



# Analysing gender dynamics in sport governance: A new regimes-based approach<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores gender dynamics in sport governance with reference to boards of National Sport Organisations (NSOs) in Australia. It is based on a recent study, underpinned by governance and gender theory. Central is the notion of a gender regime, which is characterised by four interwoven dimensions: production, power, emotional and symbolic relations. When applied to governance dynamics in sport boards, this concept permits identification of how gender works. The study involved an audit of 56 NSOs and in-depth interviews with board directors and chief executive officers ( $n = 26$ ; 9 women and 17 men) from five NSOs. This paper reports on the results of three NSOs. The data suggest that directors' participation in sport governance was not uniform in terms of gender dynamics. Three gender regimes were identified: masculine hegemony, masculine hegemony in transition and gender mainstreaming in process. Only the latter provided significant opportunities for gender equality in governance while the former two imposed significant constraints. Central to the regime associated with gender equal governance was a combination of presence of women on the board, the occupation of influential board roles by women, active support of women directors by influential men on the board and a commitment to equality in governance as equal participation by both men and women.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines gender dynamics in the governance of Australian boards of National Sport Organisations (NSOs). As such, it shares a compelling focus of international academic research and discussion in corporate governance, namely, gender diversity and equal representation of men and women on boards (Branson, 2007; Erhardt, Werbel, & Shrader, 2003; Nielsen & Huse, 2010; Terjesen, Sealy, & Singh, 2009; van der Walt & Ingley, 2003; Vinnicombe, Singh, Burke, Bilimoria, & Huse, 2008). A comprehensive review of research on women directors on corporate boards, conducted by Terjesen et al. (2009) and including more than 400 publications in the past 30 years, found that corporate governance was improved when women were appointed to boards because they brought “value-adding” talents and represented stakeholders who had previously been excluded. Further, a recent study (Nielsen & Huse, 2010) concluded, the ratio of women directors (i.e., number of women directors in relation to total number) is positively related to board effectiveness and strategic control. The case for gender diversity on boards is now solidly established.

<sup>☆</sup> The paper concludes with a discussion of implications of the study's findings for the advancement of gender equality in sport governance.

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In the realm of sport governance, the Sydney Scoreboard, a web-based tool that monitors gender representation on sport boards globally, indicates that currently, with the exception of some Scandinavian countries, women remain under-represented on boards of national sport organisations (International Working Group on Women and Sport, 2012). A growing number of studies has emerged to examine and understand women's under-representation. Researchers have examined this issue in a range of countries, for example, in Australia (McKay, 1992, 1997; Sibson, 2010), in Canada (Hall, Cullen, & Slack, 1989; Inglis, 1997; Shaw & Slack, 2002), in Germany (Doll-Tepper, Pfister, & Radtke, 2006; Pfister & Radtke, 2009), in the Netherlands (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007, 2008), in New Zealand (Cameron, 1996; Shaw, 2006), in Norway (Fasting, 2000; Hovden, 2000, 2006; Skirstad, 2002) and in the UK (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; Shaw & Penney, 2003; White & Brackenridge, 1985). Most of these studies have explored questions of distribution, such as the ratio of women directors, barriers for women to obtain director positions and strategies of how to address them (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Doll-Tepper et al., 2006; Hartmann-Tews & Pfister, 2003; McKay, 1992, 1997; Pfister & Radtke, 2009; Skirstad, 2002; White & Brackenridge, 1985).

Few studies have gone beyond the surface to investigate how gender works on sport boards (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Hovden, 2006; McKay, 1992; Shaw, 2006; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; Sibson, 2010), but this line of investigation may disclose important reasons for women's under-representation in sport governance. The focus on gender dynamics – or how gender works – has generated innovative insights and understandings across a wide range of organisational settings over the last decade, in particular, in relation to gender equality (Schofield & Goodwin, 2005). An internationally acclaimed approach in this field has been pioneered by Connell (2009) who has advanced a framework for analysis of gender dynamics, namely, a *gender regimes approach*. This paper draws on Connell's approach to add a new contribution to the field of gender and sport governance. Such an approach is a marked departure from previous studies exploring women's under-representation in sport governance. In focusing on how gender works in board governance it offers an opportunity to contribute directly to the development of policy and strategy for advancing gender equality in this field.

The two research questions that inform our study were: First, what are the gender dynamics on boards of NSOs in Australia: in other words, and in adopting a gender regimes approach, how is gender enacted or played out in NSOs in Australia specifically in relation to (i) the organisation of board business and who does what; (ii) the exercise of authority and decision making; (iii) the expression of emotional responses (from friendliness to antagonism); and (iv) the views and understandings that prevail with respect to gender and gender equality in board governance? Second, what are the implications or prospects for gender equality of these regimes on sport boards? The latter locates our study within a framework of gender analysis that seeks to generate findings that may be adopted by sport organisations to inform action towards the advancement of gender equality (Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Gender equality is the term used in international public policy in reference to advancing equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men at all levels across a wide range of arenas (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 2007). It is not usually used in corporate governance policy. As indicated above, the preferred term within the corporate sector is gender diversity.

This paper is organised in the following way. First, the authors present the conceptual framework of the study drawing from the concepts of organisational governance, gendered social processes and gender regimes. Second, we outline the methods of the study. The study involved an audit of the gender distribution on boards of NSOs in Australia as well as in-depth interviews with board directors and chief executive officers of selected NSOs. Third, we present and discuss the results for three NSOs as three case studies. These include the national governing bodies for a team sport, an individual sport and a sport that contains both individual and team events. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications of the study's findings for the advancement of gender equality in sport governance.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Organisational governance and gender

By the early 1990s, feminist theorists had achieved a broad consensus on gender relations and governance in major social institutions such as corporations and public sector agencies. Basically they agreed that such institutions do not simply reflect gender relations and inequalities that originate elsewhere. Rather, they are actively created within their own organisations albeit usually in relation to those that prevail outside them (Franzway, Court, & Connell, 1989; Fraser, 1989; Hernes, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989; Walby, 1990; Yeatman, 1990). Further, such processes do not simply advance a monolithic patriarchal interest and affect all women in the same way; they are gendered in uneven and nuanced ways.

This work developed alongside sociological study of work and organisations that produced similar conclusions: workplaces and organisations were themselves gendered (Britton, 2000). In Australia these two research directions intersected as feminist sociologists explored the gender dynamics of workplaces and occupations in a range of large organisations including many within the state (Burton, 1987; Pringle, 1989). Since then, a substantial sociological literature on the gendered character of corporations and public sector agencies as organisations has emerged internationally. Some of the more notable findings involve men's overwhelming predominance in senior management and at policy-making levels, the strongly gendered division of labour in public employment, and the marginalisation of women's interests in relation to men's through organisational processes (Gierycz, 1999). Further studies have shown the gendered nature of promotion opportunities within public sector agencies in the US (Newman, 1995), the variety of gendered patterns of management in the UK public sector (Whitehead & Moodley, 1999), and how Scandinavian public sector organisations' adjustment to change

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