefit of outsider gender perspectives was brought into the analysis by providing greater opportunity for alternative gendered interpretations of the data, coding, and initial theme development. Following phase three, the *themes were collaboratively reviewed and developed* (phase four) to capture meaningful patterns across the entire coded dataset. This included

themes relating to networking strategies and requirements that were common across women and men postholders, as well as gender differences in participants' experiences of *doing* networking. Phase five, *refining, defining, and naming themes,* added the involvement of the third author (a woman) to critically review the analysis tables and support the collaborative effort of naming themes to inform the narrative and structure of the report. Phase six, *producing the report,* initially involved writing a report based on the whole data set for the funder, and subsequently developing this paper with a specific focus on (gendered) networking due to it prominence as a topic and area of interest across the data and report. In the next section, we will present the four networking themes that we revised throughout both the analysis and peer review processes that form the structure of our findings and discussion section.

Findings and discussion

Networking requirements, strategies, and experiences discussed by participants related to individual and organisational motivations and requirements, and formal and informal organisational norms, practices, and structures. As we reviewed, defined, and named our networking themes, we created a '4 p's typology' that represented the participants' reflections on the mechanisms and role of gendered networking in international sport governance: profile, place, purpose, and preference (see Figure 1). Within this findings and discussion section, we will present each of these '4 p's' and analyse and discuss the gendered implications of these.

Profile

The concept of *profile* was developed in relation to interviewees' experiences of networking influencing, and being influenced by, visibility and trust within sports governance.

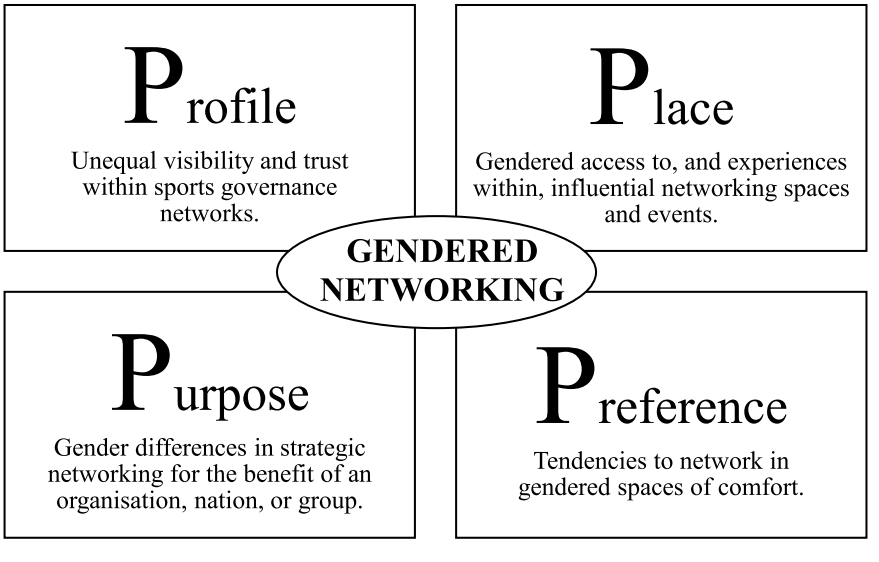

Figure 1. The 4 p's typology of gendered networking in international sport governance.

This was particularly so during election campaigns when familiarity and trust are essential to gain the approval of fellow postholders and, ultimately, win votes to progress into more senior governance positions. As highlighted by a woman postholder, 'it predominantly is about making sure that you have the right personal contacts and networks to make sure that, when it comes to an election time, you're not just a face'. Similarly, a man postholder discussed how he experienced 'no problems with the [election] process' because 'the fact that I've been on the circuit for [my sport] for many years, most people know me, and that makes a big difference. … I think people vote for people they know'. These quotes highlight the multi-dimensional interrelation between *positional power* and networking. That is, holding some form of *positional power* within a sport (at the national, continental, or international level) over an extended period allows the development of familiarity with other postholders through networking practices. In turn, such networking practices, and resultant familiarity, positively influence election processes to obtain *more* influential *positional power*. From a gender perspective, this high valuing of *positional power* in international sport networks is problematic when women are underrepresented within senior governance roles that provide them with visibility, status, and trustworthiness within networking circles (Katz et al., 2018).

The notion of familiarity being directly linked to trust was discussed by one woman postholder who had experienced that the visibility she obtained in a pipeline role directly influenced the trust that she received from others in her sport: 'I was lucky that, because of the Athletes' Commission pathway, I had the top people saying yeah, we know [woman postholder]. We trust her. We like her. Bring her in.' Another woman postholder similarly remarked that 'if you need to influence people, they need to trust you. And to trust you, they need to have a connection with you.' These findings support calls to increase the representation of women across roles that form the pipeline for more senior international sport leadership and governance positions.

In addition to *positional power* in the form of a governance profile, both men and women interviewees spoke of the influence that a sporting profile had on their approval in networking settings. For example, a woman postholder spoke of how 'I was lucky because I'm an athlete, there's a recognition people are like, 'we know who you are'. … It really helps'. Whilst both men and women postholders reported the positive influence of their sporting profile within networking spaces, it is likely that the valuing of this form of *positional power* is gendered. This is because men's knowledge and experience within sport is often assumed to be superior to women's due to the continued higher profile and status of men's sport (Joseph & Anderson, 2016; Knoppers et al., 2022; Piggott, 2022). The lower valuing of women's *positional power* becomes even more problematic when women can experience barriers in physically accessing influential networking places and spaces, as we will discuss next.

Place

The theme *place* refers to postholders' access to influential networking spaces and events, and their experiences within these. Interviewees repeatedly discussed the value of being physically present in certain core networking spaces and at major events because 'face [to face] time is very important' (man postholder). Specifically, to build large and influential networks, both women and men spoke of the importance of accessing congresses and

major championships for their sports. For example, a woman postholder highlighted that 'what does speed up [the networking process] is going to major championships', because 'I'm in the space of, go grab a coffee, 'how are you?', … [which] allows me to promote whatever governance agenda [I'm working with]'. This highlights how physical attendance at these events lowers the threshold for raising or promoting issues that are important to individuals or their organisations, and so *power of dialogue* is heightened. This is because, 'to make things happen and to have change happen, you have to be at the table, you have to be in meetings' (woman postholder).

Decision-making within such influential networking places occurs across two spatial dimensions: formal spaces (e.g. formal meetings) and informal spaces (e.g. corridors, hotel rooms, cafes, and the hotel bar). Whilst formal networking spaces were highlighted as being important to attend, informal networking spaces were seen to be most influential in developing *power of dialogue* and *agenda-setting power*. Interviewees spoke of how most influential conversations have already happened prior to arriving at the meeting (either in person or on the phone) and so being available to capitalise on opportunities for casual, informal conversations is important. For example, a woman postholder emphasised how '75% of your work on influencing takes place outside the meeting'. Similarly, another woman postholder highlighted how, within a meeting, 'we literally may have a 10-minute conversation on quite an important point'. Therefore, 'if you haven't spent the time getting those guys to understand why that vote is important, they may vote it out in Council'. A man postholder reflected on *why* informal settings are more conducive to decision-making:

> 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. … [In] 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.

It became clear from the interviews that 'finding your way in' is highly gendered. That is, while there were common perceptions and experiences across both men and women on the *importance* of accessing key networking spaces and events, there was less uniformity in *opportunities* to access them or individuals' *experiences* within them. The reasons for this were varied. For example, women, but not men, postholders discussed how childcare responsibilities created both logistical and financial challenges in attending overseas congresses and events:

> I became a mum last year and it's much more complicated now. … If I look at the travel schedule for [the IF's] three-to-five-day meetings, … either I'm going to spend seven days apart from my [baby], which for me is not okay right now, … or I'm going to spend £3,000 shipping my baby 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. … I can't see myself continuing at the IF level until [my baby's] of an age where I feel comfortable taking that time away. … They don't have policies in place to cover this kind of thing. (Woman postholder)

This woman's experience highlights how parents of young children, but particularly (breastfeeding) mothers who do not hold considerable wealth, can find it challenging

to access vital networking spaces within international sport governance. Notably, as she emphasises, there appears to be a lack of *power of conflict* being implemented, with IFs doing little, if anything, to acknowledge or address the issue. This means that logistical and financial barriers to attending key networking events continue to be naturalised and positioned as 'just the way it is'. It is clear from the woman postholder's quote that such challenges not only limit her access to networking power but also threaten her entire sport governance career. This is particularly problematic given the already substantial underrepresentation of women in international sport governance positions (Matthews & Piggott, 2021).

In addition to barriers in attending congresses and major events, women spoke of challenges in accessing or feeling comfortable within informal networking spaces once at an event. For example, a woman postholder discussed how informal decision-making processes can be exclusive to the most influential individuals within the Council who are, statistically, mostly men:

> I think that generally they do a bad job of being inclusive in that [informal] decision-making process because … you have a group of people who are the most influential within a Council having a sub-informal meeting. … Sometimes some of the female representatives or other representatives who are not included in that group … might say something that's a valid position, but it's just dismissed because it's already been pre-decided.

This quote highlights that small, informal decision-making groups can hold substantial *power of dialogue* that can also block the power of dialogue of others sitting on a board or council.

Other interviewees spoke more specifically about how much of the informal, casual conversations that happen around meetings involve drinking alcohol at a bar: '[It is] really a lot of late nights drinking gin and tonic and getting to know other people from other organisations' (woman postholder). A man postholder even explained that, during the early stages of his international sport governance career, his mentor explicitly recommended to 'make sure you're always the last person in the bar'. This demonstrates how alcohol-related informal networking has become a form of *hidden power* within IFs that is so normalised and naturalised that it is unquestionably seen to be a central element of successful networking.

A woman postholder reflected on how she finds hotel bars to be an unfavourable networking space:

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

Relatedly, another woman postholder spoke of how:

> [Informal networking] wasn't always that inclusive; people weren't specifically making sure that the women come along. … I think that there is a responsibility on the organisation, particularly the leadership of the organisation, to recognise that. … They need to create spaces where we can come together and exchange in comfort.

This aligns with Mickey's (2022) finding that organisational logics related to networking tend to favour men and masculinity through the valuing of male bonding and socialising in exclusionary male-dominated spaces. As argued by Durbin (2011), 'the informal

aspect of networking should not be underestimated as it can exclude women and is a major obstacle to women in management' (p. 99).

Unequal access to, and opportunities within, influential networking spaces was not only discussed along gender lines. One postholder (whose gender has been anonymised to avoid identification) spoke of how their positionality as a wheelchair user intersected with spatial dimensions of networking:

> When I'm in a networking environment, what I find interesting is that a wheelchair user in a room of able-bodied people is at a different height to everyone. I'm always looking up. You can't engage in the same way, can't move around the room the same way, so I can't see someone on the other side of the room to go and … speak with him. Networking is quite difficult in a physical sense.

As a result of physical networking challenges, this individual discussed how networking with other wheelchair users was much easier and more comfortable because 'there's an understanding. We're all on the same eye level and we perhaps all appreciate the challenges, but also the opportunities. … [This] is then replicated as … some able-bodied individuals stand together'. When influential networking spaces are often inaccessible to wheelchair users (e.g. non-accessible hotel rooms, narrow hallways, and standing at bars or around cocktail tables), inequality of opportunity to network widens. This is an example of *hidden power* operating within networking spaces that privilege some over others yet are rarely reflected upon. By tending to network separately due to spatial challenges, both wheelchair users and non-wheelchair users reproduce networking logics that can 'other' underrepresented people with disabilities and exclude them from key networking conversations and spaces dominated by able bodied people (Dean et al., 2021). This also demonstrates that gendered networking cannot be positioned as a one-dimensional issue but requires appreciation of intersecting forces at play.

Positively, one interviewee did discuss an example where measures were being implemented to develop more inclusive networking spaces:

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

This example demonstrates a very practical solution for addressing exclusionary informal networking spaces at congresses and major events that can provide a good practice example to other IFs.

Purpose

When operating within networking spaces, interviewees spoke of the importance of having a networking *purpose* in line with their governance roles and responsibilities. This was mostly strategic and related to a need to develop *power of dialogue* and *agenda setting power* within powerful networks to influence decisions for the benefit of an organisation, nation, stakeholder group (e.g. athletes), or social group (e.g. women). For example, a woman postholder explained how, when networking:

> 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 … your strengths which will enable you to influence.

Similarly, other postholders discussed how 'you've got to have a reason to be going and talking to people' (woman postholder) and 'make every opportunity count' (man postholder). For one woman postholder, this was to change the statutes of her organisation to be more proactive on the inclusion of women.

Some of the interviewees spoke more specifically on the mechanisms of strategic networking to achieve professional targets and outcomes. For example, a man postholder highlighted how, whilst networking at a Congress, he would 'compliment [other postholders] on their arguments' to build rapport, as well as be prepared with something 'soft' that 'we were quite happy to lose' as a bargaining tool in trying to achieve other higher priority outcomes. This aligns with our previously presented conceptualisation of networking being driven by an ultimate purpose or goal and demonstrates how strategic approaches to networking can be important in attaining *power of dialogue* and *agenda setting power* to influence both the visibility and outcomes of certain issues and agendas.

For others, 'purposeful networking' was used as a tool for information gathering to engage in *power of conflict* to improve governance within and across sports. This was achieved via good practice sharing and knowledge transference. For example, a woman postholder discussed how:

> You don't know if there's something that your sport could be doing better, but you might just by chance talk to somebody while you're in a queue for a coffee and they start to talk to you about something, and then you realize we could do that. … I think [that] is successful networking: things that benefit your sport, things that benefit your operational practices.

Given that more women than men discussed strategic, agenda-driven networking, our findings align with some earlier research that has found women to be more strategic networkers than men (Mickey, 2022), and contrasts with other research that has found men to be more instrumental and women more relational in their networking (Macintosh & Krush, 2014). It also further demonstrates a need to remove barriers for women accessing important networking spaces when the women in our study appeared to be particularly motivated to use networking opportunities to challenge and improve existing governance practices in international sport.

Preference

The interrelation of *profile, place,* and *purpose* influenced the *preferences* of postholders regarding who they chose to network with. This transcended both professional and personal preferences. In relation to the former, interviewees highlighted the importance of networking with high-profile network members who have *positional power, agenda-setting power,* and *power of dialogue* to influence decision-making within their organisation:

> 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, you've wasted your time. … You have to understand who the key runners and riders are. (Woman postholder)

This aligns with the findings of network scholars that:

> Workers' structural location affects their attractiveness as network members, their power over network members, their access to network members, and their time to interact with others, all of which should affect the amount of help they receive from their network members. (McGuire, 2002, p. 305)

In line with the findings presented across the previous three themes, 'preferred networker members' are more likely to be men because, on average, men hold more *positional power* whilst also being more centrally located within both formal and informal networking spaces.

When discussing both professional and personal preferences for networking, several interviewees spoke of migrating towards others with similar social identities and characteristics. Gender was seen to be a particularly prominent social factor that brought women together and men together. In some instances, this had a strategic purpose in trying to build collective *agenda setting power* and *power of dialogue*: 'we do talk about 'the women thing'. Trying to say, right, we've got to make sure to get this [statute or rule] through' (woman postholder). In other instances, this came from a desire to network in 'spaces of comfort' that can arise when networking with individuals with shared social characteristics. For example, a woman postholder discussed how 'there's been less females and I think we migrate together sometimes'. Additionally, a man postholder spoke of how:

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

Overall, this finding that individuals migrate to 'spaces of comfort' with others who share similar identity components highlights a coping strategy for individuals to feel a sense of belonging within IF networking settings, particularly amongst women and other underrepresented and/or marginalised groups. However, such spaces of comfort can also isolate underrepresented groups within the broader IF environments and reproduce forms of *hidden power*. This is by reinforcing the normalisation of white, heterosexual, non-disabled men within the most influential informal networks and restricting networking across social groupings. This further highlights the importance of IFs developing inclusive networking cultures and spaces that enable cross-cultural and cross-identity networking to equalise opportunities to benefit from networking.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to develop a deeper understanding of gendered networking in international sport governance. A key finding that developed early in our analysis was that women and men postholders had similar perceptions on the roles and mechanisms of networking. Specifically, both women and men identified the importance and influence of visibility and trust within key networks (profile), accessing and having a voice within important networking spaces (place), networking strategically on behalf of an organisation, nation, or group (purpose), and having both personal and professional preferences for who they network with at different times and places (preference). Notably, this contrasts with the findings of Zdroik and Babiak (2017) who

found that men and women sport leaders had differing perspectives on how to build, use, and maintain networks, with men tending to be more strategic than women in their networking approach. This difference may be due to our research being situated within international sport governance, where elections are much more competitive than the national level due the global status of IFs. Strategic networking within influential spaces is, therefore, likely a necessity rather than a preference to be successful at the world level. We suggest that such contextual differences in networking requirements, preferences, and experiences across different levels of sport governance is an interesting topic for future investigation.

A second key finding was that, despite similarities in perceptions on the roles and mechanisms of networking, women and men postholders experienced differences in *doing* networking. Specifically, women discussed more challenges in accessing and benefitting from key networks and networking spaces due to their underrepresentation within the most powerful leadership positions and the gendered nature of networking practices and places. In some instances, this led to a preference amongst women to network with other women, both for strategic purposes and as a coping strategy, which can work to further strengthen 'old boys' clubs' and peripheralize women within IFs. These findings align with networking scholarship that has previously found networking logics and practices to operate along gender lines to advantage men, amplify the masculine ideal worker, and reinforce the status and authority of men (Gremmen et al., 2013; McGuire, 2002; Mickey, 2022).

By drawing on Rao and colleagues' theorising (Rao et al., 1999; Rao et al., 2016), we can see how networking norms and practices contribute to the deep structure of IFs as multilayered, often-invisible, taken for granted, and highly resilient to change. Across our 4 p's typology, we show how networking profiles, places, purposes, and preferences are interrelated and embedded with different forms of exclusionary power to, at times, unquestionably privilege men over women. In line with Rao et al. (2016), we believe that positive change towards more inclusive networking in international sport governance requires a combination of raised awareness of key issues, implementation of concrete measures, and a collaborative effort to implement change. Regarding awareness, further research can foster a greater understanding of power relations within networking, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of any inclusion measures introduced. There is a particular need for more knowledge on the intersectional experiences of women and men (prospective) network members in sport governance. We present some intersections relating to parenthood, wealth, and wheelchair use, but many other intersecting inequality dimensions could be explored. This is particularly relevant within the context of international sport governance where there is such a diversity of individuals forming networks across national, religious, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. It would also be interesting to gather insights on the networking experiences of those who have been unsuccessful in obtaining senior sport governance positions to understand the influence of networking on their experiences and lack of success, and the extent to which this is related to their positionality.

In addition to future research opportunities, we argue that there are some concrete short-term strategies that can be implemented to work towards gender-inclusive networking. For example, IFs, national and regional governing bodies, and national sports councils should consider expanding financial support for postholders to include young children and their carers when attending congresses and other key events,

especially for breastfeeding mothers. Additionally, given the extent of their influence, national governing bodies should ensure that delegations sent to congresses are gender balanced. Finally, IFs should explore options to create inclusive and safe spaces for informal networking to ensure equal access to these influential decision-making arenas. However, these short-term strategies will not be successful in transforming gendered networking in isolation. That is, working towards more inclusive networking needs to be part of the wider long-term transformation of the deep structure of sport organisations to become more gender inclusive and challenge unquestioned ways of working that continue to privilege men and masculinity in sport organisations.

Note

1. This aligns with findings from our broader research project that there is a substantial lack of racial diversity across British postholders in international sport governance (Piggott et al., 2023).

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