Original Paper

Women in Leadership and Organisational Change in Sport: A Critical and Intersectional Review

Prof Ruth Forrest[1*] & Prof Vincent English[1]

[1] Longford International College, Ireland

[*] Prof Ruth Forrest, E-mail: ruth.forrest@longfordcollege.com

Abstract

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within the global sport industry remains a persistent and deeply entrenched challenge, despite decades of advocacy and the growing commercial and cultural prominence of women's sport. This critical and intersectional review synthesises contemporary theoretical frameworks and empirical research to examine the complex dynamics of gender, power, and organisational change in sport. The review interrogates three established theoretical perspectives—transformational leadership, gendered organisations, and institutional change—and integrates intersectionality as a vital fourth lens to illuminate the diverse and compounded barriers faced by women from different backgrounds. The analysis demonstrates that women leaders are not merely subjects of exclusion but are active agents of organisational renewal, frequently introducing relational, ethical, and inclusive approaches that challenge entrenched hierarchies and foster adaptive change. However, their transformative potential is systematically constrained by structural barriers, cultural resistance, and the persistence of masculine-coded leadership ideals. Drawing on recent research, including studies on higher education pathways and leadership development programmes, this review formulates a set of evidence-based recommendations for sport organisations, higher education institutions, and aspiring women leaders. It concludes by proposing a multi-level model for transformative change that emphasises the need for simultaneous and coordinated action at the individual, organisational, and institutional levels to achieve genuine gender equity in sports leadership.

Keywords

women in sport, leadership, organisational change, gender equity, intersectionality, transformational leadership, higher education

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

The leadership landscape within global sport remains a domain where gender inequality is profoundly entrenched. Despite decades of advocacy and the growing commercial and cultural visibility of women's sport, women consistently occupy a minority of senior executive, coaching, and governance positions. As of 2024, despite significant progress in some areas, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) achieving a 40.6% female membership, the broader picture reveals persistent underrepresentation (Gerasimuk, D., 2025, pp. 1-15). This disparity is not merely a matter of numbers; it is a manifestation of what Acker (1990) termed the "gendered substructure" of organisations, where norms, values, and practices implicitly privilege masculinity as the default template for authority (Acker, J., 1990, pp. 139-158). This is particularly acute in the context of sport, where entrenched historical assumptions often associate effective leadership with masculine-coded traits such as competitiveness, control, and aggression (Burton, L. J., & LaVoi, N. M., 2021, pp. 405-417).

However, the narrative is shifting. The global sport industry is undergoing a period of unprecedented commercial growth and cultural reappraisal, with women's sport at the forefront of this transformation. Projections indicate that revenue for women's sports, having surpassed $1 billion for the first time in 2024, is on a trajectory to reach $2.5 billion by 2030 (Forbes, 2025, October 22). This economic boom, coupled with a series of high-profile governance and ethical crises in men's sport, has created a powerful impetus for organisational change. In this context, the inclusion of diverse leadership voices is no longer viewed solely as a moral imperative but as a strategic necessity for institutional renewal, enhanced decision-making, and sustainable growth (Deloitte., 2025).

This review problematizes the definition of "organisational change." A central question is whether successful change is constituted merely by an increase in the number of women in leadership positions—an incremental change—or if it requires a more fundamental, transformative shift in power dynamics, organizational culture, and institutional structures (OECD, 2022, May 30). While the former is a necessary and visible metric of progress, this paper argues that a deeper, more sustainable change involves dismantling the very systems and norms that have historically excluded women and other marginalized groups. This transformative approach challenges the status quo, redefines leadership itself, and fosters a more equitable and inclusive environment for all (Utting, P., n.d.).

Recent scholarship increasingly positions women not merely as subjects of exclusion but as active agents of transformation capable of reshaping organisational cultures. Women leaders often introduce relational, ethical, and inclusive approaches to governance, actively challenging the historical hierarchies that have normalised exclusion (Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L., 2018). Their leadership styles frequently foster reflective and participatory management practices that align with the principles of organisational learning and adaptive change (Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A., 1996). This paper, therefore, extends the discourse from one of access to one of impact, exploring not only the barriers that women face in attaining leadership positions but, more importantly, how their leadership actively shapes

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organisational ethos, performance, and the very definition of what it means to lead in the 21st-century sport industry.

1.2 Aim and Objectives

The aim of this review is to critically evaluate and synthesise the existing literature on the role of women as agents of organisational change within the global sport industry, with a particular focus on the intersectional nature of their experiences and the pathways to leadership. Its specific objectives are:

- To examine the key theoretical frameworks that explain the complex relationship between gender, leadership, and organisational transformation in sport, incorporating a critical perspective on their limitations.

- To critically analyse the empirical research on women's influence on organisational culture, ethics, and governance, specifically interrogating the role of stereotypes, the paradox of relational leadership, and the strategic use of emotional intelligence.

- To integrate the concept of intersectionality as a core analytical lens to understand the varied experiences and compounded barriers faced by women from diverse backgrounds in their pursuit of leadership roles.

- To investigate the role of higher education and formal leadership development programmes in shaping women's leadership trajectories and to identify best practices for supporting aspiring female leaders.

- To identify the key structural, cultural, and systemic barriers that impede female-led change and to analyse the forms of resistance that women leaders encounter.

- To formulate a set of evidence-based recommendations for practice for sport organisations, higher education institutions, and aspiring women leaders to foster a more equitable and inclusive leadership landscape.

- To propose a multi-level model for transformative change that outlines how individual, organisational, and institutional actions can collectively advance women in sports leadership.

1.3 Methodological Approach

This review adopts a critical, integrative approach to synthesise a diverse body of knowledge on women, leadership, and organisational change in sport (Snyder, H., 2019, pp. 333-339). The methodology is designed to move beyond a simple aggregation of findings to construct a coherent and critical understanding of the phenomenon. The review encompasses both theoretical and empirical research, drawing from a wide range of academic disciplines, including sport management, sociology, gender studies, and organisational behaviour. To ensure the contemporary relevance of the analysis, the literature search prioritised publications from 2015 to 2025, while also incorporating foundational texts and seminal works that have shaped the field. In addition to peer-reviewed academic journals, this review also incorporates industry reports, white papers, and publications from leading sport organisations and think tanks to provide a more holistic and practice-oriented perspective. A critical lens was applied throughout the review process, evaluating not only the findings of the research but

also its methodological robustness, theoretical coherence, and underlying assumptions. The review prioritises scholarship that contributes to a nuanced understanding of how women influence and enact organisational reform, moving beyond purely descriptive accounts of underrepresentation to an analysis of agency, impact, and the complex dynamics of power.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Critical Interrogation and Integration

To comprehend the multifaceted challenges and opportunities for women in sports leadership, it is essential to draw upon a range of theoretical frameworks. This section critically interrogates three established theories—Transformational Leadership, Gendered Organisations, and Institutional Change—and introduces intersectionality as a vital fourth lens. By integrating these perspectives, a more robust and nuanced understanding of the dynamics of gender, power, and organisational change in sport can be achieved.

2.1 Transformational Leadership Theory: The Stereotype Trap

Transformational leadership theory, as articulated by Bass and Riggio (2006), provides a foundational lens for understanding effective leadership (Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E., 2006). It distinguishes itself from transactional leadership, which focuses on rewards and punishments, by emphasising behaviours that inspire and motivate followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes. The core components of transformational leadership—idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration—are often associated with relational, empathetic, and collaborative approaches. A significant body of research suggests that women are more likely than men to adopt these transformational behaviours, fostering environments of trust, psychological safety, and open communication (Burton, L. J., & LaVoi, N. M., 2021, pp. 405-417; Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L., 2018). However, the application of this theory to women in sport leadership requires critical scrutiny due to a pervasive stereotype threat. Attributing "transformational" traits to women risks reinforcing essentialist gender stereotypes that cast women's leadership as inherently nurturing or emotionally intelligent, a phenomenon often referred to as the "double bind" or the "think manager-think male" paradigm (Hoyt, C. L., & Murphy, S. E., 2016, pp. 387-399). This can subtly devalue other crucial leadership qualities, such as assertiveness, strategic decision-making, and financial acumen, which are also essential for executive roles but are traditionally coded as masculine. As Fink (2016) observes, even the most visionary female leaders operate within sport organisations that are sites of institutionalised masculinity and structural resistance, a reality that the transformational framework often underrepresents (Fink, J. S., 2016, pp. 176-188). The challenge, therefore, is to acknowledge the strategic strengths of relational leadership styles without essentialising them as innate feminine traits or overlooking the structural and political dimensions of power that women must navigate.

2.2 Gendered Organisations Theory: Systemic Inequality

Joan Acker's (1990) gendered organisations theory provides a powerful corrective to individualistic leadership theories by positing that gender is not an external variable but is fundamentally embedded in the very fabric of organisational life (Acker, J., 1990, pp. 139-158). Acker argues that organisations are not gender-neutral entities; rather, their structures, processes, hierarchies, and cultural norms are constructed in ways that reflect and reproduce gendered power relations. In the context of sport, this manifests through the valorisation of masculine-coded traits such as aggression, dominance, and a win-at-all-costs mentality, which are often presented as the natural and necessary attributes of effective leadership (Adriaanse, J. A., & Claringbould, I., 2016, pp. 547-564). This creates a form of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu, P., 1991), subtly marginalising women and devaluing feminine-coded traits, even in the presence of formal equality policies. Inequality is thus reproduced not merely by individual bias but by the impersonal and seemingly rational systems of the organisation itself, including recruitment and promotion criteria, informal social networks (the "old boys' club"), and the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities (Chu, J., Leberman, S., & Taylor, T., 2022, pp. 789-802).

While Acker's framework is indispensable for illuminating the systemic and often invisible nature of gender inequality, critics have argued that it can be overly deterministic, offering limited insight into the possibilities for agency, resistance, and transformation (Britton, D. M., 2017, pp. 5-27). An over-reliance on a binary gender analysis can also obscure the reality that women's experiences of leadership are not monolithic. The ways in which gender intersects with other dimensions of identity, such as race, class, sexuality, and disability, create vastly different experiences of marginalisation and opportunity. This highlights the need to move beyond a singular focus on gender and to adopt a more intersectional approach to understanding power and inequality in sport organisations.

2.3 Institutional Change and Organisational Learning

Institutional theory, particularly the work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) on institutional isomorphism, helps to explain the persistence of gender inequality in sport organisations, even in the face of mounting pressure to change (DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W., 1983, pp. 147-160). They identify three mechanisms through which organisations come to resemble one another: coercive isomorphism (resulting from pressure from other organisations and the legal environment), mimetic isomorphism (resulting from organisations imitating others that they perceive as successful or legitimate), and normative isomorphism (resulting from professionalisation and the influence of shared norms and values). In the context of gender equity, many sport organisations adopt policies such as gender quotas or diversity statements due to coercive or mimetic pressures, leading to a form of "paper compliance" or "performative legitimacy" where the organisation adopts the superficial appearance of change without genuinely altering its underlying culture or power structures (Adriaanse, J. A., & Claringbould, I., 2016, pp. 547-564; Adriaanse, J. A., 2022, pp. 1-20). Women leaders can play a crucial role in driving deeper, normative change by challenging existing assumptions and modelling new values and behaviours from within.

This is where organisational learning theory, particularly the concepts of "single-loop" and "double-loop" learning developed by Argyris and Schön (1996), becomes highly relevant (Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A., 1996). Single-loop learning involves correcting errors and improving performance within the existing framework of assumptions and values. Double-loop learning, in contrast, involves questioning and transforming the underlying assumptions and values themselves. Women leaders, with their often more relational and reflective approaches, can act as catalysts for double-loop learning, creating the conditions for a deeper cultural transformation. By fostering psychological safety, encouraging open dialogue, and challenging the taken-for-granted norms of the organisation, they can enable a process of collective self-examination and renewal. The most robust analytical framework, therefore, is one that integrates an understanding of institutional constraints with an appreciation for the agency of individual leaders to drive normative change and organisational learning.

2.4 A New Theoretical Lens: Intersectionality in Sport Leadership

A significant limitation of early research into women in sport leadership has been its tendency to treat "women" as a monolithic category, implicitly focusing on the experiences of white, middle-class, cisgender, and able-bodied women from Western countries. This approach overlooks the rich diversity of women's lived experiences and fails to account for the ways in which different dimensions of identity intersect to create unique and compounded forms of both privilege and oppression. The theoretical framework of intersectionality, originally developed by Crenshaw (1989) and further elaborated by scholars such as Collins and Bilge (2020), provides an essential lens for rectifying this oversight (Crenshaw, K., 1989, pp. 139-167; Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S., 2020). Intersectionality posits that social identities such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability are not independent variables but are interlocking systems of power that shape individuals' experiences and opportunities in distinct and complex ways.

Adopting an intersectional framework is therefore crucial for developing a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for women in sport leadership. It moves the analysis beyond a binary focus on gender to a more nuanced appreciation of the multiple and intersecting power dynamics at play. This allows for the development of more targeted and effective strategies for promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion that address the specific needs and experiences of women in all their diversity. The following Table 1 provides an illustrative, though not exhaustive, overview of how an intersectional lens can illuminate the distinct barriers faced by different groups of women in sport leadership.

Table 1. An Intersectional Analysis of Barriers in Sport Leadership

Identity Dimension	Primary Barriers	Compounded Barriers from Intersectionality
White, Cisgender, Able-Bodied Women	Gender stereotypes (the "double bind"); exclusion from informal male networks; work-life integration challenges; unequal pay.	While facing significant gender-based barriers, this group often benefits from racial, cisgender, and able-bodied privilege, which can provide access to resources and networks unavailable to other women.
Women of Colour (e.g., Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latina)	All barriers faced by white women, plus: overt and covert racism; racial stereotypes (e.g., the "angry Black woman"); lack of representation in leadership, leading to isolation; pressure to represent their entire racial/ethnic group.	The intersection of race and gender creates a "concrete ceiling" that is thicker and more difficult to penetrate than the "glass ceiling." They may be excluded from both male-dominated and white-female-dominated networks.
Women with Disabilities	All barriers faced by non-disabled women, plus: ableism and assumptions of incompetence; physical and infrastructural barriers; lack of accessible facilities and resources; attitudinal barriers and prejudice.	The intersection of gender and disability can lead to infantilisation or a perception of asexuality, further undermining their authority as leaders. They may be seen as a "burden" or an "inspiration," but rarely as simply a competent leader.
LGBTQ+ Women (e.g., Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender)	All barriers faced by heterosexual, cisgender women, plus: homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia; pressure to conceal their identity; discrimination in hiring and promotion; lack of inclusive policies and workplace cultures.	Transgender women in sport face intense scrutiny and discrimination related to their gender identity, often overshadowing their leadership capabilities. Lesbian and bisexual women may face the "double jeopardy" of sexism and homophobia.

3. The Impact of Women's Leadership on Organisational Change

The increasing presence of women in leadership roles is not merely a demographic shift; it is a catalyst for profound organisational change. This section examines the empirical evidence on how women leaders influence organisational culture, ethics, and governance, while also navigating the complex interplay of stereotypes and resistance.

3.1 Reshaping Organisational Culture and Ethics

Women leaders often bring a distinct set of values and priorities to their roles, which can significantly reshape organisational culture. Research consistently shows that companies with a higher representation of women in senior leadership are more likely to prioritise ethical behaviour, corporate social responsibility, and a collaborative work environment (Aman, M. S., Hussein, N., & Shahid, S., 2019, pp. 821-840). Women are more likely to adopt a transformational leadership style, which, as discussed, is characterised by a focus on mentorship, employee development, and a shared vision (Burton, L. J., & LaVoi, N. M., 2021, pp. 405-417; Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L., 2018). This approach stands in contrast to the more transactional, command-and-control style that has traditionally dominated many sport organisations.

Furthermore, the presence of women in leadership can have a powerful impact on an organisation's ethical climate. Studies have shown that gender-diverse boards are more likely to hold executives accountable for ethical lapses and to prioritise the interests of a broader range of stakeholders, not just shareholders (Adriaanse, J. A., & Schofield, T., 2014, pp. 485-497). In the context of sport, which has been plagued by a series of high-profile corruption and abuse scandals, the ethical leadership that women often bring is not just a desirable trait but a critical necessity for restoring public trust and ensuring the long-term health of the industry.

3.2 The Paradox of Relational Leadership and Emotional Intelligence

Relational leadership and emotional intelligence are frequently cited as key strengths of female leaders. Emotional intelligence, popularised by Goleman (1998), refers to the ability to recognise, understand, and manage one's own emotions and the emotions of others (Goleman, D., 1998). Women, on average, tend to score higher on measures of emotional intelligence, particularly in areas such as empathy, interpersonal relationships, and social responsibility (Brown, D., & Potrac, P., 2022, pp. 382-397). These skills are invaluable in leadership, as they enable leaders to build trust, motivate teams, and navigate complex social dynamics.

However, there is a paradox at play. While relational skills are essential for effective leadership, they are also often stereotypically associated with femininity and can be devalued in masculine-coded environments like sport. Women who exhibit these traits may be perceived as "soft" or not "tough enough" to make difficult decisions (Hoyt, C. L., & Murphy, S. E., 2016, pp. 387-399). This creates a double bind, where women are expected to be both relational and authoritative, a tightrope that their male counterparts are rarely forced to walk. The strategic use of emotional intelligence, therefore, becomes a critical skill for women leaders, who must learn to deploy their relational strengths in a way

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that is perceived as both authentic and authoritative.

3.3 Agency and Resistance: Navigating the Labyrinth

Women in sport leadership are not passive victims of a biased system; they are active agents of change who employ a variety of strategies to navigate the labyrinth of power and resistance (Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L., 2018). These strategies range from individual acts of resilience and self-advocacy to collective action and the creation of supportive networks. Women often leverage their outsider status to challenge the status quo and to introduce new ideas and perspectives that can lead to innovation and growth (Ibarra, H., 2019).

However, this agency is almost always met with resistance, which can take both overt and subtle forms. Overt resistance may include sexism, harassment, and exclusion from informal networks (the "old boys' club") (Chu, J., Leberman, S., & Taylor, T., 2022, pp. 789-802). Subtle resistance, on the other hand, can be more insidious and difficult to challenge. This can include being held to a higher standard than male colleagues, having their contributions ignored or attributed to others, and being subjected to a constant stream of microaggressions (Britton, D. M., 2017, pp. 5-27). The concept of "gender fatigue" has been used to describe the exhaustion that women experience from having to constantly navigate these forms of resistance (Hoeber, L., & Shaw, S., 2022, pp. 515-532). Overcoming this resistance requires not only individual resilience but also a concerted effort from organisations to create a culture where women's leadership is not just tolerated but actively valued and supported.

However, it is important to recognise that resistance is not always a purely negative force. Paradoxically, the very act of navigating and overcoming resistance can become a powerful site of learning and transformation. Women who strategically challenge the barriers they face often develop advanced adaptive and political skills. They become adept at building coalitions, negotiating conflict, and influencing change from the margins. In doing so, they can become the catalysts for the kind of double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996) that is necessary for genuine organisational self-examination and renewal (Norman, 2021). The following diagram illustrates the cyclical nature of organisational resistance, showing how various elements interact to maintain the status quo (Figure 1).
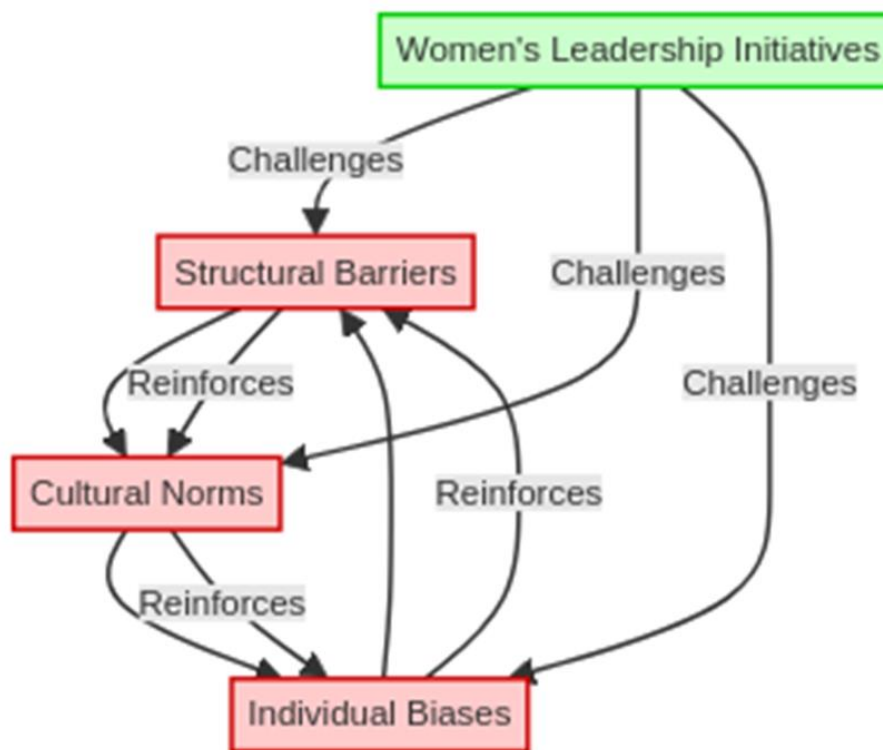
Figure 1. The Cycle of Organisational Resistance to Women's Leadership

4. Pathways to Leadership: Higher Education and Development Programmes

Developing a pipeline of talented and prepared women leaders is crucial for driving organisational change. This section explores the role of higher education and formal development programmes in creating these pathways.

4.1 The Role of Higher Education in Shaping Future Leaders

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of sport leaders. Sport management programmes, in particular, are a key pipeline for talent into the industry. However, research suggests that these programmes have been slow to adapt their curricula to address the specific challenges and opportunities for women in sport leadership (Walker, N. A., & Bopp, T., 2020, pp. 509-522). Many programmes continue to rely on outdated, male-centric models of leadership and fail to adequately integrate issues of gender, diversity, and inclusion into their core curriculum. This not only fails to prepare women for the realities of the sport industry but also perpetuates the very biases and inequalities that they will face in their careers.

However, there are also signs of positive change. A growing number of universities are developing specialised programmes and initiatives designed to support aspiring female leaders. These include mentorship programmes, networking events, and leadership development workshops that are tailored to the specific needs of women in sport (Pike, E., White, A., Matthews, J., & Southon, S., 2017, pp. 709-725). Furthermore, recent research by English and Braybrook (2025) highlights the transformative

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potential of design-based research in higher education to create more equitable and effective pathways to leadership for women (English, V., & Braybrook, K., 2025, pp. 56-79). Their study demonstrates how a curriculum that is co-designed with industry partners and grounded in the lived experiences of women leaders can empower students with the skills, confidence, and networks to succeed.

4.2 Leadership Development Programmes and Mentorship

Formal leadership development programmes and mentorship have emerged as key strategies for accelerating women's advancement in sport leadership. These programmes can provide women with the skills, knowledge, and networks to overcome the barriers they face. Research has shown that effective leadership development programmes are those that are tailored to the specific needs of women, provide opportunities for experiential learning, and create a supportive peer network (Burton, L. J., & Leberman, S., 2017).

Mentorship, in particular, has been identified as a critical factor in the career progression of women leaders. A good mentor can provide not only career advice and guidance but also sponsorship, which involves actively advocating for their mentee and creating opportunities for them to advance (Kanter, R. M., 1977). However, women often face challenges in finding suitable mentors, particularly in male-dominated fields like sport. The lack of senior female leaders means that there are fewer role models and potential mentors for aspiring women. This highlights the importance of formal mentorship programmes that can connect women with experienced leaders, both male and female, who are committed to supporting their development.

The effectiveness of these programmes is a subject of ongoing research and debate. Some studies suggest that they can be highly effective in building confidence, enhancing skills, and expanding networks (Pike et al., 2017). The design-based research by English and Braybrook (2025) provides strong evidence for the positive impact of a well-designed, university-based programme. However, critics caution that if these programmes focus solely on "fixing the women"—that is, on equipping them with the skills to fit into the existing masculine-coded organisational culture—they may have limited impact on systemic change. For these programmes to be truly transformative, they must not only empower individual women but also seek to influence the organisations to which those women belong. The most effective programmes are those that are part of a broader, integrated strategy for organisational change, which includes a commitment from senior leadership to address systemic barriers and create a more inclusive culture. The following Table 2 synthesises the key features of effective women's leadership development programmes, as identified in the literature.

Table 2. Key Features of Effective Women's Leadership Development Programmes

Feature	Description	Rationale & Supporting Evidence
Holistic & Intersectional Curriculum	The curriculum addresses not only traditional leadership skills (e.g., finance, strategy) but also the specific challenges women face, such as unconscious bias, stereotype threat, and work-life integration. It adopts an intersectional approach, acknowledging the diverse experiences of women.	A "one-size-fits-all" approach is ineffective. Tailored content that addresses the lived realities of women leads to greater engagement and impact (English & Braybrook, 2025). An intersectional lens ensures the programme is relevant to all women, not just the dominant group (Crenshaw, 1989).
Focus on Sponsorship, Not Just Mentorship	The programme actively facilitates connections between participants and senior leaders who can act as sponsors, not just mentors. This includes structured networking events and formal sponsorship initiatives.	Sponsorship is a more powerful driver of career advancement than mentorship. Sponsors use their influence to create opportunities, which is critical for breaking through the "glass ceiling" (Ibarra, 2019).
Creation of a Supportive Peer Cohort	The programme is designed to foster a strong sense of community and peer support among participants. This is achieved through collaborative projects, peer coaching, and ongoing networking opportunities.	A strong peer network provides a vital source of support, advice, and solidarity, helping to mitigate the feelings of isolation that many women in leadership experience (Pike et al., 2017).
Integration with Organisational Change	The programme is not a standalone initiative but is integrated into a broader organisational strategy for gender equity. This includes securing buy-in from senior leadership and linking the programme to talent management and succession planning processes.	To be sustainable, individual development must be coupled with organisational change. Without this link, women may gain new skills but still face the same systemic barriers upon returning to their organisations (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2019).

5. Barriers and Resistance to Female-Led Change

Despite the clear benefits of gender-diverse leadership, women continue to face a formidable array of barriers and resistance in their pursuit of leadership roles in sport. These barriers are not just individual or isolated incidents but are systemic and deeply embedded in the culture and structure of sport organisations.

5.1 Structural and Cultural Barriers

Structural barriers are the formal and informal rules, policies, and practices that systematically disadvantage women. These can include biased recruitment and promotion processes, unequal pay, and a lack of family-friendly policies (Hoeber, L., 2007, pp. 259-280). The "old boys' club," a powerful and exclusionary informal network of men, remains a significant barrier for women, who are often excluded from the key conversations and decisions that shape their careers (Chu, J., Leberman, S., & Taylor, T., 2022, pp. 789-802).

Cultural barriers are the shared values, beliefs, and norms that create a hostile or unwelcoming environment for women. These can include a culture of sexism and misogyny, the normalisation of masculine-coded leadership styles, and the devaluation of feminine-coded traits (Adriaanse, J. A., & Claringbould, I., 2016, pp. 547-564). The media also plays a significant role in perpetuating these cultural barriers, often portraying female athletes and leaders in a way that reinforces gender stereotypes (Fink, J. S., 2016, pp. 176-188).

5.2 The Intersectional Nature of Barriers

It is crucial to recognise that the barriers to leadership are not the same for all women. An intersectional perspective reveals that women from marginalised groups face unique and compounded barriers. For example, women of colour may face both racism and sexism, while women with disabilities may face ableism in addition to gender bias (Hancock, M., & Hums, M. A., 2023). Research has shown that women from culturally diverse backgrounds are significantly underrepresented in sport leadership and face a unique set of challenges, including cultural stereotypes, a lack of role models, and a sense of isolation (Dadswell, K., Mandicos, M., et al., 2023, pp. 135-155).

The Sport Intersectional Model of Power (SIMP), developed by Simpkins (2019), provides a useful framework for understanding how these intersecting systems of power operate in sport (Simpkins, S., 2019, pp. 493-515). The model highlights the need to move beyond a single-axis analysis of gender and to consider how race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity shape the experiences of women in sport leadership. A truly inclusive approach to gender equity must be an intersectional one that recognises and addresses the unique challenges faced by all women.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Key Findings and Implications

This review has synthesised a wide range of literature to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of the role of women in leadership and organisational change in sport. The key findings are:

• Women leaders are not just a matter of equity; they are a source of competitive advantage, bringing diverse perspectives and skills that can drive innovation and growth.

• The definition of organisational change must be expanded beyond simply increasing the number of women in leadership to include a fundamental transformation of power dynamics and organisational culture.

• Women face a complex and multi-layered system of barriers, including stereotypes, bias, and resistance, which are compounded for women from marginalised groups.

• Higher education and leadership development programmes have a crucial role to play in creating a pipeline of talented and prepared women leaders.

• A multi-level model of change is needed that addresses the individual, organisational, and institutional dimensions of gender inequality.

The implications of these findings are clear. Sport organisations must move beyond tokenistic gestures and commit to a deep and sustained process of organisational change. This requires a willingness to challenge the status quo, to dismantle systemic barriers, and to create a culture where women's leadership is not just tolerated but actively celebrated.

6.2 Gaps in the Literature and Future Research

While the body of research on women in sport leadership is growing, there are still significant gaps in the literature. The most significant of these is the need for more intersectional research that explores the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds. Future research should also focus on the following areas:

• The long-term impact of gender-diverse leadership on organisational performance and culture.

• The effectiveness of different strategies for overcoming resistance to female-led change.

• The role of men as allies in promoting gender equity in sport leadership.

• The impact of new technologies and media on the representation and perception of women in sport.

6.3 A Model for Transformative Change

Based on the synthesis of the literature, it is possible to propose a multi-level model for advancing women in sports leadership. This model, illustrated in the diagram below, posits that sustainable change requires simultaneous and coordinated action at the individual, organisational, and institutional levels. At the individual level, the focus is on empowering women with the skills, networks, and resilience to navigate their careers. At the organisational level, the focus is on creating inclusive cultures and equitable systems. And at the institutional level, the focus is on challenging the broader norms, policies, and power structures that shape the entire sport ecosystem. Change at any one level is

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unlikely to be sufficient; it is the interplay and mutual reinforcement of actions across all three levels that will drive transformative and lasting change as summarized in Figure 2.
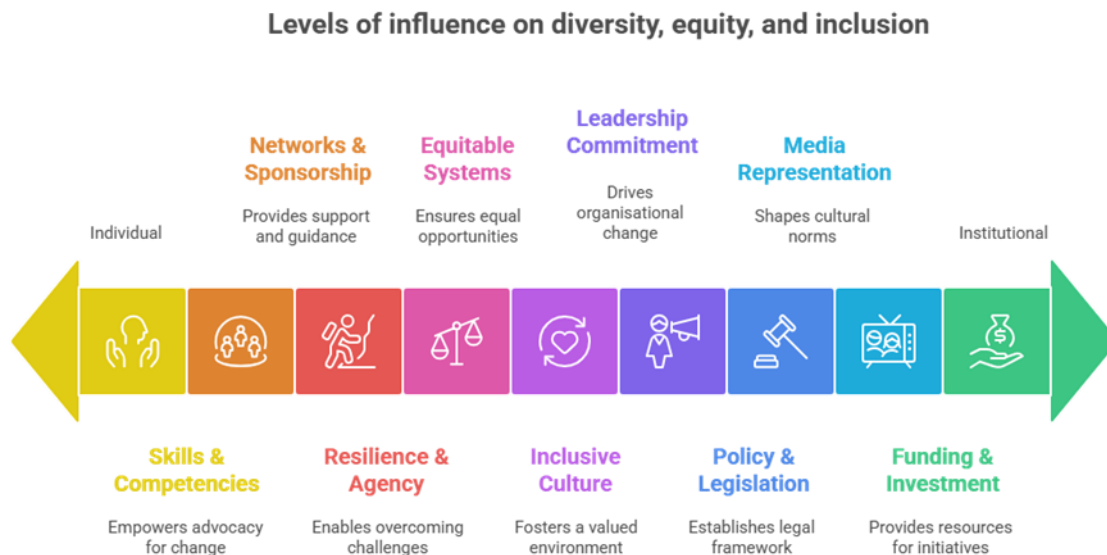

Figure 2. A Multi-Level Model for Advancing Women in Sports Leadership

6.4 Conclusion

This critical and intersectional review of the literature demonstrates unequivocally that women leaders are not merely a desirable addition to the sport industry but are vital agents of organisational transformation, cultural renewal, and ethical governance. The evidence synthesised in this paper indicates that female leaders frequently bring relational, reflective, and inclusive strengths that can enable sport institutions to move beyond outdated, hierarchical models of leadership and to embrace a more adaptive and resilient future. Their leadership is a powerful catalyst for the kind of double-loop learning that is essential for addressing the complex challenges facing the contemporary sport ecosystem, from governance crises to the demands for greater social responsibility.

However, this transformative potential is far from being fully realised. It is systematically constrained by a deeply entrenched and multi-layered system of barriers. These include the pervasive influence of masculine-coded organisational cultures, the persistence of gendered stereotypes and unconscious bias, the exclusionary nature of informal male networks, and the insufficient integration of an intersectional perspective that recognises and addresses the compounded barriers faced by women from diverse backgrounds. The journey to leadership for women in sport is not simply a climb up a ladder; it is a complex navigation of a labyrinth fraught with subtle and overt forms of resistance.

The central implication of this review is that achieving genuine gender equity in sport leadership requires a paradigm shift. Efforts must move beyond a narrow focus on representational targets and "fixing the women" to a more holistic and systemic approach that addresses the deeper cultural and structural dimensions of power. Sustainable transformation requires a concerted and coordinated effort from all stakeholders. Sport organisations must proactively dismantle systemic barriers and cultivate inclusive cultures. Higher education institutions must reimagine their role in developing the next generation of leaders, creating equitable pathways and providing tailored support. And aspiring women leaders must continue to build their skills, networks, and resilience, while strategically challenging the status quo.

Ultimately, this review calls for a fundamental reframing of what constitutes effective leadership in sport. The future of the industry depends on its ability to move away from a hierarchical model rooted in command and control and towards a more relational and networked paradigm grounded in trust, ethics, and collective growth. The advancement of women into leadership is not simply a women's issue; it is central to the future health, integrity, and success of the entire global sport industry.

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