

# Female chairs on the boards of European National Sports Federations: a comparative study

Boards of  
European  
National Sports  
Federations

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the impact of board size, board gender diversity and federation age on the likelihood of having a female chair in National Sports Federations (NSF).

**Design/methodology/approach** – A quantitative methodology compares 300 sports boards in five countries (Italy, Portugal, Spain, Turkey and the UK), using data collected from NSF's websites.

**Findings** – The board size and federation age have no significant impact on having a female board chair when the countries and the percentage of female directors are included in the model. When the number of women is measured in absolute value rather than in relative terms, the only variable that predicts a woman chair is the country. When the model does not include country differences, the percentage of female directors is key in predicting a chairwoman, and when the number of women is used as a variable instead of the percentage, a board's smaller size increases the odds of having a chairwoman.

**Research limitations/implications** – There are some limitations to this study which we believe provide useful directions for future research. Firstly, the authors have not considered the role of gender typing in sports activities which explains the extent that women participate in specific sports (Sobal and Milgrim, 2019) and the

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related perception of such sports in society. The social representation of sports activities classified as masculine, feminine or gender-neutral can hypothetically influence women's access to that specific federations's leadership. The authors included the country factor only partially, as a control variable, as the social representation of sports usually goes beyond national boundaries.

**Practical implications** – This study has implications for sport policymakers and stakeholders, and for institutions such as the IOC or the European Union that implement equality policies. If the aim is to increase female presence in the highest position of a sports board and to achieve gender equality more generally, other policies need to be implemented alongside gender quotas for the sports boards, namely, those specifically related to the recruitment and selection of the sports board chairs (Mikkonen *et al.*, 2021). For example, given the implications of critical mass and its ability to increase more female's engagement then the role of existing chairs acting as mentors and taking initiative in this objective may be warranted. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the existing gender portfolio of each board and its subsequent influence on recruiting a female chair, regardless of the organization's age. Knoppers *et al.* (2021) concluded that resistance to gender balance by board members is often related to discriminatory discourses against women. The normalization of the discourses of meritocracy, neoliberalism, silence/passivity about the responsibility of structures and an artificial defence of diversity emphasise that equality should not only be determined by women (Knoppers *et al.*, 2021).

**Social implications** – When countries are included in the model, the results suggest that the social representation of a female board member is different from that of a female board chair.

**Originality/value** – The originality of the study is that it shows the factors that constrain women taking up a chair position on NSF's. Theoretically, it contributes to existing literature by demonstrating how a critical mass of females on boards may also extend to the higher and most powerful position of chair.

**Keywords** Chairwoman, Equality, Gender, National Sports Federations, Sports boards

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The benefits of achieving gender equality in sport leadership have increasingly important social and economic implications for organizations (Lesch *et al.*, 2022). Where a critical mass of women exists on sports boards, evidence suggests this improves board performance and organizational outcomes (Joecks *et al.*, 2013; Konrad *et al.*, 2008). Nevertheless, sport remains a symbolic and cultural phenomenon that celebrates a virile and strong embodied masculinity and where women struggle to gain the same recognition as men, namely in the most powerful and decision-making positions (Thornton and Etzebarria, 2021). For example, considering 45 countries data, Adriaanse (2016a) showed that women remained underrepresented in the chair and chief executive positions on sports boards. Men have persistently occupied the highest sports leadership positions (Evans and Pfister, 2021), and women's access to these privileged and powerful roles may face public invisibility, gender stereotypes, family-work conflict, lack of competence recognition and career opportunities and sexual harassment (Knoppers *et al.*, 2022). More positively though there are signs that women in sport are being increasingly celebrated and that ways of challenging the masculine dominance may be possible. As Garcia-Blandon *et al.* (2022) have found in this journal, strength in building female representation can often be found where women are already occupying impactful leadership positions. Motivated by growing female representation in sport and a paucity of knowledge on females occupying the highest positions in sports boards, this study contributes by illustrating the organizational structural constraints that determine women accessing the position of chair, based on data from Italy, Portugal, Spain, Turkey and the UK. The importance of the study is extended by the fact that sports boards more broadly have a critical role in promoting gender equality policies (IOC, 2022).

The National Sports Federations (NSFs) under study are responsible for governing all sports-related activities in their respective countries and the board of directors is their

fundamental governance mechanism, being accountable for approving major strategic and financial decisions. There are multiple reasons necessitating exploring the representativeness of women in the most powerful positions in the sports boards of NSFs. Firstly, given the international pressures for more significant female leadership representation in sports (IOC, 2022) and the inherent assignments of the federations, the key factors that increase women's presence broadly and in the leading role of chair must be investigated. Secondly, women in leading roles can be impactful role models for other sports women, inspiring their willingness to assume the leading roles in boards (Brieger *et al.*, 2019; Garcia-Blandon *et al.*, 2022). Thirdly, the presence in a leading role such as chair may contribute to a culture of diversity and inclusion and facilitate the adoption of more equitable gender policies in the decision-making as evidenced by the increase of women in sport boards (Bilimoria, 2006; Sotiriadou and de Haan, 2019). Finally, evidence has long suggested that women in leading positions may positively influence organizational performance (Adriaanse, 2016a, 2016b).

Consequently, how organizational constraints may affect women's representativeness in the highest position in sports boards must be explored. This study contributes to this by focusing on the impact of three organization-level factors on the likelihood of having a chairwoman in an NSF: board size, board gender diversity and federation age. Framed by Acker's (1990) theory, it is assumed that sports organizations are gendered (Adriaanse and Schofield, 2013), and that those three organizational factors may influence the representativeness of women in the position of chair, being related to the gender norms and masculine culture that shapes power and authority within the organization, determining who should hold such a position.

The literature on the impact of board size on board diversity is inconclusive. However, empirical evidence suggests that small boards are more receptive to gender diversity (Wicker and Kerwin, 2020). It may therefore be expected that smaller boards are less affected by the gender bias associated with the social representation of the chair position as masculine (Adriaanse and Schofield, 2013). Thus, women may encounter less prejudice when seeking the leading board position. In this study, in the context of the NSFs, it is argued that smaller sports boards promote greater gender inclusivity and increase the likelihood of the chair being female.

Boards with a high number of male members may be more gender stereotypical and affected by "similar to me" gender bias (Sotiriadou and de Haan, 2019), consequently creating resistance towards electing a female chair. On the contrary, the increase of women's presence in boards tends to positively influence the adaptation of good practices towards gender equality (Bilimoria, 2006), which can favour women's future access to the leading position of board chair. This study therefore also explores whether the presence of a critical mass of women in sports boards may affect the selection of female chairs of NSFs in the analysed countries.

Finally, younger federations may be more likely to elect a woman as a board chair, due to their heightened gender awareness and concerns regarding the bias against women in decision-making and which has been of topical interest, particularly in the past decade. Research by Stainback and Kwon (2012) shows that older organizations tend to have greater sex segregation. Additionally, the sport context has witnessed extensive debate and implantation of gender equality policies (Fasting *et al.*, 2014; IOC, 2022). Younger federations, not burdened by a history of sex segregation, may thus be more receptive to implementing gender equality policies.

The results of the study confirm that national cultures have the greatest impact on determining women's representation as chairs on sports boards. However, when countries

are not included as a differentiating variable, the odds of having a chairwoman are higher, as the percentage of women directors, excluding the chairwomen, increases. The study also evidences the impact of the board size and the total numbers of female directors on the gender of the chairperson, indicated by the results that show chairwomen tend to preside smaller boards.

This research contributes to the literature about women's representativeness in sports by showing the organizational factors that constrain women's access to the leading role of the chair board. This advances literature focused on gender and sports governance by distinguishing the roles that women may occupy on the board and highlighting the "gender discrimination contours" which they are subjected to based on their different roles.

Secondly, it contributes to international comparative research in gender and sport governance by analysing how different national cultures, with distinct gender regimes and levels of openness to practices and policies towards gender equality in sports, can impact gender equality in leadership positions of sports organizations. In the subsequent section of the paper, literature related to women's representativeness in sports governing positions is outlined in conjunction with our hypotheses development. Following this, our methodology is detailed before presenting the results. In the final sections, we discuss the results, highlight the implications for practice and draw our conclusions.

### **Theoretical background and hypotheses development**

Gender is a powerful social and historical dispositive in the organization of human life that constructs an axis of difference and power between what it means to be a woman/feminine and a man/masculine, and with the latter representing the norm (Acker, 1990; Connell, 1996). The context of sport remains defined by a hegemonic masculine norm (Thornton and Etxebarria, 2021) that pervades all organizational processes, namely, how power is represented and enacted in sports governance (Elling *et al.*, 2019).

Influenced by Acker's (1990) theory and subsequent research conducted on sport adopting her work (Claringbould and Knoppers, 2008; Sotiriadou and de Haan, 2019), sports organizations can be perceived within a theory of gendered organizations that helps to understand how organizational norms, practices and policies and individual expectations impact the lack of women's representativeness in sports governance. The power positions, normalized as gender neutral, are signified by masculinity and men (Sotiriadou and de Haan, 2019) and women in sports boards are perceived as lacking the profile to occupy those positions, even when they endeavour to be perceived as competent in accordance with the masculine norm (Knoppers *et al.*, 2022).

Tokenism Theory illustrates how women's social experiences and interactions are affected by the organizational structure like their low number in sports governance (Kanter, 1977; Torchia *et al.*, 2011). Women, who constitute a minority in sport leadership positions, experience adverse effects such as an increased visibility that leads to criticism, negative pressure and competence devaluation (Piggott, 2022), sexual harassment (Knoppers *et al.*, 2022) and their exclusion from male networks (Piggott, 2022). The glass ceiling metaphor is used to reflect upon the difficulties faced by women who seek to occupy sports governance positions (Thornton and Etxebarria, 2021).

Critical Mass Theory asserts that achieving gender equality requires a significant representation of women in powerful and influential positions (Wicker *et al.*, 2022). Previous studies have shown that a critical mass of women on a board is necessary for realizing the potential benefits of diversity (Joecks *et al.*, 2013; Lafuente and Vaillant, 2019). The critical mass is the minimum number of women required to influence decision-making and promote gender diversity (Wicker *et al.*, 2022). Research thus far shows that to guarantee a critical

mass of women on boards, at least three women must be present (Wicker *et al.*, 2022; Schwartz-Ziv, 2017). Accordingly, if there are three or more female board directors (or around 30% women) (Joecks *et al.*, 2013), their contributions will be more meaningful. Otherwise, the contributions of one or two female directors may be ignored in a predominately male boardroom (Owen and Temesvary, 2018), and the organization's performance may be impeded by gender inequality (Joecks *et al.*, 2023, 2013).

Research shows that the level of representativeness of women on sports boards also varies across countries (McLeod *et al.*, 2021). In particular, the countries involved in the study have different cultures of gender equality (WEF, 2022). As reflected in the World Economic Forum's (WEF, 2022) gender gap index. The UK, Portugal and Spain ranked within the top 25 countries, indicating greater gender equality. In contrast, Italy and Turkey ranked below the 63, suggesting lower gender equality. Such different cultures stem from different historical backgrounds of political and feminist activism, which led to a distinct involvement and emancipation of women in society, and particularly in sports (Di Cimbrini *et al.*, 2019; Koca and Öztürk, 2015). Such gender regimes are reflected in the policies adopted by the countries studied to promote women in sports governance (Adriaanse and Schofield, 2013), with the UK (Sport England, 2021) and Spain (Law 39/2022) being the first ones to adopt gender measures to promote women's access to sports boards (e.g. gender quotas or government funding policies). In 2018, Italy also adopted gender quotas policies to promote women's participation in sports governance (Resolution of the CONI National Council, 2018), and Portugal adopted legally binding quotas for the boards of state-owned companies and publicly traded companies (Casaca *et al.*, 2022), though not yet applicable to sports. Turkey remains without any practice or policy to promote gender equality governance in sports (Law No. 7405 on Sport Clubs and Federations, 2022). This study therefore contributes to knowledge on the factors that determine women's leadership on sports boards, by highlighting the impact of organizational variables such as the board size, board gender diversity and federation age to predict women's presence as chairwomen in the NSFs of these five countries.

### *Board size*

Board size captures the total number of board members (Wicker *et al.*, 2022). In terms of sports governance, the board size of NSFs is accepted as a primary indicator in determining their performance. As such, studies investigating sports board size generally state that small-size boards increase performance (McLeod *et al.*, 2021), are more efficient in decision-making (Taylor and O'Sullivan, 2009) and support good practices in sports governance (Hung, 1998). New principles and guidelines on sports (e.g. The UK Code for Sports Governance and Australia's Sports Governance Guidelines) urge NSFs to have boards with a maximum of 12 people, supporting the scholarly perspective on small boards (Stenling *et al.*, 2022).

Nevertheless, the literature focused on the link between board size and gender diversity is inconsistent (Wicker and Kerwin, 2020; Joecks *et al.*, 2013). According to some authors (Brammer *et al.*, 2007; Burke, 2000; Terjesen *et al.*, 2009), larger boards welcome more diverse perspectives and experiences, and a more diverse board composition when considering gender and ethnicity.

However, Odendahl and Youmans (1994) asserted that women are better represented in non-profit and small boards. Wicker and Kerwin (2020) suggested that smaller board sizes had more gender diversity. There is, however, limited research focused on analysing the impact of board size on gender diversity in sports boards (Wicker *et al.*, 2022; Wicker and Kerwin, 2020). Notwithstanding, there is a dearth of research on the connections between

board size and board gender diversity, particularly when specific roles held by women on the board are considered, such as chairperson. Hence, it stands to reason that gender bias would rise since the board chair position typically requires stereotypically male characteristics and behaviours (Burton *et al.*, 2009). As a result, a larger board size may be associated with more complex organizations and an increase in the power attributed to the board, reinforcing gender biases and stereotypes for the chair position. Based on these considerations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1.* The chairwomen of NSFs tend to be related to smaller boards of directors.

#### *Board gender diversity*

Gender diversity is a recurring theme in sports governance literature (Adriaanse, 2016a). The masculinization of boards tends to negatively affect the policies towards gender equality and a low number of women on a board can lead to their inclusion being portrayed as “tokens” (Kanter, 1977; Mcleod *et al.*, 2021), subjecting them to gender discrimination. The literature has also shown that increasing women’s participation in boards positively impacts corporate risk disclosure (Saggar *et al.*, 2022), corporate social responsibility disclosure (Issa and Fang, 2019), firm performance (Stefanovic and Barjaktarovic, 2021) and gender equality (Bilimoria, 2006; Brieger *et al.*, 2019). Bilimoria (2006) indicated that the presence of women on boards positively impacts top management team diversity. Brieger *et al.* (2019) showed that chairwomen influence female board participation positively. Similarly, Garcia-Blandon *et al.* (2022) showed that firms with female CEOs had more women in senior management than other firms. We may expect that this self-reinforcing effect can also work in the opposite direction, i.e. the greater the presence of women on the board, the higher the probability of having a chairwoman. However, no studies have investigated whether the presence of women on sports boards promotes their access to the position of chair. Thus, we test the following hypothesis:

*H2.* NSFs boards with greater gender diversity (excluding the chairwomen) increase the likelihood of having a chairwoman.

#### *Age of federation*

Research has shown that organizational age can influence gender representation on boards (Stainback, 2009). For example, Baron *et al.* (1991) found that gender equity in job assignments was highest among young departments. Moreover, Baron *et al.* (2007, p. 59) suggested that “the current extent of gender inequality in an organization might reflect not only the current sex composition but also the developmental path by which the enterprise achieved that demographic mix”. These are the arguments that support how the notions of path dependence and organizational inertia demonstrate the importance of the age effect on gender segregation (Stainback *et al.*, 2010). Lynall *et al.* (2003) developed the concept of path dependence within the context of boards where inertial pressures increase the “stickiness” of board characteristics. From this perspective, and consistent with Stainback and Kwon (2012), who argued that older organizations are likely to exhibit higher levels of gender segregation, younger organizations are more likely to be chaired by a woman. This leads to our third hypothesis:

*H3.* Chairwomen are more likely to be related to young NSFs.

## Methodology

### *Context of the election of the board chair and sample*

In all five countries, the board chair represents the federation and is also responsible for overseeing the organization's success. Even if the management processes of federations are becoming more "business-like" (Madella *et al.*, 2005) and "professional" (Nagel *et al.*, 2015), their governance is still typically structured like non-profit organizations (Lang *et al.*, 2018) where the chairperson is elected by a collegial body involving the members of the federation or the heads of the local branches and/or their delegates (Table 1).

Herein data were collected from the official websites of the NSF's within the five countries ( $N = 300$ ) between 2022 and 2023. Each researcher obtained a list of the NSF's in their country by consulting the website of the central sport authority. In addition, information missing on the websites was gathered by phoning the NSF's. The total sample corresponded to 56 federations in Italy and Portugal, 58 in the UK and 65 in Spain and Turkey. Only 23 federations had a chairwoman, representing 7.7% of the total sample (92.3% of the board chairs are men, 277 of the 300). The country with the largest number of chairwomen is the UK, with 13, followed by Portugal and Turkey (3 each) and Italy and Spain, with 2 in each.

### *Variables*

The dependent variable is the presence of a chairwoman. It was measured by a dummy variable equal to one if a federation has a chairwoman, and equal to zero otherwise. The independent variable BOARD SIZE was measured as the total number of board members.

The results of our study will reveal whether the presence of a critical mass of women on sports boards may affect the selection of female chairs of NSF's in the analysed countries. We measured the BOARD GENDER DIVERSITY through two independent variables: the total number of women (TWOMEN) and the percentage of women on the board (PERWOMEN). The chairwoman was removed in the calculation of the variables, so that it did not affect the prediction of the dependent variable and produce endogeneity.

We calculated TWOMEN as:

$$\text{TWOMEN} = \text{Total number of female directors} - N$$

Where  $N = 1$  if the chair is a woman, and 0 if the chair is a man.

Consistent with Kanter (1977), the proportion of women on the board is calculated as the percentage of female board members. In our case, we calculated it by subtracting the chairwoman using the following formula:

$$\text{PERWOMEN} = (\text{TWOMEN}) / (\text{Board Size} - N) \times 100$$

We recalculated the independent variable FEDERATION AGE because it caused multicollinearity problems. We used a dummy variable (AGE) to avoid this difficulty and be consistent with  $H3$ , assuming the value 0 if the federation existed before the Brighton Declaration (1994) and 1 otherwise. This declaration, the outcome of the first international conference on women and sport, produced the principles that should guide the actions intended to increase the involvement of women in sports at all levels and in all functions and roles and remains prevalent today.

As a control variable, we considered the COUNTRY to provide an international and comparative perspective to the study, taking the UK as a reference as it has the highest PERWOMEN. To avoid correlation problems, we did not include the variables PERWOMEN and TWOMEN in the same models (Table 2).

**Table 1.**  
Selection of the board  
chair

Chair's electoral procedure	Italy	Portugal	Spain	Turkey	UK
Regulation	Legislative Decree of 23 July 1999, no. 242	Juridical Regime of Sports Federations	Order ECD/2764/2015, of 18 December	Regulation on the Election of Federation Presidents of the General Directorate of Sports, approved on 12 February 2009 and updated on 25 December 2012	NGB's Articles of Association (AoA)
Election procedure	Democratic secret vote by the members of the General Assembly (GA)	Democratic secret vote by the members of the GA	Democratic secret vote by the members of the GA	Democratic secret vote by the members of the relevant federation (the maximum member numbers who vote is 100 for one federation) approved by the General Directorate of Youth and Sports	Democratic election by the board and a nomination committee, chaired by an Independent Non-Executive Director
Years of office	4	4	4	4	3–4

**Source:** Authors' own creation

**Table 2.**  
Pearson correlation

Variables	N = 300	Gender chair	Board size	TWOMEN	PERWOMEN	AGE
Pearson correlation	GENDER CHAIR	1	-0.094	0.148	0.212	-0.038
	BOARD SIZE	-0.094	1	0.38	-0.14	0.012
	TWOMEN	0.148	0.38	1	0.81	-0.134
	PERWOMEN	0.212	-0.14	0.81	1	-0.097
	AGE	-0.038	0.012	-0.134	-0.097	1
Sig. (1-tailed)	GENDER CHAIR	.	0.051	0.005	0	0.255
	BOARD SIZE	0.051	.	0	0.008	0.418
	TWOMEN	0.005	0	.	0	0.01
	PERWOMEN	0	0.008	0	.	0.047
	AGE	0.255	0.418	0.01	0.047	.

Source: Authors' own creation

We obtained a linear combination of the predictor variables capable of estimating the characteristics influencing the probability that a chair belonging to a sport governing board is chaired by a woman. Thus, we built four models in which the dichotomous dependent variable equals 0 when the board chair is a man and 1 if the chair is a woman. A logistic function represents the models whose values range from 0 to 1, where  $p$  is the probability of success – belonging to a board chaired by a woman – and  $q$  is the likelihood of failure – belonging to a board chaired by a man. We performed a binary logistic regression to assess the likelihood that a sports board would have a chairwoman.

In the first model, the variables predicting the gender of the chair are: the board size, the age of the federation, PERWOMEN and the countries under study. In the second model, we substituted the PERWOMEN variable with TWOMEN. In the third model, we excluded the dichotomous variables corresponding to the countries and measured the female presence with the PERWOMEN, while in the fourth model, we substituted PERWOMEN by TWOMEN. We have not included the variables TWOMEN and PERWOMEN together in any model because these variables are highly auto correlated.

Model 1:

$$Z = B_0 + B_1 \text{BOARDSIZE} + B_2 \text{PERWOMEN} + B_3 \text{AGE} + B_4 \text{Italy} + B_5 \text{Portugal} \\ + B_6 \text{Spain} + B_7 \text{Türkiye}$$

Model 2:

$$Z = B_0 + B_1 \text{BOARD SIZE} + B_2 \text{TWOMEN} + B_3 \text{AGE} + B_4 \text{Italy} + B_5 \text{Portugal} + B_6 \text{Spain} \\ + B_7 \text{Türkiye}$$

Model 3:

$$Z = B_0 + B_1 \text{BOARD SIZE} + B_2 \text{PERWOMEN} + B_3 \text{AGE}$$

Model 4:

$$Z = B_0 + B_1 \text{BOARD SIZE} + B_2 \text{TWOMEN} + B_3 \text{AGE}$$

**Results**

The results show that chairmen lead the oldest federations, while chairwomen lead the youngest ones (Table 3).

In the UK, there is a chairwoman in a federation created in 1863, while the rest of the chairwomen in the study preside over younger federations created after the 1960s and up to 2014. Three Portuguese chairwomen lead federations created between 1950 and 1992, while in Turkey, women preside over federations created between 1957 and 1991. Spain stands out for having chairwomen in the oldest federations created between 1918 and 1961. In Italy, there are two chairwomen in federations created in 1977 and in 1996.

The average size of a board chaired by a man is 12.22 people, while the average size of a board chaired by a woman is 10.43 members. In sports boards chaired by men, the number of members ranges from 3 to 40 people, while in those chaired by women, the number of members ranges from 6 to 15 people. Once the chairwoman is excluded, in Italy, the two NFSs with a chairwomen have 10 members. In Portugal, one has 9 members and two have 8 members. In Spain, one has 11 and the other 6. In Turkey, two boards chaired by women have 14 members and one has 11. In the UK, the maximum size of boards chaired by a woman is 13, and the minimum 5 members.

The average number of women on a board chaired by a man is 2.86, while the average number of women on a board chaired by a woman is 3.04, excluding the chairwoman. Consequently, the sports boards chaired by women have more female members than those chaired by men. The percentage of women on the boards chaired by men is 24.32%, while on the boards chaired by women, there are 38.33% of female directors.

Table 4 reports the four logistic regression models. The first model shows the results between the dichotomous dependent variable, the gender of the chair and the predictor variables: BOARD SIZE, FEDERATION AGE, PERWOMEN and COUNTRY. The entire first and second models, containing all predictors, were statistically significant,  $\chi^2 = 30.366$ ,  $p < 0.01$  and  $\chi^2 = 22.839$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , showing that the models capably distinguish between the boards presided by a man and by a woman. The first model explains between 9.6% (Cox and Snell *R*-square) and 23% (Nagelkerke *R*-square) of the variation in the gender of the chair by this criterion, and the second between 7.3% (Cox and Snell *R*-square) and 17.5% (Nagelkerke *R*-square).

Variables	Chair	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. deviation	Minimum	Maximum
BOARD SIZE	0	277	12.22	5.18	3	40
	1	23	10.43	2.52	6	15
	Total	300	12.08	5.05	3	40
TWO MEN	0	277	2.86	2.15	0	10
	1	23	3.04	1.55	0	7
	Total	300	2.88	2.11	0	10
PER WOMEN	0	277	24.32	17.32	0	90
	1	23	38.33	15.27	15.67	86.5
	Total	300	25.40	17.61	0	90
AGE	0	277	0.28	0.45	1823	2019
	1	23	0.22	0.42	1863	2014
	Total	300	0.28	0.45	1823	2019

**Table 3.**

Summary statistics  
(*n* = 300)

**Notes:** 0 = Chairmen; 1 = Chairwoman  
**Source:** Authors' own creation

Models success	Models														
	1			2			3			4					
	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Wald	df	Exp (B)	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Wald	df	Exp (B)	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Wald	df	Exp (B)
Board size	-0.13	0.10	1.66	1	0.88	-0.15	0.11	2.00	1	0.86	-0.07	0.1	1.2	1	0.94
PER WOMEN	0.05***	0.02	7.00	1	1.05						0.04***	0.0	10.1	1	1.27
AGE (1)	0.61	0.57	1.16	1	1.84	-0.81	0.56	2.06	1	0.45	0.24	0.5	0.2	1	0.79
Country			12.30	4			16.11	4							
Country (1)	-1.73**	0.82	4.43	1	0.18	-2.21***	0.81	7.46	1	0.11					
Country (2)	-1.30	0.83	2.48	1	0.27	-2.33***	0.84	7.65	1	0.10					
Country (3)	-2.50**	0.85	8.66	1	0.08	-2.18***	0.81	7.35	1	0.11					
Country (4)	0.18	0.94	0.04	1	1.19	-1.12	1.03	1.18	1	0.33					
TWOMEN															
Constant	-2.06	1.38	2.24	1	0.13	-0.19	1.11	0.03	1	0.83	-3.13***	1.0	10.7	1	0.04
Cox and Snell <i>R</i> -square			0.096				0.073					0.047			0.16
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> -square			0.230				0.175					0.112			0.039
Chi-square			30.366***				22.839***					14.332**			4.930***
Classification % correct			92				92.3					92.3			92.3

**Notes:** The levels of significance are \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < 0.001$   
**Source:** Authors' own creation

**Table 4.**  
Results of the logistic  
regression analysis

In the third and fourth models, countries are excluded from the analysis. The entire third and fourth models containing all predictors were statistically significant,  $\chi^2 = 14.332$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and  $\chi^2 = 4.930$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , showing that the model capably distinguishes between the boards chaired by a man and by a woman. The third model explains between 4.7% and 11.2%, and the fourth 1.6% and 3.9% of the variation in the gender of the chair. The four models correctly classify between the 92 and 92.3% of the cases.

Looking at the values and signs of the coefficients in the equation, the results show that, in model one, the variables that contribute significantly to predicting the chair's gender are the percentage of women and two countries, in Italy and Spain, taking the UK as a reference. The negative  $b$ -values indicate that these countries will cause a decreased probability of having a chairwoman. In the second model, the percentage of women is replaced by the number of women, in this case, when the female presence on the boards is taken in absolute terms, except for Turkey, all countries contribute significantly and negatively towards predicting the presence of a chairwomen. The third model supports  $H2$  positively with a strong correlation between the probability of having a chairwoman and boards with a high percentage of female directors. However, the fourth model indicates that if the number of women is considered, the smaller the board size, the higher the probability that the chair is a woman ( $p < 0.05$ ). This means that chairwomen tend to be related to smaller sports boards when the model does not differentiate by country.

Some interesting insights stem from comparing different countries. The data show that when we measure board gender diversity through the PERWOMEN for a federation located in Italy, or Spain, the odds of having a chairwoman are 0.18% and 0.08%, respectively, lower than if the federation is in the UK. In these two countries, the results are statistically significant at a level of  $<0.05$ . However, when we measure board gender diversity through the TWOMEN, the odds of having a chairwoman is 0.11, 0.10 and 0.11 in Italy, Portugal and Spain, respectively, at a level of significance of  $p < 0.01$ , which means that in these countries the likelihood of having a chairwoman is low. Regarding the Turkish federations, the variables concerning the board gender diversity, TWOMEN or PERWOMEN, do not contribute significantly to the model. The very low presence of female directors in Turkish federations could be an explanation.

In sum, to confirm the scarce presence of women as chairs, the key result is that Italy and Spain, taking the UK as a reference, negatively affect the odds of having a chairwoman, and as the percentage of female directors increases, the likelihood of the chairperson being a woman increases, while the board size and the organizational age have no significant effects on the chair's gender. When the model measures the number of women in absolute rather than relative terms, the only variable that contributes to predicting a chairwoman is the country, i.e. in all countries except Turkey, they are negatively statistically significant in predicting a chairwoman.

When countries are excluded from the analysis, the percentage of women contributes to predicting a chairwoman ( $p < 0.001$ ), whereas if the total number of women on the sports board is taken, only the board size is decisive in predicting a female chairwomen ( $p < 0.05$ ). The negative sign implies that, in absolute terms, the probability of having women on smaller boards is greater than on larger boards.

### Discussion and conclusion

This paper has explored the influence of board size, diversity and federation age on the gender of the board chair in the NSFs of five European countries. Its results show which organizational structural factors contribute to a higher presence of chairwomen on sports boards, an area previously understudied. The study demonstrates three important findings.

Firstly, we have found a significant relationship between the percentages of women when countries are included in the model, taking the UK as a reference. Although they have gender regulations, Italy and Spain contribute negatively and predict a higher percentage of chairwomen when compared to the UK. However, when the number of women is considered, all countries except Turkey contribute negatively and significantly to the prediction that the chair will be a woman. However, the role of the board chair does not appear to be affected by such policies when compared to the UK, which is perhaps influenced by the overall higher representation of females on boards and greater gender equality throughout compared to other countries. The results herein demonstrate that the quotas established, in for example, Italy and Spain have no impact towards producing a greater probability of having a chairwoman. These results are consistent with the findings of [Valiente \(2022\)](#) suggesting that gender quotas do not impact the female presidency on the boards of the Spanish federations. Thus, women holding membership only positions may have different and separate motivations to those who hold chair positions. Although there is an overall positive effect of gender quotas in sports ([Elling et al., 2019](#)), researchers have concluded that there are several challenges regarding the adoption of gender equality policies and, as the findings show, the impact on practices is not as significant as expected ([Claringbould and Knoppers, 2008](#); [Elling et al., 2019](#)). Nevertheless, these results should be carefully observed since the presidency of a sports board is not always explicitly associated with quotas.

The international comparisons conducted in the study are consistent with [Evans and Pfister \(2021\)](#), who conclude that although the socio-cultural nature of the obstacles for women to have access to leadership positions in sports organizations can vary across countries, such impact is globally low. This also confirms [Adriaanse and Schofield's \(2013\)](#) work, who found that the influence and power of the chairperson of the board of directors in sports organizations and the subsequent shortage of women show that accomplishing gender balance remains a significant and global challenge. However, the international comparison also reveals that the probability of an NSF having a female board chair significantly decreases in Italy or Spain, when the percentage of women is compared to the UK. But curiously, when we take the number of women, instead of the percentage, Italy, Portugal and Spain predict negatively that the chairperson will be a woman. In contrast, we did not find a significant association for Turkey. The UK, Italy and Spain are the countries of the sample where gender quotas were in force, but the low number of chairwomen in Spain and Italy cannot explain its primacy in this study when referring to the gender quotas because of the absence of an association between such policies and board gender diversity, which deserves further investigation.

Secondly, despite previous studies showing that women are more likely to be appointed in younger organizations, there is no significant impact of a federation's age on the gender of the board chair herein, illustrating that the life cycle of federations does not determine the chair's gender. With the organizational age not being relevant, it is suggested that the gender stereotypes prevail through time and persist even in the youngest NSFs. Furthermore, although it seems difficult to make a judgment on the issue, we must not exclude from the analysis the fact that these discrete networks, by not admitting women for a long time ([Picart, 2008](#)), may have contributed to excluding women leaders of the most important positions of the federal and Olympic system. An observation that persists, is that "behind the quotas there are much less feminized organizations than it seems at first glance" ([Caprais, 2020](#), p. 2018). Subsequently if women do not belong to these networks, and there are hardly any women in associated key positions, then the more difficult it will be for them to access the presidency.

Thirdly, the results show that when the proposed models are not differentiated by country, the percentage of female directors again is a determining factor in having a female chair. These results could be because the UK has the highest number of chairwomen, which means that the results change due to the weight of British chairwomen in the sample. Consequently, the results may suggest that as there is a higher percentage of a woman once the chairwoman is excluded from the calculation, then quotas indirectly increase the likelihood of having a female president, and could have an impact on the gender of the chair. However, when the total number of women is introduced, instead of the percentage of women, then the smaller the board, the more likely it is that a woman will be chairperson. Despite the lack of knowledge regarding the relationship between chair gender and board size in NSFs, these results remain consistent with those of [Odendahl and Youmans \(1994\)](#), who assert that women are better represented in non-profit and small boards. This also aligns with the more recent findings of [Wicker and Kerwin \(2020\)](#), who suggest that smaller boards offer more gender diversity, but this parallelism should be taken with caution as board access differs from board presidency. Importantly though our findings hint that achieving critical mass of women on a board increases the likelihood of their being a female chair. Curiously, none of the countries has a chairwoman presiding on one of the most popularized or larger sports boards, except football in the UK. Instead, we observe a more frequent presence of chairwomen in small sports boards such as archery, rescue and first aid, kickboxing and muay thai, or taekwondo. By not presiding over the most popular and larger sports, it may indicate a broader societal issue whereby long held norms of the masculinity of sport have yet to be challenged to the same extent that has been prevalent in discourses of sport governance.

This study has implications for sport policymakers and stakeholders, and for the institutions such as the IOC or the European Union whom implement equality policies. If the aim is to increase female presence in the highest position of a sports board and to achieve gender equality more generally, other policies need to be implemented alongside gender quotas for the sports boards, namely, those specifically related to the recruitment and selection of the sports board chairs ([Mikkonen et al., 2021](#)). For example, given the implications of critical mass and its ability to increase more female's engagement then the role of existing chairs acting as mentors and taking initiative in this objective may be warranted. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the existing gender portfolio of each board and its subsequent influence on recruiting a female chair, regardless of the organization's age. [Knoppers et al. \(2021\)](#) concluded that resistance to gender balance by board members is often related to discriminatory discourses against women. The normalization of the discourses of meritocracy, neoliberalism, silence/passivity about the responsibility of structures and an artificial defence of diversity emphasise that equality should not only be determined by women ([Knoppers et al., 2021](#)). However, there are some limitations to this study which we believe provide useful directions for future research. First, we have not considered the role of gender typing in sports activities which explains the extent that women participate in specific sports ([Sobal and Milgrim, 2019](#)) and the related perception of such sports in society. The social representation of sports activities classified as masculine, feminine or gender-neutral can hypothetically influence women's access to that specific federation's leadership. We included the country factor only partially, as a control variable, as the social representation of sports usually goes beyond national boundaries. Future research should explore whether these results remain valid in other temporal and geographical scenarios. Moreover, future international comparisons could focus on the potential relationship between having a female board chair in a federation and the gender typing of sports. Focusing more on the national cultural differences is also

needed to explore how different dimensions (WEF, 2022) can affect women's presence in the board chair roles.

In conjunction with this, future research could also analyse whether national cultures or personal and family networks lead to woman's access to the sports board and/or impact female representation as chairs. It is striking that the number of chairwomen in Turkey is proportionally greater than female board members. We have observed that these women could have acceded to the presidency due to family ties. Still, further research is necessary in the broadest range of countries to uncover the reasons that could link women to presiding over sports boards.

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### Further reading

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