

The role of national governing bodies (NGBs) in promoting women's team sport in Ireland: the case of football

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Introduction

The paper reviews the organisational structure and activities of two sports governing bodies in Ireland – the Ladies Gaelic Football Association (LGFA) and the Women's Football Association of Ireland (WFAI). These associations have several common characteristics; yet have achieved differing fortunes particularly in terms of their games' promotion and development. In Ireland there are just under 80,000 women and girls playing Ladies Gaelic football, while approximately 6,000 play Association football (soccer).

Methods

Drawing on theory and primary and secondary data, possible explanations for such contrasting consequences are provided. The research objectives for this study are as follows – (a) to provide a profile of two governing bodies associated with women's sport in Ireland; (b) to identify the organisational features that facilitate strategic planning in these sporting bodies and (c) to ascertain the factors that facilitate or inhibit the attainment of a sporting body's goals. The secondary sources utilised in the study included newspaper articles, reports and various web pages. Primary evidence were gathered using in-depth personal interviews. The interviewees who contributed to the research endeavour included representatives from the two associations, the Irish Sports Council (ISC), the National Coaching and Training Centre (NCTC), schools (primary and post primary), higher education institutions and various clubs. Ellis Cashmore (2000) notes that the experience of women in sports virtually replicates their more general experience – that they have been treated as not only different to men but also inferior in many respects. While women in Ireland have participated in various team sports (hockey, tennis, golf, basketball and netball among others) over the years, it was only during the 1970s that women's football (Gaelic and soccer) became popular in Ireland.

Literature review

Organisational structure defines the manner in which the tasks of a sport organisation are broken down and allocated to employees or volunteers, the reporting relationships among these role holders and the co-ordinating and controlling mechanisms used within the sport organisation (Slack, 1997). In order to assess the fortunes of any organisation (sporting or otherwise) it is also necessary to take into consideration, developments within the macro environment (Daft, 1989). Organisational theorists are concerned with organisational structure and design, the impact of contextual factors such as strategy, size, technology on structure and design; and such issues as power within the organisation, the process of decision-making and how these can change and are managed. According to Doherty and Chelladurai (1999) organisational culture is 'how things are done around here'. The manifestations of a sport organisation's culture include stories and myths, symbols, language and ceremonies or rites. The physical setting in which the sport body operates can transmit meaning about the nature of its culture.

The focus of this research project is two governing bodies for women's sport, and their organisational effectiveness is connected with several constituencies (the government, the Irish Sports Council, clubs, schools, media, medical personnel, psychologists, employees, players, voluntary personnel, coaches, managers, parents). Dunning (1999) in exploring the problems of sport and gender, details five ways in which the theory of civilizing processes may be of use. One such issue is the reaction of males who feel threatened by the increasing 'encroachment' of females into this former male preserve (sport).

Interestingly, in both associations under review, men were associated with formalising the organisation's structure, however, the perception of 'encroachment' is evident on occasion particularly with respect to facilities availability (pitches, training centres) and club co-operation (Bourke, 2003).

Many theorists argue that organisational effectiveness is a difficult construct to measure, due in some degree to the fact that the goals and objectives of organisations are multiple, occasionally contradictory and difficult to identify (Wolf et al, 2002). In the case of governing bodies, attributes such as the calibre of board members and voluntary personnel, the internal procedures used and sports science support available will have a bearing on their attaining strategic development and performance goals.

Study findings

The LGFA and the WFAI were set up in the 1970s and their relationship with the governing body for the male codes (GAA and FAI) differed. The Ladies Gaelic Football Association is organized and structured in a similar manner to the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), is independent of it but currently has a project underway to achieve integration. The Women's Football Association initially was independent of the FAI, but in recent years (early 1990s) has sought and got representation on the Senior Council of the FAI. Both associations (LGFA and WFAI) are concerned with the promotion and development of football (Gaelic and soccer) at all levels in the country. In addition, the WFAI has responsibility for the Republic of Ireland National teams at Senior, U19, and U17 levels. The international demands for the LGFA are less, but it has clubs in the UK and US that organize local league and cup competitions.

Strategic planning is an important activity for sporting bodies. In 2003, the LGFA completed a detailed plan that specifies targets to be achieved by 2006. Planning for the WFAI is intertwined with that of the FAI. The LGFA has two full time executives, whereas there is just one full time women's soccer executive - a Regional Development Officer (RDO) funded by the FAI. To provide the football competition infrastructure, both organizations are dependent upon voluntary personnel (administrators, referees, coaches, medical personnel, public relations) but LGFA players have access to the more developed GAA facilities (pitches and training).

The Irish Sports Council oversees the funding of National Governing Bodies (NGBs). Both associations have received grants to fund various activities, but in the case of the WFAI the majority of its budget is for its international team activities and comes from the FAI. All interviewees noted the 'success' achieved by the LGFA in getting sponsorship for the All Ireland Championship and National League competitions. The prominence given to each sport by the media differs considerably – fixtures and results for LGF are published regularly in the national press. Many study participants specifically referred to each organization's culture, noting the importance of history (Gaelic football is a national sport) in formulating its goals and objectives. Interviewees also emphasized the importance of maintaining close ties with personnel in the various educational institutions (universities, primary and secondary schools). It was asserted that the LGFA personnel have deeper ties, but that the WFAI RDO is currently addressing this issue.

Concluding comments

While external and internal forces (power relations, cohesion) influence organizational planning, the findings from this study point to the organizational culture of a sporting body, plus the ability of its key personnel (officers, board and committee members) to be objective as being vital in promoting the association's sporting activities and attaining its goals.

References

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