

Women in Sport Governance across Europe: Institutional and Socioeconomic Determinants of Leadership Representation

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Abstract. *Although women's participation in sport has increased considerably in recent decades, leadership and governance positions within sport organizations remain dominated by men to a great extent. This continuous asymmetry raises questions about equality, representation and the institutional conditions that shape leadership opportunities in sport systems. Existing research has focused on organizational barriers within sport institutions, such as masculinized cultures, informal recruitment networks and gender stereotypes that limit women's access to leadership roles. However, less attention has been paid to the broader structural and institutional factors that may influence women's representation in sport governance across different national contexts.*

This study examines how gender equality, socioeconomic inequality, women's labor force participation and public investment in sport are associated with representation in sport governance across European countries. The analysis is based on a dataset covering 30 countries from Europe observed between 2018 and 2024. The research combines indicators from international statistical databases to explore how differences in national institutional settings relate to gender representation in sport leadership. Four research hypotheses concerning the role of institutional equality, economic inequality, labor market participation and public investment in shaping governance outcomes are investigated.

The results show that higher levels of institutional gender equality and stronger participation of women in the labour market are associated with higher representation of women in sport governance. Public investment in sport also appears to support more inclusive leadership structures, although regional differences remain visible. The findings highlight the importance of considering sport governance within its extensive institutional environment and contribute to the growing literature on gender equality and leadership in sport systems across Europe.

Keywords: Sport Governance, Women's Representation, Gender Equality, Institutional Determinants, Sport Leadership, Public Investment in Sport, Europe.

Introduction

Sport embodies values such as fairness, merit and equal opportunity. In spite of that, leadership and decision-making positions within sport organizations remain far from gender equal across Europe. Women's participation in sport has changed over the past decades, bringing more female professionals into this sector. However, this progress is not equally mirrored in governance roles like board memberships, executive committees or national sport federations leadership. As a result,

sport governance continues to be largely controlled by men, raising questions about equality, representation and institutional change.

This imbalance has drawn growing academic attention. Studies highlight how sport organizations are rooted in masculinized environments, where leadership roles are tied to masculine norms and influence networks (Burton, 2015). At the same time, academics have argued that internal dynamics alone do not explain women's low representation. Institutional and societal factors also play an important role. Countries with stronger gender equality policies and inclusive labour markets open more leadership doors for women across sectors (Terjesen et al., 2015).

Building on this, women's sport governance roles are not shaped just by organizations internally. They are influenced by societal conditions, such as national gender equality policies, labor market participation and economic structures. While these relationships have been explored in different policy areas, the evidence examining how they relate to sport governance remains relatively limited, especially from a comparative European perspective.

By addressing this gap, this study addresses the following research question: How do gender equality, socioeconomic inequality, women's economic participation and public investment in sport relate to women's representation in sport governance across European countries? It analyses a panel dataset covering 30 European countries between 2018 and 2024, using data from the European Institute for Gender Equality, Eurostat and the World Bank.

The study is guided by four hypotheses. First, H1 proposes that higher levels of institutional gender equality are associated with higher percentages of women's representation in sport governance. Second, H2 suggests that lower levels of structural socioeconomic inequality are linked to higher participation of women in leadership positions. Third, H3 proposes that higher female labour force participation is positively associated with women's representation in sport governance through broader societal spillover effects. Finally, H4 suggests that higher public investment in sport systems is associated with greater participation of women in sport governance, with potential differences across European regions due to variations in institutional capacity and governance traditions.

Literature review

Gender equality in sport leadership and organizational outcomes

Given the increasing power and gravity of gender equality in the sport industry and leadership, the social and economic consequences for organizations that respect this index are becoming more and more impactful (Konrad et al., 2008; Lesch et al., 2022). Evidence suggests that having a critical mass of women on sports boards, or even in chair roles, enhances organizational outcomes, as well as overall board performance, fosters an inclusive and diverse culture and helps the establishment of more gender-equitable decision-making (Bilimoria, 2006; Joecks et al., 2013; Konrad et al., 2008; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). According to the bright side of current research, indications already show that women in sports are being recognized more and more, proving that there may be ways to balance the dominance between women and men. Areas with high potential to increase overall female representation include those where women already hold influential leadership roles (Garcia-Blandon et al., 2024).

Given how social injustice provoked by male-dominated power systems can lead to instability, marginalization, and even adverse effects on health and acts of violence, a fundamental principle of the European Union (EU), gender equality is ingrained in its policies (Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). Although the Gender Equality Index of the European Union offers insightful

information, it is not precise enough for local implementation (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024a). Yet, when it comes to community, its members that are indirectly connected to sports influence as well the norms and beliefs regarding such social issues in a region or area.

Understanding a population's attitudes toward gender equality is crucial because concepts like this together with sports itself are flexible and subject to on context and time (Wicker & Cunningham, 2023). Nevertheless, academia still suggests that sport still symbolizes masculinity, causing the other sex to struggle when striving to receive the same recognition as men, especially in the context of the positions with the most influence and decision-making power (Thornton & Etxebarria, 2021).

How masculinity shapes sport organizations

The historical and institutional obstacles that women face extend to sport organizations. Besides influencing an individual's identity, gender functions as an "axis of power that shapes organizational structures, identities, processes, and the dominant forms of knowledge that become truths or taken-for-granted ways of operating" (Shaw & Frisby, 2006, p. 491). Sport, just like other masculinized professions such as military and firefighting, have been labeled as "extremely gendered", marked by hierarchical control, gender segregation, exclusionary regulations and strong cultural justification for gender inequality (Bryan et al., 2021; Tyler et al., 2019; Sasson-Levy, 2011). Accordingly, sports organizations in particular have been included in this classification by a number of studies (Hindman & Paulsen, 2024; Hindman & Walker, 2024; Pape, 2020).

Even when such leading positions are neutralized, they are still defined by men and masculinity (Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). Women in sports boards striving to be seen as competent in line with these masculine norms are portrayed as lacking the profile required to hold the power positions (Knoppers et al., 2022). Nevertheless, more visibility becomes controversial too: criticism, negative pressure, disregarded competence and exclusion from male networks are some of the negative effects experienced by women, who make up a minority in sport leadership positions (Knoppers et al., 2022; Piggott, 2022). These ideas are problematic given how they put the weight of changing culture and norms on other women, as well as with regards to the fact that obtaining more women in leadership positions does not always result in better working conditions for other women. Concepts from critical mass theory let us interpret the complexities when analyzing the shift of culture and norms inside a gendered organization. According to this theory, if a minority group reaches a critical size, it can change or overturn social norms, meaning that change could happen when a minority presence is quantitatively sufficient to qualitatively change relationships between minoritized and non-minoritized groups (Granovetter, 1978; Taylor et al., 2025).

Gendered pipelines: from early socialization to career entry

A comparative study of National Sports Federations in five European countries, encompassing federations in Italy, Portugal, UK, Spain and Turkey, revealed that only 7.7% of federations had a chairwoman, with 92.3% of board chairs being men (Esteban Salvador et al., 2024).

As a matter of fact, a "leaky pipeline" has been identified for female sport employees due to an interaction of societal, political, and individual factors (Hancock & Hums, 2016). Yet, when analyzing gender inclusion in sports and physical education, a specific idea has been widely discussed: in mixed-gender sport settings, boys dominate situations over girls, the latter taking over more supportive, secondary roles (Hastie, 1998; Parker & Curtner-Smith, 2012). This gender gap

in school may be caused by a variety of factors, such as a "masculinized" curriculum where team games and competition-driven activities are the main focus of physical education classes (Kastrup & Kleindienst-Cachay, 2016; Liu et al., 2023). Although these factors vary by age (Gyurcsik et al., 2006) and gender, girls confirm acknowledging barriers about twice as often as boys (Rosselli et al., 2020). Physical activity motivations, needs, and lifestyles differ between men and women, which also results in unequal physical activity participation patterns.

What's more, according to Trudeau and Shephard (2005), the long-term effects of these gender-related issues in early-age education seem to have an impact on later-life enjoyment of physical activity. And intuition, just like research as well, suggest that students' decision to pursue a degree in the area of sports is partially influenced by their pre-university interest in sports (Hancock & Greenwell, 2016). Further on, when it comes to career entry and growth, men's informal arrangement of loyalty and trust represent the fundamentals of homosocial dynamics, which are based on a sense of sameness and familiarity. This doubtlessly increases some of their access to networks of power, providing them with more support, possibilities and guidance (Collinson, 2023).

The reproduction of gendered power structures in sport leadership

Regarding the previously mentioned sameness, the affective social preference of men for other men in organizations has been highlighted by a number of academics. This affect, a factor shaping how men engage in working environments, was referred to as "male homosociality" (Bird, 1996; Lipman-Blumen, 1976). The concept of homologous reproduction has been used by academics to explain the constant overrepresentation of men in leadership roles within sport organizations (Boucher & Lavoie, 2023; Darvin & Lubke, 2021; Grappendorf & Henderson, 2008; Greenhill et al., 2009; Knoppers et al., 2016; O'Shea, 2017). This process refers to the discursive strategies employed by leaders, who are mostly men, to choose for leadership roles individuals who are perceived as members of the same category, like those based on ethnicity and gender. Reasons supporting this hold that hiring someone who is thought to resemble those already in a high-status position increases the likelihood that the decision is suitable and beneficial for the company (Knoppers & Piggott, 2025).

Besides gender and race, organizational disparities can also be based on social status and result from disparities in the unequal allocation of resources, inadequate access to prospects for growth and success, and compensation (Acker, 2006). Two important studies demonstrate how these disparities remain undetected in the regular gendered procedures of sports organizations, and lead to a feeling of helplessness and loneliness in people (Amis et al., 2017). However, given the dominance men has obtained in sport leadership roles globally, it is crucial to look at how female employees navigate gendered workplaces in order to determine how improvements on an organizational level can increase female employee retention (Taylor et al., 2025). Positioning themselves in this leadership dynamic is from start reflected by the glass ceiling concept (Thornton & Etzbarria, 2021), reducing the number of female representatives in sport governance. This becomes an indicator as well explaining how overall women's social experiences and relationships are affected by the organizational structure (Bluedorn & Kanter, 1980; Torchia et al., 2011). Women express the need to adapt coping mechanisms to adapt the masculine sphere, yet they still have to face dislike towards them due to either gender, or ethnic identities.

These dynamics outline how the acceptance from the male side comes from being conformed to preferred gender roles and respecting cultural norms and structures set by them.

While on the sports field boys and men are accustomed with the idea of masculinity and how sport defines how “acting like a man” looks like (Coakley & Messner, 1993; Fink, 2016), women athletes and females who are acting in this industry undergo discrimination and bullying to get used to their second-class status (Burton, 2015; Taylor et al., 2024). Nonetheless, these traditional and structural disadvantages that women experience extend to sport organizations (Morgan et al., 2025), these environments being “rich in hegemonic masculinity and comprised of job positions that are associated with traditional gender and sex-role stereotypes” (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007, pg. 257). Studies have demonstrated several factors, like systemic, organizational and individual ones, that lead to the mistreatment of women in the workplace (Burton, 2015; Taylor et al., 2025).

Intersectional, cultural and socioeconomic barriers

Even though the last decades were about promoting and increasing the commercial and cultural awareness of women's presence in the sports industry, they still account for a minority of coaching, managerial and executive positions. Generally speaking, when a popular sport is more common among one of the genders, it inevitably strengthens gender stereotypes. Effects may vary from discriminatory behavior by organizations and clubs until self-selection effects from a personal perspective, decreasing the overall sport involvement (Anne & Moussi-Beylie, 2025).

Even though numbers represent a considerable issue, this general pattern is rather explained by a phenomenon called “gendered substructure” of organizations, a framework being described as one favoring masculinity in the majority of values, standards and protocols (Acker, 1990). Indeed, sports reflects a context where effective leadership is historically connected to qualities highly associated with masculinity, just like control and competitiveness (Burton & LaVoi, 2011). According to Hargreaves (2013), heroism in sports is another multifaceted social construct, varying by gender. On the one hand, male athletes are associated with strength, power and aggression. Yet, on the other hand, female ones are more likely to be linked to concepts such as kindness, compassion and generosity. This conflict leads to ambiguity in the public perception of women’s sporting achievements. Even if female athletes get to achieve great accomplishments, they tend to be considered as not meeting the standard and social expectations of a sporting hero, making their successes less appreciated than the one of men’s (Wicker & Frick, 2016).

Another effect could be disregarding numerous other qualities that are crucial for an effective leader, such as financial knowledge, efficient decision-making skills and assertiveness (Forrest & English, 2025). As a practical example, coaches in sport are perceived as people with great impact on the emotional and mental state and maturing of athletes, aspects appreciated besides the physical instructions and preparations they offer (Chelladurai, 2012; González-García et al., 2021). Research substantially supports how women indeed incline more towards transformative leadership practices, this enabling them to encourage and foster open communication, trustworthiness and emotional security (Burton & LaVoi, 2011; Eagli A. H. & Carli L. L., 2007).

Governance Gaps and Strategic Shifts in Sport Management

While gender equality is aspired to be achieved, its application in sports governance is still hindered by various contradictions and limitations. A representative power here is the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the organization that owns a considerable amount of influence when it comes to gender norms through regulations (Hayhurst et al., 2015). Several governance trends and initiatives, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5, emphasizing the

empowerment of women and gender equality as a whole, are in line with the objectives of this establishment. Nonetheless, gender equality as a fundamental value within the IOC remains to be limited due not only to its historical origin from Western elite masculinities, but also to industrial needs and requirements. This complexity creates institutional resistance, making the shift in the power dynamics frequently symbolic and conditional upon compromises (Connell, 2005; Huang, 2025). In this context, the concept of feminist institutionalism reflects how official regulations and informal corporate cultures both support, but also undermine equality between women and men (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Krook & Mackay, 2011).

A second theory about nested newness reveals how these new ideas and initiatives are often nested within institutional frameworks that have been existing for long. This situation causes a contradiction, where reforms are both limited and encouraged, an illustrative example being how athlete participation quotas prove to be higher while radical shifts in leadership or resource distribution do not (Huang, 2025; MacKay, 2014). Research suggests that only numerical representation does not overcome excluding environments, since the real impact is subject to further elements like involvement in high-level decision making and decisive presence in boards (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013). As a matter of fact, women leaders confess feeling isolated and disconnected from others as a consequence of the homosocial reproductive mechanisms (Sveinson et al., 2022). While searching for more powerful forces that may support them, political bodies become relevant as they form behind diversity in leadership (Terjesen et al., 2015). Female inclusion can potentially diminish the existing stereotypes (Brieger et al., 2019) and also advance social impacts regarding how they are seen as leaders (Seierstad et al., 2017). This is explained in fact by the gender balance of the parliament itself, this indicator representing equal opportunities for all genders.

Additionally, academia suggests how female presence in politics directly influences the psychological perception of individuals, as it represents a political indicator for gender parity (Else-Quest & Grabe, 2012). In other words, this might highly affect how people see as something normal and usual that women occupy places at higher decision-making levels. Yet, such political dynamics lead to spillover effects, which are widely discussed in many areas. According to regulatory structures, the activity of political institutions potentially influences organizations within the same state, and so sport governing bodies as well (Saeed et al., 2016; Terjesen et al., 2015). In addition, gender diversity remains essential from both an ethical and an economic standpoint (Joecks et al., 2013). Evidence shows how incorporating this value strengthens organizations, not only corporations (Terjesen et al., 2009), but also sports institutions (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). For instance, it has been validated how organizations in the sports industry claimed fewer financial problems and generated higher per-capita revenues, due to their more gender-diverse boards (Wicker & Kerwin, 2022). This illustrates how such diversity in boardrooms and higher decision-levels can improve financial performance as well.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative panel-data design to investigate institutional and socioeconomic determinants of women's participation in sport leadership across 30 European countries, from 2018 to 2024. The analysis relies on indicators compiled from recognized international statistical institutions. The Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024a) and Women's Representation in Sport Governance (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024b) were accessed from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). GDP per capita (Eurostat,

2024a), the unadjusted Gender Pay Gap (Eurostat, 2024b), the Gini Index (Eurostat-c) and Government Expenditure on Recreational and Sporting Services (Eurostat-d) were retrieved from Eurostat. The source for Female Labor Force Participation (World Bank Group, 2024) was the World Bank Group. To capture historical and institutional differences among European gender dynamics, the countries were divided into four regions: Northern, Western, Southern and Central-Eastern Europe.

The dependent variable, Women's Representation in Sport Governance, measures the percentage of women in national sport governance. The set of explanatory variables reflects institutional gender regimes, labor market integration, economic capacity and structural inequality. Institutional gender equality is measured using the Gender Equality Index (GEI), while Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) is an indicator for women's economic integration. Government Expenditure on Recreational and Sporting Services reflects state investment within sport systems and GDP per capita indicates overall economic development. Structural inequality is measured through the Gini index and the unadjusted Gender Pay Gap, which represent income dispersion and gender-based wage disparities.

Data preparation, integration and exploratory analysis were conducted using Microsoft Power BI Desktop. The software was used to merge cross-source datasets, create calculated measures and generate time-intelligence indicators. Derived variables were constructed to facilitate structural interpretation, including categorical bins for GDP per capita and Governmental Expenditure on Sport Services, regional segmentation variables and clustered groupings to identify countries with similar profiles. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine bivariate relationships between Women's Representation in Sport Governance (%) and the explanatory variables. Distributional analysis, regional comparisons and Key Influencers exploration were employed to detect variables most associated with higher levels of women's participation in sport governance. This combination of descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, segmentation techniques, clustering exploration and longitudinal trend assessment facilitates a comprehensive analysis of macro-level interplay across the period under examination.

Results and discussions

The first hypothesis proposed that countries characterized by higher levels of institutional gender equality exhibit higher levels of women's participation in sport leadership. This assumption is strongly supported by the observed evidence.

The relationship between the Gender Equality Index (GEI) and Women's Representation in Sport Governance (%) is presented in Figure 1. The scatter plot exposes a clear upward trend, which reveals that higher gender equality is associated with a higher percentage of women holding governance roles in sport organizations. The Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.77 suggests a strong positive relation across the 30 European countries included in the analysis. A distinct regional pattern emerges, with Northern and Western European countries appearing in the upper-right area of the distribution, which shows higher institutional equality and participation rates, whereas countries from the Central and Eastern region of Europe are situated in the lower-left sector.

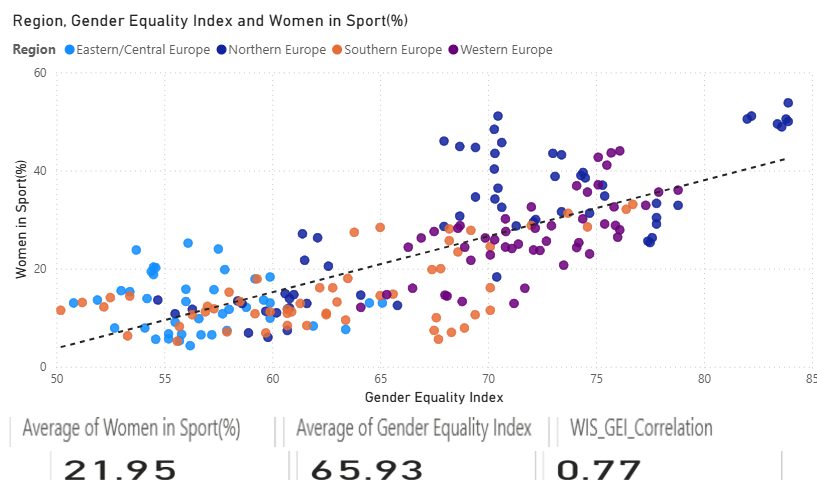


Figure 1. Scatter plot of Gender Equality Index vs. Women's Representation in Sport Governance

Source: Authors' own research.

Comparisons at the national level further reinforce this pattern. In Figure 2 is shown the joint distribution of the Gender Equality Index and Women in Sport Leadership (%) by country. Countries with high gender equality, such as Sweden, Norway and France, record the highest participation rates. In contrast, countries with lower gender equality scores, namely Czechia and Poland, present a lower level of women's participation in sport leadership.

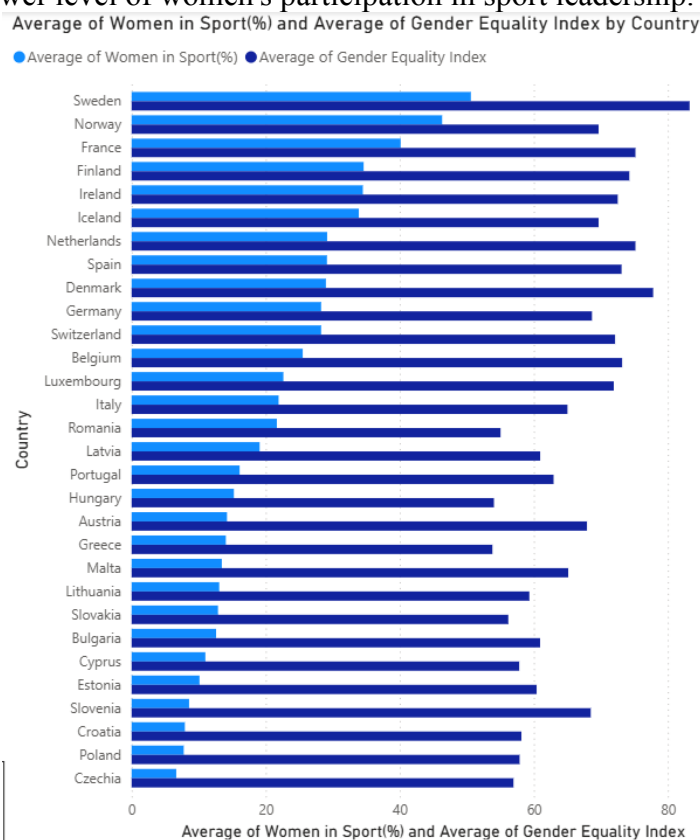


Figure 2. Average Women's Representation in Sport Governance (%) and average Gender Equality Index by country

Source: Authors' own research.

Taken together, these findings support the first hypothesis and are consistent with the theoretical arguments developed in the literature review. Feminist institutionalism suggests that governance systems operate within broader institutional contexts that shape access to decision-making positions (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). Where gender equality is more firmly embedded within national policy and regulatory frameworks, leadership structures become more open to female representation. In opposition, in contexts where institutional equality is weaker, established governance practices remain more resistant to change. The regional clustering observed in the figures aligns with this interpretation. This implies that sport governance mirrors institutional environments rather than functioning independently of them.

The second hypothesis suggests that lower levels of structural socioeconomic inequality are associated with higher levels of women's participation in sport governance. This disparity was quantified through two indicators: the Gender Pay Gap and the Gini Index.

Figure 3 presents the overall relationship between the Gender Pay Gap and Women's Representation in Sport Governance (%). At the European level, the correlation coefficient indicates an extremely weak association of -0.02. Thus, the scatter plot does not display a clear linear pattern. This suggests that gender-based pay disparities alone do not systematically predict women's representation in sport governance across all countries. High-participation countries appear at both moderate and relatively high pay gap levels and some lower-participation countries exhibit smaller pay gaps. This aligns with research arguing that gendered substructures and hegemonic masculinity within sport organizations may persist independently of economic equality indicators (Acker, 1990; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007), as leadership access is often shaped by homosocial recruitment mechanisms (Knoppers et al., 2016).

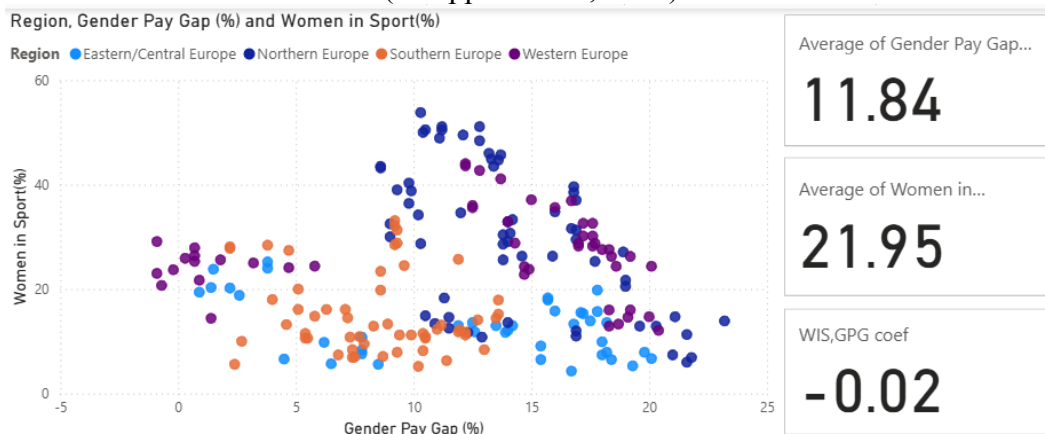


Figure 3. Scatter plot of Gender Pay Gap vs. Women's Representation in Sport Governance

Source: Authors' own research.

However, the relationship becomes more pronounced when examining regional subsamples. As shown in Figure 4, the correlation coefficient within Northern Europe is -0.56. In this regional context, higher pay disparities are more associated with lower participation levels. This finding suggests that wage inequality reflects a stronger negative association with participation levels in Northern Europe than at the aggregate European level. In contexts where gender equality is strongly embedded in political and regulatory frameworks, economic disparities may directly spill over into governance outcomes (Terjesen et al., 2015; Else-Quest & Grabe, 2012).

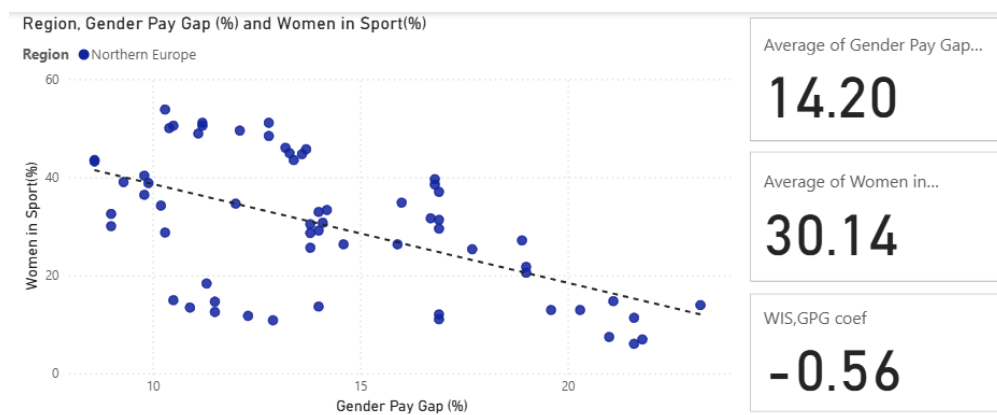


Figure 4. Scatter plot of Gender Pay Gap vs. Women's Representation in Sport Governance for Northern Europe

Source: Authors' own research.

To further explore structural heterogeneity, a clustering analysis was conducted for Central-Eastern European countries in Figure 5. The results reveal distinct configurations of pay inequality and participation levels. Romania combines very low gender pay gaps with comparatively high levels of women's participation. Poland shows medium pay gaps and consistently low participation levels. Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Czechia display higher pay gaps but heterogeneous participation outcomes. These differentiated profiles are consistent with the persistence of homologous reproduction and gendered career pipelines that shape leadership access beyond macroeconomic conditions (Knoppers et al., 2016; Hancock & Hums, 2016).

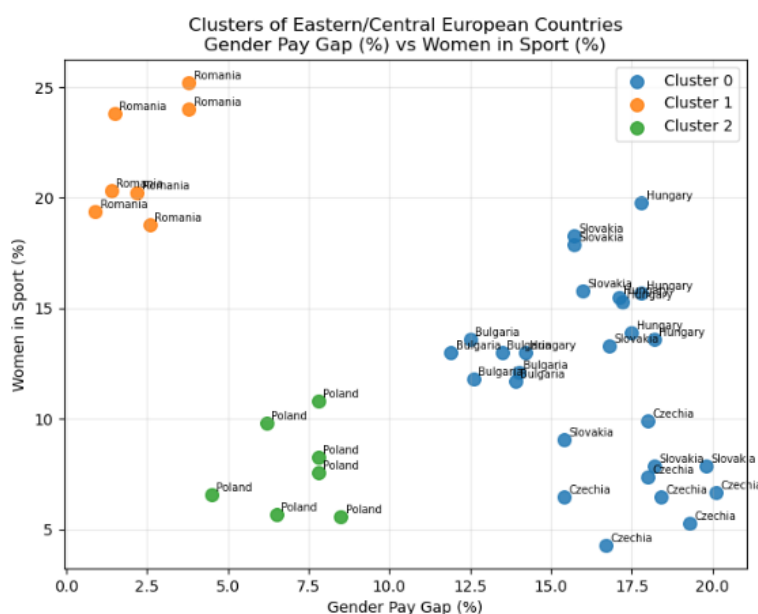


Figure 5. Clusters of Central-Eastern European Countries based on Gender Pay Gap and Women's Representation in Sport Governance for Northern Europe

Source: Authors' own research.

Additional evidence emerges from the analysis of income inequality using the Gini Index. The Key Influencers model from Figure 6 indicates that the dependent variable is more likely to

increase when the Gini Index falls within moderate values. Countries within this range display higher average participation compared to both more unequal contexts and those at the very lowest inequality levels. This pattern suggests the presence of threshold effects rather than a linear association. Reductions in income inequality appear to create more favorable conditions for women. Yet their impact remains mediated by historically masculine governance structures within sport organizations (MacKay, 2014; Huang, 2025).

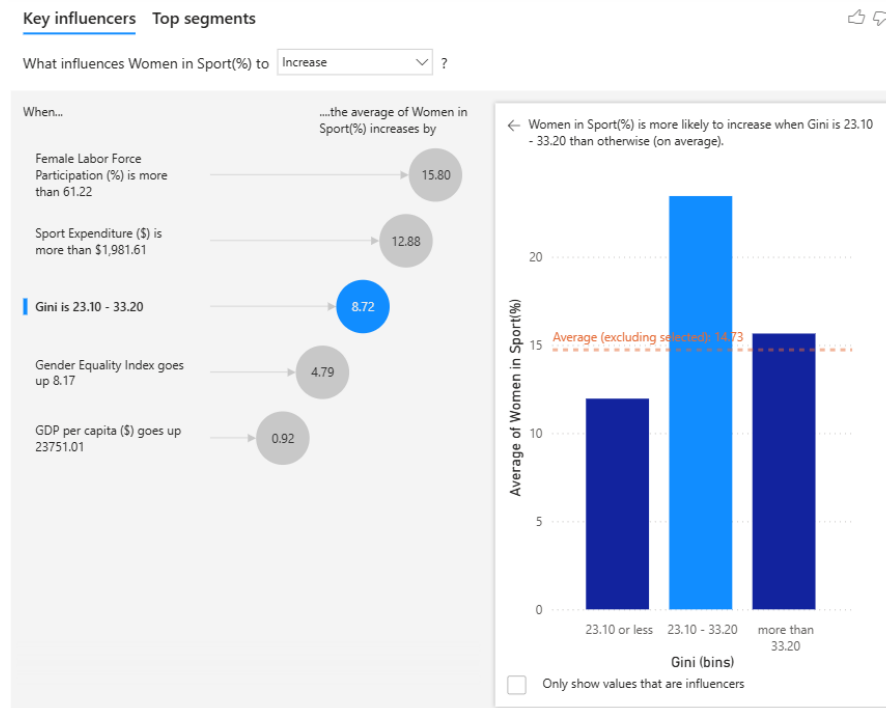


Figure 6. Key influencers model: Effect of Gini Index bins on average and Women's Representation in Sport Governance

Source: Authors' own research.

Overall, structural socioeconomic inequality reveals no consistent linear tie to women's sport governance participation across Europe. Thus, the second hypothesis is supported by partial empirical findings. Instead, its effects hinge on how national institutions and sport structures channel economic gaps into leadership access (Acker, 2006; Krook & Mackay, 2011). Regional and threshold patterns underscore this contingency.

The third hypothesis states that higher female labour force participation is positively associated with women's representation in sport governance. This assumption is grounded in the argument that broader societal gender integration influences organizational governance structures by normalizing women's presence in positions of authority (Terjesen et al., 2015; Else-Quest & Grabe, 2012).

The Key Influencers model shown in Figure 7 identifies Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) as a variable strongly associated with Women in Sport Governance (%). Precisely, when the labour force of women exceeds 61.22%, the average level of women's participation in sport governance increases by approximately 15.8 percentage points compared to other contexts. This difference demonstrates that higher levels of female economic integration are associated with higher representation within sport leadership structures.

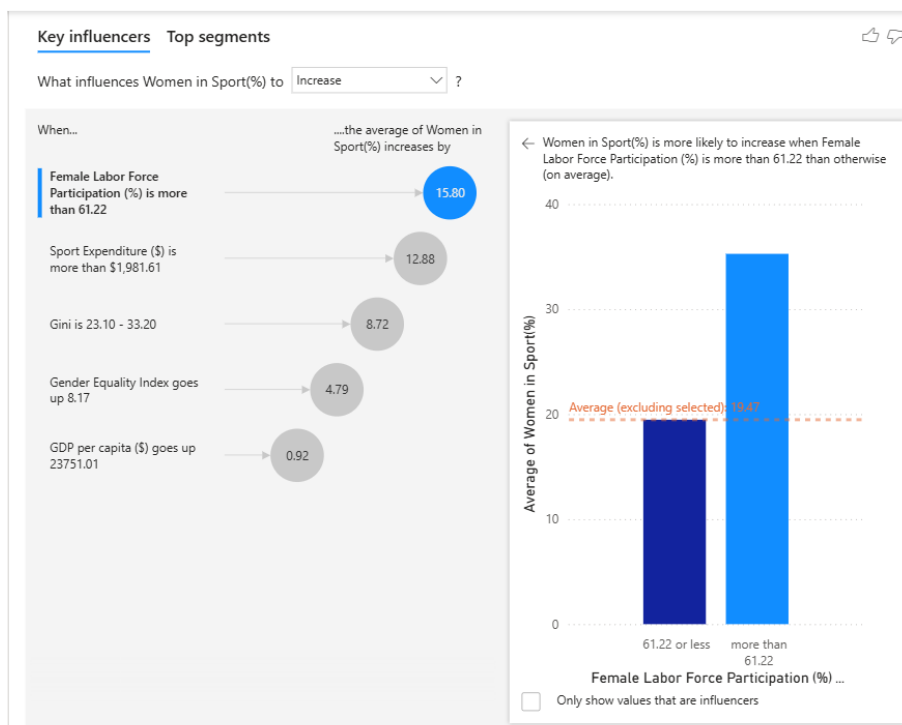


Figure 7. Key influencers model: Effect of Female Labor Force bins on average and Women's Representation in Sport Governance

Source: Authors' own research.

Regional segmentation further reinforces this pattern, as shown in Figures 8 and 9. Northern Europe records the highest levels of Female Labour Force Participation and presents the maximum average participation in sport governance. In contrast, Eastern and Central Europe registers lower levels of female labour market participation and exhibits the lowest representation levels. This regional alignment suggests that countries with higher Female Labor Force Participation also tend to exhibit higher levels of Women's Representation in Sport Governance.

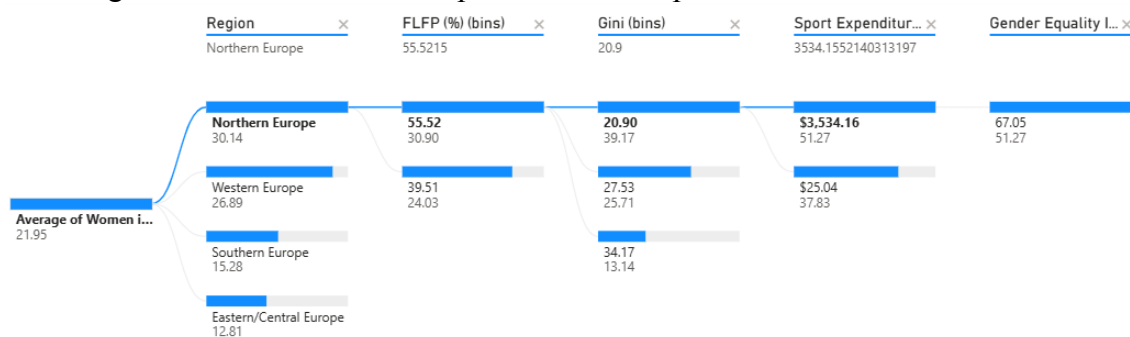


Figure 8. Decomposition tree: women's representation in sport governance (%) in Northern Europe

Source: Authors' own research.

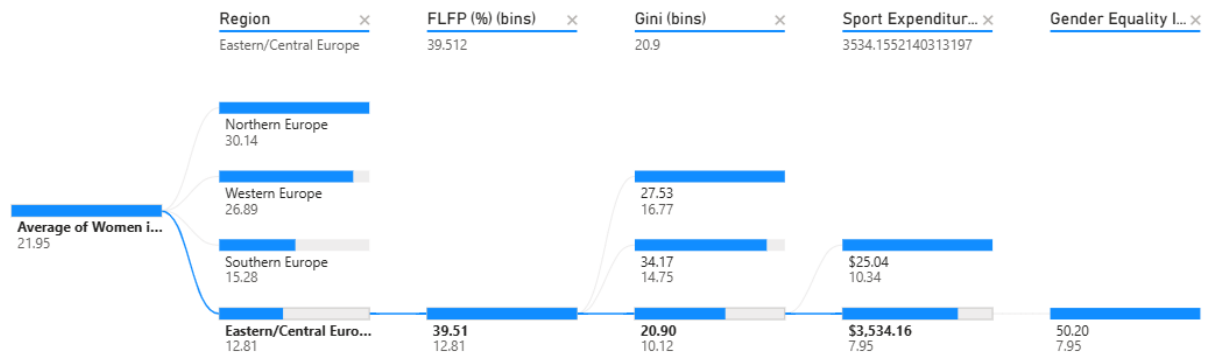


Figure 9. Decomposition tree: women's representation in sport governance (%) in Central-Eastern Europe

Source: Authors' own research.

These findings are consistent with the spillover mechanisms discussed in the literature. Greater female participation in the labour market increases the visibility and legitimacy of women in professional authority roles and reduces the homosocial closure within sport institutions dominated by men (Bird, 1996; Collinson, 2023). In addition, the normalization of women's presence in professional environments reshapes societal perceptions of leadership competence and authority, which facilitates the acceptance of women in governance positions (Else-Quest & Grabe, 2012). Through this mechanism, broader economic inclusion can translate into increased representation within sport leadership structures. Generally, the results provide strong support for H3. Higher levels of female labour force participation are associated with substantially higher levels of women's representation in sport governance, reinforcing the argument that societal gender integration can generate spillover effects into organizational leadership structures (Terjesen et al., 2015).

The fourth hypothesis proposes that women's participation in sport leadership is positively associated with public investment in sport and differs across European regions, showing discrepancies in institutional capacity and governance structures.

The relationship between public expenditure on sport and Women's Representation in Sport Governance (%) is illustrated in Figure 10. The scatter plot reveals a relatively positive association between the two variables with a correlation coefficient of 0.45. Thus, countries that assign higher levels of public investment to sport generally display higher participation of women in governance roles. However, the distribution also indicates some dispersion around the trend line, suggesting that financial resources alone do not fully determine gender representation within sport leadership structures.

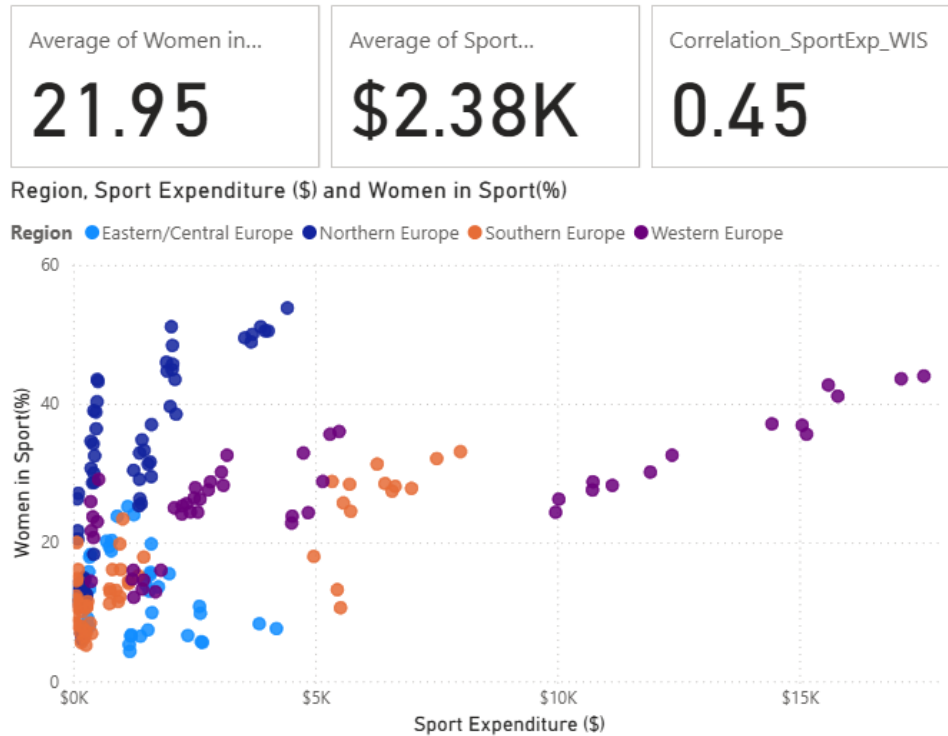


Figure 10. Scatter plot of Governmental Sport Expenditure vs. Women's Representation in Sport Governance

Source: Authors' own research.

Further insights emerge from the analysis of expenditure categories. As presented in Figure 13, countries within the highest spending bin (above €15 million) record the highest women's participation in sport governance of 40%. In contrast, countries within the lowest expenditure category (below €5 million) display lower participation levels of 19%. This pattern suggests that greater public investment can strengthen institutional capacity within sport systems, creating more favourable conditions for governance diversity and implementation of inclusive policies.

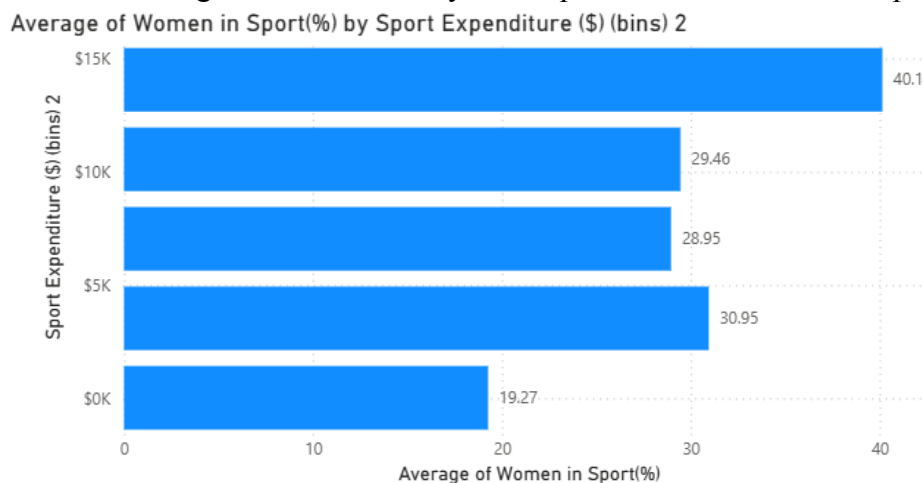


Figure 11. Average Women's Representation in Sport Governance (%) by Public Sport Expenditure bins

Source: Authors' own research.

The Key Influencers model shown in Figure 12 provides additional support for this relationship. The analysis indicates that when public expenditure on sport exceeds approximately €1.98 million, women's participation in sport governance increases by about 12.88 percentage points. This finding further suggests that higher levels of institutional investment contribute to more inclusive governance structures within sport systems.

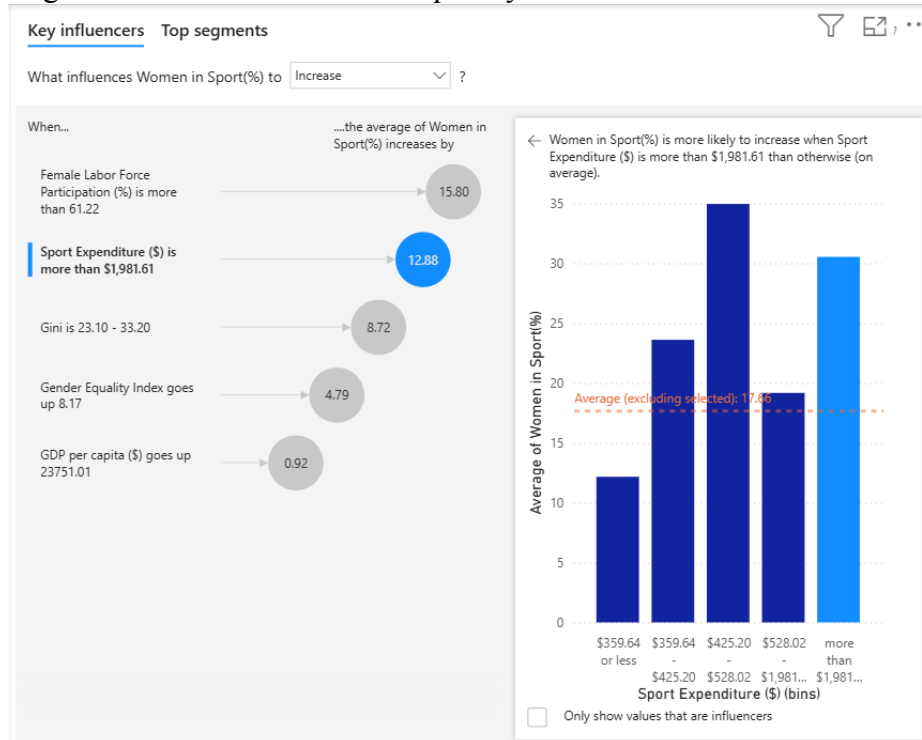


Figure 12. Key influencers model: Effect of Public Sport Expenditure bins on average and Women's Representation in Sport Governance

Source: Authors' own research.

Regional patterns illustrate how the impact of investment varies across institutional contexts. Figure 13 presents the relationship between sport expenditure and women's representation within Western Europe. In this region, the association becomes stronger with a correlation coefficient of 0.83. Countries with higher levels of sport investment exhibit higher levels of women's participation in leadership positions. By contrast, in regions characterized by lower institutional capacity, the relationship between investment and participation appears less pronounced.

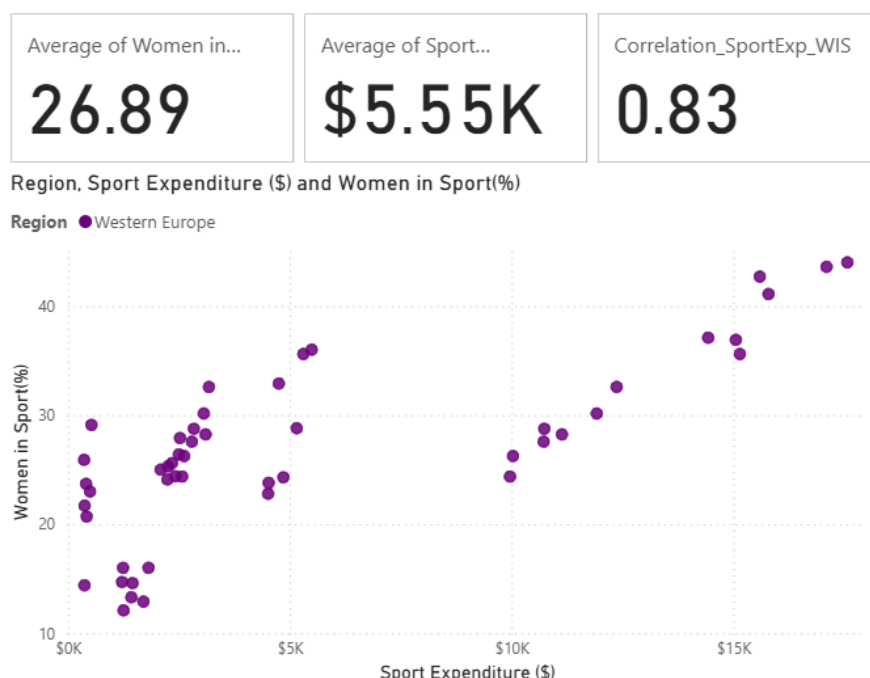


Figure 13. Scatter plot of Governmental Sport Expenditure vs. Women's Representation in Sport Governance for Western Europe

Source: Authors' own research.

The findings align with theoretical arguments in the literature review emphasizing institutional capacity and spillover effects from political structures (Terjesen et al., 2015; Krook & Mackay, 2011). Higher public investment enables professional administrative structures and equality-oriented reforms, similar to how embedded gender policies facilitate leadership access (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). Regional differences reflect historical institutional resistance and nested reforms, where resources fail to convert evenly into gender inclusion due to masculinized legacies (Acker, 1990; Knoppers et al., 2016). Within sport organizations, these dynamics can influence how effectively resources translate into inclusive governance reforms.

Conclusion

This paper set out to better understand why women remain underrepresented in sport governance across Europe. By examining 30 European countries between 2018 and 2024, the study explored how institutional gender equality, structural socioeconomic inequality, female labour force participation and public investment in sport relate to women's presence in high level positions within sport leadership.

The results suggest that the environment in which sport organizations operate matters significantly. Countries where gender equality is more embedded in policy frameworks and where women participate more actively in the labour market tend to show higher levels of female representation in sport governance. These findings indicate that leadership opportunities in sport are shaped by societal dynamics that influence how women access positions of authority. Public investment in sport also turns out to play a role. Higher levels of spending on recreational and sporting services are generally associated with greater female participation in governance, although

the strength of this relationship varies across European regions. In contrast, structural socioeconomic inequality does not show a consistent linear relationship with governance participation, which further suggests that institutional circumstances may mediate how economic disparities translate into leadership outcomes.

Taken together, these outcomes reinforce the idea that improving gender balance in sport leadership requires attention beyond individual organizations. Policies that promote gender equality, support women's economic participation and strengthen institutional capacity in sport systems contribute to more inclusive governance structures.

At the same time, the study has some limitations. The analysis relies on macroeconomic indicators and therefore cannot capture the internal decision-making processes within sport federations. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating organizational data or by examining similar dynamics in contexts outside Europe. Such approaches would help deepen the understanding of how institutional environments and governance practices interact in shaping equality in sport leadership.

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