

# Gender Stereotypes in Nonprofit Governance: The Case of Nonprofit Sports Organisations

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**Abstract:** This study addresses the issue of a “lack of diversity” in nonprofit sports organisations, where gender stereotypes influence social expectations regarding who should hold leadership positions. By reflecting normative notions of femininities and masculinities and disseminating generalised opinions about what men and women are like, gender stereotypes often contribute to discrimination and prejudice. According to gender role congruence theory, leadership traits such as assertiveness and individualism are considered masculine and incompatible with female gender role traits, which are expected to be collaborative and sensitive. As a consequence, women face more barriers than men when climbing organisational hierarchies. The nonprofit sector is not immune from gender stereotypes that can limit women’s access to governing boards. This paper uses the lens of gender role congruence theory to explore the relationship between gender and governance in the domain of nonprofit sports organisations. Although sports do not have inherent gender characteristics, gender stereotypes often operate in this field, resulting in women being underrepresented on boards. The aim of the study is answering the following questions: To what extent are women represented on nonprofit boards? How likely are they to reach leadership positions (e.g. president) on the board? Does women’s representation vary according to the sport that nonprofits focus on? The findings confirm that, on average, board membership and leadership are still skewed towards men. Nonprofit sports organisations have more men than women in their boardrooms. Women are less likely than men to hold the position of president/chairperson of a nonprofit sports organisation. When sports are classified according to gender stereotypes (e.g. softball and volleyball are considered female sports; rugby and baseball are identified as male sports; swimming and running are neutral sports that can be played by both genders), women hold the majority of board and president positions only in nonprofits that focus on female sports.

**Keywords:** Governance, Stereotypes, Gender, Nonprofit boards, Sport

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## 1. Introduction

Interest in the representation of women in leadership roles within the governance of public, private and nonprofit organisations continues to grow alongside the greater demand for social justice, equity, and the advancement of gender minorities. Although the proportion of women on boards has increased, particularly in countries where gender quotas were mandatory, they often have limited access to top positions and less influence over board decisions than their male counterparts (Revillard and Tuffy, 2023).

Many barriers hinder substantive women’s involvement in leadership roles (Elkhwesky, Salem and El Manzani, 2025), including the persistence of gender stereotypes that disseminate simplified ideas about what men and women are like. By perpetuating an image of women as caregivers and men as breadwinners, gender stereotypes end up having a prescriptive role and depicting what women and men should be like (Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024). This often generates gender bias and results in consequent gender discrimination.

According to gender role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), gender stereotypes contribute to explaining why women face more barriers than men when climbing organisational hierarchies. Leadership traits such as competitiveness, assertiveness, individualism and independence are considered masculine and incompatible with female gender role traits, which are expected to be nurturing, collaborative, gentle, sensitive and soft (Kobutary, Syed and Haloub, 2019). Nonprofit organisations are not immune to concerns regarding gender stereotypes, despite values such as representation, equality and inclusivity being at their core (Piatak, McDonald and Mohr, 2022). Simplified and generalised opinions about women’s characteristics and abilities limit their access to governing boards and often relegate them to symbolic roles (Evans and Knepper, 2022).

This paper uses the lens of gender role congruity theory to explore the relationship between gender and governance in the domain of nonprofit organisations, focusing specifically on the sports sector. Although sports do not have inherent gender characteristics (Alsamih, 2024), gender stereotypes often operate in this field, resulting in women being underrepresented on boards and confined to expected, socially congruent gender roles within the governance of these organisations (Burton, 2015; Knoppers et al, 2022).

Specifically, the study poses the following research questions:

*RQ1: To what extent are women represented on nonprofit boards?*

*RQ2: How likely are they to reach leadership positions (e.g. president) on the board?*

*RQ3: Does women's representation vary according to the sport that nonprofits focus on?*

The findings reveal gender patterns diffused among the boards of nonprofit sports organisations, and confirm that, on average, board membership and leadership are still skewed towards men.

By exploring gender stereotypes, this paper positions itself at the intersection of sports management research and nonprofit board governance theory. It shows that gender is a powerful factor in the social processes that shape the governance of nonprofit organisations, influencing beliefs about role congruity that legitimise specific governance behaviours. As gender stereotypes affect the perception of board effectiveness, they can be included among the factors that influence “widely accepted notions of how a nonprofit board of directors should operate” (Miller-Millesen, 2003, p. 525).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical underpinnings for the study. These are then laid down in the context of nonprofits in Section 3, with a particular focus on sports organisations. Section 4 outlines the methodology employed for the empirical analysis, the results of which are presented in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 provides a discussion of the findings and offers some concluding remarks.

## **2. Gender Stereotypes and Role Congruity Theory**

Stereotypes are simplified and generalised images or ideas of a group of people who share certain characteristics (Rosenthal and Overstreet, 2016). Based on widely held and often unconscious mental models, they affect how people think and act. Among the most common are gender stereotypes, which reflect normative notions of femininities and masculinities. “Gender stereotypes are the widely shared conceptions about the attributes of men and women, and they include personality, cognitive, and physical attributes as well as attributes related to interests and abilities” (Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024, p. 167). Based on common assumptions, gender stereotypes attribute a set of characteristics to women that encompass kindness, concern for others, sensitivity, and helpfulness. On the negative side, women are thought to be passive, compliant and insecure. Men are typically viewed as being competent, independent, productive, and assertive, but also competitive, controlling, aggressive and arrogant. By disseminating generalised opinions about what men and women are like, gender stereotypes play a prescriptive role. Men are expected to take charge and get things done, while women are expected to build relationships and take care of others (Hentschel, Heilman and Peus, 2019). Stereotypical female and male roles translate into expected organisational roles, which perpetuates the disparities between women and men in the workplace and boardrooms, and amplifies the differentiation of their skills through gendered divisions of labour (Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024).

According to gender role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), women face more barriers than men when climbing organisational hierarchies due to gender stereotypes. These barriers stem from a perceived mismatch between the gender of a person who has to cover a certain role and the stereotyped idea about the characteristics required for that role. The mismatch is a product of social conditioning and expectations, which lead to bias against individuals who do not fit the stereotype for a given role. A lack of fit typically occurs when women are evaluated for leadership positions. Leadership is a gendered role, which is stereotypically expected to be filled by men. Although this is less the case than in the past, it is assumed to require masculine qualities (Kobutary, Syed and Haloub, 2019). Men are believed to succeed better in power positions because they are “seen as more similar to the leader stereotype than women are, producing disadvantage for women” (Koenig et al, 2011, p. 617). Therefore, prejudice and barriers against women in leadership roles usually stem from perceptions about their gender rather than their actual ability to perform leadership tasks.

Although the growing complexity of organisational environments has led to the development of a less masculine model of leadership, based on relationships, participatory decision-making and delegation (Kolpakov and Boyer, 2021), recent empirical studies conducted worldwide confirm that gender biases and stereotypes are among the most persistent challenges faced by women in the boardroom (Elkhwesky, Salem and El Manzani, 2025). The “think manager–think male” paradigm (Schein, 1973) is difficult to overcome, and women continue to discount two forms of prejudice against them as leaders. On the one hand, they appear less natural in most leadership roles, and on the other, they are often perceived as arrogant when displaying the agentic traits required by these roles (Ma, Rosette and Koval, 2022). As a consequence, even when women reach leadership positions, they are often excluded from the upper echelons, which tend to remain the domain of men.

## **3. Women's Representation in Nonprofit Boards**

Nonprofit organisations are not immune to concerns regarding gender stereotypes (Kolpakov and Boyer, 2021), despite representation, equality and inclusivity being core values of such organisations and forming the basis of

good governance practices (Ortega-Rodríguez et al, 2024). Representative and inclusive boards reflect the diverse demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, age and race) of the communities they serve, thereby contributing to the perception of nonprofits as symbols of local identities (Abzug and Galaskiewicz, 2001). A wealth of research shows that gender diversity on boards matters for reasons beyond its representational and inclusive value, ultimately enabling the organisation to fulfil its mission (Azevedo et al, 2021; Evans, Kuenzi and Stewart, 2025; Holgersson and Hvenmark, 2023). Having a diverse board of directors can help nonprofits to manage relationships with multiple stakeholders, build networks, improve decision-making, and acquire resources, among other things.

Nevertheless, despite the increased number of female leaders over the past few years, women are still underrepresented in boardrooms, suggesting that the glass ceiling has not been broken; it has simply been moved higher. Although nonprofit organisations are female-dominated and women comprise the majority of the workforce (Evans and Knepper, 2022), the nonprofit sector becomes less diverse at leadership level. In the U.S., for example, national data show that women hold 52% of board positions (Clerkin, Diomande and Koob, 2024), which suggests favourable career prospects for women. However, data should be interpreted carefully for at least two reasons. First, unlike companies, the vast majority of nonprofit board members are not paid, or paid less than their counterparts in the for-profit sector. This makes leadership positions less appealing to men and more accessible to women (Feng and Greenlee, 2024; Finley, Hall and Marino, 2022). Second, women are, on average, better represented than men only in smaller organisations (Piatak, McDonald and Mohr, 2022). In large nonprofits with expenses above \$25 million, women remain in the minority at the leadership level (44% of board members). This confirms the “glass escalator” effect, whereby men in female-dominated fields rise more quickly to senior leadership positions.

There are a number of reasons why women are underrepresented on nonprofit boards, including stereotypical interpretations of social order that see women’s roles in nonprofits as more about support than leadership. (Evans and Knepper, 2022). When current leaders become the archetype of what and who leaders are, the risk is perpetuating the gender gap in nonprofit leadership positions (Piatak, McDonald and Mohr, 2022), as archetypes “serve as filters, screening out everyone but those who meet the accepted standards; therefore, the leaders remain the same and so do the standards” (Stivers, 2002, p. 72).

Gender stereotypes affect many nonprofit organisations, including those operating within the sporting arena (Burton, 2015). “Sports institutions are important upholders of the privileging of men and masculinities” (Alsarve, 2024, p. 286; Anderson, 2009). Although sports do not have inherent gender characteristics, women are more likely to be equally represented in the governance of sports organisations that are perceived as feminine (Elling, Hovden and Knoppers, 2018). Tennis, basketball, swimming and running are usually considered gender-neutral. Conversely, football and boxing are typically masculine, while gymnastics, volleyball, cheerleading and ballet are typically considered feminine (Alsamih, 2024). In contexts where their presence is unusual, women are more likely to be affected by the use of gender stereotypes and tend to be underrepresented on boards (Eime et al, 2021; Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024; Knoppers et al, 2022). The result is that gender and cultural divides persist, with male and female leaderships dominating gender-separate male and female sport organisations (Alsarve, 2024). This ultimately hinders the board’s ability to perform to its full potential, as “women may bring qualities and values to sport boardrooms that men are less likely to possess” (McLeod et al, 2025, p. 552) and vice versa. Overcoming gender stereotypes and allowing for greater gender diversity has been reported to enhance stakeholder engagement, risk management, and strategic planning and policy (McLeod et al, 2025; Wicker, Feiler and Breuer, 2022).

#### **4. Methodology**

To address the study’s research questions, this paper focused on U.S. nonprofit sport organisations. According to the research protocol, the list of organisations was obtained using the Internal Revenue Service’s Tax Exempt Organization Search tool. From a total list of 481 organisations with the activity code “Sports, Athletic Recreational and Social Activities”, only those with a mission that was clearly related to sports and athletic activities were selected (N = 192). After excluding those with unavailable Form 990 or incomplete data on board composition and roles within the form (N = 16), the final sample included 176 organisations.

Although gender is often understood in broader terms, this study employed a binary gender classification and measured gender as either woman/man or female/male, depending on the board members’ names (Holgersson and Hvenmark, 2023). This approach was adopted for the pragmatism it affords during analyses, in line with previous studies (McLeod et al., 2025).

Three analyses were performed. The first aimed to understand the extent to which women are represented on the boards of nonprofit sports organisations, which are stereotypically considered to be the domain of men and masculinity (Alsarve, 2024). To this end, the data analysis focused on the percentage of women serving on each board. As researchers have warned about the risk of women being relegated to a mere symbolic presence (Wicker, Feiler and Breuer, 2022), particular attention was paid to women reaching a critical mass. This “is typically identified as being around three members or constituting 30% of the total board composition” (McLeod et al, 2025, p. 550). The second analysis investigated how many women reached leadership positions within the board, such as president/chairperson, thereby breaking down gender stereotypes associated with these roles (Elkhwesky, Salem and El Manzani, 2025). The third analysis aimed to determine whether the representation of women differs in nonprofit sports organisations depending on the sport they focus on and the gender stereotypes usually associated with it (Knoppers et al, 2022). To this end, sports were categorised according to the gender classification proposed by Sobal and Milgrim (2019). Sports not included in it are classified as N/A. The label “General” indicates nonprofits that offer multiple sports (Table 1).

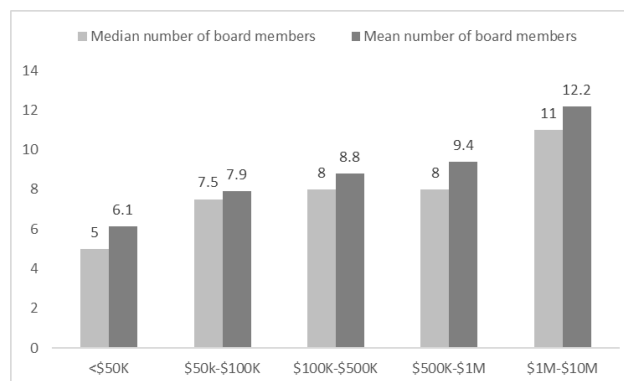
**Table 1: Sports’ gender-typing**

Male sports	Female sports	Neutral sports	N/A
Baseball	Equestrian	Basketball	Bridge
Boxing	Gymnastic	Chess	General
Football	Softball	Cycling	Pickleball
Hunting	Volleyball	Golf	Shooting
Hockey		Lacrosse	Soaring
Karate		Rowing	
Rugby		Running	
Water Polo		Sailing	
Wrestling		Soccer	
		Swimming	
		Tennis	

## 5. Findings

With a total number of 1,659 directors, the board sizes of nonprofit sports organisations range from 1 to 48 members. 50% of boards have between 5 and 9 members. This percentage rises to 84% when considering boards with 3 to 12 members. The average board size is 9 people (median = 9).

As for nonprofits in general (Clerkin, Diomande and Koob, 2024), board size varies substantially by organisational size (as measured by annual expenses), with larger organisations that tend to have more members on their boards (Figure 1).

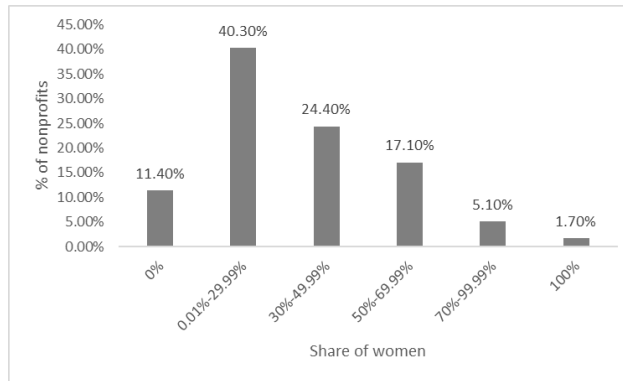


**Figure 1: Average board size by organisational size**

### 5.1 To What Extent are Women Represented on the Boards of Nonprofit Sports Organisations?

Nonprofit sports organisations have more men than women in leadership roles. Women hold only the 32% of board positions, compared to 52% for the whole nonprofit sector (Clerkin, Diomande and Koob, 2024).

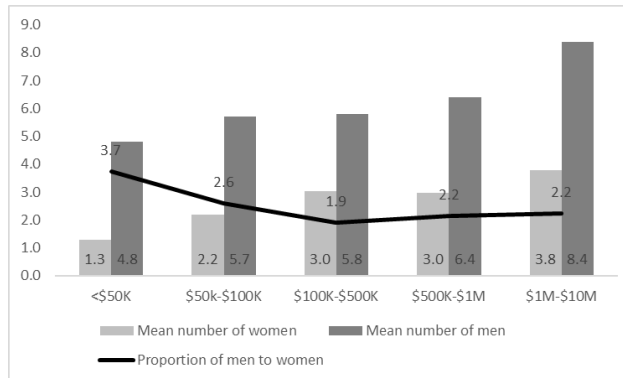
Beyond this average figure, the representation of women on boards varies significantly. Figure 2 shows the percentage of nonprofit sports organisations by share of women on their boards.



**Figure 2: Representation of women on boards**

In 52% of cases, women are far from reaching critical mass in boardrooms, staying largely below the threshold of 30% of board positions (McLeod et al, 2025). For men, this only happens in 7% of cases. More than 11% of nonprofit sports organisations have no women directors, compared to less than 2% of boards that are entirely female-held. Balanced boards with a share of women between 40% and 60% (Wicker, Feiler and Breuer, 2022) only represent the 20% of cases.

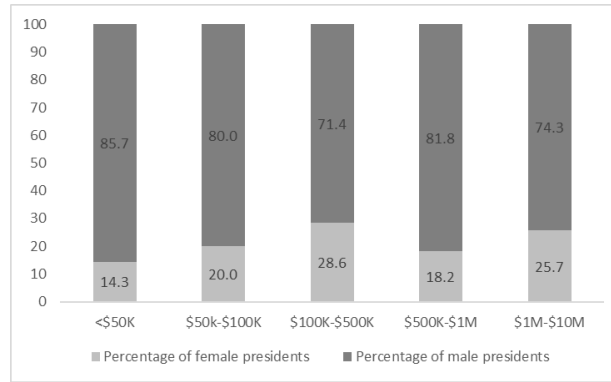
Figure 3 shows the average number of board members by gender, depending on the organisation’s size. For example, on average, organisations with expenses between \$50,000 and \$100,000 have a board of 7.9 directors, of whom 2.2 are female and 5.7 male. The gender gap is greatest for organisations with expenses of less than \$50,000, with men outnumbering women by an average of 3.7 times in the smallest nonprofits. Although the gap narrows as organisations grow, men always outnumber women by a ratio of two to one.



**Figure 3: Average board gender representation by organisational size**

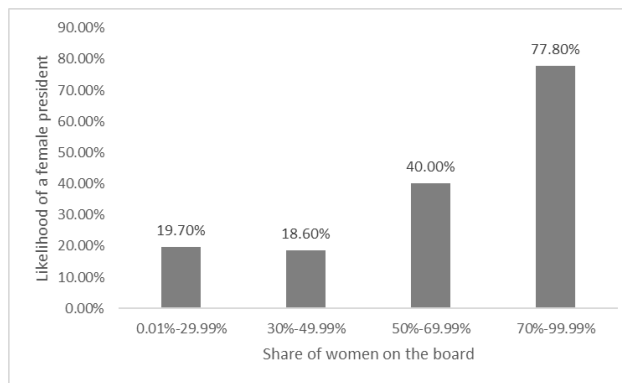
### 5.2 How Likely are Women to Reach Leadership Positions Within the board of Nonprofit Sports Organisations?

Men are more likely than women to hold the position of president/chairperson of a nonprofit sports organisation. Only 44 of the 176 boards are chaired by women, accounting for 25% of the total. This figure varies depending on the size of the organisation, with the share of female presidents increasing from 14.3% to 28.6% for organisations up to \$500,000 (Figure 4). For larger organisations, the gender breakdown fluctuates.



**Figure 4: Percentage of presidents/chairpersons by gender and organisational size**

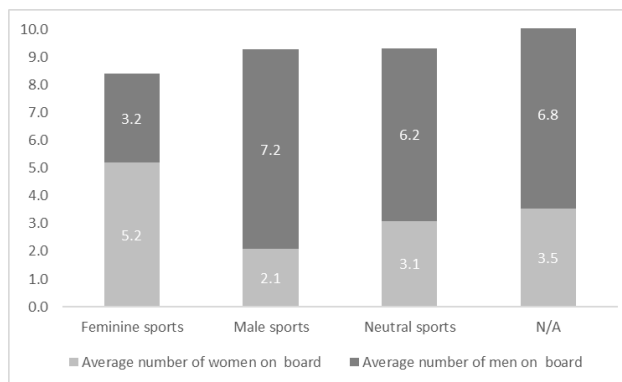
As was to be expected, the likelihood of having a female president increases significantly with the growing number of women on the board (Figure 5). However, balanced boards with a share of women between 40% and 60% (Wicker, Feiler and Breuer, 2022) are led by a woman only in one third of cases.



**Figure 5: Female president likelihood by % of women on board**

### 5.3 Does Women’s Representation Vary According to the Sport that Nonprofits Focus on?

When sports are classified according to gender stereotypes, women hold the majority of board positions only in nonprofits that focus on female sports (e.g. softball, volleyball). In all other cases, men dominate the boardrooms, outnumbering their female colleagues by a ratio of three to one in male sports and two to one in gender-neutral sports or N/A sports (Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Average board gender representation by sport gender-typing**

Some organisations that typically focus on male-gendered sports (e.g. rugby or wrestling) have no women on their boards (Figure 7). Conversely, men are always represented in the boardroom, with at least one director.

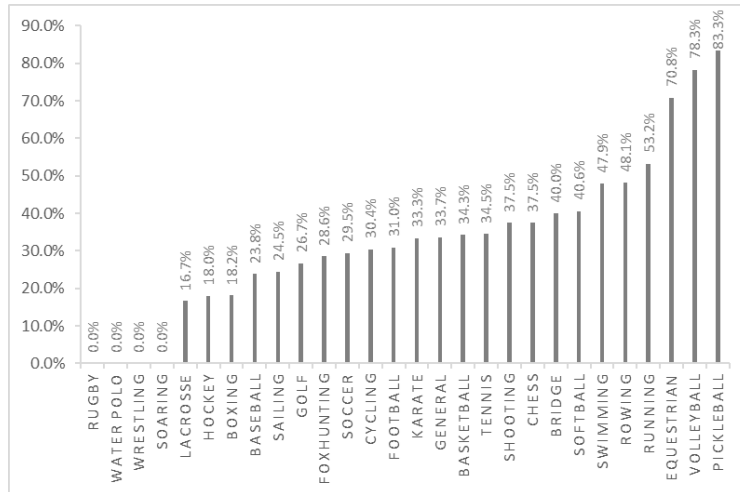


Figure 7: Average percentage of women on the board, by sport

When it comes to presidents/chairpersons, women have the same likelihood as men of leading the board (50%) only in the case of female-gendered sports (Figure 8). In the other cases, the likelihood of a female president is rather low. Interestingly, despite being the only woman on the board, six women reached upper leadership positions within nonprofits focused on male (i.e. baseball, hockey), neutral (i.e. soccer, swimming) or N/A (i.e. general) sports. The same does not apply to men.

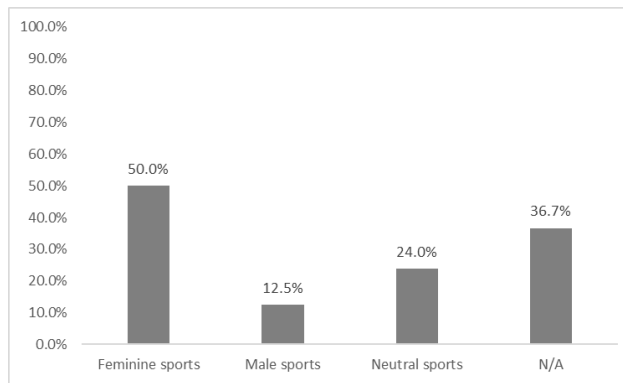


Figure 8: Female president likelihood by sport gender-typing

Figure 9 provides a highlight of the frequency of female presidents by sport.

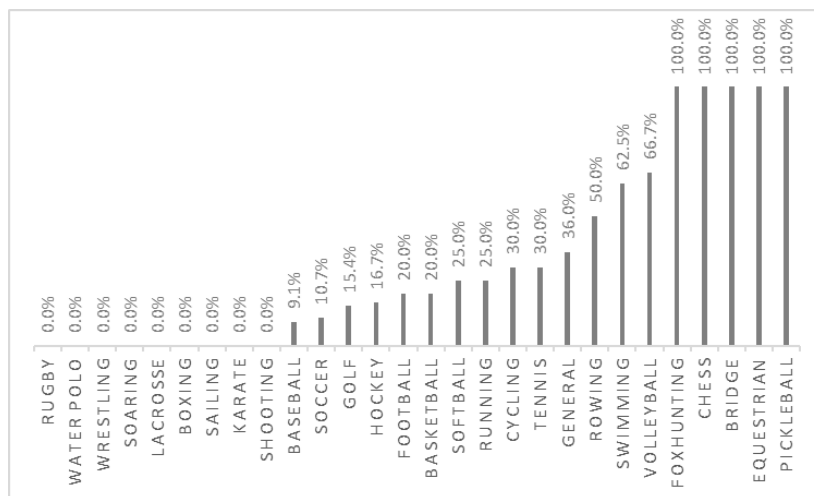


Figure 9: Female president likelihood by sport

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

In a context where research on gender diversity has increased significantly in line with broader societal movements advocating for gender equality (McLeod et al, 2025), this study examined women's access to the governance of nonprofit sports organisations. Although sports do not have inherent gender characteristics (Alsamir, 2024), gender stereotypes often operate in this field, resulting in women being underrepresented and often precluded from holding apical leadership positions within the boardrooms (Knoppers et al, 2022).

The study's findings confirm that the governance of nonprofit sports organisations is typically male-dominated (Alsarve, 2024), thus perpetuating the conservative and stereotypical perception of sport as a masculine institution (Anderson, 2009). The gender disparity in leadership positions is evident, with men holding over two thirds of board seats. While previous studies have found that women hold the majority of board positions in smaller nonprofits (Clerkin, Diomande and Koob, 2024), the boards of sports organisations consistently favour men over women representation. Despite women on average reaching the critical mass of 30% or more of total board positions in the sector, they actually constitute a mere symbolic presence in more than half of nonprofit sports organisations. This jeopardises their capacity to make a meaningful contribution to board decisions and could hinder the board's ability to perform to its full potential, as it would not benefit from the combined qualities that women and men could bring to the boardroom (McLeod et al, 2025; Wicker, Feiler and Breuer, 2022).

Even when women reach leadership positions, they are often excluded from the upper echelons and most influential board roles (Eime et al, 2021; Wicker, Feiler and Breuer, 2022). Although the likelihood of having a female president increases with the growing number of women on the board, data show that only a few women chair nonprofit sports organisations, thereby confirming that breaking down gender stereotypes associated with these roles is difficult (Elkhwesky, Salem and El Manzani, 2025). However, a few cases show that discriminatory behaviour towards women is neither ubiquitous nor inescapable (Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024), and that women can reach senior leadership positions even in male-dominated boards.

Finally, the data show that women are more likely to be underrepresented in the governance of sports organisations that are perceived as masculine, whether as board members or presidents/chairpersons (e.g. wrestling and rugby). This finding seems to support the assumption that gender stereotypes affect women more in contexts where their presence is unusual (Eime et al, 2021; Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024; Knoppers et al, 2022). Conversely, women tend to be better represented in the governance of sports organisations that are perceived as feminine, such as volleyball (Elling, Hovden and Knoppers, 2018). The risk is that gender and cultural stereotypes persist, with male and female leadership dominating separate male and female sports organisations (Alsarve, 2024).

The findings of the study contribute to the understanding of gender representation at board level, which is important because directors control their organisation's direction, act as its most visible representatives, and secure its funding. Board gender diversity benefits the organization in many ways including financial, human and social capital (Wicker, Feiler and Breuer, 2022). Therefore, avoiding significant gender-imbalances within the boardroom can be a way to improve the effectiveness of decision-making processes.

On average, board membership and leadership of nonprofit organisations are still slightly skewed towards men, and the imbalance is even greater in the sports sector, where gender stereotypes often hinder the emergence and success of female leaders. Some gender equality practices, such as gender quotas, may facilitate the emergence and potential of female leaders, even in a masculine-dominated environment. However, these practices do not always work as intended and can sometimes have the opposite effect, such as perpetuating the stereotypical belief that women require intervention because they lack adequate competence (Alsarve, 2024; Poma and Pistoresi, 2024; Verge and Lombardo, 2021). Therefore, a change in cultural beliefs that underpin gender stereotyping may increase women's opportunities to hold leadership positions (Kobutary, Syed and Haloub, 2019).

Extensive research shows that changing gender stereotypes is a slow and complex process (Eagly et al 2020; Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024). However, examples and stories of successful women can help accelerate this process by boosting other women's self-confidence and increasing acceptance of them as effective leaders.

**Ethics declaration:** Ethical clearance was not required for this research.

**AI declaration:** AI tools were not used to create this paper.

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