

Gender in Olympic Organisational Culture: a Review of the IOC Policy of Setting Minimum Targets for the Proportion of Women in Executive Decision Making Positions in National Olympic Committees

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Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a study commissioned by the IOC from the Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy at Loughborough University over the period January 2002- March 2004, to review the recruitment of women to National Olympic Committee (NOC) Executive Committees (Henry et al., 2004). The project stemmed from the IOC's concern relating to the low levels of representation of women in the Olympic Movement in senior administrative roles and in particular in executive decision making positions.

To address this situation and other aspects of women's under-representation, the IOC established a Woman's Working Group in 1995. Led by the Working Group, the IOC established targets in 1996 for the proportion of executive committee positions to be held by women in NOCs and in International Federations (IFs). These target levels were a minimum of 10% by 2001, and of 20% by 2005. It is important to note that these were minimum targets but not quotas. The significance of the difference is that targets represent an aspiration while quotas would reflect a requirement, with sanctions for failing to meet the requirement.

The IOC has regularly collected and published statistics on progress towards the target. For example in September 2003 the IOC was able to declare that 62% of NOCs and 41% of IFs had made the 10% minimum target and 26% of NOCs and 22% of IFs had made the 20% minimum target. However the IOC wished to understand the mechanisms which lay behind the statistics, to grasp the nature of the barriers to recruitment of women to these positions, and the nature of their contributions once recruited, and thus it sought the input of an independent research group which could inform its policy deliberations on sport and gender in the IOC.

Methods

At the outset a set of key questions to be addressed to women members of NOC Executives and to the almost wholly male population of Secretary Generals of NOCs was agreed. In relation to the women members of NOC Executives, questions to be considered included the following. What was the background of the women on the NOC Executives, how were they recruited, what difference were they making? What qualifications, skills and competences do they have? What roles do they fulfil and how do they experience them? What are the views of the women themselves on their roles and on the 'targets policy'?

In relation to the Secretary Generals the research questions included the following. What were the views of the NOCs on the targets policy and how and why have they gone about recruiting (or not recruiting) women? What contribution do they feel the women make to the NOC? Does the NOC have a Women's Commission and how successful do they feel it has been? What overall impact has the policy had?

Two approaches were adopted to generate answers to the research questions. The first was a comprehensive questionnaire survey of all women members of NOC Executive Committees (N=257; response rate 57.5), and of all Secretary Generals (N=199; response rate 48.2). The second was a set of in-depth interviews with a sample of one in eight of women from NOC Executives (n=30) and of Secretary Generals (n=25). The questionnaires were provided in English, French and Spanish. The interviews which took place largely in the margins of other meetings (such as IOC seminars) at various international venues and were conducted in English, French, Spanish and Arabic by the research team, with the occasional need for an interpreter where the respondent's language was not one of the above.

The material generated from the qualitative responses to the questionnaire and the interviews was subject to analysis employing NUD*IST a qualitative data analysis software package. The material generated by closed questions in the questionnaire was subjected to analysis employing SPSS.

Results and Discussion

The discussion of findings is structured under six summary headings.

(A) Types of women recruited to NOC Executives.

The women recruited had an average age of 50. 77% were in full time employment and 78% were married or cohabiting. Thus these were already busy individuals, often with considerable responsibilities in other areas of their lives.

(B) The experience skills and competences they brought to the work of the NOC Executives.

Many of those interviewed had senior posts in their working lives. In educational terms the group was extremely well qualified 78% having a degree or teaching qualification, and 30% and 8% having postgraduate and PhD qualifications respectively. This group was seen as being better qualified than its male counterparts, though many reported doubts about their own ability. In addition the group had considerable experience as elite participants – half were international sportswomen and one in five were Olympians.

(C) The impact of the targets policy.

Recruitment of women to Executives was demonstrably at least partially a product of the targets policy. In that sense the targets policy had been a success, though it seems likely that NOCs will have considerable difficulty in reaching the 20% minimum target.

(D) The impact of women on the work of the Executives

Male respondent reported women to be more active than males on the Executives. A majority of respondents reported positive consequences of having women on the Executive, in terms not simply of more serious consideration of women's sport, but also in terms of the ways in which meetings were conducted.

(E) Measures taken / difficulties experienced in recruiting women to Executives.

The principal difficulty associated with the recruitment of women was the structural context of the electorate for NOC Executives and that for IF executives being invariably very predominantly male. It is clear from the feedback from respondents that without changing the nature of the electorate for Executive positions further gains towards equity of representation will be difficult to achieve.

(F) The tension between 'universalism' and cultural diversity in implementation of the policy

Finally the paper reviews the difficulties associated with culturally diverse views of gender roles evident in a global movement such as the Olympic movement.

References

Henry, I., Radzi, W., Rich, E., Shelton, C., Theodoraki, E., & White, A. (2004). *Women, Leadership and the Olympic Movement*. Loughborough: Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy, Loughborough University and the International Olympic Committee.

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