

Sport, Women and Leadership: Selected results of the German project “Women Taking the Lead”

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Point of Departure

Not only in Germany but throughout the world women are a small minority in the governing bodies of organised sport. A collection of articles on women and sport in 16 countries has shown that, with regard to leading positions in sport, women are underrepresented in all areas and at all levels (Hartmann & Pfister, 2003).

The quantitative analysis of the decision-making committees of the German sport federations at the national and the regional levels has revealed the enormous extent to which women are excluded from leadership positions (Doll-Tepper & Pfister, 2004). The percentage of women in the executive committees of the organisations, for example, varies between 0 and 20 percent. In all organisations the percentage of female leaders is significantly smaller than the percentage of female members, and it decreases as the status of positions increases. Currently only three of the more than fifty sport federations at the national level have a woman president.¹

“Women in Leadership” has meanwhile become a political issue at the international level. In 1996 a conference supported by the British Sport Council and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) endorsed the Brighton Declaration, which aims at furthering the participation and improving the status of women in sport. The Brighton Declaration was followed by the Windhoek Call for Action in 1998. Also in 1998 the IOC decided to urge the National Olympic Committees to increase the percentage of women in executive posts to 20 percent by the year 2005 (see www.olympic.org, the webpage of the IOC).

These international initiatives make clear that the dominance of men in leadership positions is a long-standing and widespread phenomenon which has numerous and various causes as well as far reaching effects. Despite the interest in and the discussion about this

issue, the reasons for the lack of female leaders in sport organisations are far from clear, and the gender hierarchy in the world of sport is a contested topic inside and outside the scientific community of sport scholars.

Aims of the project “Women Taking the Lead”

The project “Women and Leadership” consists of a scientific as well as a practice-oriented segment and pursues the dual aim of gaining knowledge about the representation of women in leadership positions of sport organisations, and of using this knowledge in order to change the situation.² The scientific part of the project aims at:

- analysing the gender relations in executive bodies of sport organisations;
- identifying the reasons for the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in sport organisations; and
- gaining knowledge about male and female leaders, i.e. their biographies, motives, experiences, attitudes and situations.

The “practical” segment of the project focuses on the development of “best practices” and initiates and supports pilot projects in sport federations. The information and insights provided by the “scientific” project are the basis of:

- developing concepts and measures to encourage women to take up honorary posts; and
- developing concepts of gender mainstreaming in sport.

Both parts of the project pursue the following synergetic effects:

- the experience and competence of women can be made use of;
- the shortage of personnel in leadership positions can be remedied;
- women are to be given equal opportunities of influence and decision-making.

Theoretical approaches

The complexity of the issue of “women in leadership” requires us to make use of different theoretical approaches. Our starting point is a theoretical conception of the gender order or, more specifically, we start out from approaches which, following Judith Lorber (1994; 2000) and Robert Connell (2002), consider gender to be a social construction. In addition, the approaches of labour-market research are relevant for our inquiry, that focus on the “careers” of women in paid employment as well as in voluntary, “honorary” positions. Knapp (1988) , among others, has analysed labour-market structures and employers’ interests, on the one hand, and the circumstances and the needs of women, on the other, in

order to explain the hierarchical structures of the labour market and of society in general (see also Pfister, 2004). However, organisations such as sports associations operate according to rules of their own and conform only to a certain extent to the laws of the labour market. Our theoretical framework must additionally include approaches employed in organisation sociology which regard gender as an important factor of influence and which analyse the “gender structuring of organisations” (e.g. Mills & Tancred, 1992). The written and unwritten expectations, the social relations and the concrete questions of how, where and when work is done, are part of the culture of the organisation. Recent work on the culture of organisations has focused on the values and symbols as well as the communication and interactions in organisations, emphasising the important role of gender in shaping and changing the culture of organisations (Mills & Tancred, 1992; Alvesson & Due Billing, 1997; Acker, 1999; Pfister, 2004).

Against the background of these approaches, we have developed several tools, from quantitative inquiries to in-depth interviews, and have identified different target groups, from women in power to “drop-outs”. A central aim of our project has been to conduct an in-depth analysis of causes and backgrounds of gender hierarchies rather than simply a descriptive overview. With this rationale, we have carried out seven empirical studies between 2001 and 2004

Selected results

This paper presents results from two studies: the interview study, based on interviews with female executives of sport organisations (N = 23), and a survey of women and men in leadership positions of the German Sports Confederation (*Deutscher Sportbund*, DSB), the national sport federations (*Sportfachverbände*), the regional sports federations (*Landessportverbände*) and the National Olympic Committee (NOC for Germany). This survey was based on a standardised questionnaire with predominantly closed questions. The questionnaire addressed four main areas: socio-demographic issues (education, family, everyday life and leisure), sports biography, profession and career as leader in sport organisations (experiences, motives, attitudes and evaluations).

We sent out this questionnaire to all 591 male and 106 female members of the executive bodies of the above-mentioned associations. 341 men and 72 women returned the questionnaire. The relatively high response rate of 60 percent was achieved because we asked our contacts in the sport organisations, especially members of the executive bodies, to assist us and persuade the board members to fill out the questionnaire.

In the following we present an overview of the important results of this survey, focusing especially on significant gender differences. In addition, we will provide more in-depth information, using statements made by the female leaders in the interviews.

Socio-demographic background

The sports leaders who took part in the survey were on average 55 years old, and the women were on average five years younger than their male colleagues. Over 80 percent of

the male and female executive board members were between 40 and 69 years old. However, the largest group overall was that of the 50 to 59-year-olds; in this group one third of the men as well as one third of the women were represented. The oldest person taking part in the survey was a 90-year-old man; the youngest a 27-year-old woman. It is striking that the group of the over 65-year-olds is three times larger than the group of the under 35-year-olds. The younger the group, the higher the percentage is of female executives. With increasing age the percentage of women decreases. The age cohort of the over 72-year-olds is exclusively male. The gender-specific difference of the average age of sport leaders is highly significant.

On the one hand, these gender differences can be explained by developments and changes in sport and society. 20 to 30 years ago it was more difficult for women to have a career in sport as well as outside sport. On the other hand, the results of our survey may indicate that more women than men are willing to give up their position in older age.

A major factor with regard to decisions, opportunities and barriers in a professional career is the family. As numerous studies in various areas of employment have shown, climbing the career ladder depends to a considerable degree on the support of the family, mostly the wife, who relieves her successful husband of the household chores, does the housework and brings up the children – and possibly gives up her own career in order to further her husband's. The reversal of these roles is still very rare. Not many men are prepared to sacrifice their own careers in order to support a more successful partner (see, among others, Pfau-Effinger, 1998; Müller, 1999). It is therefore not surprising that women in leadership positions are significantly more often singles than their male colleagues. Does this also hold true for men and women engaged in voluntary work?

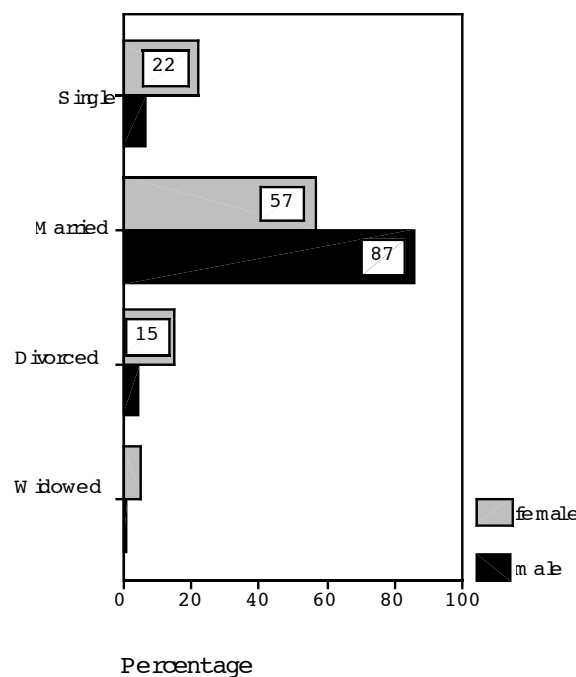


Figure 1: Marital status of male and female leaders

As Figure 1 shows, only 57 percent of the women as compared with 87 percent of the men are married and more women than men are divorced. Whereas 20 percent of female executives have no partner, only 6 percent of the male executives are ‘singles’. Thus, the members of executive bodies of sport organisations exhibit similar gender-specific patterns of marital status to those of men and women in leadership positions in other areas of the society. Two thirds of the women but only 41 percent of the men pointed out in our survey that their partners supported their voluntary work. In addition, 67 percent of the female leaders but as many as 83 percent of the male leaders have children, and 90 percent of the fathers reported that it was mainly their wives who looked after the children. These results indicate that women have more difficulty in balancing the triple burden of family, profession and voluntary work. The following quotation from one of the interviews illustrates the conflicts that arise between family and voluntary work:

Those were hard times when my son was still living at home. I went to work and had to look after the family. But I also wanted to do my voluntary work. That was a big challenge and it led to stressful situations in the family.

For women support for their voluntary activities seems to be of great importance. Two thirds of the women but only 41 percent of the men of our sample had partners who encouraged them in their careers as sports leaders. Furthermore, all our interviewees agreed on the fact that a commitment to time-consuming voluntary work was only possible if the partner accepted and supported this, among other things, by taking over household chores and family responsibilities. Male executives seem less dependent on their wives’ approval of their voluntary work. The following statement by one of the women interviewed illustrates how important it is for women to have a partner who shows understanding for their voluntary work:

I have the most wonderful husband in the world. Without him it wouldn’t be possible, without his understanding, his support. He never complains when I come home late. This is remarkable.

Moreover, statements made by the female leaders we interviewed suggest that it has positive effects on the partnership if both partners are involved in voluntary work. This is especially true for women, as results of the quantitative survey reveal. Whereas 55 percent of the female members of executive boards have partners who are also engaged in voluntary work, this is true of only 37 percent of the men. One of our interviewees expressed this in the following way:

If one of them finds fulfilment in a dog-breeding club and the other in something else, but both are happy, complement each other and exchange experiences, they can stimulate each other. But that is an art.

But a career as a sports leader can cause problems in relationships because of the frequent absence from home this involves. Several women reported that their voluntary work caused conflicts, even separations from their partners. “My boyfriend somehow got lost on the way,” said one of the women interviewed. “I moved on faster in my development ... Men can’t cope with that.”

Education and profession

With regard to the professions of the sample, there are striking similarities in the level of education and the careers of male and female members of executive boards. They represent a highly qualified group of professionals with a considerably higher level of education than the average population. Thus, 62 percent of the participants in our survey left school with university-entrance qualifications.

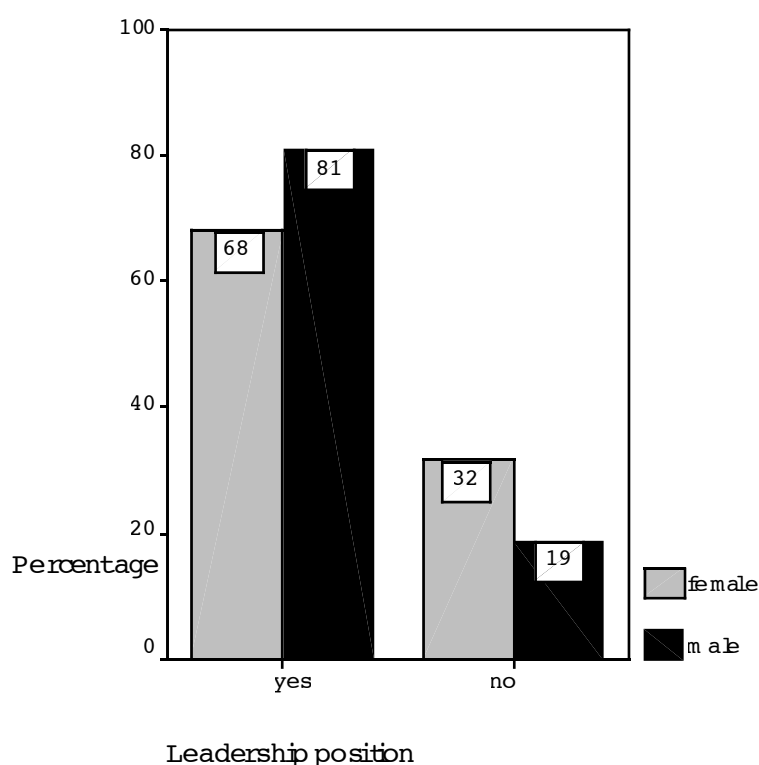


Figure 2: Leadership position in the labour market

As can be seen from Figure 2, the executive board members of sport organisations hold high positions in their professions. Here, there is no significant difference between men and women. Thus, a high professional position is obviously a basic requirement for occupying a key position at the executive level of the German sports system. The skills and abilities gained in a professional career are an important resource for the sport organisation. The two following quotations are typical examples which illustrate the transfer of knowledge and skills from profession to voluntary position and vice versa:

Everything I learned in my profession I can now use in my voluntary function ...
 And in my profession I learned how to deal with people, of course.

My voluntary position gave me a lot of security. It meant a lot of stress, of course,
 because I was often unsure of myself and before I was able to give a speech or hold
 my own in a discussion ... well, that I learned through my voluntary work.

However, voluntary activities can also cause conflicts at the workplace:

All the time you are involved in voluntary work, you can't do anything for your pro-
 fessional career. I've never had an employer who said: 'It's great that you do volun-
 tary work.'

Commitment to sport

Typical of sports leaders is their very intensive commitment to sport. 95 percent of our
 sample were active in sport in their youth, and 87 percent still participate – more or less
 frequently and intensively – in sport today.

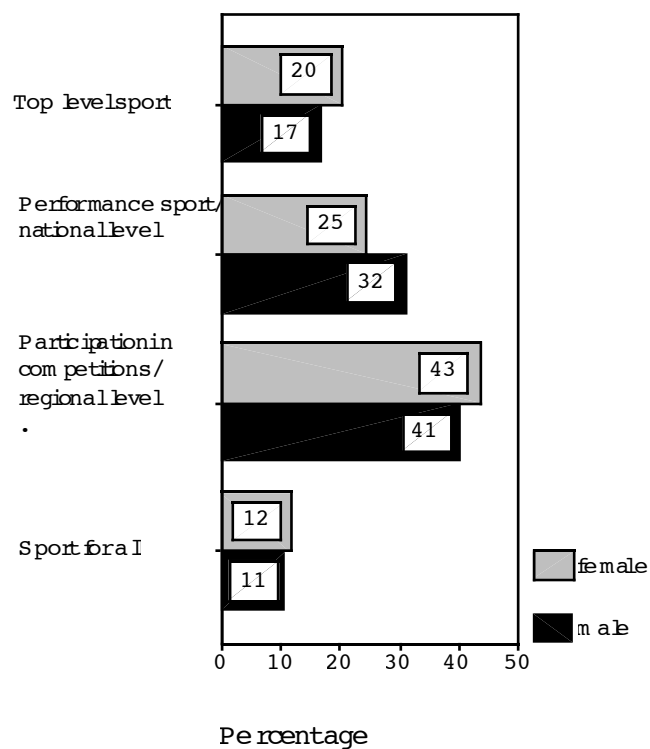


Figure 3: Participation in sport / performance level (N = 398)

Figure 3 shows that a high percentage of sports leaders participated in competitive sport at
 some stage in their lives. The largest group of our sample took part in sports competitions
 at a regional level. Whereas a commitment to sport and one's knowledge as an "insider"

seems an important precondition for a leadership position, a career as a top-level athlete is not officially a requirement for members of executive bodies in the German sports system.

Leadership positions in sports federations

The lack of female leaders in the governing bodies of German sport organisations has already been mentioned. Besides the gender imbalance in leadership positions, there are also significant gender differences with regard to the responsibilities of male and female leaders.

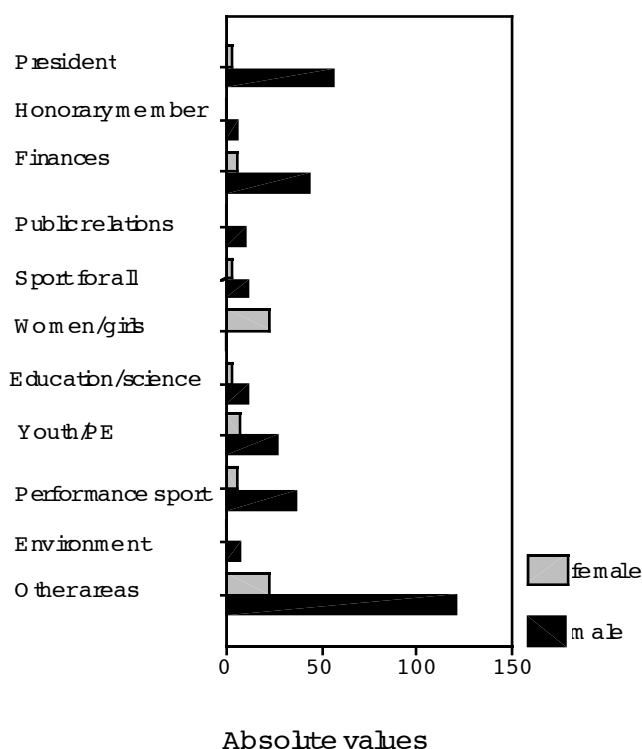


Figure 4: Responsibilities within the executive boards

The large number of persons working in “other areas” indicates that many positions do not have any specific responsibility. Except for the department of women’s issues, men have the majority in all areas. In the categories of ‘honorary members’ and ‘environment’ there is not a single woman represented. 97 percent of the presidents are men. Other departments with a large majority of male leaders are ‘performance sport’ and ‘finance’. Most of these areas are connected with high budgets and, consequently, with a high amount of power and influence.

By contrast, most women have responsibilities which correspond to the traditional roles of women like ‘women and girls’, ‘youth and physical education’. In third place among the areas taken over by women, however, comes ‘finances’, showing that women are interested in and capable of running areas/departments which require specific expertise and are invested with influence and power.

The results of the survey as well as of the interview study show that the careers of male and female leaders have similar patterns. Overall, the conclusion can be drawn that female executives plan their career as systematically as their male colleagues do. However, they seem to be more inclined to wait until someone, preferably a sports official, encourages them to stand as a candidate.

Most of the board members (52 percent) surveyed had been in office for less than six years. The male board members of the German sport organisations had been in office for 7 years on average while their female colleagues had served for an average of 5 years. The longest term of office among the men of our sample was 36 years. The longer the period of office, the lower was the proportion of women. Only three women had been in office for longer than 15 years.

We asked the participants in our survey if they had experienced barriers during their careers as voluntary leaders.

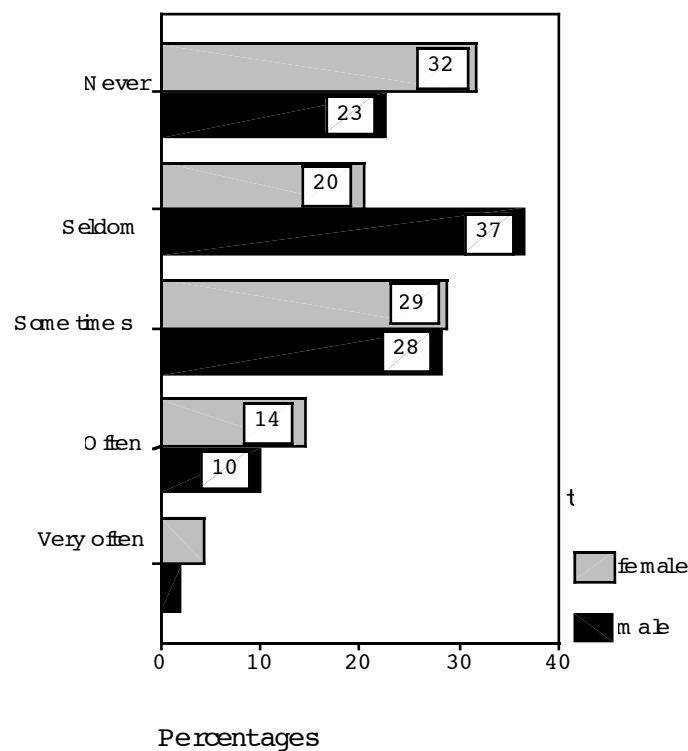


Figure 5: Barriers on the way to leadership positions

As Figure 5 shows, both men and women were confronted with barriers, but, as a rule, this did not happen very often. However, it must be taken into consideration that the individuals who made up our sample were all in leading positions, which means that they cannot have been faced with insuperable obstacles. They have made their way in their professions and have adapted to the conditions of leadership positions.

We presented a list of potential problems to the participants of the quantitative survey and asked them to mark those that they had experienced. The women most frequently stated gender-specific barriers but – not surprisingly – not a single man had problems because

of his gender. Second and third place among the problems faced by women were taken by power struggles and incompatibility between voluntary work and family life. The men named power struggles as their main problems, followed by antiquated structures in administration as well as envy and animosity amongst colleagues. This last point was not named by any of the women.

Barriers	Women	Men
Profession	6.5%	5.9%
Lack of time	4.3%	2.3%
Family	8.7%	2.0%
Officials are too old	4.3%	6.6%
Lack of acceptance as a young official	8.7%	5.9%
Competition, fight about power	17.4%	28.5%
Envy	0.0%	10.9%
Structures of administration	0.0%	12.9%
Gender as barrier	34.8%	0.0%
Lack of competencies of the colleagues	0.0%	3.9%
Problems of interhuman relations	8.7%	12.9%

Table 1: Barriers and gender

A good impression about the specific barriers which women have to face can be gained from the interviews. One woman remembered:

I was often let down during the first years. Sometimes I got no information: people had forgotten to tell me ... One of the presidents of a sports association said to me: ‘You have done so much for the sport, I really appreciate that, but I would never marry you.’ I was furious.

On the other hand, several interviewees emphasised the lack of solidarity among female leaders: One woman remarked: “I fell flat on my face, and got to know intimately the unreliability of my female colleagues.”

During their careers most of the women came to the conclusion that they had to adapt to the structures and cooperate with men in order to be successful.

I had to have the men as my partners to achieve a majority for my issues. There was no point in confrontation. I soon found out how to get the men on my side.

These women have appropriated the gendered culture of organisation, as indicated in the theoretical contextualisation above (Alvesson & Due Billing, 1997; Acker, 1999).

Summary

Summarising, the following conclusions can be drawn: despite men and women having the same qualifications and similar positions in professional life, women do not have the same status as men on the executive boards of sport organisations. One of the reasons for this unequal balance of power is the women's dilemma of having to combine family, profession and voluntary work. The gender order and the specific circumstances of women's lives are obviously an obstacle to taking on a leading position in sport but some women have made a success of it all the same. The following questions arise here: Is this a certain type of woman? Are there typical biographies of women who take up voluntary work?

The typical female executive in German sport organisations is about 50 years old. She is either single and has no children or she is married and either has no children or her children are grown-up. She has the full support from her husband or companion. She is well-educated and highly qualified. Today she works in a leadership position and has the freedom to organise and make decisions. In her profession she is required to have guidance skills, too.

At the beginning of her career in voluntary work she was mainly encouraged by the people around her to take on higher positions. Later on, she became more self assured, made strategic plans and stood as a candidate on her own initiative. Her honorary career was clear-cut. As a young adult she first made her mark on the executive board of her local sports club before taking on commitments at the regional and national levels. Today she is motivated to increase her voluntary activities.

There are mainly two sets of motives for doing voluntary work that can be observed in the women we interviewed: firstly, to participate actively, to have influence, to initiate changes and to work for a good cause, as well as, secondly, to be appreciated.

However, it has to be said that women who do not possess the expected opportunities, qualifications and competencies and who do not have this particular type of personality have great difficulty in joining the executive boards of sports associations. This is also true for those women, who - due to their circumstances of life - cannot adapt to the prevailing structures of sport organisations. Thus, changes of the structures and cultures of sport organisations will be very difficult, if not impossible.

Notes

- 1 In our project leaders were defined as members of governing bodies and committees, and we focused on the umbrella federation, the various national sport federations as well as the sports federations in the 16 German federal states. In Germany and other European countries where sport is based on associations and federations sport organisations are headed by unpaid "volunteers" who have great power since they form the decision-making committees. They are supported by paid administrators. Although their positions are "honorary", they are the leaders with control over definitions and decisions.

2 The project was funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

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