

To become one of the men: female strategies

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Introduction

Although the participation of women in competitive sports has increased dramatically in the last thirty years to 40%, the gender ratio in the governance of sport is still largely skewed towards men. In the Netherlands, for example, 27% of the positions on the boards of national sport federations are occupied by women. In addition, only 10% of the chairpersons are women while 33% of the sport federations have no women on their boards at all (Kalmthout & Janssens, 2002, NOC*NSF, 1998). These differences are not unique for the Netherlands; comparable percentages exist in the USA and Canada as well (Acosta & Carpenter, 2002; CIAU Directory, 1994-1995). An exploration of the paths, the relatively few women involved in sport governance at the highest levels took to achieve these positions, may shed light on what needs to be done to change this gender skewness.

Theory

The relatively low number of women in board positions of sports federations is not just a result of social exclusion. Social exclusion means people are limited or constrained in their opportunities by others. In other words, power differences may influence social choices. Self exclusion refers to self-imposed constraints or limits (Elling, 2002, Collins, 1997). It is however related to other forms of exclusion. Individuals may choose not to strive for a position on a board, for example, if they estimate that their chances of succeeding are small. In addition, most forms of exclusion are tied to a specific context in which unequal chances play an important role. Women and minorities for example may be welcome as long as they assimilate and act like the other board members.

Dominant images and ideologies about gender, ethnicity, and sexual preference mean that some people are assumed to be a better fit for certain positions than others. A lack of fit is said to occur when the gender, ethnicity and sexual preference of a group of individuals do not correspond with functions IN the labour market (Heilman, 1993) Witz (1990, 1992) argues that inclusion (fit) or exclusion (lack of fit) are the result of processes of negotiation. She has developed a model which links fit/lack of fit to material and ideological privileges accruing to a certain gender, ethnicity and/or sexual preference and their intersections. These privileges allow the dominant group to claim resources and opportunities which in turn makes them the ideal candidates for certain positions. In other words, they consciously or subconsciously can use their gender, ethnicity and/or sexual preference to mobilise power and to exclude others. Dynamics of in- and exclusion take place because the dominant group reproduces its own position through various processes that Acker (1990; 1992) has described. Subordinate groups resort to specific strategies to gain positions of which they are excluded.

Method

This research study uses in depth interviews to explore strategies for inclusion used by six Dutch women to become members of executive boards of (international) sport federation. These women come from six different sports (soccer, athletics, hockey, swimming, tennis, skating) which are the most popular sports in the Netherlands in terms of participation and/or media attention. The interviews took place between July and November 2003. The interviewer focused on the dynamics of career choices and their context. Specifically, the women were asked about conditions that were important in making these choices and about the influence of others in making those choices. We used Witz's perspective to analyze these interviews and to describe the strategies that these women used to attain their top-level positions. Specifically, in this paper we look at the paths these women followed to achieve these positions (inclusion).

Results

The results show that there were two dominant strategies that enabled women to become a member of an executive board. First, they were able to obtain these high positions only by participating in male networks and by behaving like members of these networks did, that is, they tried not to stand out but to assimilate. They felt they were 'one of the men'. This network behavior resulted in their being asked to apply for a position. Yet they could not behave completely like their male colleagues. Although male members of the network were expected to show ambition, these women could not reveal their ambition to attain their positions. As one woman said 'for men it is common sense to show your ambition, but not for women..., it's not womanly to show your ambition'. One of the interviewed women was open about her ambition to become chairperson of the board, after being a member for many years, but she did realize that she had taken an uncommon step. The second important strategy used by the interviewed women pertained to their private life. Most of them did not have children; those who did have them waited until the children were older before they accepted a membership on the board. All of those who had a partner asked for his approval before accepting the top position. Without the support of their partner, none of them would have accepted the function.

Discussion

The use of these strategies to negotiate their positions on a top-level board show how women who believe they are 'one of the men' must use gender specific strategies to become a member of a board of a national or international sport organization.

Women seem to be expected to wait to be asked for a position in the board instead of applying for it. Although they had shown ambition in their own sport participation, they are expected not to show that in sport governance. Their male colleagues however, are praised for being ambitious and showing it. In addition, those women who are assumed to be able to assimilate, that is, fit the existing male dominated culture, are the ones who are asked for high ranking positions. Consequently, women who have different ideas or are vocal feminists tend not to be asked for positions on the national governing boards of sport associations. Obviously these strategies are gendered and strengthen male hegemony in sports governance (Witz, 1992). These privileges allow the dominant male group to claim resources and opportunities which in turn makes them the ideal candidates for positions on these boards.

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