

WHY ORGANIZATION STUDIES SHOULD CARE MORE ABOUT GENDER EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION IN SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Sport organizations hold substantial ideological power to showcase and reinforce dominant cultural ideas about gender. The organization and portrayal of sporting events and spaces continue to promote and reinforce a hierarchical gender binary where heroic forms of masculinity are both desired and privileged. Such publicly visible gender hierarchies contribute to the doing of gender beyond sport itself, extending to influence gender power relations within sport and non-sport organizations. Yet, there has been a relative absence of scholarship on sport organizations within the organizational sociology field. In this paper, we review findings of studies that look at how formal and informal organizational dimensions influence the doing and undoing of gender in sport organizations. Subsequently, we call for scholars to pay more attention to sport itself as a source of gendered organizational practices within both sport and

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non-sport organizations. We end with suggestions for research that empirically explores this linkage by focusing on innovative theoretical perspectives that could provide new insights on gender inclusion in organizations.

Keywords: Sport organizations; doing and undoing gender; gender binary; formal and informal organizational dimensions; conceptual paper

INTRODUCTION

The influence and power of modern sport organizations in Western societies are both multifaceted and complex, and sport organizations hold the potential to create social transformations beyond the sporting sphere (Bergsgaard, 2005; Coakley & Pike, 2014; Elling et al., 2019). Such potential stems from their immense geographical and social dissemination, which globally bonds together nations, regions, and local societies across divides of class, gender, sexuality, and race. Sport organizations reflect and showcase dominant societal values, cultures, and imageries that are publicly celebrated and contested (Bairner & Han, 2022). Thus, sporting events can act as symbols of, and models for, dominant cultural ideas about gender, such as the “true nature” of men and women (Adjepong, 2019). Resultantly, sport organizations possess ideological power to influence how gender is “done,” “undone,” and “redone” both within sport and wider society (Rahbari et al., 2019). For example, the history of sport organizations as male-dominated spaces has led to the resistance and exclusion of women from sport participation, politics, and governance (Coakley & Pike, 2014; Elling et al., 2019; Hargreaves, 1994). Despite advances in gender inclusion among athletes (48% of the athletes that competed at Tokyo 2020 were women; IOC, 2019), women are still grossly underrepresented in sport leadership and governance positions at all levels and across all corners of the globe (Adriaanse, 2019; Matthews & Piggott, 2021). Specifically, globally, men continue to form a significant majority of coaches, athletic/club directors, sport managers, board members, and the like. There remains a persistent trend: the higher the level, the fewer women.

The existing feminist body of research on sport organizations, as reviewed by Burton (2015) and Evans and Pfister (2021), has explored how many men continue to be privileged within male-dominated leadership structures. Theories frequently used to explain the underrepresentation and undervaluing of women include those that focus on human capital, agency, gender difference/essentialism, patriarchy, positional power, critical mass, and organizational structure (Burton, 2015; Evans & Pfister, 2021; Kanter, 1977; Reddy & Jadhav, 2019). Acker (1990), in her theory on gender and organizations, has argued that the primary (formal and informal) activities of an organization shape how gender is done within that organization. Resultantly, a distinct stream of research has developed on both sport and non-sport organizations that has sought to understand how organizational factors shape board gender composition (Evans & Pfister, 2021; Kirsch, 2018). In doing so, scholars (e.g., Bridges et al., 2022; Bridges et al., 2020; Sogn, 2023) have argued that gender is done, undone, and redone through an association

between organizational activities and dominant practices associated with (heterosexual) masculinities. We describe and explain some of these practices throughout this paper.

Since sport occurs in mediated and public spaces, the visibility of women athletes, especially on the world stage, has contributed to undoing a long-held gendered belief that women are physically weak (Hargreaves, 1994). Simultaneously, the organization and portrayal of this public space continues to promote and reinforce a hierarchical gendered binary where heroic forms of masculinity are both desired and privileged. Women athletes may be seen as competent and strong, but men are constructed as *more* competent and *stronger* (Ryan & Dickson, 2018). This public visibility, moreover, contributes to the doing of gender beyond sport itself and underlines the need to pay attention to how gendered public discourse in sport and the resources devoted to it, influence the gendering of both sport and non-sport organizations.

In this paper, we attempt to address this in several ways. We first use a sociological lens to review findings of studies that look at how formal and informal organizational dimensions influence the doing and undoing of gender in sport organizations. Subsequently, based on the increasing global significance of institutionalized sport, we call for scholars to pay more attention to sport itself as a source of gendered organizational practices within both sport and non-sport organizations. For example, we argue that the linkage between sport and constructions of desirable masculinity may also infiltrate conceptualizations of desirable leaders in non-sport organizations and shape gender ratios in positions of leadership in these organizations. This goes some way in answering calls within organizational scholarship to shift attention away from the most common theoretical paradigms and instead focus on more innovative perspectives that could provide new insights on gender inclusion in organizations (Joshi et al., 2015; Rao & Donaldson, 2015; Warren et al., 2019). We end with suggestions for research that empirically explores this linkage.

We contribute to the aim of this volume to explore the new boundaries of organizational sociology in several ways. First, there has been a relative absence of scholarship on sport organizations within the organizational sociology field, despite the powerful social influence of sport organizations on societal practices, as previously indicated. We therefore deem our paper to be an important contribution to limited scholarship on this topic within the field of organizational studies. Second, despite other papers having an inclusion or secondary gender focus (e.g., see Papers 6 and 9, this volume), our paper is the only contribution within this volume with a central gender focus. We believe that any organizational sociology issue or scholarly volume should minimally include several contributions that centralize gender since much of the gender inequity that exists in industrial societies is created and reproduced within organizational settings through the daily activities of working and organizing work (Acker, 2006). Finally, while conceptual papers and literature reviews already exist on gender inclusion within sport organizations, few of these contributions have a central focus on the role of social theory and on the implications for non-sport organizations. Therefore, in this paper, we hope to contribute to deepening understanding within this sub-field

by bringing a novel contribution to a growing body of (sport) organizational research, and the ways gender is done, undone, and at times redone, in organizations (Knoppers & Spaaij, 2021; Pape, 2020; Piggott, 2021).

DOING AND UNDOING GENDER

The conceptualization of gender as something that is “fluid, dynamic and as something that has to be done” has increasingly gained popularity within organizational research (Kelan, 2010, p. 174). “Doing gender” is a term developed by West and Zimmerman (1987) to conceptualize gender as a social product of doing, as an activity or practice that is part of interactions, rather than as a set of traits or roles. Butler (1990) further posits that “gender is always a doing” (p. 25). Organizations are particularly potent sites for doing gender as organizational practices can produce and reproduce gender in a way that positions men as “naturally” more competent and suitable for status roles, such as managerial, sport leadership, or coaching positions (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012; Kvande, 2007). Additionally, occupations constructed as masculine are perceived to require skills and qualities that men supposedly possess and women supposedly lack (Ely & Meyerson, 2010). This essentialist masculine occupational identity is further reinforced by the numerical dominance of men within these occupations. The invisible nature of such gendered status hierarchies can often mask the mechanisms that reinforce and sustain them (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012).

“Undoing gender” is a concept that was introduced by Butler (2004) and developed by Deutsch (2007) out of dissatisfaction with the one-dimensional nature of doing gender. It refers to social practices and interactions that reduce gender differences and produce change toward gender inclusion. An increasing body of work is exploring how undoing gendered practices within organizations can help to move toward greater gender equity (e.g., Benschop & Verloo, 2011; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Kelan, 2018). A further body of work also points to ways that gender can be undone and subsequently redone. For example, Claringbould and Van Liere (2019) revealed how sport boards of governance that had actively recruited women to balance the gender ratio no longer engaged in this policy once the presence of an equal number of women and men indicated gender had been undone. When women left these boards, they tended to be replaced by a male, and thus gender was redone. Messner and Bozada-Deas (2009) also found that gender was undone when both women and men were encouraged and recruited to be leaders in youth sport organizations. Gender was redone, however, because women were implicitly found to be most suitable for supportive roles while men ended up being most of the coaches. Thus, although both women and men volunteered to be leaders, occupational segregation still occurred along traditional gendered lines.

Gender is done, undone, and redone within all organizations across both formal and informal organizational dimensions. Korvajärvi (2002) provides a helpful distinction between the two. First, formal dimensions include ways of organizing work, formal job requirements, job descriptions, and organizational structures

and hierarchies. An important element of formal dimensions is that they can always be documented or textualized, such as written rules, organograms, job titles, and statistics, as well as logos or uniforms (Korvajärvi, 2002). Conversely, informal organizational dimensions are more nuanced and include interactions, symbols, and attitudes. Such practices are not easily documented and often lack visibility (Korvajärvi, 2002). Within the next section, we draw on the concepts of doing and undoing gender across formal and informal organizational dimensions to provide a deeper understanding of how organizational practices and processes contribute to (a lack of) gender inclusion in sport organizations.

DOING AND UNDOING GENDER IN SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

Formal Organizational Dimensions and Doing Gender

Formal organizational dimensions contribute to doing gender by organizational rules and actions privileging men and masculinity within internal organizational structures, such as leadership and governance hierarchies. A structural dimension that is both a *symptom* and *cause* of doing gender is vertical gender segregation. A common finding across sport organizations (as well as non-sport organizations) is that the more senior or influential the role or space within an organization, the fewer the women (e.g., Adriaanse, 2019; Cabrera-Fernández et al., 2015; Clayton-Hathway, 2022; Halliday et al., 2021; Kirsch, 2018; Litchfield, 2015; Melton & Bryant, 2017; Preston & Velija, 2022; Simpkins et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2017). This works to do gender by reproducing perceptions that men belong in (sport) leadership roles, while the presence of women is positioned as the exception rather than the norm (Deutsch, 2007). This vertical gender segregation within sport organizations has been conceptualized in different ways. For example, Wilson et al. (2017) drew on Low and Iverson's (2016) work on socially just public spaces to position the lack of women in decision-making spaces within Australian rules football organizations as a form of procedural injustice. Procedural justice is concerned with "the ways in which decisions about public spaces are made" and the extent to which such spaces are "the object of genuinely democratic and inclusive public debate" (Low & Iverson, 2016, p. 21). Wilson et al. (2017) argue that the exclusion of women/women's agendas from Australian Football League decision-making spaces can result in women being "locked out" of decision making that goes on behind closed doors" (p. 1710). This results in unjust processes that do gender by contributing to a wider climate of unjust organizational politics of gender exclusion both inside and outside of the boardroom (Low & Iverson, 2016).

Adriaanse (2019) analyzed such politics of exclusion by drawing on Kanter's (1977) critical mass theory to discuss how uneven gender ratios across the boards of European national sport federations (NSFs) shape organizational conditions. She argued that the lack of a critical mass (30%) of women across boards indicates that sport organizational cultures will remain male dominated and that prospects for women to undo gender via cultural change are limited. Research continues to

find that a critical mass of women is needed on boards for women to influence the culture of an organization, both within and beyond sport (e.g., [Hovden, 2016](#); [Joecks et al., 2013](#); [Konrad et al., 2008](#); [Kramer et al., 2006](#)). Yet, critical mass theory has also received critique within the wider organizational literature for its lack of insight on whether an increased proportion of women leaders works to undo gender by disrupting dominant board culture and positively influencing change toward greater gender equity within organizations ([Childs & Krook, 2008](#)). Board members may, for example, be selected on the basis of perceived fit with the dominant board culture. Thus, a critical mass of women on a board may not necessarily mean a change in gendered policies or that women members will be supportive of each other.

The lack of opportunity to undo gender by changing board culture as a result of compositional change is further reflected in [Preston and Velija's \(2022\)](#) study. They drew on [Rao et al.'s \(1999\)](#) concept of exclusionary power to discuss how men overwhelmingly hold “positional power” within the English Football Association (The FA) by dominating decision-making positions. The minority of women who did hold positional power felt fearful of having their knowledge and competence questioned due to their hypervisibility as isolated women leaders. Preston and Velija concluded that, within such gender imbalanced organizational structures, positional power among women leaders often fails to translate into having a voice or power to make decisions. This finding highlights how it is not only the gender composition of organizational roles that does gender but also that gendered status hierarchies within organizational decision-making bodies continue to empower men more than women as decision-makers. This was further discussed by [Hedenborg and Norberg \(2019\)](#), who drew on [Acker's \(1992\)](#) work on gendered institutions. They conceptualize the underrepresentation of women leaders on Swedish sport boards as a gendered production of power in favor of men that results from the production of gender division. That is, gendered perceptions, symbols, and images result in notions about leadership that lack gender neutrality and justify (consciously or subconsciously) gender divisions that continue to privilege many men ([Acker, 1992](#)).

An increasing number of scholars have addressed vertical gender segregation from an intersectional lens, highlighting how marginalizing practices in sport organizations have a more profound impact on some women over others depending on their intersecting identities. That is, doing gender has different meanings for different people across different organizational situations and contexts. This aligns with a growing body of non-sport scholarship that considers “the various ways in which multiple social categories intersect to shape outcomes for women in the workplace” ([Rosette et al., 2018](#), p. 1). Yet, academic discussions on the opportunities and experiences of women sport leaders have overwhelmingly been framed around the experiences of White women doing gender within sport organizations. For example, women have been traditionally portrayed as docile, communal, and supportive, which often ignores the experiences of Black women doing gender within sport organizations that are also defined by racial ideology and accompanying stereotypes, such as that Black women are loud, aggressive, and independent ([Simpkins et al., 2022](#)).

Both [Simpkins et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Melton and Bryant \(2017\)](#) found that there is a severe underrepresentation of Black women within US sport organizations. [Melton and Bryant \(2017\)](#) revealed that there were just two women of color that held the position of president or CEO of teams in the Women's National Basketball Association at the time of writing, despite women of color making up a large proportion of players in the league. Additionally, [Simpkins et al. \(2022\)](#) applied the Sport Intersecting Model of Power (SIMP; [Simpkins, 2019](#)) to examine how a person's positionality can play a critical role in the amount and type of access that an individual has to power and privilege. These scholars found that vertical racialized gender segregation resulted in Black women sport leaders experiencing "outsider within status" ([Hill Collins, 1986](#)). That is, although the women themselves occupied leadership positions, and so were "inside" the top rung of the organizational hierarchy, they were constantly aware of being Black because they were often the only Black women present in these organizational spaces. Resultantly, their outsider status was even more visible compared to their White female counterparts, and so the doing of gender (and Whiteness) within sport organizations resulted in both men and White women being positioned as "naturally" more competent for positions of authority. Research on managers/leaders in non-sport organizations shows similar results (e.g., [Bloch et al., 2021](#)). Ironically, the notable presence of women of color in elite sport means that a pool of knowledgeable women is available for work in sport organizations. This pool does not, however, translate into more women of color occupying positions of leadership in sport organizations compared to non-sport organizations ([Bernard et al., 2021](#); [Dadswell et al., 2022](#); [Miller, 2021](#)).

A range of formal organizational dimensions have been found to *contribute* to continued vertical (racialized) gender segregation within sport organizations and ultimately to the doing of gender. For example, [Karacam and Koca \(2019\)](#) discussed the gendered influence of formal rules within Turkish sport governance. One such rule was that presidential candidates of NSFs were required to make a non-refundable donation of €40,000 to the NSF prior to an election. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of economic capital, they argued that such institutional practices disproportionately benefit a small number of highly privileged men who have access to considerable amounts of economic capital. Due to gender unequal economic conditions within wider Turkish society, these formal organizational practices have resulted in the vast majority of presidency and board positions of Turkish NSFs being occupied by businessmen whose suitability has become normalized within sport leadership roles. Similarly, [Piggott and Matthews \(2021\)](#) drew on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field to discuss how formal processes within English national governing bodies (NGBs) of sport contribute to doing and undoing gender. They found that formal processes acted as conservation strategies to maintain male dominance in organizational leadership and governance hierarchies in terms of both representation and recognition. This included a gendered election rule that guaranteed more elected men than women on the board, and a merger between a men's and a women's NGB that resulted in women becoming peripheralized and lacking autonomy in the newly merged organization. These examples are specific to the formal policies and structures of

individual sport organizations but are also symptomatic of a wider critique of how the traditional governance structures and rules of sport organizations make them particularly susceptible to poor practice, corruption, and unethical leadership (Tomlinson, 2014).

Scholars have also discussed the challenge of the *lack* of formal action or policy that attempts to undo gender. For example, Litchfield (2015) found that no policy existed across Australian recreational hockey clubs to ensure that men and women were afforded the same opportunities to engage in decision-making practices. This meant that even when women at the clubs recognized unequal practices, no complaint procedure was available to express concerns. Drawing on Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory of gender relations, Litchfield (2015) argued that this lack of policy, combined with other factors, produces organizational cultures where women are systematically disenfranchised from power structures. Additionally, Norman et al. (2018) discussed the lack of strategic leadership within The FA to identify and provide opportunities for career progression for under-represented women football coaches and coach developers. Drawing on Schein's theory of organizational culture, the authors identified a disconnect between espoused (championed) values within the FA and actual practice on the ground. This led informants to feel that they were on the "cliff edge" after gaining tutoring qualifications due to fewer job opportunities compared to men. The existence of glass ceilings that need to be shattered or glass cliffs that occur when women are hired for precarious positions is common for women managers in both sport and non-sport organizations (Ahn & Cunningham, 2020; Groeneveld et al., 2020).

A range of scholars have explored formal *implications* of gendered power structures, beyond vertical gender segregation, because of formal organizational dimensions doing gender. For example, Preston and Velija (2022) discussed how a lack of "positional power" among women in The FA resulted in men dominating "agenda setting power." This led to agenda items in decision-making spaces (e.g., board or leadership meetings) often being dominated by matters related to the men's game. This demonstrates how male-dominated leadership can influence the doing of gender within other areas of the organization outside of leadership spaces and matters. Furthermore, Velija (2022) developed a sociological analysis of the gender pay gap in UK sport organizations, finding that male dominance across many sport organizations resulted in men being paid more, on average, than women. The highest disparity in gender pay was across organizations where professional sport is commercialized relating to male performance (with an average gender pay gap of 59.1% in 2018–2019 across such organizations). Drawing on figurational theory, Velija discussed how gender pay gap reporting highlights differences in power relations between groups but also develops higher levels of mutual understanding as organizations are, at least to some extent, forced to consider how the gender pay gap affects female employees. Velija argued that, while the reporting of gender pay gap data may reflect a process of equalization (undoing gender), the results highlight ongoing inequalities that continue to exist despite an expectation that the gender pay gap should be reduced. This demonstrates how doing gender is most strongly reinforced within organizations most aligned with competitive male sport and in turn heroic masculinity.

Formal Organizational Dimensions and Undoing Gender

As well as formal organizational dimensions contributing to doing gender, they also have the potential to undo gender when organizations are committed to increasing the representation, remuneration, and valuing of women leaders. Such structural changes work to undo gender by “promot[ing] changes at the interactional level by undermining the perception that women are less competent in the domains that matter” (Deutsch, 2007, p. 118). Within sport organizations, this includes the implementation of structural strategies and actions such as the use of gender quotas, targets, and gender pay gap reporting (Fasting & Sisjord, 2019; Hovden, 2016; Jakubowska, 2019; Piggott, 2022; Velija, 2022) and more cultural means such as diversity steering groups and action plans (Clayton-Hathway, 2022), equity training (Norman, 2016), and formal mentoring schemes (Clayton-Hathway, 2022; Norman et al., 2018). The implementation of such formal organizational strategies and actions largely reflects those that have been introduced within non-sport organizations, which have led organizational scholars to dedicate “massive efforts towards understanding ... the appropriate actions and policies to advance women’s equality” (Belingeri et al., 2021, p. 2; Cabrera-Fernández et al., 2015).

Within the sporting context, drawing on Schein’s theory of organizational culture, Norman et al. (2018) discussed how the development of quality workplace relations through formal mentoring schemes at The FA went beyond an “espoused philosophy” toward practices that are undoing gender through women experiencing a sense of belonging and being valued within the workplace. Additionally, Velija (2022) drew on figurational analyses of shame and embarrassment to highlight the potential of gender pay gap reporting as a form of social control over sport organizations to challenge ongoing gender inequalities. That is, the interactive and social dimension of shame as a collective phenomenon can influence those not following gender equity expectations to commit to more equal labor patterns and, in turn, positively influence gender inclusion.

A commitment to undoing gender via more equal labor patterns was also discussed by Clayton-Hathway (2022), who drew on an institutional theory perspective to highlight the important role of the British Horse Racing Authority in establishing norms of valuing inclusion and diversity across the entire horse-racing industry. Such norms were established through the implementation of formal top-down rules and practices. This included the development of a Diversity in Racing Steering Group and a Diversity in Racing Action Plan that incorporated a 30% minimum target for female representation on horse-racing boards. Clayton-Hathway (2022) argued that the legitimization of gender inclusion as a serious issue for horse racing “positively reinforces cultural and ethical expectations, supporting ‘institutional isomorphism’ [in] encouraging other organizations to assess and adopt shared goals and processes” (p. 171). Similarly, Piggott (2022) drew on Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, and capital to discuss how the implementation of top-down regulations in English sport governance has changed the rules of the field to encourage NGBs of sport to reform their internal governance rules and structures to be more gender equitable. Here, the implementation of “A Code for Sports Governance” by UK Sport and Sport England in 2016, which included

a 30% minimum gender target on the boards of sport organizations in receipt of public funding, resulted in a significant increase in female representation on sport boards. Fifty-five out of 58 NGBs hit the 30% target by the end of 2017 and average female representation on NGB boards was at 40% by 2019 (Piggott, 2022). Several other studies, both in sport and non-sport organizations, have also argued that gender quotas as a structural fast track strategy have led to fast-paced and substantial increases in the representation of women in male-dominated boards (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005; Fasting & Sisjord, 2019; Hovden, 2012; Terjesen et al., 2015). For example, the quota law in Norwegian sport organizations, approved in 1991, resulted in the highest percentage of women board members among national sports federation globally (Adriaanse, 2019).

While positive impacts have resulted from formal actions aiming to make sport leadership and governance more gender inclusive, some scholars have critiqued the extent to which such practices genuinely contribute to undoing gender (and in some cases result in the redoing of gender). For example, Piggott (2022) found that, while the majority of English NGBs complied with the formal requirements of “A Code for Sport Governance,” the principles and values of the code were not internalized. A clear indicator of this was the lack of change in gender ratios among leadership positions not regulated by the governance code (e.g., executive leadership positions). This suggests that the code did not go far enough in transforming the deep-rooted organizational culture of NGBs. A similar conclusion was made by Jakubowska (2019), who drew on Nancy Fraser’s (2007, 2013) concept of social justice to argue that the implementation of gender quotas for sport governance positions is an example of affirmation, with an increased recognition of women but without undoing gender by changing the underlying culture-value structure. Likewise, Norman (2016) drew on a critical feminist framework to argue that interventions being implemented by The FA, such as equity training for coaches, attempt to change structures that produce inequality without implementing corresponding interventions addressing the beliefs that legitimate this inequality. The contribution of formal organizational dimensions to undoing gender is, therefore, complex and can vary depending on the type of organization and the political context within which it is located. Within organizational research, *informal* institutions and practices have been important research topics in helping scholars to understand this gap between espoused formal institutional practice or change and actual outcomes (Waylen, 2013). This is where we now turn our attention.

Informal Organizational Dimensions and Doing Gender

Informal practices influence doing gender within sport organizations by positioning men and masculinity as synonymous with leadership and decision-making roles and in turn positioning women and femininity as synonymous with supporting or peripheral roles. For example, Piggott and Pike (2020) drew on Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, and capital to explore how informal organizational practices within two English NGBs of sport impacted upon gender representation and equity within their leadership and governance. Such informal practices

included gendered dress codes (e.g., awarding all board members with a blazer and tie on election), gendered language (e.g., sexist humor and the use of gendered terms like “Chairman”), informal gender segregation (e.g., women sitting with women and men sitting with men within board meetings), and informal expectations for leaders to work long and unsociable hours. The influence of socially embedded gendered processes, and particularly those relating to appointment processes and social networks, has similarly been a key focus in the non-sport literature (Kirsch, 2018). Piggott and Pike (2020) highlighted how such informal practices can result in gendered disparities in capital accumulation and align sport leadership to the dominant male habitus. For example, informal gender segregation in the boardroom can work to reinforce gender stereotypes and strengthen “old boys’ clubs” that are continually found to benefit the accumulation and value of social capital for men over women (Hotham et al., 2021; Karacam & Koca, 2019). Additionally, long and unsociable working hours in sport and non-sport organizations are mostly incompatible with the cultural habitus of motherhood that continues to normalize the position of women as the primary caregivers of children (Claringbould & Van Lier, 2019; Piggott & Pike, 2020). These authors argue that increased organizational consciousness of such informal practices and their implications is needed as a first step in creating organizational change that undoes gender.

Informal organizational cultures that privilege men and masculinity also influence the individual experiences of women leaders. For example, Hotham et al. (2021) found that, compared to men, women working in Australian male team sports felt underestimated, patronized, and lacking respect in relation to their experience, knowledge, and skills. Drawing on a third-wave feminist lens, the authors discussed how this was the result of hegemonic masculinity and male privilege, which led to a disparate level of power between men and women. Resultantly, women often feel as though they must work harder or have superior skills compared to men to be valued in the same way within sport organizations (e.g., Hotham et al., 2021; Hovden, 2013; Melton & Bryant, 2017). This is not a new finding, with 20-year-old organizational scholarship similarly reporting that women have higher standards imposed on them (Eagly et al., 2003). Such gendered power disparities have led to some women leaders feeling unwelcome, marginalized, and othered within organizational spaces.

As aforementioned, researchers are increasingly exploring how experiences of otherness can be heightened for some women over others because of diverse experiences of gender being done. For example, Rankin-Wright et al. (2019) drew on a critical race theory approach that engaged insights from Black feminist thought to explore the experiences of Black men and women coaches in the United Kingdom. One woman within their study explained how she felt detached from the “ideal image” of a traditional coach in her sport because her “Pakistani female body was immediately marked as ‘different’ to the “unmarked normative positions of Whiteness and masculinity dominant in this sport” (Rankin-Wright et al., 2019, pp. 609–610). Other women felt like intruders within spaces that have typically privileged White men. Rankin-Wright et al. (2019) discussed how such experiences of marginalization are underpinned by racialized and gendered

occupational stereotypes that lead to conscious or subconscious assumptions that Black women are more suited to assistant positions and less suited to leadership positions. Such gendered and racialized stereotypes are reproduced by “the cultures of sport organizations [that] often have a line of entitlement and privilege running through them such that whiteness and maleness are celebrated in leadership positions” (Simpkins et al., 2022, p. 47). Puwar (2004) has revealed how this feeling of being a space invader in a male-dominated organizational culture also occurs among those holding positions in parliamentary bodies in government.

In response to racialized and gendered meritocratic ideals, Melton and Bryant (2017) discussed how women leaders with multiple marginal identities in US sport organizations adopt techniques and strategies to fit in or connect with the dominant group within their organization. This includes using various techniques to downplay parts of their identity, such as their sexuality or gender. One identity management technique that has been commonly discussed within the sport leadership literature is women sport leaders and coaches adopting masculine leadership styles to be accepted and respected within male-dominated organizational spaces (Hotham et al., 2021; Preston & Velija, 2022; Tjønndal, 2019). However, Hotham et al. (2021) found that women sport leaders faced negative backlash if they adopted more agentic or masculine behaviors due to a perceived incongruity between styles associated with masculinity and their biological gender. This demonstrates the “double bind” that women leaders often face in both sport and non-sport organizations. If they behave like men, they risk having their femininity, and in turn womanhood, called into question. However, if they behave like women, they appear incapable and unfit for the job (Bourdieu, 2001; Shaw & Hoerber, 2003).

Preston and Velija (2022) drew on Rao et al.’s (1999) concept of hidden power to discuss *how* informal gendered practices and outcomes continue to be reproduced within sport organizations to reinforce the doing of gender. Hidden power refers to forms of power that are exercised to the detriment of others without their knowledge. It is a similar notion to other theoretical ideas that conceptualize invisible or consensual forms of power, such as Bourdieu’s (1991, 1992, 2000) symbolic violence and Gramsci’s (1971) theory of hegemony. In the context of The FA, hidden power was seen to play out through female employees changing their behaviors upon joining the organization and accepting this as “normal” or “just football” (Preston & Velija, 2022). Additionally, some female employees seemed to accept that male employees had a greater likelihood of promotion or career progression than their female counterparts. Preston and Velija (2022) discussed how this was likely due to hidden power relations normalizing cultural assumptions that men have more right to be promoted within the organization. In doing so, “the dominance of men and the valued forms of masculinity [will continue to be] ... considered synonymous with dominant forms of leadership” (Preston & Velija, 2022, p. 160). This demonstrates the often-invisible workings of doing gender that mask the very mechanisms that reinforce and sustain gendered status hierarchies (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012). While scholarship on non-sport organizations has discussed how all institutions are “substantively gendered through numerous mechanisms that result in gender bias” (Waylen, 2013, p. 215),

these hidden power dynamics are particularly prominent within sport organizations when “images and discourses associated with management and leadership in sport are infused with masculine traits and characteristics such as toughness, sport playing experience, and instrumentality” (Schull et al., 2013, p. 59).

Informal Organizational Dimensions and Undoing Gender

In addition to doing gender, informal organizational dimensions also have the power to undo gender by reducing perceptions of gender differences within sport organizations and in turn developing more inclusive and equitable practices. However, unlike proactive, strategic, and intentional formal actions and strategies, informal dimensions tend to work subconsciously, accidentally, or indirectly to undo gender. Waylen (2013) argued that “informal norms and rules can play an important part in the extent to which new formal rules take root, often with complex and contradictory outcomes not intended by institutional designers, and this varies in different contexts” (p. 221). Yet, organizational scholarship has been critiqued for being too rigid and deterministic in understanding and theorizing (a lack of) institutional change, adopting concepts like path dependence and critical junctures to explore externally driven change (Clegg, 1990; Waylen, 2013). This means that less focus has been given to how informal, internal institutional rules, norms, and practices uphold, surpass, or subvert the formal in achieving certain organizational aims, including undoing gender.

A handful of studies have explored examples of informal organizational dimensions that contribute to undoing gender within the sporting context. For example, Spaaij et al. (2018) drew on Ahmed’s critical analytical lens for investigating diversity practices in institutional contexts to examine diversity work in Australian community sport organizations. Their findings indicated that diversity work within these organizations was “mostly haphazard or accidental” (Spaaij et al., 2018, p. 292). In particular, they discussed how the emergence of informal “diversity champions” within sport clubs (those who “exhibit extra-role behaviors aimed at ensuring the success of diversity initiatives”) tended to happen by chance (Spaaij et al., 2018, p. 292). This is because the development of these positions tended to be the result of an individual club member with an existing formal position (e.g., committee member) being committed to diversity rather than it being strategically initiated at the club level. The authors discuss how such informal strategies are important in developing more welcoming and inclusive organizational environments, as well as ensuring that equality, diversity, and inclusion issues do not fall off the clubs’ agendas. However, they also highlight how such informal roles tend to lack systematic embedment within sport organizations and so can be unsustainable and insufficient in achieving organizational change. A key element of this is the lack of accountability associated with informal strategies to undo gender. Whereas the success of formal roles or strategies are (ideally) subject to appraisal or review processes, informal roles and strategies are not monitored or evaluated in the same way. Spaaij et al. (2018) argue for the need for informal diversity work to become more formalized and systematically integrated into organizational life to be effective.

The formalization of informal organizational dimensions has not always been found to be effective in supporting the undoing of gender within sport organizations, however. For example, Sisjord (2019) drew on perspectives of doing and undoing gender to support her understanding of the dynamic aspects of women's agency within the Norwegian Snowboard Federation (NSF). She found that the development of an informal snowboard network was influential in undoing gender through a high engagement of women in political activity, resulting in the undoing of stereotypical notions of gender in sport governance. However, she also found that the replacement of this network with a more formal performance-focused project anchored in the national snowboard federation pushed the doing of gender more in line with "traditional" sport. This problematically resulted in a smaller pool of strong female candidates for board positions and acts as an example of redoing gender, where gender has been undone via an informal activity and subsequently redone by the formalization of this activity.

Other scholars have also observed informal networks being effective in undoing gender in sport organizations. For example, Hotham et al. (2021) found that support and being empowered by men and other women was important for women while working in male Australian team sports clubs. This contributed to the development and maintenance of confidence in their own ability. Drawing on a third-wave feminist lens, Hotham et al. (2021) discussed how some participants who felt such empowerment were "understood to be claiming pockets of ownership within a male dominated sporting space and exerting confidence whilst doing so" (p. 408). Similarly, Norman et al. (2018) found that positive horizontal relationships across the coaching workforce of The FA were facilitative for coach development. Many coaches had maintained informal relationships with fellow coaches following participation on formal coaching courses, which led to frequent, day-to-day supportive interactions among these individuals. Drawing on Schein's theory of organizational culture, the authors highlight how the quality, consistency, and meaningfulness of relationships in the workplace are a key tenet of organizational culture in supporting the progression of women as football coaches and tutors. Norman et al. (2018) discuss how the nurturing of personal relations is rarely a formal focus of organizations, despite low social integration often correlating with occupational burnout. Therefore, they call for increased attention to be paid by organizations to the socio-relational elements of women's working conditions in sporting contexts. This is an example of interaction as a site of change, with interactions between individuals having the potential to change normative conceptions of gender (Deutsch, 2007).

In addition to the workings of informal actions and processes, some researchers have found that simply having female representation within certain organizational positions can positively influence the undoing of gender in sporting contexts. For example, drawing on Haavind's theory of gender as a cultural code, Tjønndal (2019) discussed how the representation of women as boxing coaches is "challenging the general perceptions of what a boxing coach is" (p. 93). This aligned with research within non-sport literature that has found that an increase of women's representation among positions of organizational power is gradually leading to a normalization of women in roles and positions formerly possessed by

men (Benshop & Verloo, 2011; Stainback et al., 2016). Similarly, drawing on Rao et al.'s (1999) concept of exclusionary power, Preston and Velija (2022) found that women holding senior positions within The FA continue to push for change and, in doing so, often challenge traditional mindsets within the organization. This challenging of mindsets did not come without resistance, however, with some women being viewed as a nuisance and some men within the organization being displeased by women holding leadership positions (Preston & Velija, 2022).

Within this section, we have shown how a wide range of theoretical perspectives have been used to aid an understanding of how organizations do and undo gender through both formal and informal organizational dimensions. However, in engaging with this existing literature, we have also identified a notable theoretical gap. That is, there has been a lack of focus on how binary orders in and through sport may influence structures and the doing of gender within (sport) organizations. We will now discuss how a future focus on sport as a source of (formal and informal) gendered organizational practices could be a fruitful approach in further developing scholarship within the organizational sociology field.

THE REPRODUCTION OF BINARY ORDERS IN AND THROUGH SPORT

A notable omission in the use of theoretical perspectives to explain how gender is done within sport organizations is the absence of grounding explanations in the unique way sport is organized and in the enactment of gender binaries within competitive sport. This is in line with Ahmed's (2006) argument for the need to explore the history of objects and how historical constructions have shaped understandings of what bodies can do (in sport). Since the beginning of the formal organization of sport, sport participation has been based on hierarchical gendered binary classifications that are assumed to be fixed. Much of formal sport is organized into women's sport and men's sport. This binary classification has always been justified with the use of an essentialized differentiation between women and men's bodies (Pape, 2020). This binary, however, is based on a gendered hierarchy that assumes a male body has a superior capacity to that of a woman's in terms of qualities such as size, musculature, speed, and aggression.

Although leadership positions in sport are purportedly not based on the ability to execute sport skills, qualifications for positions of leadership often require the candidates to have a sport history (Knoppers et al., 2021). Most sport careers begin in childhood, a time when children not only learn sport skills and strategies but also begin to understand the gender hierarchy that constitutes the structure and culture of sport (Larneby, 2016; Lütkevitte, 2023; Persson, 2022). Importantly, the residual effect of the sporting history of (potential) sport leaders may leak into ideas about who is best suited to be a leader, whether it be in sport or other organizations. Ryan and Dickson (2018) have argued that "the intersection of sport, leadership and gender provides an otherwise unavailable insight into what is normalized, men and the masculine subtext of leadership" (p. 329).

Attention, therefore, needs to be paid to the extent to which the gendered sport binary may shape managerial practices in both sport and non-sport organizations. Few scholars have looked at the role that images of, and ideas about, athletic masculinities play in managerial practices in non-sport organizations. [Knoppers \(2011\)](#) found that male senior managers working in various non-profit organizations in sport, in public safety (military and police), in health care, and in service organizations attributed their team and leadership skills, toughness, and ability to persevere to their athletic history. They also asserted that they preferred to hire those who had a sport history, preferably in team sports. Furthermore, [Agarwal et al. \(2016\)](#) highlighted the importance of women playing golf – a historically male preserve ([Hargreaves, 1994](#)) – as a social networking tool for board access. No available research has explored how a sport history in women's team sports may contribute to women's ascension through the managerial ranks. These relatively few findings not only suggest more research is needed but also that the hierarchical gendered sport structure and culture may indirectly contribute to gendered managerial practices, including recruitment and selection in non-sport organizations.

The link between male athletic history and managerialism could also be embedded in practices of heteronormative masculinity that may shape organizational culture and leadership conceptualizations in both sport and non-sport contexts ([Hovden, 2000](#); [Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2006](#); [Sørhaug, 2004](#)). Practices associated with the male sporting body in elite sport, and with heroic or desirable masculinity, have become the norm for coaching behaviors, values, and attitudes (e.g., [Gearity, 2014](#); [Kamphoff, 2010](#); [Thomas et al., 2021](#)). Few have explored how this norm is enacted at the leadership level and acts as a filter for exclusion of women administrators/managers/leaders in organizations. This goes beyond the social capital men may build through their sport participation ([Darcy et al., 2014](#); [Piggott & Pike, 2020](#)) and extends to an essentialized perception that men “naturally” embody sport and, therefore, are deemed to be best suited to enact leadership regardless of the organization (although it seems most visible in sport organizations). Research on football coaching, for example, suggests that men who have never played women's football are assumed to be more qualified to coach women than women who have played the sport ([Knoppers et al., 2022](#)). Women are routinely rejected for coaching positions in men's football due to their supposed lack of knowledge and experience in men's football. In other words, women's bodies in sport organizations are, and continue to represent, abject bodies ([Mavin & Grandy, 2016](#)). This finding suggests that theorizing about the relative lack of women in positions of (sport) leadership may need to focus on possible linkages between the seemingly fixed binary structure of competitive sport and how this notion infiltrates and facilitates thinking about the enactment and embodiment of leadership in general. In turn, this may shape the numerical dominance of men in (sport) leadership positions.

We suggest that the gender binary, the hierarchy that is linked to it at the athlete level, and its possible influence on (sport) management, need to be queered. We understand queering as a verb reflecting theoretical frameworks

that challenge and possibly disrupt a seemingly fixed social order (Moulin de Souza & Parker, 2022). An institutional queering of bodies as they are embedded in the management of organizations, including coaching, would, therefore, require problematizing the standardization of gender categories at the competitive sport or sport participation level (Knoppers et al., 2022). This would inform an exploration of how constructions of gender at the athlete level subtly may infiltrate the gendering of (sport) leadership. The current binary structure of competitive sport has meant that many boys/men have developed a male-oriented sport habitus as part of their sport history. For them, sport has become a primary site for the development of male bonding (Messner, 1990, 1995). Holgersson (2013) has suggested that male homosociality plays a large role in the tendency of men to hire men as managers of organizations. This male homosocial desire may be even greater in organizations associated with sport and/or among men who have been active in team sports. To date, no research has explored this phenomenon.

Similarly, little scholarly attention has been paid to how practices at the leadership/administration level are shaped by heteronormativity and fears of femininity. These practices of masculinity that pervade the sport setting are visibly and audibly shaped by homonegativity, grounded in fear of being seen as feminine, and dominate many sporting contexts (Allison & Knoester, 2021; Amstutz et al., 2021; Denison et al., 2020; Rollè et al., 2022; Smits & Knoppers, 2020). Yet, few scholars have focused on how misogyny – that is, a disdain for an enactment of stereotypes associated with femininity – may exclude many women as well as men from becoming (sport) administrators/leaders. Practices that have become the norm in elite male-dominated sport, therefore, need to be queered to expand understandings of how women may be kept out of not only sport administration/leadership but leadership of non-sport organizations as well.

Queer theory has already heavily influenced scholarship on the participation of trans athletes in sport. Their presence challenges the rigid gender binaries that exist at the participatory level; trans athletes undo gender in ways that cannot be reduced to fixed gender binaries and often require a response from sport organizations in the form of policy (re)creation (Moulin de Souza & Parker, 2022; Piggott, 2020). The ways they disrupt the binary can be seen as a form of activism and as undoing gender. Relatively little is known, however, about the experiences of nonbinary and trans people who work in and for organizations, especially those in sport (Piggott, 2020; Sawyer et al., 2016). The impact that various policies of exclusion of male-to-female transgender individuals in women's sport may have on the inclusion of transgender individuals in positions of leadership is unknown (Bekker et al., 2022; Posbergh, 2022). If transgender women are excluded from women's sports due to their perceived association with masculinity, are they then seen as more suited for positions of leadership than cisgender women? This question suggests that if the focus of research on exclusion in sport leadership is widened to include those who do not conform to cisgender norms, a better understanding of practices of desirable masculinities embodied by and enacted in leaders may emerge.

CONCLUSION

Within this paper, we have shown how gendered practices work to do and undo gender across both formal and informal dimensions of sport organizations. First, we presented evidence from the literature that demonstrates how formal organizational dimensions contribute to doing gender by privileging men and desirable masculinity within organizational leadership and governance hierarchies. We discussed how gender and sport leadership researchers have drawn on a range of social theories to analyze how (a lack of) formal rules and structures have worked to exclude and lock women out of formal decision-making structures and agendas within sport organizations. This has led to a lack of female influence, procedural justice, and positional power within sport organizations, as well as an increase in gender divisions and gender pay gaps. This reinforces the doing of gender by normalizing the belonging of (dominant) men and exclusion of women, and especially minority women, in sport leadership. Subsequently, perceptions of gender differences in the leadership capabilities of men and women are maintained or increased. When women do access formal leadership structures, it tends to be the most privileged (White, able-bodied, heterosexual) women who influence decision-making, demonstrating that doing gender within (sport) organizations influences women differently. Additionally, when women do hold positions within formal sport leadership structures, they can experience a lack of empowerment due to their hypervisibility as “the other” within organizations where the physical and cultural presence of men is normalized and legitimized.

Much less scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which formal organizational dimensions undo gender in sport organizations. We discussed within the paper how formal practices are proactive, strategic, and intentional, such as gender quotas and targets, action plans, training, and mentoring schemes. Despite some of these actions, particularly gender quotas, having documented positive impacts on female representation and recognition in decision-making structures, scholars have drawn on diverse social theories to discuss how gender equity strategies can also lack internalization, neglect to change the underlying culture-value structure, and fail to address beliefs that legitimate inequality. Subsequently, the extent to which formal strategies are effective in undoing gender through creating long-term and sustainable change can be variable.

We also drew on literature to show how informal organizational dimensions have considerable influence on doing gender by positioning men and desired masculinity as synonymous with leadership and decision-making. Informal practices and structures provide men with increased opportunity to accumulate and convert valuable forms of power and align (sport) leadership with the dominant male culture. This results in disparate levels of power between men and women, and women leaders feeling unwelcome, marginalized, and othered within (sport) organizational spaces. Problematically, women often consent to or reinforce such informal practices without knowledge of the wider problematic implications. This demonstrates how both men and women may contribute to doing gender within (sport) organizations. Both majority and minority women adopt identity management techniques to attempt to fit in and connect with the dominant and

most powerful groups within their organizations, yet this can often be ineffective due to the doing of gender within sport organizations creating a perceived incongruity between dominant and normalized leadership styles and the (assumed) racial and/or gender roles.

Finally, we analyzed how sport scholars have used social theory to examine the role of informal dimensions in undoing gender in sport organizations. Overall, it has been found that informal organizational dimensions tend to work subconsciously, accidentally, or haphazardly to undo gender by reducing gender differences and developing more inclusive and equitable practices. This includes the implementation of strategies such as informal diversity champions, informal social networks, and simply having female representation within decision-making positions. While some have argued that the lack of formalization or embedment of informal practices within organizations can lead to a lack of influence, others have found that the very informal nature of dimensions can be empowering and develop new opportunities for the inclusion of women outside of traditional, male-dominated (sport) organizational structures. This demonstrates the non-linearity of processes of undoing gender within sport organizations.

Overall, our findings demonstrate how sport organizations are characteristic of “extremely gendered” organizations due to male dominance existing in both practice and numbers and because the doing of gender is often legitimized and normalized (Sasson-Levy, 2011). In this sense, scholarly analyses of sport and other extremely gendered organizations, such as the military, can complement each other and provide needed contemporary insights. Furthermore, the diverse, layered, and at times contradictory nature of empirical and theoretical contributions on gender inclusion and exclusion in sport organizations demonstrates the complexity of the issue. Yet, despite theoretically informed scholarship providing new insights on the causes and symptoms of gender inequity in sport organizations, there continues to be a lack of representation and recognition of women leaders. Throughout the paper, we have identified how findings regarding the lack of representation and recognition of women in sport organizations mostly reflect findings in the wider organizational literature, albeit with some variations in conditions for women across different sectors. However, within our paper, we have also identified an opportunity to extend theoretical knowledge in both the sport and non-sport fields by grounding analyses in the unique ways that sport is organized according to gender binaries. In doing so, we advocate the application of queer theory to make visible, challenge, and possibly disrupt the seemingly fixed binary social order of sport. This would enable a greater understanding of how constructions of gender at the athlete level may subtly infiltrate the gendering of (sport) leadership. For example, how homosocial and homonegative practices can benefit men and disadvantage women within (sport) coaching, administration, and leadership teams.

As we pointed out in the beginning of this paper, the global visibility of sport can contribute to ways gender is done and leadership is defined in non-sport organizations. The sport history of many men may shape informal interactions and male bonding within non-sport organizations as well as their perceptions of desirable leadership. Yet, few scholars have explored the ways in which athletic

masculinities influence managerial practices in either sport or non-sport organizations. Furthermore, most literature in the field (both sport- and non-sport-focused) seem to lack an understanding of feminist-based activism, despite an exploration of this activism having the potential to enrich theoretical perspectives. Bell et al. (2019) have argued that feminist theory needs to be intertwined with activism because both play an important role in understanding practices that exclude.

In sum, although much work has been done to uncover dynamics resulting in the relatively low number of women in (sport) leadership positions, the picture is incomplete, requiring different theoretical approaches than those that have been used. We suggest that critically and queerly examining the unique context of the historic binary structuring of competitive sport may offer a good starting point for future theoretical developments in organizational research, both within sociology of sport and wider organizational sociology.

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