



Mohamed Chelali

E-mail: m.chelali@univ_Djelfa.dz.com

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8832-3059>

Ziane Achour University of Djelfa. Algeria

Suggested citation (APA, seventh edition)

Chelali, M. (2026). The symbolic–substantive gap: institutional masculinity and the politics of hiring and promotion in sport management organizations. *Portal de la Ciencia*, 7(S1), 353-361, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51247/pdlc.v7iEspecial1.990>

==== o ====

The symbolic–substantive gap: institutional masculinity and the politics of hiring and promotion in sport management organizations

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the causes of persistent gender inequality in international sports governance decision-making spaces, despite progress made in the symbolic and numerical representation of women. A qualitative research approach was developed, based on secondary data analysis. First, a quantitative synthesis of statistics published between 2024 and 2026 by the International Olympic Committee, FIFA, International Federations, and the International Paralympic Committee was conducted, presented in an original comparative graph. Second, a qualitative meta-synthesis of five empirical studies on sports organizations was performed, coded using Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations and Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism. The analysis was also based on Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Kerfoot and Knights' (1998) interpretation of management as a masculinized managerial project. The results revealed a persistent gap between symbolic representation and effective access to power, as female participation reached levels close to parity in governing bodies and commissions, but decreased considerably in federation presidencies and coaching positions. A significant exception was identified within the Paralympic movement, where women constituted a majority in an administrative body. It is concluded that numerical equality does not guarantee an effective redistribution of power, making it necessary to strengthen institutional reforms and develop comparative studies that explain the organizational factors that favor substantial female participation in sports governance. Keywords: institutional masculinity; gendered organizations; sports management; tokenism; hegemonic masculinity; recruitment and promotion.

Keywords: institutional masculinity, gendered organizations, sport management, tokenism, hegemonic masculinity, hiring and promotion

La brecha simbólico-sustantiva: la masculinidad institucional y las políticas de contratación y promoción en las organizaciones de gestión deportiva

RESUMEN

El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar las causas de la persistencia de la desigualdad de género en los espacios de decisión de la gobernanza deportiva internacional, pese a los avances alcanzados en la representación simbólica y numérica de las mujeres. Se desarrolló una investigación de enfoque cualitativo basada en análisis secundario de información. En primer lugar, se realizó una síntesis cuantitativa de estadísticas publicadas entre 2024 y 2026 por el Comité Olímpico Internacional, la FIFA, las Federaciones Internacionales y el Comité Paralímpico Internacional, representadas mediante un gráfico comparativo original. En segundo lugar, se efectuó una metasíntesis cualitativa de cinco estudios empíricos sobre organizaciones deportivas, codificados a partir de la teoría de las organizaciones generizadas de Acker (1990) y de la teoría del tokenismo de Kanter (1977). El análisis se sustentó además en el concepto de masculinidad hegemónica de Connell y Messerschmidt (2005) y en la interpretación de Kerfoot y Knights (1998) sobre la gestión como un proyecto gerencial masculinizado. Los resultados evidenciaron una brecha persistente entre la representación simbólica y el acceso efectivo al poder, ya que la participación femenina alcanzó niveles cercanos a la paridad en órganos colegiados y comisiones, pero disminuyó considerablemente en presidencias de federaciones y cargos de entrenamiento. Asimismo, se identificó una excepción relevante dentro del movimiento paralímpico, donde las mujeres constituyeron la mayoría en un órgano administrativo. Se concluye que la igualdad numérica no garantiza una redistribución efectiva del poder, por lo que resulta necesario fortalecer reformas institucionales y desarrollar estudios comparativos que expliquen los factores organizacionales que favorecen una participación femenina sustantiva en la gobernanza deportiva.

Palabras clave: masculinidad institucional; organizaciones generizadas; gestión deportiva; tokenismo; masculinidad hegemónica; contratación y promoción.

==== o ====

A lacuna simbólico-substancial: masculinidade institucional e políticas de recrutamento e promoção nas organizações de gestão desportiva

RESUMO

Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar as causas da persistente desigualdade de género nos espaços de decisão da governação desportiva internacional, apesar dos avanços alcançados na representação simbólica e numérica das mulheres. Foi desenvolvida uma abordagem de investigação qualitativa, baseada na análise de dados secundários. Em primeiro lugar, foi realizada uma síntese quantitativa de estatísticas publicadas entre 2024 e 2026 pelo Comité Olímpico Internacional, FIFA, Federações Internacionais e Comité Paralímpico Internacional, apresentada num gráfico comparativo original. De seguida, foi realizada uma meta-síntese qualitativa de cinco estudos empíricos sobre organizações desportivas, codificados com recurso à teoria das organizações generificadas de Acker (1990) e à teoria do tokenismo de Kanter (1977). A análise baseou-se também no conceito de masculinidade hegemónica de Connell e Messerschmidt (2005) e na interpretação de Kerfoot e Knights (1998) da gestão como um projeto de gestão masculinizado. Os resultados revelaram um fosso persistente entre a representação simbólica e o acesso efectivo ao poder, dado que a participação feminina atingiu níveis próximos da paridade nos órgãos e comissões directivas, mas diminuiu consideravelmente nas presidências das federações e nos cargos de treinadoras. Uma

excepção significativa foi identificada no movimento paralímpico, onde as mulheres constituíam a maioria num órgão administrativo. Conclui-se que a igualdade numérica não garante uma redistribuição efetiva do poder, tornando-se necessário o reforço das reformas institucionais e o desenvolvimento de estudos comparativos que expliquem os fatores organizacionais que favorecem a participação feminina substancial na governação desportiva.

Palavras-chave: masculinidade institucional; organizações generificadas; gestão desportiva; tokenismo; masculinidade hegemónica; recrutamento e promoção.

==== o ====

INTRODUCTION

Research Problem

Over the last decade, sport governance has demonstrated measurable progress toward gender parity in terms of athlete participation, organizational membership, and the adoption of equality policies promoted by international institutions. Nevertheless, these quantitative advances have not translated into proportional access to positions where strategic decisions are made, such as federation presidencies, executive boards, technical committees, and elite coaching roles. As Adriaanse (2016) argues, increasing female participation alone does not guarantee equitable distribution of organizational power because governance structures often reproduce historically embedded gender hierarchies. Similarly, Burton (2015) maintains that leadership inequalities persist despite formal commitments to diversity, revealing the resilience of institutional barriers within sport organizations.

The persistence of this imbalance suggests that the problem extends beyond individual qualifications or recruitment practices and instead reflects organizational cultures that privilege masculine leadership norms. Research in sport management has consistently shown that decision-making processes, promotion systems, and leadership expectations remain shaped by assumptions that associate authority, competitiveness, and technical competence with masculinity. According to Acker (1990), organizations are fundamentally gendered institutions in which seemingly neutral structures reproduce unequal power relations. Likewise, Kanter (1977) explains that limited female representation in positions of authority reinforces structural exclusion by restricting access to influential networks, mentorship opportunities, and organizational legitimacy.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines whether the concept of institutional masculinity provides a sufficient theoretical explanation for the persistent divergence between symbolic gender representation and substantive decision-making authority within sport governance. Rather than considering the increase in female participation as evidence of organizational transformation, this research investigates why authority continues to remain concentrated in traditionally masculine leadership spaces despite policies promoting equality and inclusion. As Connell (2005) argues, hegemonic masculinity operates through institutional arrangements that normalize male dominance while presenting organizational practices as gender neutral. Likewise, Hovden (2010) demonstrates that sport organizations frequently reproduce these gendered power structures even when equality policies are formally adopted, thereby limiting meaningful institutional change.

Theoretical Framework

Acker (1990) argues that organizations are gendered not incidentally but structurally, through five interlocking processes: the division of labor, symbols and images that construct organizational roles, interactions between individuals that enact gendered expectations, internal mental work through which individuals reconcile themselves to gendered arrangements, and the underlying logic of the organization itself, which is rarely gender-neutral even when it is described that way. Kanter (1977) offers a complementary account at

the level of group composition: when women constitute a small minority within a given organizational stratum, they experience heightened visibility, are read through exaggerated contrast with the male majority, and face pressure toward assimilation into male-coded norms of competence and leadership.

Kanter's framework is not adopted here uncritically. Yoder's (1991) reassessment, based on more than a decade of subsequent research, found that the specific consequences Kanter predicted — performance pressure, isolation, role encapsulation — occurred reliably only for token women entering occupations already coded as gender-inappropriate, not as a general effect of numerical scarcity on its own; Yoder further argued that Kanter's proposed remedy, simply increasing numbers, can provoke backlash from the dominant group rather than resolving the underlying inequity. This matters directly for the argument developed here: it implies that Kanter's tokenism dynamics should be expected to appear most strongly in the leadership and coaching roles this article treats as masculine-coded (Sections 4–5), and should not be assumed to generalize automatically to administrative or staff positions that carry no comparable gender-typing — a qualification the discussion in Section 6 relies on directly.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) supply the concept that ties these processes to a wider social order: hegemonic masculinity, the historically specific configuration of practice that legitimizes men's dominant position and is reproduced, not simply inherited, through institutional practice. Kerfoot and Knights (1998) sharpen this for organizational settings more broadly, describing management itself as a "man"agerial project — a set of everyday practices through which masculine authority is continuously performed and naturalized as competent leadership. It should be stated plainly that Kerfoot and Knights' study is drawn from the British financial and insurance sector, not from sport organizations; it is retained here only for its general theoretical claim about managerial masculinity, and is treated in Section 5 as a source of theoretical vocabulary rather than as one of the sport-specific empirical studies synthesized in the coding matrix.

Taken together, these frameworks predict a specific pattern: gender balance should be easiest to achieve where organizations can adjust membership composition administratively, and hardest to achieve where positions require the ongoing performance of a masculine-coded leadership or technical prototype that structures who is recognized as promotable. Sections 4 and 5 test this prediction against two different kinds of evidence.

Methodology

This is a mixed secondary-data synthesis, combining two methods rather than one, deliberately, because each addresses a different half of the research problem. The first is a quantitative comparative synthesis of publicly reported governance statistics drawn from International Olympic Committee gender equality progress reports (2024–2025), the Women's Sports Foundation's 2025 Olympic and Paralympic report, UN Women's 2026 sport statistics compilation, and FIFA's public workforce disclosures. These figures were not generated by this study; they are compiled here into a single original comparative visualization (Figure 1) designed specifically to make the symbolic–substantive gap visible across categories that are rarely plotted together in the same figure. Because the underlying reports were published at different points between 2021 and 2026, Figure 1 should be read as a comparative snapshot of the most recent available figure in each category, not as a single simultaneous measurement; the one exception, coaching data from the Tokyo Olympic Games, dates specifically to 2021 despite the Games' 2020 name, and is flagged as such in the figure discussion in Section 4.

The second method is an illustrative qualitative synthesis, not a full systematic meta-synthesis in the protocol-driven sense (e.g., Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007); no formal search protocol, inter-rater coding reliability check, or study quality appraisal was carried out, and

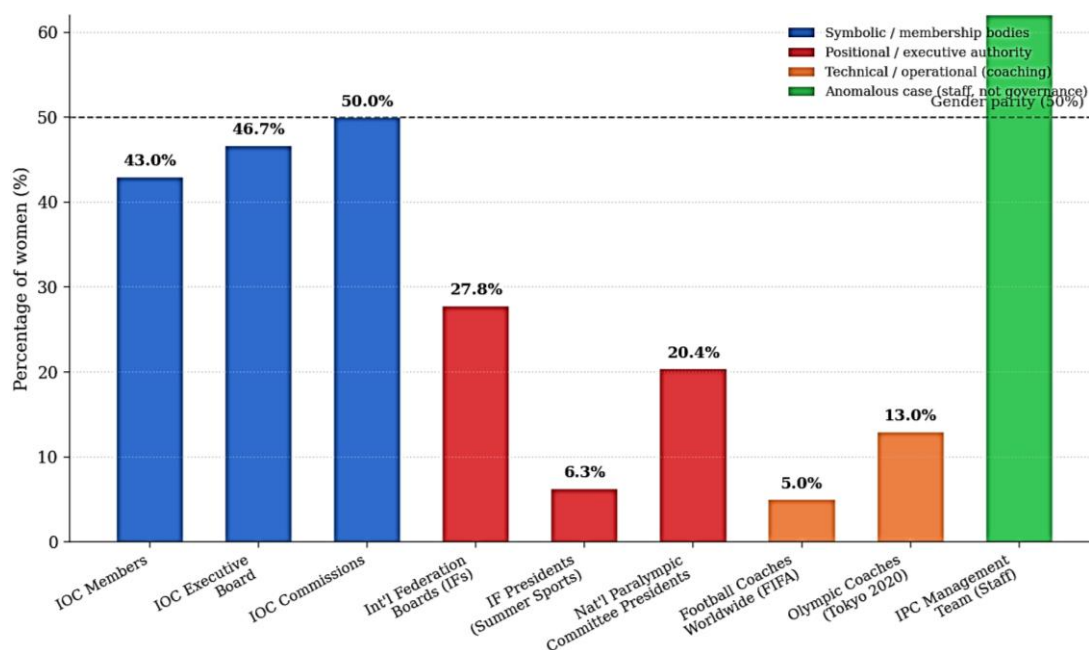
this limitation is stated here rather than implied by the terminology used. Five studies were selected from a larger pool of eligible sport-organization research on the criterion that each addressed a hiring, selection, or promotion decision directly, in a distinct national context, without duplicating a mechanism already represented by another selected study. Other eligible studies addressing closely related ground — notably Claringbould and Knoppers' (2007) study of Dutch board selection, Adriaanse and Schofield's (2014) analysis of gender quotas, and Sotiriadou, De Haan, and Knoppers' (2017) report on men's roles in sport leadership equity — were identified in the same literature search and were considered for inclusion; Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) is included in the final matrix precisely because it documents a mechanism, homologous board reproduction, not separately represented by the other four studies; the remaining two were set aside to keep the matrix at a size that could be discussed in full within this article, not because they contradicted the pattern reported below. Each included study was then coded independently against Acker's five gendered processes and against Kanter's tokenism dynamics, producing the matrix in Table 1.

Findings I: The Symbolic–Substantive Representation Gap

As of 2024–2025, women held 43% of International Olympic Committee memberships, 46.7% of seats on its Executive Board, and 50% of positions across its commissions — figures the IOC itself presents, accurately, as historic highs. Representation collapses, however, at the level of International Federations: across 540 board positions reported by federations themselves, women hold only 27.8%, and only 6.3% of summer-sport federation presidencies. FIFA's own workforce data show that only about 5% of registered football coaches worldwide are women, and Olympic coaching data from Tokyo 2020 place women at 13% of coaches. National Paralympic Committees show a similar pattern at 20.4% of presidencies.

Figure 1

The symbolic–substantive representation Gap in Global sport governance (most recent reported figure per category, 2021–2026)



Source: Compiled by the author from IOC (2024–2025), Women's Sports Foundation (2025), UN Women (2026), and FIFA public disclosures.

One category disrupts this pattern rather than confirming it, and the disruption is analytically useful rather than inconvenient: women constitute 64% of the International Paralympic Committee's Management Team, an administrative staff body rather than an elected governance body. This is the inverse of the pattern found in federation presidencies, and it suggests a refinement rather than a rejection of the framework in Section 2 — administrative staff positions, unlike elected leadership and technical coaching roles, may not carry the same masculine-coded prototype of authority that Hovden (2000) and Kerfoot and Knights (1998) describe, even within the same broader organizational family. Section 6 returns to this case directly rather than treating it as an outlier to be dropped from the analysis.

Findings II: Mechanisms of Institutional Masculinity in Hiring and Promotion

Table 1 presents the coding matrix described in Section 3, restricted to five sport-specific empirical studies. Read across its rows rather than down its columns, a pattern emerges that the aggregate statistics in Section 4 cannot show on their own: the mechanisms blocking women's advancement are not concentrated in any single Acker (1990) process. They appear in the symbols used to describe ideal leaders (Hovden, 2000), in the structural division of administrative labor (Betzer-Tayar et al., 2017), in the symbolic "fit" criteria governing board succession (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007), in the design logic of formally neutral policy (Shaw & Frisby, 2006), and in the internal rationalization by which organizational actors treat known inequity as a low priority (Hoeber, 2007). This spread across four of Acker's five processes, rather than concentration in one, is itself a finding: it implies that a single-lever intervention — a quota on board composition, for instance — addresses only the process Hovden's and Claringbould and Knoppers' studies document, and would be expected, on this evidence, to leave the other mechanisms largely intact.

Table 1.

Original coding matrix: institutional-masculinity mechanisms across five sport-specific empirical studies, coded against Acker (1990) and Kanter (1977).

Study (Context)	Acker's (1990) Gendered Process	Kanter's (1977) Tokenism Dynamic	Key Empirical Finding	Organizational Level Affected
Hovden (2000) Norway	Symbols & images of the ideal leader	Assimilation to a male "heavyweight" norm	Selection discourse tied to "heroic" masculine traits framed as gender-neutral; most female candidates judged to lack the preferred profile.	Board / leadership selection
Betzer-Tayar et al. (2017) Israel	Division of labor and organizational structure	Visibility & heightened scrutiny of tokens	Structural barriers documented in a woman's attempt to found and lead a girls' volleyball academy within an established federation.	Founding / administrative authority
Claringbould & Knoppers (2007) Netherlands	Symbols & images (the "right fit")	Homosocial / homologous reproduction	Incumbent (male) board members select new women members judged to be a "normal," properly-fitting woman, reproducing existing norms regardless of gender composition.	Board recruitment & succession

Shaw & Frisby (2006) Canada	Logic of the organization itself	Numbers treated as sufficient (structural fallacy)	Formally gender-neutral equity policies found to rest on a narrow liberal-equality frame that leaves embedded structural bias unaddressed.	Policy design
Hoeber (2007) Canada	Internal mental work / rationalization	Assimilation via denial of relevance	Gender equity affirmed in principle but consistently deprioritized in practice — "somewhere on the list, but one of the bottom ones."	Organizational values & priority-setting

Read through Kanter's (1977) tokenism categories, as qualified by Yoder's (1991) critique in Section 2, the same five studies show a division between mechanisms that operate through comparison to a male norm (Hovden, and the "right fit" criteria in Claringbould & Knoppers) and mechanisms that operate through structure independent of any individual's traits (division of labor and policy logic, as in Betzer-Tayar et al. and Shaw & Frisby). This distinction matters practically: comparison-based mechanisms are, in principle, addressable through changing evaluative criteria, while structural mechanisms require redesigning the organization's division of labor itself — a substantially larger intervention than most current sport-governance equity policy attempts.

Discussion: Reconciling the Two Kinds of Evidence

The quantitative and qualitative findings converge on the same conclusion through different routes. Section 4 shows where the gap is largest in aggregate; Section 5 shows, through five independent studies spanning Norway, Israel, the Netherlands, and Canada, what specifically produces it at the level of everyday organizational practice. The IPC Management Team exception deserves to be tested against the framework, not simply absorbed by it, and it is worth stating plainly what a genuine disconfirmation would look like: if administrative-staff bodies elsewhere in Olympic and Paralympic governance showed the same male-dominated pattern as elected boards, the claim that gendering varies by division-of-labor position, rather than applying uniformly across an organization, would not survive. The evidence available does not allow that direct test at scale — a single high-scoring case is not, on its own, a confirmed pattern, a point already flagged as a limitation below.

With that caveat stated, the case is at least consistent with, rather than contradicted by, Acker's (1990) framework. Acker's argument was never that all organizational positions are gendered identically, but that gendering operates through the specific logic of each position's division of labor. Administrative staff roles supporting a governance body are not, in Acker's terms, the same position as the elected leadership of that body, and Yoder's (1991) qualification of Kanter adds a second, independent reason to expect the difference: tokenism effects concentrate in occupations already coded as gender-inappropriate, and there is no strong prior reason a technical secretariat role should carry the same masculine coding that Hovden (2000) documents for elected board leadership. Both of these are reasons the exception does not automatically falsify the framework — but they are reasons that would need to hold up against a larger sample of comparable administrative bodies to be more than a plausible post hoc account of one case, which is exactly what Section 8 proposes testing next.

Limitations

The quantitative synthesis in Section 4 draws on categories reported inconsistently across organizations — federations report board composition differently from how the IOC reports commission membership, and the 2026 Sport Integrity Global Alliance figure of 32% women in international federation executive positions sits in some tension with the 27.8% board-seat figure reported elsewhere, likely reflecting different samples and definitions of "executive

position" rather than genuine disagreement about the trend. This article reports both figures rather than resolving the discrepancy, since resolving it would require access to each organization's internal reporting methodology. Figure 1 also compiles figures reported at different points between 2021 and 2026 rather than a single simultaneous measurement, a choice made explicit in Section 3 and in the figure's own title.

The qualitative synthesis in Section 5 is explicitly illustrative rather than a protocol-driven systematic review, for the reasons stated in Section 3; a larger-scale systematic review, of the kind Evans and Pfister (2021) have already begun for sport leadership more broadly, would be needed to establish how representative these five mechanisms are across the wider empirical literature. The five studies included are also geographically concentrated in Northern Europe (Norway, the Netherlands), North America (Canada), and Israel; no study from Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Arab world met the inclusion criterion in the literature identified for this article. This is a substantive limit on generalizability, not a minor caveat: the article's title refers to "sport management organizations" without geographic qualification, and that framing should be read as applying most confidently to the specific institutional contexts actually examined, pending comparative research elsewhere. Finally, this article synthesizes existing data and studies; it does not collect new organizational data of its own, and its claims about mechanism should be read as a structured synthesis of established findings rather than as new primary evidence.

Conclusion and Direction for Further Research

The evidence assembled here supports a specific claim: institutional masculinity in sport management organizations does not operate as a uniform barrier but as a barrier concentrated in positions coded as leadership or technical authority, operating through at least five distinct organizational mechanisms that do not respond uniformly to the same policy intervention. The IPC Management Team case indicates that this concentration, rather than a general resistance to women's employment across every organizational function, is the more precise way to state the problem.

The concrete, falsifiable direction this suggests is a systematic test of whether administrative and technical-secretariat roles across a larger sample of sport organizations consistently show smaller gender gaps than elected leadership and coaching roles within the same organizations — a comparison that, to this author's knowledge, has not yet been run directly at scale, and that would either confirm the refinement proposed in Section 6 or reveal the IPC case to have been an isolated exception rather than a pattern.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002>
- Adriaanse, J. (2016). Gender diversity in the governance of sport associations: The Sydney Scoreboard Global Index of Participation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 137(1), 149–160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2550-3> (Advance online publication 2015.)
- Betzer-Tayar, M., Zach, S., Galily, Y., & Henry, I. (2017). Barriers to women's access to decision-making positions in sport organizations: The case of establishing a girls' volleyball academy in Israel. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(4), 418–431.

- Burton, L. J. (2015). Underrepresentation of women in sport leadership: A review of research. *Sport Management Review*, 18(2), 155–165. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.02.004>
- Claringbould, I., & Knoppers, A. (2007). Finding a "normal" woman: Selection processes for board membership. *Sex Roles*, 56(7–8), 495–507. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9188-2>
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>
- Evans, A. B., & Pfister, G. U. (2021). Women in sports leadership: A systematic narrative review. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 56(6), 317–342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690220911842>
- Hoeber, L. (2007). "It's somewhere on the list but maybe it's one of the bottom ones": Examining gender equity as an organization value in a sport organization. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 2(4), 362–378.
- Hovden, J. (2000). "Heavyweight" men and younger women? The gendering of selection processes in Norwegian sport organizations. *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 8(1), 17–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/080387400408035>
- International Olympic Committee. (2025). Gender equality and inclusion progress report 2021–2024. IOC.
- Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation*. Basic Books.
- Kerfoot, D., & Knights, D. (1998). Managing masculinity in contemporary organizational life: A "man"agerial project. *Organization*, 5(1), 7–26.
- Sandelowski, M., & Barroso, J. (2007). *Handbook for synthesizing qualitative research*. Springer Publishing Company.
- Schoch, L., & Clausen, J. (2019). Women within international sports federations: Contemporary challenges. In G. Cervin & C. Nicolas (Eds.), *Histories of women's work in global sport* (pp. 273–292). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26909-8_12
- Shaw, S., & Frisby, W. (2006). Can gender equity be more equitable?: Promoting an alternative frame for sport management research, education, and practice. *Journal of Sport Management*, 20(4), 483–509.
- UN Women. (2026). *Facts and figures: Women in sport*. UN Women.
- Women's Sports Foundation. (2025). *Beyond the podium: A women's sports foundation research report on the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games*.
- Yoder, J. D. (1991). Rethinking tokenism: Looking beyond numbers. *Gender & Society*, 5(2), 178–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124391005002003>