

Challenges affecting the management functions of female senior managers in selected South African sports organisations

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: The aim of the study was to investigate the perceived challenges facing female senior managers working in selected South African sports organisations.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative research approach was adopted where in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected female senior managers. An inductive, bottom-up approach to data analysis was applied using Atlas.ti (v. 9) for coding the study's data.

Findings: The key findings revealed the negative impacts of autocratic leadership styles, and the perpetuated impacts of the apartheid era on the current state of management in South African sports organisations. This study concludes that systemic events of the apartheid era, exclusion, and the lack of funding opportunities affect the current management practices of female senior managers. It is apparent that the poor implementation of existing policies or guidelines on gender equity hinders the support for females in senior sports management

positions in South Africa. The study forms part of a broader study which elucidates other challenges on the underrepresentation, gender bias, the glass ceiling, the wage gap, work-life balance challenges, and the lack of capacity-building, networking and mentoring, that female employees face in corporate organisations.

Recommendations/value: The outcomes of this study support the sports business literature on the documented challenges females face in corporate organisations. The study contributes to the application of the constructs of management in relation to the liberal feminist theory.

Managerial implications: South African sports organisations may need to consider being proactive in implementing policy and leadership styles in order for female senior managers to effectively produce high-performing sports organisations using the fundamental constructs of management.

Keywords

Female work challenges; management functions; senior management; South African sports organisations

JEL Classification: Z22

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies focused largely on female representation in sports previously revealed the gross underrepresentation of females within sport's public and private sectors (Lapchick, 2016; Evans & Pfister, 2020; Pape, 2020; Darvin *et al.*, 2021). The situation is improving slowly as male employees continue to occupy decision making positions in senior management levels of sports organisations (Smith & Wrynn, 2013; Evans & Pfister, 2020). Evans and Pfister (2020:2) stated that due to the trend of female underrepresentation, it has become imperative to understand the causes and impacts of gender imbalances in senior management levels of sports organisations, primarily because "gender shapes not only identities in sport, but also constitutes an axis of power around which interactions, structures and processes in sport rotate".

Previous studies have shown that men are over-represented in senior decision-making positions in sports administration in South Africa (Lapchick, 2016; Darvin *et al.*, 2021; Lotfy *et al.*, 2023). By 2020, South African females comprised only fourteen per cent of the available chief executive officers, chief financial officers, and executive directors of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) listed companies (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020; West, 2020). Despite some improved statistics over time, critics argued that the improvements "are not yet good enough" (Business Women's Association of South Africa, 2017:8). Burton and Leberman (2017:1) and Evans and Pfister (2020:1) suggested that the male over-representation in sports is typically "able-bodied white men," who are involved in the decision-making processes of mainly international sports organisations. This highlights the importance of understanding why

men continue to dominate the sports industry (Burton & Leberman, 2017). The existing literature on the challenges faced by females in the working environment is largely in accordance with the objectives set out by Jarvie (2006) and Wilson (2023) regarding feminism, which links to political agendas surrounding sexuality, patriarchy, gender logic, gender roles, engendered power relations, and oppression.

Management functions, for example, Planning, Organising, Leading and Controlling (POLC) play a unique role in an organisation (Carpenter *et al.*, 2012; Jones & George, 2019). Female employees have, however, been perceived to be incapable of fulfilling tasks associated with leadership and management (Aman *et al.*, 2018; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023).

A number of studies have explored various factors concerning women in management, which spans numerous industries and various levels of management (see, for example, Choge, 2015; Thomas *et al.*, 2019; Chyu *et al.*, 2020). The researchers identified challenges such as the glass ceiling, underrepresentation, discriminatory culture, career immobility, limited job security and training opportunities, the lack of mentors and role models, the wage gap, work-life factors (e.g. child-rearing), self-limiting beliefs (low confidence), gender bias, gender stereotypes, and power dynamics in the workplace (Choge, 2015; Thomas *et al.*, 2019; Chyu *et al.*, 2020). While these challenges are typically observed in fields such as education, business management, and health sciences, Malie (2011) suggests that future research should be extended into other industry sectors. This research has thus set out to investigate females in the sports industry, an industry historically considered to be male-dominated (Burton, 2019; Toffoletti & Palmer, 2019).

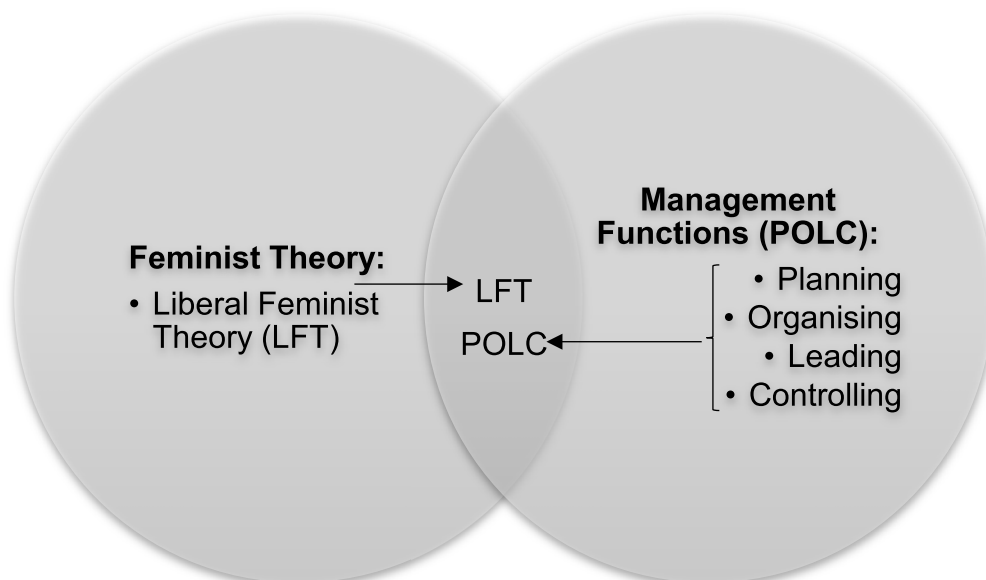
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of theories are discussed in pursuit of sociologically theorising sport, for example, the Marxist theory, functionalism, figural sociology, cultural studies, feminism, interpretive sociology, post-structuralism, pluralism, political economy, post-modernism, the globalisation theory, and hegemony theory (Edwards, 1973; Jarvie & Maguire, 1994; Coakley & Dunning, 2000; Scambler, 2005; Jarvie, 2006; Malcolm, 2016). Feminism, however, is believed to be integrated with theories that pursue various political agendas on issues pertaining to sexuality, patriarchy, gender logic, gender roles, space, femininity, engendered power relations, notions of the body, social differences and oppression (Jarvie, 2006). In the sporting fraternity, feminist theories are based on (a) liberal democratic beliefs, for example, liberal feminism; (b) structural power relations, for example, radical and socialist feminism; and (c) post-structuralist notions of difference and power, for example, post-structural Black feminism (Scambler, 2005). An

example of this is the way liberal and radical feminists have argued about issues such as the maintenance of predominantly male power over females and unequal access to decision-making roles in sport (Scambler, 2005). The liberal feminist theory was the adopted paradigm for this study solely because it seeks to address matters pertaining to the equal distribution of power and membership within male-controlled economic, political, judicial, educational and medical structures (Baehr, 2020).

In all areas of sport, particularly in leadership positions, including sports business, female roles are believed to be scarce (Burton, 2015; South Africa: Department of Sport and Recreation South Africa, 2016), which potentially affects their management practices. Therefore, the study narrows its focus onto the key management constructs of POLC that are significant to feminist ideologies. As such, Figure 1 conceptualises the link between the four fundamental management functions (which will be detailed in this section) and the liberal feminist theory that guided this study. Furthermore, previously identified challenges that female senior managers might encounter in sport organisations, for example, the old boy's network, glass ceiling, wage gap, educational profiles, gender stereotypes, and the lack of mentors and networking opportunities (Salloum *et al.*, 2016; Grant Thornton, 2019; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023) will be detailed in this section.

Figure 1: Link between the liberal feminist theory and the four fundamental management functions



Source: Compiled by authors

2.1 Fundamental management functions in sports business

Since the first attempt at professional preparation in sport management was established in the United States in 1949, sport management has expanded into various areas, for example, the commercialisation of sports in areas such as business, education, and academia (Baker & Esherick, 2013; Pedersen & Thibault, 2019). In the context of this study, the definition of sport management was adopted in relation to characteristics associated with sport as a business, which considers managerial tasks involving organisations' business models, strategic planning, leadership and governance (Petkovic *et al.*, 2016; Hoye *et al.*, 2018). As a result of the commercialisation of sports, sports managers have emerged due to the need to organise the legal, business, and managerial aspects of sport (Hums & Crosset, 2012). A practical perspective of the organisation of sports includes working with components such as game tickets, online and media content, sponsorships, community events and merchandise or consumer products (Pitts & Stotlar, 2013). In essence, the management of sport requires sport managers to liaise with important stakeholders and manage key organisational resources to ensure the "efficient realisation of business and sporting goals of an organisation and/or sportsman in all management functions" (Retar *et al.*, 2015:275). This current study, therefore, ventures into the sport sector from a management perspective and, in particular, explores personal perceptions of female managers and their role as leaders and decision-makers within the given context.

Past research averred that traditional management functions involve forecasting, planning, organising, commanding, coordinating and controlling (Fayol, 1949; McLean, 2011), while contemporary functions are believed to have been adapted from traditional functions, according to Griffin (2016), and Jones and George (2019), including leading, decision making, influencing, motivating, staffing, and communicating. However, POLC is deemed the predominant management framework across the globe because its functions are essential in producing exceptional performing organisations (Carpenter *et al.*, 2012; Jones & George, 2019).

2.1.1 Planning

Planning involves specifying an organisation's future actions and selecting, ahead of time, the necessary steps to accomplish those objectives (Bateman & Snell, 2022). The planning process involves stipulating how and when tasks should be implemented to achieve success through the formulation of short-and long-term goals (Certo & Certo, 2012). It is then generally agreed that formulating organisational goals and stipulating the best ways to achieve the goals

is the simplest means of defining the planning process (Griffin, 2016). Notably, planning aligns itself as the primary management function in the management process, as defined by Gutterman (2015), and this process involves making decisions on the purposes, politics, strategies, programmes and plans that guide the operations of the sport organisation (Ilić, 2013).

2.1.2 Organising

Boddy (2008) described organising as the act of creating a realistic situation off abstract plans by allocating time and effort to specific organisational goals. The process of organising could involve formulating an organisational structure, finalising the necessary resources needed by employees, and developing policies for human resource management (Boddy, 2008). Organising is identified as the second function of the management process, and McLean (2011) and Robbins and Coulter (2012) reveal that it involves allocating the appropriate human, financial and material resources that will, in turn, ensure the optimal use of the organisation's systems, resources, procedures, processes, and services. This entails developing a formal structure identification of the organisational units, for example, describing the position of the Assistant Athletic Director for Marketing (Petronel & Florentina, 2013; Barr & Hums, 2014).

2.1.3 Leading

Leading is said to be the process of utilising informal and social means to influence employees to act towards achieving the organisation's objective (Carpenter *et al.*, 2012). It is therefore emphasised that the process of effectively influencing an organisation's employees can be achieved by means of motivation, while power, personality, persuasion, and communication are other effective ways that can be utilised (Jones & George, 2019). Leading practically involves the act of visioning, inspiring, energising, networking, forming and maintaining relationships, the ability to plan long-term, and the ability to initiate a positive impact in an organisation, during extremely challenging and changing times (Jun & Lee, 2023). Leading remains a key imperative for management, as postulated through the definitions above, and the process requires sport managers to "supervise, manage limits, create challenges, encourage self-management, and promote an atmosphere of social support in the organisation" (Imbroda-Ortiz *et al.*, 2015:62).

2.1.4 Controlling

The process of “verifying that everything occurs in accordance with plans, instructions, established principles and expressed command” (Mullins, 2005:197) serves as the primary purpose of the fourth management function that is reinforced in Jones and George’s (2019) definition of management. In detail, controlling entails the process of ensuring that all plans executed conform to organisational policy and practice, conform to the initial command and rule and the initial plan of action, and lastly, ensures the evaluation of the organisation’s performance in its aim of identifying any incongruences that need to be addressed (McNamara, 2009). Practical examples of monitoring include using information systems to measure cost, productivity, and overall organisational performance and receiving progress reports from employees on the allocated tasks (DuBrin, 2011). In sports organisations, however, controlling entails, for example, ensuring that the implementation of the organisation’s strategic and operational plans, as well as of the projects and initiatives of the organisation, is in accordance with the initial plan(s) (Guță, 2019).

Female employees are perceived to be incapable of fulfilling tasks associated with management and leadership (Aman *et al.*, 2018; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). However, contrary to such views are the examples of Meghan Jenkins as the Vice President International of the National Basketball Association in the United States of America and Sumayya Khan as the Chief Operating Officer at the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture in South Africa. This study builds on Jenkin and Khan’s examples by investigating the contemporary challenges that female senior managers may face in sports organisations despite the sometimes-ambivalent perceptions of female management abilities.

2.2 Politics concerning females in sport organisations

In this study, the term ‘politics’ refers to an “individual or collective action that disrupts ordinary states of affairs, normal life, or routine patterns of behaviour” (Alexander, 2014:277; Gabriel, 2017). With the meagre proportion of females in senior management, it was impossible to ignore the possibility of an existing range of challenges that female senior managers might encounter in sports organisations. For example, the old boy’s network, the glass ceiling, the wage gap, education (i.e. educational profiles), gender stereotypes, discriminatory culture, the power dynamics in the workplace, the lack of mentors and networking opportunities (Salloum *et al.*, 2016; Grant Thornton, 2019; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023), and more (see for example Choge, 2015, Thomas *et al.*, 2019, and Chyu *et al.*, 2020), which have been previously identified in the literature.

2.2.1 *Old boys' network*

The “old boys’ network” is regarded as one of the main barriers facing female managers (Burton, 2019). The network is a significant obstacle for female employees in the sports industry because it serves as an unofficial social network that keeps women and people of racial minorities from forming connections that could advance their careers and give them authority (Katz *et al.*, 2018). This involves exclusion from knowledge about job-related opportunities, therefore reproducing and strengthening gender inequality within the organisation (McDonald *et al.*, 2009; Burton, 2019). It is also said that elements of competition and power-related aspects derived from the organisational structure are further adopted and transferred into social practices such as friendships and alliances within such an informal network (Garcia & Tor, 2023). Considering the trends of the old boy’s network, it became clear for the current study therefore to probe the issue of whether powerful men retained additional organisational elements, and whether or not additional issues transpired as a result of the marginalising network.

2.2.2 *Glass ceiling*

Accompanying the old boys’ network is probably the most noticeable challenge encountered by females in management - the glass ceiling - which is an invisible barrier that prevents women from rising to positions of authority in companies where men predominate (Kulik & Rae, 2019). It is argued that the negative impact of the glass ceiling is most evident within the statistical representation of female senior managers in large organisations, which highlights the scarcity of managers, particularly chief executive officers, in such organisations (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Components of the glass ceiling that hinder females from obtaining top positions can include promotion, compensation and corporate rules and practices in career development (Kulik & Rae, 2019). Additionally, glass walls are believed to prevent females from progressing into particular fields and positions (Rao & Tilt, 2016). Meanwhile, the glass cliff, which results from shattering the glass ceiling, entails females who are only promoted to top management roles above equally qualified men when there is a significant risk of organisational failure; for example, employment in an organisation that comprises a history of failure, lack of resources or inadequate levels of support (Buckalew *et al.*, 2012; Morgenroth *et al.*, 2020). With the perceived existence of the glass ceiling, glass walls and glass cliffs, it thus became important for this study to ask questions about the awareness of the glass ceiling in South African sports organisations.

2.2.3 Wage gap

In a study seeking to address the rise of women and their impact on an organisation's performance, it was found that there exist differences in remuneration between male and female employees; female managers received fewer opportunities to establish growth in their careers in comparison to males, and furthermore, gender-governed promotions existed within the workplace (Salloum *et al.*, 2016). Even when promoted, the remuneration of female managers was sometimes less than that of male employees in the same position. Additionally, female employees were perceived to be less career-orientated than their male counterparts (Woudstra, 2016). The issue of female senior managers receiving lower wages than males who are occupying the same position is attributed to substandard earnings that negatively affect their ascendancy in the organisational hierarchy (Zimmermann, 2022). This led the researcher to question the perceptions of female senior managers' personal encounters with the wage gap as part of the remuneration processes of sports organisations in South Africa.

2.2.4 Education

It has been indicated that male individuals often have greater experience and knowledge of the business world compared to females who merely possess higher education qualifications but have little to no knowledge of business management (Vázquez-Carrasco *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, it was discovered that female individuals hindered their opportunities to occupy senior managerial roles by selecting academic qualifications, termed traditional female academic qualifications, for example, Human Resource Management and Communications-related courses that did not primarily serve as training prerequisites for senior management level positions (Research Focus, 2009). Furthermore, it is apparent that many females avoided pursuing postgraduate studies, for example, a Master of Business Administration, due to a negatively perceived cost-benefit ratio (Research Focus, 2009). However, it was argued that female senior managers tend to have higher levels of education compared to their counterparts (Keloharju *et al.*, 2018). They are more inclined towards obtaining degrees from career paths that require large numbers of senior managers. Thus, they are better positioned to acquire great experience from large firms (e.g. consulting firms), which in turn improves their ability and willingness to work in competitive corporate environments (Keloharju *et al.*, 2018). Focusing on historically perceived male-dominated careers (e.g. technology and engineering), the Business Women's Association of South Africa (2017:84) stated that despite females achieving a higher percentage of graduates within such fields, they tend to experience difficulty in overcoming the challenges posed by the stereotypical societal perspectives of such careers; as females were frequently viewed as "incapable" and "unsuited" for male-dominated

careers. The Business Women's Association of South Africa (2017) reported a finding that brings into question whether the perceived male dominated environment of sport poses similar challenges to female senior managers. Given the different perceptions of females and education, this study found it important to probe into the importance and role of higher education for female senior managers in sports business.

2.2.5 Gender stereotypes

Gender-role stereotypes and discrimination have been identified as catalysts for increasing negative attitudes towards female managers in sport organisations (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Gender stereotyping hampers female employee's advancement into the higher managerial ranks of an organisation, where, consequently, the gender gap becomes more visible (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). Aman *et al.* (2018) pointed out that such a barrier translates to perceived evidence that increased entry of females into senior managerial roles could be a result of females entering organisations that deal with 'female sports', for example, hockey and netball, or occupying positions on boards and committees of organisations working with 'neutral sports' such as swimming. Such recruitment trends thus reinforce female underrepresentation in organisations handling traditionally 'male sports', like football or rugby (White & Kay, 2006). It is thus posited that such a biased recruitment process not only restricts females' career advancement within sport organisations but, in turn, emphasises the unfair practices attached to the hiring processes of certain sports organisations (Aman *et al.*, 2018). Considering the negative impacts posed by gender stereotypes in organisations, this study found it necessary to question the perceived role of gender bias or stereotyping in the South African sports sector.

2.2.6 Mentorship and networking

As early as 2006, the importance of role models for females within the sports sector was deemed "undeniable" and most likely a "virtuous circle" due to the effect which role models had by taking up roles such as decision-makers, on the existing perceptions of gender equality (White & Kay, 2006:30). It was found that too few females serve as role models and thus the lack of females in senior management results in the lack of role models and mentors (Sims *et al.*, 2021).

Coupled with mentoring, respondents in Massengale's (2009) study emphasised the need to establish bonds with professionals, as it is essential for hierarchical progression in an interscholastic sport. However, they further emphasised the perception that females do not initiate adequate attention and effort to networking (Massengale, 2009). In 2019, when

participants were asked to report on the greatest challenges that females faced, the participants highlighted the lack of access to networking and development opportunities, which showed overall access of 26 per cent worldwide (Grant Thornton, 2019). Although the low percentage of networking has remained an area of concern, organisations have established various initiatives in an attempt to address the issue. A prime example of such initiatives is a training and networking programme known as the Female Future programme, in which, of the 600 female candidates who successfully completed the programme, 60 per cent have secured positions on Norwegian boards (Davies, 2011). It thus became imperative for this study to investigate the role of mentors in the lives of female senior managers. As such, the benefits and challenges of mentoring and networking were used as a baseline for inquiry in this study.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the qualitative research inquiry. Qualitative research is a field of inquiry that interprets events using case studies, personal experiences, life stories, life-history interviews, participant observations, artefacts, cultural texts and productions, and observational, historical, interactional and visual texts (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). This study was best aligned with the assumptions, purposes, approaches and the researcher role of the qualitative mode of inquiry described by Yilmaz (2013), which incorporates the socially constructed reality based on the respondent's experiences; data collection with minimal numerical influence; interpreting participant responses for purposes of data analysis; and prioritising respondent views throughout data collection, reporting of findings, discussion, and study conclusions.

As a design that is popular in social sciences, particularly in sport studies, this study made use of a cross-sectional design by using interviews to collect data from a specific population over a single period (Gratton & Jones, 2010). The inquiry further adopted the interpretive paradigm because this study's researcher needed to view events as subjective and employ contextual, humanized, and reflexive research practices (Dean, 2018; Pham, 2018). The paradigm was suitable because there was a need to obtain significant meanings, values, and explanations regarding the research participant's personal experiences in the senior management levels of South African sports organisations (Yilmaz, 2013; Jones, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth information about the experiences, complex behaviours, and opinions of female senior managers within the senior management levels of South African sports organisations.

Stakeholders were purposefully selected through a non-probability sampling technique (purposive sampling) in order to obtain research participants who have the same characteristics (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). Using this technique, the research participants were required to be female and needed to occupy job titles such as President, Vice President, General Manager, Chairperson, Chief Executive, Chief Officer, Chief Director, the Board of Directors, and Managing Director in specific sports organisations. The criteria excluded male participants and low to middle-level management positions (e.g. team managers/coaches, commentators, referees, or athletes). The study sample was enough to obtain a valid understanding of the challenges that female senior managers face in South African sport organisations, therefore reaching saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Consent to participate in the study was requested by the researcher via email, to which a total of twelve female senior managers agreed to participate in the study. A snapshot of the research participant profiles that include categories of participant's positions, highest qualifications and number of years in a senior position is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Snapshot of research participant profiles

	Number of participants
Senior management positions:	
President	2
Vice President	5
Chief Executive	3
National Director	1
Vice Chairperson	1
Highest qualification:	
No formal qualification	0
Matric Certificate	2
Undergraduate	2
Postgraduate	8
No. of years in senior position:	
<1 Year	2

1-5 Years	6
6-10 Years	1
11-15 Years	2
>16 Years	1

Source: Compiled by authors

3.1 Data collection

The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview, which consisted of fourteen open-ended questions that were used to inquire, probe, and obtain clarification and feedback about topics identified in previous studies. The interview questions can be seen in Annexure 1. Prior to conducting the actual interviews, the interview questionnaire was piloted on female senior managers within South African organisations across various sectors in order to obtain feedback that would help enhance the rigour and validity of the data collected (Janghorban *et al.*, 2014). The topics covered included the experienced challenges of female senior managers in the workplace and their experiences with networking and government and organisation support as female senior managers. A similar line of questioning was followed using the guidance of interview schedules from the likes of Malie (2011) and Mwangi (2012). To emphasise the reliance on the perceptions, views, and opinions of the research participants, the interview questions were often posed using phrases such as, “How would you describe...”, “based on your awareness...” and “in your opinion...”.

All interviews were conducted during individual scheduled time slots with each female senior manager. Both in-person and online interviews were held in a quiet environment with minimal noise interference at a time and location most convenient for the research participant, in this case, the respondent’s work office (in-person) or home (online). The names of the research participants and the sports organisations they worked for were kept confidential in this study, and all ethical protocols were taken into account. Participants are distinguished using respondent numbers (e.g. R6) when a direct quote is used, and where necessary, a description of the nature of the sector or organisation is provided.

3.2 Data analysis

With the use of Atlas.ti version 9, the author placed the data into independent codes. The data then underwent the process of open coding (Medelyan, 2020), where the data was carefully read, and then identified and assigned a category or theme based on the data’s relation to each research question (Jones, 2015). Following open coding, the data underwent the process

of axial coding, where the data was re-read, and further evidence (where necessary) was identified and placed into code groups (Jones, 2015). The three code groups that were established are (a) status quo of female representation, (b) identified challenges facing female senior managers, and (c) organisational and governmental policy. Lastly, the process of selective coding was adhered to by identifying information that was similar and/or contradictory to a particular concept or theme (Jones, 2015). The data validity and reliability were achieved by constantly checking the interview recordings and transcripts for any errors and biases, which were then eliminated when discovered. Memos were constantly referred to and checked during data analysis.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present study forms part of a broader study that identifies challenges linked to the perspective that female senior managers in South African sports organisations were often under-represented in managerial structures that tended to be male-dominated. Furthermore, it emerged that they did not feel a sense of inclusion and/or belonging, and issues relating to sexist attitudes were ongoing challenges. The broader key challenges experienced by female senior managers included decision making related challenges, gender bias and/or stereotyping, the glass ceiling, the lack of mentors, and challenges linked to organisational management and achieving a work-life balance. Further challenges pertaining to government policies and initiatives, organisational practices, leadership, higher education, networking, recruitment and hiring processes, funding opportunities, and systemic, historic factors were highlighted. However, this paper focuses predominantly on the challenges that have a direct impact on the management functions of female senior managers in South African sports organisations, which are discussed in the sections below.

4.1 Systemic historic factors

In light of the historical antecedents of South Africa (bearing in mind the socio-economic consequences of apartheid), the findings reveal that race demographics, gender bias, and stereotypes significantly affect the managerial roles of female employees in the sports industry. To demonstrate the challenge around race, the nature of challenges experienced by black African female senior managers was said by respondents to differ from females of other races/ethnic backgrounds, more specifically white female senior managers. The following response encapsulates the nature of this issue from responders:

“There is a type of intersectional level of challenge where it is intensified being a Black woman above being a woman in general. Are the challenges that I faced as

a Black woman the same challenges that the white woman who we have on the board faces? We do not really know, but we can definitely understand that a difference can be mentioned.” [R5]

Such findings are consistent with Robinson *et al.* (2023) and Pace (2018), who argued that the perpetuating racial issue thus may adversely affect Black female employees within sports organisations by hindering their career progression and overall success in the organisation. It has been reported that in the global context where females predominantly occupy senior sports management positions, females from racial/ethnic minority groups (e.g. women of colour) are usually underrepresented (Melton & Bryant, 2017; Evans & Pfister, 2020).

In addition to race demographics, Manzi and Heilman (2021) have previously identified gender stereotypes and discrimination as factors that foster negative attitudes towards female senior managers in sports organisations, while Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi’s (2023) further noted that gender stereotypes negatively affect the hierarchical progression of females in sports organisations. Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi’s (2023) finding was reflected in this study through the following response:

“So, the attitude and behaviour that they (executive committee colleagues) have towards you (as a young, black female senior manager) is always that of the petulant woman who does not sit in her corner and be quiet and do what we tell her to do. So, you deal a lot with trying to cement the respect of your opinion, especially when you are speaking to older white men and older men in general.”
[R5]

The findings of this study concur with Manzi and Heilman (2021), and Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023), as most respondents revealed that gender stereotypes and discriminative traits remain prevalent within sports organisations. To this end, key informants emphasised that biased and stereotypical perceptions (e.g. perceptions that females are weak and emotional) largely exist in the senior management level and/or decision-making positions of sports organisations. According to the responses, this form of discrimination consists of perceived basic, historically engendered, sexist traits such as expecting respondents to handle tea and coffee duties in the workplace.

4.2 A strategic view of leadership at senior management levels

Studies by Robbins and Judge (2014), Rao (2017), and MacIntosh and Burton (2019) have previously advised on the assessment of internal and external factors that influence employee behaviour in organisations. In line with the suggested assessment of internal and external

factors that influence employee behaviour, the current study identified how an autocratic leadership style influences the behaviour of employees towards female senior managers in sports organisations. The following extract reveals the lived experience of a key informant:

“Because of the challenges we experienced with the national committee and with the leadership at that time, and the manner in which the organisation was managed - which was totally autocratic - as a woman, it was a huge challenge.”
[R7]

The study also discovered how several respondents struggled with being unfairly ignored and struggled to debate and substantiate their ideas during work discussions and engagements, which may emphasise how female senior managers are undervalued in decision-making contexts. The following extract reflects this finding:

“As a woman, it (the manner that the organisation was managed) was a huge challenge. Although I was the deputy president and the vice president, you always had to convince them why you were saying or raising things or debating things. There was always this battle to convince them what needs to be done and it was quite very challenging.” [R7]

The study's findings further revealed that the leadership within South African sports organisations is still trying to reconcile the apartheid-era's oppressive practices and attitudes while at the same time re-writing policy and legislation in terms of the previous injustices of apartheid. The following response encapsulates this:

“We are dealing with leadership, which comes from the heart of apartheid. [The leadership] is either driven by oppression and fixing what was wrong or still trying to hold on to what they think was right. So, the clash of those two worlds is our leadership at the moment. And the problem is, [sports organisation's executives] are replicating below them so there is not always necessarily working together, it is always more opposition, so you are not creating any convergence.” [R1]

Previous leadership during apartheid had autocratic tendencies linked to governance, segregation, inequality, and politics. Therefore, the perception of the state of leadership in South African sports organisations could be linked to such factors. The incongruence found in South African sports leadership may thus be subjected to negative impacts of the broader strategic management functions of leaders within sports organisations, as posited by Bateman and Snell (2022). Moreover, the perceived state of leadership may adversely affect the allocation of the appropriate human, financial and material resources to ensure the optimal

function of sports organisations, as mentioned by McLean (2011), which could lead to the ineffective operation of the entire organisation.

4.3 Inclusion of females in the sports business industry

According to Wolff and Hums (2020) and Dixon (nd), inclusion in sport consists of providing individuals across their gender, age, race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, or ability, with the full respect, dignity, value, belonging, and opportunity to participate in various roles in sport (i.e. athletes, spectators, coaches, officials, and administrators). The definition of inclusion thus comprises aspects of diversity belonging and inadvertently emphasizes transformation. While the study's inquiry focused specifically on inclusion as a key concept of female senior managers, the findings reveal that other additional aspects, as mentioned by Wolff and Hums (2020), are reflected in respondent's views when discussing inclusion in the workplace.

"One of the biggest challenges is the inclusion and the belonging. In South Africa, we speak about transformation, diversity, inclusion and belonging, [yet] people (sports organisations/practitioners) do not understand the difference between these." [R3]

The findings further indicated that male senior employees often get together, sit and have a chat over beer or coffee and make certain decisions, while female senior managers question the consultation processes and their inclusion in work-related matters. This challenge of meeting to discuss and partake in the decision-making processes of work-related matters at informal settings is summed up in the following excerpt:

"I mean, we do not have a girl's club and it is something that a lot of us women who are in leadership in the sports world are trying to impress upon each other. That, a lot of these things (decision making processes) were being left out at golf clubs; on the golf course, at bars, because, gents (male employees in sports organisations) go and agree to things as gents, and we do not have that type of system." [R5]

This, therefore, shows that management, especially for females in the sport business industry, needs to consider additional aspects of inclusion. South African sport policymakers should also consider Dixon-Fyle *et al.* (2020) recommendations when drafting new policies or amending existing policies on the aspects of inclusion. These recommendations include a) increasing the diverse representation in leadership positions, b) enabling equality of opportunity through fairness and transparency, c) promoting openness, tackling bias and

discrimination, and d) fostering belonging through support for multivariate diversity, as recommended by Dixon-Fyle *et al.* (2020:41-44).

4.4 The influence of policies and organisational support on management functions

The Transformation Charter of South Africa was commended by a number of respondents for its outstanding role in transforming South African sport. However, what is noted from the findings is that the Transformation Charter is more inclined towards aspects of sport participation rather than the support for management-specific functions. This was reflected in how respondents commonly described the impact using terms such as ‘transforming sport’ [R4] or ‘driving transformation and change in sports in South Africa’ [R5].

Furthermore, respondents noted that gender is treated as a sub-section within the Transformation Charter; this appears to be highly problematic as gender is effectively relegated down the priority list by most South African sport governing bodies. In theory, the Transformation Charter is concerned with implementing change to the different ways in which individuals and organisations deliver sport (South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee, 2012). It prioritizes groups that include females, persons with disabilities, the youth, children, and the elderly to better obtain more access and opportunities within sport (South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee, 2012). While the Transformation Charter thus provides a broader scope to the consideration of vulnerable groups, which includes females, this may not be evident in the lived experiences of respondents. What is thus questionable or missing is the clear delineation of the objectives of the Transformation Charter towards the support of females in management positions. This is reflected in the following response:

“I mean, I keep mentioning the Transformation Charter and the EPG (Eminent Persons Group) because those are things that we are supposed to look at to drive transformation and change in sports in South Africa, [but], it is interesting to note that the Transformation Charter does not actually have a section that focuses just on gender. Gender is mentioned as a sub-sub section in some of the sub-sections such as capacity-building [regarding] woman referees, coaches, etc. (aspects of sport participation).” [R5]

Additionally, the study’s respondents criticised the lack of organisational practices to support female employees in sports organisations. The following quotation applies:

“I think we need to do a lot for women. We need to work a lot on women and focus on education, and skills, and ensure that the programmes that had been there in the past are being revived because they used to be so many.” [R2]

As a result of the lived experiences of respondents and in consideration of the current objectives of the Transformation Charter, albeit the focus being on sport participation, sport policy-makers should revise the objectives of the Charter towards more management-inclusive guidelines. The following key objectives from the Transformation Charter are suggested:

- elimination of all inequalities;
- increased access to participation opportunities;
- skill and capability development at all levels and in all areas of activity;
- human capital development; and
- equitable resource distribution.

4.5 Limitations on funding opportunities for females in senior management positions

The findings illustrate that there is a lack of financial resources for female managers, and this, in turn, hinders female senior managers’ ability to implement certain senior management tasks and responsibilities effectively. This finding is expressed in the following response:

“Generally, the biggest challenge we face as an organisation is finance, never mind having to look at it from the gender perspective. So, that is a challenge in the sports industry. There is a lack of funding, overall, be it from national government or be it from the private sector that look after employment opportunities within sports.” [R6]

More prominently, respondents highlight the difficulty of acquiring sponsorship, as reflected in the following response:

“I think also the challenge is that sometimes it is easier for men to source funding, to get sponsorships. It is a sport that is very individual, so, a young boy, it will be easier for him to take up a game [the less it] will be for a girl.” [R4]

The challenge of sourcing sponsorship is in line with the complexity of accessing and obtaining financial resources (i.e. sponsorship), as asserted by Bowes *et al.* (2021). Burnett (2018) posits that the difficulty of acquiring sponsorship can negatively affect female employees’

access to career opportunities in sport, equal recognition and rewards, and income. Additionally, Retar *et al.* (2013) noted that funding plays an integral part in a senior manager's role; to enable them to employ and select candidates for jobs and display preparedness for any change needed to improve operations within the organisation. However, respondents found that the limited funding opportunities from sport governing bodies adversely influenced their ability to effectively employ, compensate and retain employees. From a practical perspective, the lack of funding hinders the ability of senior managers to function effectively because this affects their ability to offer capacity-building training and workshops to upskill employees.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that systemic and historical events such as the apartheid era, exclusion, and the lack of funding opportunities affect the current management practices of female senior managers in South African sports organisations. While policies or guidelines exist, it has been the poor implementation of these policies or guidelines that have hindered the inclusion and advancement of females in senior sports management positions. The results can be used as recommendations for amendments to existing legislation, such as the National Sport and Recreation Amendment Act and the Transformation Charter, where key considerations should be given to the following factors: the systemic and historical events and practices that continue to negatively impact female senior managers in the current sports business sphere, and the inclusion of female employees in senior management structures in sports.

This study adds to the existing literature related to female executives in the sports industry by delineating the challenges of female senior managers in the unique context of South Africa and the perceived male-dominated sports environment. This theoretical contribution aimed to understand and eliminate the oppression of all females through theoretical development and practices such as that found within this study (Burton & Leberman, 2017). By focusing on the South African sports industry, this study further contributes to the emergent and developing literature of the study's context from a Global South perspective. Particularly regarding the unequal access females experience in terms of decision-making positions in sports, and the maintenance of the perceived predominantly male power over female employees in sports organisations, as per the liberal feminist theory. This study contributes to policy by providing sports governing bodies in South Africa with an understanding of the overall experience of female employees in senior management. The study's results equip sports organisations with insight into the development of new policy support and best practices that can support female senior managers within the sports business environment.

This study further explains the application of the constructs of management to liberal feminist ideology. For example, sport organisations might need to consider operating in less authoritative leadership styles in order for female senior managers to produce high-performing sport organisations effectively, using the fundamental constructs of management. Regarding the constructs of planning, sport organisations need to critically consider the decisions made by female senior managers on the purposes, politics, strategies, programmes and plans that guide the operations of a sport organisation (as per Ilić, 2013), particularly regarding the advancement of females in the organisation, which creates gender-inclusive organisations that could well ultimately assist in achieving greater overall organisational success.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the limitation imposed on this study by conducting an exploration of a single region or country, it is recommended that the results of this study be further explored across additional regions and countries, particularly in a Global South context. Some findings are consistent with other trends in society, for example, the glass ceiling, the wage gap, and navigating work-life balance as a female senior manager. However, the countries considered as part of the Global South would have a degree of similarity in terms of social and political stances, as well as the socio-economic challenges encountered. Therefore, further studies could provide a greater understanding of the challenges encountered by female senior managers in sports organisations within the Global South region.

Additionally, this study suggests that future researchers need to be cognizant of the unique socio-economic consequences of apartheid, and the systemic challenges that continue to confront females in senior management positions. This study recommends future research to identify the challenges posed to female senior managers of different races/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds in the South African sports industry. This will provide a richer understanding of the distinct challenges posed to female senior managers of different backgrounds and possible recommendations on how best to address their challenges. Due to the likely increase in the number of Black African females who will apply and occupy management and leadership positions in the future, research and policy development must consider the socio-economic issues that will invariably pose challenges for females, especially Black African females. Regarding policies and organisational support practices, this study encourages researchers to conduct an in-depth investigation into the effectiveness and implementation of existing South African legislation that was designed to support female senior managers in South African sports organisations and provide solutions to overcome

identified weaknesses and shortcomings. The findings can then be used to build on the existing literature or alternatively, refute the findings of this current study.

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7. ANNEXURES

Annexure 1: Interview schedule

Section	Interview question
Section 1: The awareness and perceptions of the challenges facing female senior managers	▪ What is your perception of the female representation in senior management positions in the sports sector?
	▪ How would you describe your understanding of the challenges that females are likely to face in senior management positions within the sports sector?
	▪ As a senior manager, can you elaborate on any challenges you may currently face?
Section 2: Networking, policy, and organisational support	▪ In your opinion, are there any governmental policies that have supported you as a female senior manager?
	▪ In your opinion, are there any organisational practices that have supported you as a female senior manager?
	▪ If you are affiliated with any association, how have you benefitted in relation to networking opportunities?