

Artículo

# Gender Leadership Imbalance in Latin American Sport Organizations

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the study was to examine gender imbalance at the leadership level within sport administrators of National Olympic Committees, National Paralympic Committees and National Sport Organizations affiliated with the Pan American Sports Organization. Specifically, this study examined how social and human capital, socio-cultural aspects of each country, and power-based discourses affect the advancement of women's careers at the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. Twelve female sport administrators were selected to participate. Participants hold the position of president, vice-president, or secretary-general of these sport organizations in seven countries across Latin America. Semi-structured interviews were used to examine how similar experiences defined the careers of women in the sport industry. Findings of this investigation showed that participation barriers that prevent women's access to sport leadership roles are most prevalent at the meso-level, being influenced by both endemic sexist discourses within the sport culture and socio-cultural factors. Results also revealed that social class and status provide women with not only better education opportunities but also access to advance a career in sport. Participants perceived that despite the effects of a strong *machista* culture in their organizations, a generational change in leadership is occurring in these organizations.

**Key Words:** Sport Leadership, Feminism, Latin America, Multilevel Analysis, Social Capital, Human Capital, Power-based discourses.

## 1. Introduction

Sport leadership in Latin America has remained male-biased in practice and management (Archetti, 1998). Nevertheless, female participation in sport has been conditioned not only in Latin America but also in many countries across the world. Male dominance in sport occurs based on the idea that men are physically stronger than women, with athletic activities serving as a platform for them to showcase their masculinity. Connell (1995) defines sport as a space for men to reproduce hegemonic masculinity, as long as it is exclusively heterosexual and physically dominant to subordinate women. Furthermore, 'the institutional organization of sport embeds definite social relations: competition and hierarchy among men, exclusion or domination for women' (Connell, 1995, p. 54). Even though this idea only takes into consideration the physical features of men, it is the foundation of sport as a social institution and shapes the axis of power in sports institutions, qualifying women as physically inferior, therefore unqualified for a leadership position (Burton, 2015).

Historically, women have been underrepresented at the leadership levels of sports organizations (Adriaanse, 2016; Evans & Pfister, 2021; Hartman-Tews & Pfister, 2003). Factors promoting gender imbalance are often based on social components such as religion, culture, and gender stereotypes, shaping the discourses and attitudes experienced by women in sport organizations and affecting their work relations by legitimizing gender discrimination and even sexual harassment (Adriaanse, 2016; Aitchison, 2005). When a woman is looking for a job in the industry, her physical appearance will be judged, and opportunities will increase based on her looks. However, at the same time, if the same woman expresses the desire of becoming a mother, her chances of gaining employment will significantly decrease, as recruiters prefer someone who is perceived to be only committed to the job (Walker & Hindman, 2019).

Although female underrepresentation in sport leadership is present all over the world and at all levels (Evans & Pfister, 2021), in Latin America<sup>1</sup> women have to endure many more cultural and social barriers that affect their opportunities to achieve important leadership roles because Latin American societies were built from the independence of European subjugation, based solidly on a theocratic regime where the first form of government during the Spanish colonization was an alliance between the Catholic Church and State (Mallimaci, 2000). According to the social structure throughout the Catholic Church, women are divinely ordained as inferior to men in both physical and intellectual nature (Bokenkotter, 2005) which could influence ideas regarding the sex roles of Catholics in the region.

Female underrepresentation in leadership positions is sustained in stereotypes and gendered discourses (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; Walker & Hindman, 2019). In Latin America countries, the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in international governing bodies remains alarmingly evident, with little tangible efforts towards changing the issue. For example, of the 37 members of the FIFA Council, only seven are women and only one is a Latina woman (FIFA Council, n.d.). In the IOC, out of 111 members 45 are women. Of these, five are from Latin America (IOC, n.d.). Then, in Panam Sports, of 41 National Olympic Committees, only eight women hold the position of President, and four of these are from Latin America (National Olympic Committees, n.d.).

If we consider that gender equality is a fundamental human right (OHCHR, 2021), a lack of advancement of women in sport leadership roles could also reflect a lack of progress in other areas of life, such as education, economic development, and productivity. Therefore, a better understanding of what deters women from accessing higher-level positions in sport could eventually help identify strategies that contribute to achieving greater gender balance.

Although the topic of gender underrepresentation in sport leadership has been broadly discussed by scholars in the United States and Europe (Burton, 2015; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Pfister, 2006; Walker & Hindman, 2019), only a few authors have discussed gender underrepresentation in sport leadership in Latin America (Lopez de D' Amico, 2018; Montes-de-Oca-O'Reilly & Nava, 2014). The present study adds to the limited literature regarding the issue of gender underrepresentation in leadership roles in Latin American sport organizations. Results from this investigation provide new insights and a deeper understanding of how similar experiences define the career path of female sport administrators in the region, their path to becoming leaders, and which platforms and resources were used to empower them to become successful in the industry.

The purpose of this study was to examine gender imbalance at the leadership level of sports administration at National Olympic Committees (NOCs), National Paralympic Committees (NPCs), and National Sport Organizations (NSO) affiliated with the Panamerican Sports Organization. Specifically, this study examines how factors such as social and human capital, socio-cultural aspects of each country, and power-based discourses affect the advancement of women's careers and leadership roles in sport organizations. Consequently, this study poses the following four research questions: (1) How does social capital influence the advancement and security of women's careers in sport leadership positions? (2) How does human capital, such as personal life outside work influence the career paths of women in sport leadership positions? (3) How do socio-cultural factors in Latin American societies influence women's representation in sport leadership positions? (4) How do

<sup>1</sup> Latin America as a region cannot be solely described in geographical terms. Instead, it is much more accurate to describe this area in terms of its Iberian cultural proximity, particularly with its Hispanic and Portuguese heritage. This cultural proximity binds many of these countries in terms of language, religion, culture, and historical roots (Eaking, 2004).

power-based discourses affect the career advancement and life decisions of women in sport leadership positions?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study included (1) Multilevel Perspectives and (2) Feminist Theory. In addition, we briefly discuss the concepts of social capital and networking, human capital, and personal relations' influence on career advancement. From each theoretical perspective, the relationship with the sports industry is also pointed out.

### 2.1 Multilevel Perspective on Gender Underrepresentation and Leadership in Sport

The Multilevel Perspective or Three-Level Perspective is commonly used in social science research to observe and analyze a specific phenomenon from three hierarchical levels: macro, meso, and micro (Blalock, 1979). In this study, the purpose of using the Multi-level Perspective was to analyze how gender discourses and biases affect the entire sport industry down to the individual level.

Blalock (1979) defines that the macro-level covers a large extent of characteristics, from national to global aspects that interact with an individual and/or organization. The meso-level describes the characteristics of the community or organization in which the individual interacts. Then, the micro-level is defined as the individual characteristics of a person, including beliefs, perceptions and ideas learned from the family and social context in which the individual was raised or lives (Blalock, 1979). Several authors (Burton, 2015; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Cunningham & Sagas, 2007; Hartzell & Dixon 2019; Taylor et al., 2018) have used the Three Level Perspective to examine gender underrepresentation in the sport industry.

*Macro-level.* This level encompasses how historical and socio-cultural interactions influence the most fundamental values of a given society. Costa (2011) noted the relationship between historical dimensions and social constructions that foster unequal practices towards gender, race, ethnicity, or social class in Latin American countries. Inequality persists over time by legitimizing inequality in social practices, such as subordinating women. Hartzell and Dixon (2019) define the macro-level of gender underrepresentation as federal policies, norms, and trends on the labor market and a country's economic development. Burton (2015) defined the factors that constituted the macro-level as organizational demography, hegemonic masculinities, power influences (or power relations), stakeholder perspectives, and institutionalized perceptions.

*Meso-level.* The level is defined by Hartzell and Dixon (2019) as social norms at the organizational operation and culture of an organization. At the meso-level of sports organizations, women usually have to conform with the lowest level of responsibilities, most of which are strictly administrative and supportive. At the meso-level, belief systems that allow gender stereotyping could directly affect the career path of a woman (Evans & Pfister, 2021). Burton (2015) suggested that although the meso-level of organizational operation in sport allows gendered discourses to affect women, it offers the best opportunity to promote change.

*Micro-level.* Burton (2015), defines the micro-level as individual understandings of gender, including behavior, human and social capital. Taylor et al. (2018) noted that at this level, individuals give meaning to their experiences at a given organization based on their own understanding of the policies. According to Graham et al. (2016), workplace gender discrimination has deep roots that originate at social and psychological levels, influencing the way the performance of women is perceived.

As opposed to the meso-level and macro-level, where gender bias originates from external factors, the micro-level focuses on the internal factors of the individual reflected in their professional careers. The micro-level also includes how the individual interacts and communicates at their organization. Self-limiting behaviors often occur at the micro-level, especially when the discourses of power surrounding women in sport organizations lead them to assume and accept that escalating into a leadership position in a male-dominated industry is infeasible (Burton, 2015; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007).

Considering the research purpose of this investigation, the Multilevel Approach is appropriate as a theoretical framework since it offers the opportunity to investigate the phenomenon more broadly, encompassing socio-economic, cultural, and historical aspects of the Latin American region and its impact on the role of women in sport at both the institutional and personal levels. Additionally,

this framework allows us to examine the interactions that occurs between women and their social capital, human capital, and power-based discourses in the context of sports organizations.

## 2.2 Feminist Theory

While discussing issues of gender imbalance, this study positions itself using a feminist approach. Cook and Fonow (1986) divide the elements of feminist research into gender and women as the central point of research, the significance of awareness, ethical concerns, women as knowledge producers, and power balance and initiatives towards social chance through female empowerment. By using a feminist research approach, the aim is to create awareness towards the participants' efforts and challenges to obtain a leadership position, and for them to be celebrated as groundbreaking women in an industry where power discourses and patriarchy would rather position them in secondary roles.

Critical feminist research seeks for a change in the system to eradicate and prevent social inequalities; it is also change-oriented and advocates for equal opportunities (Martin, 2002). Critical feminist research considers the role of intersections and discrimination, principally ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation. The goal of feminism is to challenge the instruments of hierarchy to offer more opportunities for segregated groups (Martin, 2002). It is important to take into consideration that feminist research does not signify that we are conducting research from a female point of view. Feminist research means that the purpose is to inquire into gender inequality issues.

## 2.3 Social and Human Capital and Career Advancement

Social Capital refers to the networks and interpersonal relationships people form in a given organization or industry (Lochner et al., 1999). Building connections when pursuing a career in the sport industry could open the door to many opportunities. However, it is perceived differently by men and women. For women, networking dynamics are required as a determination of their career path, as opposed to men whose micro-level abilities, such as experience, curriculum, and skills are often enough to access a leadership position. This gives the impression that in the case of women, the future of their careers depends on outside influences at the meso-level, making their own efforts almost irrelevant.

Hanzell and Dixon (2019) argue that the motivations of women in the industry at an entry point are very malleable. Women entering sports could be easily demotivated by persisting meso-level factors such as the workplace environment and being outnumbered by their male counterparts. Although participation barriers are considered to be at the meso- and macro-levels, the way a woman perceives and internalizes them at the micro-level impacts her performance in the company, eventually defining her future in it.

Human Capital refers to a series of intangible assets employees bring to work. These are characteristics of an individual that could serve as an input within their organization, such as specific knowledge and education, or traits such as loyalty toward the organization and the capacity to relate to others (Wright & McMahan, 2011). Human capital characteristics can be also shaped by gendered social stereotypes within a given society. In some instances, these might draw the roles men and women have to fulfill in society. Stereotypes based on gender expect women to set their career as a secondary priority, which could be harmful by creating the idea that being married with children is more important than being a woman who can work, negotiate, and become a leader in her field.

## 3. Methodology

For this study, qualitative research is the most appropriate method (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006) instead of a quantitative approach since the purpose is to obtain, through interviews, meaningful in-depth experiences of Latin American women in the sport industry.

### 3.1 Participants

We recruited participants through a snowball approach following the recommendation of initial sample subjects who were purposefully selected based on the selection criteria described below, and we stopped recruitment when data saturation was achieved (Naderifar et al., 2017).

The selection criteria were females holding the position of president, vice-president, or secretary-general of a National Olympic Committee (NOC), National Paralympic Committees (NPCs), or a National Sport Organization (NSO) such as Sport Federation or a Sport Confederation in a country within the Latin American region. In this study, we used the Pan American Sport Organization (Panam

Sports) as the sample population. Panam Sports, is an umbrella sport organization affiliated to the International Olympic that has led the Olympic Movement of the Americas since 1948 (The History of the Pan American, n.d.). From the 41 countries that are members of Panam Sports, this study considered countries with an Ibero American background (Moya, 2012) to allow for cultural and organizational consistency in sport (Bravo et al., 2016). Thus, a list of 60 potential participants from 19 National Olympic Committees from Spanish-speaking countries were indentified as the sample frame of this study. Of this sample frame, a goal of reaching a minimum of 12 participants, or 20% of the sample frame, was preestablished. Thus, 17 women who fit the criteria were initially contacted via email and invited to take part in this study. The email included a letter indicating the purpose of the study and a copy of the protocol with the questions to be included in the interview. Of the 17 invitations, five declined to participate and 12 accepted the invitation.

Interviews took place from July to October of 2021. All 12 interviews were conducted in the Spanish language and recorded from Zoom and then transcribed using the software Amberscript. Data saturation was achieved after the eighth interview since the answers to specific themes among the participants concurred. Despite the data saturation, four more interviews were conducted to confirm what the data already suggested until that point (Jassim & Whitford, 2014 cited in Saunders et al., 2018).

Thus, participants in this study included 12 female sport administrators representing seven countries (Appendix 1). In terms of demographic characteristics, participants had four to 12 years of experience, the majority were married with eight being mothers, and 10 self-described as white and of European descent. As for their educational background, all 12 participants completed college degrees. In addition, 11 hold master's degrees, and one participant holds a PhD. Regarding their socioeconomic status (SES), several participants mentioned being middle and upper-class citizens, while a few declined to answer this question.

### 3.2 Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews were used to examine how similar experiences defined the careers of women in the sport industry, with thematic analysis used as the primary method for data analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed the questions to be flexible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) which meant that instead of strictly asking all the questions on the list, more questions or comments would be discussed during the conversation. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) suggested that one of the benefits of semi-structured interviews is that they gave the participant the freedom to express their own experiences and opinions. Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were used to analyze the phenomenon and draw a conclusion.

The protocol for the semi-structured interviews was developed based on the four main themes discussed in the review of the literature. These four themes were identified following the recommendation of Hartzel and Dixon (2019), who used the multilevel perspective to inquire into female underrepresentation in sport organizations. The themes included were: "social capital", "human capital", "socio-cultural aspects" of each country, and "power-based discourses".

The duration of each interview ranged from 27 to 52 minutes, 38 minutes on average. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and then reviewed to make sure the text downloaded from the software was coherent with the audio.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed and translated from Spanish to English the coding process began. Following Santos et al. (2015) and McKenna (2022) it was decided to translate the interviews as soon they were completed, a step that is known as "forward translations". According to Santos et al., forward translations allow researchers to have a common ground language to discuss the data. Moreover, McKenna (2022) noted that "forward translation involves translating from the source language into the language the reporting will be done in" (p. 2).

Thematic analysis, consisting of a deductive interpretation of the data collected based on the predefined themes of the investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2022), was conducted. Coding was used to identify the negative and positive experiences of the participants with their positions in sport leadership. First, each transcript was carefully reviewed and then patterns of meaning were identified across all the interviews.

The following six themes were found in the data collected from the 12 semi-structured interviews: (a) effects of '*machismo*' attitudes in sport organizations in Latin America, (b) prevalence of former athletes in sport leadership roles, (c) prevalence of women of white/European descent in leadership roles, (d) preference for qualified leaders over imposing quotas, (e) lack of specific training for personnel working in sports in Latin America, and (f) generational change towards attitudes that affect balance.

#### 4. Results

Findings of this study present the results of the six themes found in the data collected through 12 semi-structured interviews. These themes were: (1) *machismo*, (2) former athletes, (3) prevalence of white women, (4) qualification vs equity, (5) lack of sport management training, and (6) general change.

**Machismo.** This term can be translated as sexism or male chauvinism (Felitti & Rissotti, 2016) and is used to define everyday attitudes and ideas that affect gender roles. It is used widely in Latin American society.

All 12 participants mentioned that *machismo* has had an impact on their careers. Particularly, participants expressed being aware that implicit *machista* behavior in the sport industry and their careers was a direct reflection of the culture of their countries where they live. While some participants did not recall a specific episode in which they experienced discrimination based on gender, all of them were able to highlight the existence of certain privileges that their male counterparts had.

When inquiring about the awareness of different treatment that participants received in comparison to their male counterparts, for three participants it was easier to identify some discrepancies since they had relatives who were currently or previously leaders at the same sport federation. Some participants said they noticed they received different treatment than their male relatives received, such as being taken less seriously, ignored, and accused of nepotism.

Sport organizations often based operational practices and communication on masculine orientations (Evans & Pfister, 2021). Participant 10 recalled being subject to verbal violence while working at the sport federation she now presides over. She could perceive she was subject to psychological abuse, which included insults, denigrating her actions, and male co-workers treating her with arrogance. This same individual was told that the field she was in was 'only for men' and that if she wanted to work there, she had to 'accept' the treatment she was receiving (Zdroik & Babiak, 2017). Eventually, Participant 10 decided to leave the sport federation since it was affecting her mental health. Participant 10 revealed, consistent with Pfister and Radke (2006), that gender-specific aggressions towards women usually affect their mental health more in comparison to men. Years later, she was asked to come back and eventually became the president of the federation. However, she recognized that she required years of psychological therapy to overcome her first term working at that sport federation.

**Former athletes.** Of the 12 participants, nine were former professional athletes, who even represented their countries at Olympic Games, Pan-American Games, and other international competitions. Six of those nine had been presidents or vice-presidents of the federation of the sport they practiced. One of them, Participant 6, was both an athlete and the president of her federation simultaneously since at the time of the election, there was no impediment for an athlete to apply for the position. Participants were asked whether being a former professional athlete represented an advantage, a recommendation, or a requirement for aspiring sport leaders. Answers varied. Some believe that it did not represent a benefit other than the networking built inside the sport federation and/or the National Olympic Committee. If the position required elections for the board, being a former athlete gave them the possibility of having enough acquaintances willing to vote for them inside the federation. Those who were chosen through direct election rather than voting, consider that being a recognized and successful former athlete in the sport puts them in sight of being considered to lead the federation.

Regarding the participants who were not former professional athletes, they got access to their organizations by applying for a work vacancy in areas such event management, social communications, and psychological services. From those original positions, they eventually gained promotion to the roles of presidents or vice-presidents. It is important to mention that only five participants, including the three non-athletes, worked full-time in the position and received a salary. The other participants volunteered and did not receive any remuneration.

Several participants agreed that although it was not a requirement, being a former athlete allowed them to understand how the sport federation functions from within. For participants involved with the federation of the sport they formerly practiced, managing potential conflicts of interest was an important theme. In general, former athletes highlighted the sense of empathy that they had towards the current athletes of their federations, and how they were able to manage specific issues that they perceived needed to be solved from the days they were athletes. Participant 7, who competed in the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, said that being a former athlete is not indispensable for aiming at a leadership role at a sport federation or the NOC. According to Participant 7, regardless of being a former athlete, a potential leader requires two things: one, having general knowledge of the sport, and two, passion and love for the sport, whether the position is remunerated or not.

Although several participants concluded that being a former athlete helps the leader have more empathy and understanding towards the athlete's needs, they perceived that this could be different from their male counterparts. Participant 1 suggested that female former athletes seeking a position at the federation have clear ideas of the issues they want to solve, as opposed to male former athletes who sought the position as a personal achievement. Participants 4, 6, and 9 commented that men contending for a leadership position in sports have personal motives. They perceived that some men consider that becoming president of a sports organization represents the pinnacle of a successful career. According to these participants, men leaders tended to focus their success directly on results, such as winning medals and championships whereas women desire well-being, stability of the athletes, and the creation of sustainable projects.

**Prevalence of white women.** Participants for this study were selected based on their position as leaders and their race and ethnicity were unknown to the researchers before the selection process. While race and ethnicity were not a selection criteria for participants, most of the participants self-identified as white. Hence, they mentioned that color, ethnicity, and SES were not a barrier for them to earn their position. Along with race and ethnicity, social class or SES could represent a potential advantage that white women have over other ethnic minority groups.

As previously discussed, only five of the 12 participants worked full-time and earned a salary in their position. The remaining seven acted as volunteers and did not receive any financial compensation from it. Some participants even contributed money from their pocket to their organization. This finding suggests that for those (male or female) aspiring to have leading roles in sport, income level might be an implicit barrier if they don't have sufficient economic resources independent of the leadership position they are seeking. Along with having a primary source of income, some participants highlighted that belonging to a higher socioeconomic group could represent an advantage for women pursuing a leadership position:

'[...money] not only does it help to solve the economic part, but you can also dedicate the time you need to do this role. It also implies that you have access to certain contacts that help you open doors' (Participant 7).

Participant 1 pointed out that race and ethnicity is not necessarily a barrier for women in sport leadership, but women of higher SES could significantly benefit by having access to certain people that would facilitate their career advancement, including better social and human capital in comparison to women from a lower class.

As the president of the Paralympic Committee of her country, Participant 1 commented that having a disability is an immense barrier for any person in pursuit of a career in sport leadership. That is, unless the individual was a heralded former Paralympic athlete.

Some participants highlighted that access to education represents a factor to advance into a leadership position. Hence, when participants were asked about race and ethnicity being a potential barrier for women in sport leadership, Participants 6 and 11 noted that the problem resides not much on race and ethnicity but instead on access to high quality education, which in Latin America, could be much easier for someone from a higher SES.

Participant 6 pointed out that one of the privileges that education gives to people from a higher SES is the access to learn English. For Participant 6, being able to communicate in English is a critical skill for any person in pursuit of a leadership position in sports.

**Qualification vs. equity.** Several authors (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Hogue & Lord, 2007; Singer, 2015) have mentioned that the implementation of policies for gender balance (such as quotas) become an effective tool to create a more favorable environment to achieve gender balance in sport leadership. In this study, half of the participants expressed concern about quota policies,

since they perceived that having qualified people who are capable of fulfilling the demands of the role is more important than creating a more diverse National Olympic Committee through quotas. Some participants worried that, to comply with those regulations, sport organizations could be tracking women into positions they are not prepared for. Instead of using quotas to advance the career of women sport leaders, participants commented that it is better to provide more educational opportunities for women aiming for sport leadership roles.

Some participants were adamant about their preference of a status quo that is slowly opening more opportunities for women, rather than giving unprepared people positions of power only to fulfill diversity quotas. According to some participants, imposing mandatory gender quotas could be counterproductive. Participant 6 said:

'It is not about quantity, it is about quality. Regardless [of gender] you want to make sure that whoever gets in, has the skills needed for the position'.

Participants consider that potential leaders need to have a clear reason for why they want to be involved and to be aware of what they can contribute as leaders of the organization. Participant 1 said:

'...[women] have to understand the needs [of the organization] and have a clear "why" they want to the leader. They need to have a clear objective and to know what they are looking for, and what could be their contribution'.

Participants also mentioned being aware of the problem of corruption persistent in Latin American societies, which have permeated into the sport arena. For participants, rather than achieving gender balance, it is more important to ensure that those interested in a leadership position are trustworthy and have a clean record. Participants expressed that maintaining a transparent organization free of scandals and corruption is important.

**Lack of sport management training.** Several participants agreed that preparation and capacity truly define whether a sport leader is efficient. Since most of the participants are now in the position of both hiring staff and electing potential leaders for their federations, one of the issues of concern for them was to find trained individuals. Several participants highlighted the need for developing sport management training programs in Latin America. Sport management programs at the college level in Latin America are almost non-existent; with the majority of the training available being short certificate diplomas.

The majority of the participants have pursued graduate education degrees and certifications (i.e., coaching/refereeing, sport management) to prepare them for their current positions as sport leaders. Participants 3, 6, and 12 obtained academic certifications on disabilities to comply with their current position at the Paralympic Committee.

In regard to what participants perceived as necessary skills needed to be a sport leader, they mentioned the importance of language, specifically English, since the position requires direct involvement with the many international organizations such as the International Olympic Committee, the International Paralympic Committee, or the International Federations of their specific sport. While younger generations have more access to bilingual education, some participants recognize that not being able to speak English is a barrier for those aspiring to lead a sport organization.

**Generational change.** While discussing the implicit *machismo* culture of Latin America affecting female leaders in sport, the majority of participants perceived what they called a 'generational change' in regard to equality. Participants consider that new generations of sport leaders are more open to inclusion regarding gender, sexual orientation, and race and ethnicity. To this, participants noted that there is a significant attitude shift among younger generations, who not only acknowledge inequalities but also are willing to act upon them. But this transition has not been quick and is not near to being completed. Participant 7 shared how the efforts at her NOC towards gender balance have helped to normalize female leaders, while the status quo was that men and the few women on board opposed it since they consider women inadequate for the industry. Eventually, as the number of women grew, people began to congratulate them, which annoyed Participant 7: 'If a woman achieving a leadership position is celebrated, it means it is not normalized'.

When inquiring on the status quo of gender imbalance, most participants have positive views towards the future, since they can perceive from their perspective of leaders that more women have been interested in joining a sport federation or the National Olympic Committee. In regard to the age group of participants, older participants consider that although gender balance in sport leadership is important, it is not an urgent theme that needs to be solved.

## 5. Conclusion

Using a feminist critical approach become important in order to advance the body of literature of gender balance in sport. The feminist critical approach challenges harmful hegemonic biases that affect the advancement of women. The experiences of participants recollected in this study serve as a testimony of harmful practices that lay on *machista* endemic attitudes common in Latin American society. However, findings in this study reveal that the problem does not only lie in gender, but it also permeates an elitist culture that fails to provide the same opportunities for racial/ethnic minority groups and individuals from the lower social class. Participants' testimonies demand a change on the matter. However, they believe this change should not come based on gender quotas, instead change will come with the growth of more educational opportunities available to everyone regardless of gender, race, SES, or ethnicity.

At the macro-level, some participants were able to confirm that generalized hegemonic masculinities and other gendered assumptions compelling to their sport could affect the social capital of women in it. Once these barriers are crossed, the influence of socio-cultural factors of each society could influence the interactions of women within the sport industry.

For participants, a support system as the core of their human capital is important to help them cope with the challenges and negative experiences that could be experienced as a result of sexism in the sport industry. This support system is mainly based on the support of their families, along with having a secured source of income that could allow them to commit to their duty as a leader without having to worry about their finances and their family life.

Findings of this investigation show that participation barriers that could prevent Latin American women from being more present in sport leadership roles are most prevalent at the meso-level, being influenced by both endemic sexist discourses of the sport culture as a male dominated industry and by the socio-cultural factors of the region. Nevertheless, some participants were able to identify that sexist discourses could also be prevalent in sports leadership at the macro-level, as discrimination and exclusion in leadership roles in sport is present in other regions of the world (Evans & Pfister, 2021).

At the meso-level, some participants benefited from their previous involvement with the organization whether as former athletes or workers. In some cases, participants were able to use their position as sport leaders to have some level of influence in certain political circles in their countries, the governmental offices related to sport, or at the international sport federation of their sport.

Lastly, at a micro-level, having relatives and acquaintances at the sport federation allowed some participants to construct the needed network for them to get involved at the leadership level of their federation and or the NOC. In regard to potential participation barriers women could have at the micro-level, results showed that some women have internalized behaviors that exclude themselves from certain scenarios, especially those where gender roles are well defined. Nevertheless, some participants have defied such assumptions, not without encountering certain levels of attrition among their social circle and relatives. Awareness of the need to prioritize their mental health and their values above their role as sport administrators is a prominent attribute among participants.

A change could begin by educating the stakeholders involved, especially women, on how to act upon gender imbalance in sport organizations. By having a foundation of knowledge where these organizations educate their employees about what sexism is, how to identify it, and how to proceed when situations involving the issue present, the practices that enforce gender balance could better shield the workplace from discrimination.

## 6. Limitations to the Study

This study has some limitations. First is the characteristics of the population of the study. Participants were invited based on convenience. Thus, only those who were available and interested were invited to participate. In terms of the nationalities represented, the sample did not include participants from Brazil because the Portuguese language was a barrier for the researchers. Adding participants from Brazil could not only provide a better representation of the sample but also perhaps it would add to the discussion in terms of race. A second limitation is the use of semi-structured interviews. With open-ended questions, participants do not always elaborate and direct their responses to what was asked. For some questions, participants might be reluctant to expand with

more details as they might consider the topic personal or sensitive. Finally, results of this study need to be interpreted with caution as these may not be generalized to the general population but rather represent the experiences of just a portion of the targeted population.

## 7. Recommendations for Future Research and Implications for Management

The following are a few recommendations for future research in gender imbalance in leadership roles in sport. First, to further advance our understanding of the problem, studies using mixed methodology would be beneficial. The addition of quantitative data through surveys administered to a large sample of participants could yield new insights about the problem. While collecting sample of sport leaders might not be an easy task, it is advised that researchers request the endorsement of a National Olympic Committee to reach out to other NOC within the region.

Second, future investigations on gender imbalance in sport leadership in Latin America must include women of color and women from other minority groups. As noted, the majority of the female sport leaders who took part in this study were of white and European descent. Understanding the barriers that prevent the advancement of women of diverse ethnic groups is also important. This will expand our understanding of how issues regarding race or color discrimination influence women's careers. It would be important to examine the experiences of minority women and see the extent of the intersections between race, gender, and SES. Thus, future studies should expand the sample to include participants from other countries within Latin America such as Brazil and the English-speaking Caribbean. Thus, it would be more possible to obtain a more ethnically diverse data set, since the African population in those countries is greater than in the countries chosen for this study.

To further explore the impact of the macro level of analysis, particularly to the influence of economic factors, it is recommended to design a comparative study of all the countries that are members of the Pan-American Sports Organization. This data set should include Canada and the United States, two countries that are not only culturally and socio- economically much different to those of Latin America, but also have shown more significant progress for female sport leadership. By adding these countries, this could provide more information on the effect of the socio-cultural and socio-economic context that affects women in the sport industry. With the aforementioned recommendations, the literature gap could be narrowed, and more empirical studies could be developed, aimed to better understand female representation in sport leadership in Latin America.

In terms of managerial applications, current leaders of sport organizations across Latin America must be cognizant of the challenges and concerns faced by women who aspire to take leadership roles inside a sport organization. Current sport leaders must promote not only a culture that is inclusive and welcoming for women but also develop actions that facilitate more women to take leadership roles in these organizations. In this regard, sport organizations acting at the meso-level offers the best opportunity for change to influence the culture of these organizations (Burton, 2015). Sport organizations can develop educational programs and train their personnel on the importance of having an inclusive organization. This can be achieved by organizing round tables, symposiums, and seminars (i.e., like the Gender Equality Forum organized by the IOC) that address gender inequality in sport, and specifically about the lack of representation of women in leadership roles. Moreover, sport organizations can also partner with international governmental organizations that promote gender equality, like UN Women, and develop a campaign with the aim to educate people about gender inequality in sport as well as to learn how to eradicate male chauvinist culture and practices inside sport organizations. Sport organizations can also do this by partnering with private organizations and highlight the value of inclusivity in sport, like Iberdrola Spain, a multinational electric utility company that partnered with Consejo Superior de Deportes did in Spain. Finally, sport organizations should review and modify their statutes and bylaws and develop rules that advance equal gender representation inside their boards. These actions will contribute to educate people and thus change the *machista* culture that is common inside many sport organizations across Latin America. Thus, women sport administrators who already have a leadership role –or aspire to have a leadership role in the future, might feel more empowered, supported and motivated to continue pursuing their goals.

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