

# Challenges of Women's Sports Management

1. Maryam. Tavakoli<sup>1</sup>: PhD student in Sports Management, Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Qa.C., Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran
2. Mahdi. Naderinasab<sup>2</sup>: Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Qa.C., Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran
3. Sayed Abbas. Biniiaz<sup>3</sup>: Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Qa.C., Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran

\*corresponding author's email: Mehdynaderinasab@yahoo.com

## ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore and explain the multidimensional challenges faced by women in sports management positions within the sociocultural and organizational context of Tehran. This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm to capture the lived experiences of women involved in sports management. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 21 participants who were actively engaged in managerial, administrative, or policy-related roles in sports organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using inductive qualitative content analysis. NVivo software was used to manage, code, and organize the data. The analytical process involved open coding, categorization, and theme development through constant comparison and iterative refinement to ensure analytic rigor. The analysis yielded four overarching categories of challenges affecting women's sports management: structural and institutional barriers, sociocultural and normative constraints, individual and professional challenges, and gendered organizational cultures and management practices. The findings indicate that formal policies often fail to translate into substantive authority for women, while entrenched gender stereotypes and cultural expectations undermine leadership legitimacy. Organizational environments were found to reproduce masculine norms through biased evaluation systems, informal power networks, and exclusionary communication practices. At the individual level, prolonged exposure to these conditions contributed to psychological strain, reduced motivation, and constrained career advancement. The findings demonstrate that challenges in women's sports management are systemic and interrelated, requiring multi-level interventions that address institutional structures, organizational cultures, and sociocultural norms to enable meaningful and sustainable gender equity in sports leadership.

**Keywords:** Women's sports management; gender inequality; qualitative research; organizational culture; sport governance

## Introduction

Over the past several decades, gender equity in sport has emerged as a central concern within both academic scholarship and policy-oriented debates, particularly as sport organizations increasingly claim commitments to diversity, inclusion, and good governance. Despite notable progress in women's participation as athletes, persistent inequalities remain in leadership, management, and decision-making positions across local, national, and international sport systems. Research consistently demonstrates that women are significantly underrepresented in



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managerial and governance roles, even in contexts where formal equality policies exist and women's participation rates in sport have increased (1, 2). This discrepancy highlights the need to move beyond surface-level indicators of inclusion and instead examine the deeper structural, cultural, and organizational mechanisms that continue to marginalize women in sport management.

Sport organizations are not neutral institutions; rather, they are socially constructed spaces shaped by historical power relations, gender norms, and institutionalized practices that privilege masculine forms of authority and leadership. Scholars have emphasized that sport management has traditionally been conceptualized as a masculine domain, where leadership competence is implicitly associated with traits culturally coded as male, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and physical authority (3, 4). As a result, women who seek managerial roles often encounter skepticism regarding their legitimacy, capacity, and commitment, regardless of their qualifications or professional experience. These dynamics are further reinforced through informal networks, gendered recruitment practices, and evaluation systems that systematically disadvantage women (5, 6).

At the governance level, international and national sport federations have implemented various policy instruments aimed at increasing women's representation, including quota systems, diversity charters, and gender mainstreaming strategies. However, empirical evidence suggests that policy adoption does not necessarily translate into meaningful change in organizational practice or power redistribution. Longitudinal analyses of international sport federations indicate that while women's numerical presence has increased marginally, their influence within decision-making structures remains limited (2, 7). In many cases, women are positioned in roles with limited strategic authority, reinforcing symbolic rather than substantive inclusion (8). This gap between policy rhetoric and organizational reality underscores the importance of examining how gendered power relations operate within everyday management practices.

The persistence of gender inequality in sport management is not confined to Western or elite sport contexts but represents a global phenomenon shaped by local sociopolitical and cultural conditions. Studies from diverse regions, including Europe, Africa, and Asia, reveal common patterns of exclusion alongside context-specific challenges. For example, research on gender representation in regional sport management systems demonstrates that women face barriers related to institutional inertia, cultural resistance, and limited access to leadership pipelines (9, 10). Similarly, analyses of leadership in educational and public-sector organizations suggest that broader gendered power structures within society strongly influence women's access to senior roles, including in sport-related institutions (11, 12).

Sociocultural norms and gender ideologies play a critical role in shaping women's experiences in sport management. Deeply embedded stereotypes about appropriate gender roles often position women as caregivers rather than leaders, creating tensions between professional aspirations and social expectations. These norms can manifest in both overt and subtle forms of discrimination, ranging from explicit exclusion to everyday micro-level practices that undermine women's authority (3, 13). In some contexts, cultural and religious interpretations are mobilized to legitimize women's limited participation in sport leadership, further constraining opportunities for advancement (11). Such dynamics highlight the intersection of gender with broader cultural and institutional forces that shape managerial careers in sport.

Another critical dimension of inequality concerns organizational culture and workplace experiences. Research has shown that women in sport organizations frequently report hostile or exclusionary environments characterized by masculine norms, informal male-dominated networks, and limited access to mentoring and sponsorship (4, 14).

These conditions not only affect career progression but also have implications for well-being, job satisfaction, and retention. Women with intersecting identities, such as disability or minority status, often experience compounded forms of marginalization, revealing the need for intersectional analyses of sport management structures (14). Such findings suggest that gender inequality in sport management cannot be fully understood without considering the organizational cultures in which leadership is enacted.

Performance-related narratives also contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality in sport management. Discourses that link leadership legitimacy to performance outcomes often fail to account for structural disadvantages faced by women, instead attributing underrepresentation to individual choice or perceived lack of competitiveness. Empirical studies from sport economics and performance research challenge simplistic assumptions about gender and capability, demonstrating that performance differences are context-dependent and shaped by access to resources, opportunities, and support systems (15, 16). Nevertheless, performance-based arguments are frequently used to justify women's exclusion from senior management roles, particularly in high-performance sport environments.

Within the broader landscape of gender and sport scholarship, increasing attention has been paid to governance, policy, and organizational change as key levers for promoting equity. Multidisciplinary research emphasizes that effective gender equality initiatives require not only formal policy measures but also cultural transformation, leadership commitment, and accountability mechanisms (17, 18). Comparative studies across sport and non-sport sectors further suggest that lessons from other governance domains—such as environmental or community-based governance—may offer valuable insights into strategies for enhancing women's participation and influence (19). However, translating these insights into the specific institutional context of sport management remains a complex challenge.

Despite the growing international literature on gender, leadership, and sport governance, qualitative research that captures the lived experiences of women managers within specific sociocultural contexts remains limited. Large-scale surveys and policy analyses provide important macro-level insights but often overlook the nuanced ways in which structural constraints, cultural norms, and individual agency intersect in everyday managerial practice (20, 21). Qualitative approaches are therefore essential for uncovering the meanings, strategies, and coping mechanisms through which women navigate gendered sport organizations, particularly in metropolitan contexts where institutional complexity is high.

In light of these gaps, the present study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing an in-depth qualitative exploration of the challenges faced by women in sports management within the context of Tehran, drawing on the perspectives and experiences of key actors embedded in sport organizations, with the aim of identifying structural, sociocultural, individual, and organizational factors that shape women's managerial trajectories.

## Methods and Materials

The present study adopted a qualitative research design, as this approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena such as the challenges of women's sports management. A qualitative methodology allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations within their real-world professional and organizational contexts. The study population consisted of women and key stakeholders involved in sports management and administration in Tehran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the aim of recruiting individuals who possessed rich and relevant

experience related to women's sports management. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new concepts, categories, or substantive insights emerged from additional interviews. In total, 21 participants took part in the study. All participants were based in Tehran and had direct or indirect professional engagement with sports management structures, policy-making processes, or organizational leadership related to women's sports.

Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method was chosen to ensure a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility to explore emerging themes in greater depth. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and a preliminary review of relevant literature, focusing on perceived structural, cultural, organizational, and personal challenges in women's sports management. Open-ended questions allowed participants to freely express their experiences and viewpoints, while probing questions were used to clarify meanings and expand on key issues raised during the interviews. Interviews were conducted in person in Tehran at locations convenient and comfortable for the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach. The transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software to facilitate systematic coding, organization, and retrieval of data. The analysis process involved several iterative stages, including familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, initial open coding to identify meaningful units of text, and the grouping of similar codes into subcategories and broader themes. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison was employed to examine similarities and differences across participants' accounts and to refine emerging categories. Theoretical saturation guided the completion of data collection and analysis, ensuring that the identified themes comprehensively captured the range of challenges related to women's sports management in Tehran. To enhance rigor, reflexive memo-writing and ongoing review of coding decisions were undertaken during the analytic process.

## Findings and Results

The study participants consisted of 21 individuals actively engaged in sports management-related roles in Tehran. In terms of gender composition, the majority of participants were women ( $n = 16$ , 76.2%), while a smaller proportion were men ( $n = 5$ , 23.8%), included due to their managerial or policy-level involvement in women's sports. Regarding age distribution, 6 participants (28.6%) were between 30–39 years old, 9 participants (42.9%) were aged 40–49 years, and 6 participants (28.6%) were 50 years old or above. With respect to educational attainment, most participants held at least a master's degree ( $n = 13$ , 61.9%), followed by those with a bachelor's degree ( $n = 5$ , 23.8%) and doctoral degrees ( $n = 3$ , 14.3%). In terms of professional experience in sports management, 7 participants (33.3%) reported less than 10 years of experience, 8 participants (38.1%) had between 10–19 years of experience, and 6 participants (28.6%) had 20 years or more. Collectively, this demographic profile indicates that the sample comprised predominantly highly educated and mid- to senior-level professionals with substantial experience in the field of sports management, providing a rich and informed basis for qualitative inquiry into the challenges of women's sports management.

**Table 1. Main Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts Related to the Challenges of Women's Sports Management**

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
Structural and Institutional Barriers	Policy and Governance Constraints	Gender-biased regulations; Lack of gender-sensitive policies; Male-dominated decision-making; Inconsistent policy enforcement; Limited legal support
	Organizational Hierarchy Inequality	Glass ceiling effect; Unequal promotion opportunities; Exclusion from strategic roles; Informal power networks; Token representation
	Resource Allocation Disparities	Unequal budget distribution; Limited access to facilities; Priority given to men's sports; Inadequate equipment; Financial dependency
	Administrative Bureaucracy	Complex approval processes; Centralized decision-making; Slow institutional responses; Excessive regulations
Sociocultural and Normative Challenges	Employment Instability	Short-term contracts; Job insecurity; Lack of career pathways; Absence of tenure systems
	Gender Stereotypes in Sport	Masculinization of management roles; Doubts about women's leadership competence; Traditional gender roles; Stereotypical media portrayals
	Cultural Resistance	Social disapproval; Family opposition; Community pressure; Cultural taboos surrounding women in sport; Value conflicts
	Media and Public Perception	Limited media visibility; Biased sports coverage; Marginalization of women's achievements; Symbolic recognition
	Religious and Traditional Interpretations	Restrictive interpretations; Normative expectations; Selective enforcement of norms; Cultural justifications for exclusion
	Social Support Deficits	Lack of professional networks; Weak mentoring culture; Limited peer support; Isolation in leadership positions
Individual and Professional Challenges	Gender Socialization	Early discouragement from leadership; Internalized gender norms; Social learning of passivity
	Leadership Skill Development	Limited access to training; Fewer leadership workshops; Exclusion from capacity-building programs; Skill underestimation
	Work-Life Balance Strain	Dual role pressure; Family responsibilities; Time conflicts; Emotional exhaustion; Role overload
	Psychological Barriers	Reduced self-confidence; Fear of failure; Impostor feelings; Performance anxiety
	Career Motivation Erosion	Burnout experiences; Reduced professional commitment; Perceived futility of advancement; Emotional disengagement
	Professional Recognition	Lack of acknowledgment; Limited performance evaluation; Invisible achievements
	Networking Limitations	Restricted access to influential networks; Male-only professional circles; Informal exclusion
Organizational Culture and Management Practices	Role Ambiguity	Unclear job expectations; Conflicting responsibilities; Ambiguous authority boundaries
	Gendered Organizational Climate	Masculine work norms; Gender-insensitive environments; Symbolic inclusion; Cultural exclusion
	Managerial Attitudes	Resistance from male managers; Lack of trust in women leaders; Patronizing behaviors; Conditional support
	Evaluation and Promotion Systems	Biased performance criteria; Subjective assessments; Informal promotion mechanisms; Unequal appraisal standards
	Training and Development Policies	Gender-neutral policy bias; Unequal access to development programs; Limited sponsorship
	Communication Patterns	Exclusion from informal communication; Limited voice in meetings; Interrupted participation
	Conflict Management Practices	Gendered conflict labeling; Penalization of assertiveness; Silencing strategies

The qualitative analysis revealed structural and institutional barriers as a central category shaping the challenges of women's sports management. Participants consistently emphasized that policy frameworks and governance structures are predominantly designed and implemented through a male-centered lens, resulting in gender-biased regulations and limited institutional support for women managers. Several interviewees described decision-making bodies as exclusionary spaces in which women's voices are marginal or symbolic rather than influential. One participant noted, "Even when policies claim to support women, in practice the key decisions are still made by men, and we are rarely part of the real power circle." Inequitable resource allocation emerged as a persistent concern,

particularly in relation to budgets, facilities, and equipment, which were perceived to be systematically prioritized for men's sports. Administrative bureaucracy and centralized control were also reported as constraining women's managerial autonomy, often delaying initiatives related to women's sports development. Employment instability, including short-term contracts and unclear career trajectories, further reinforced a sense of professional precarity, as one interviewee explained: "You never feel secure enough to plan long-term, because your position is always temporary and easily replaceable."

The second major category pertained to sociocultural and normative challenges, which participants described as deeply embedded in societal attitudes toward gender and sport. Dominant gender stereotypes portraying sports management as a masculine domain were repeatedly cited as a major obstacle to women's advancement. Interviewees reported encountering doubts about their leadership competence and authority simply because of their gender. As one participant stated, "People still believe that management in sport requires masculine traits, so when a woman takes charge, her abilities are questioned from the start." Cultural resistance, including family and community pressures, further limited women's participation in managerial roles, particularly when leadership responsibilities conflicted with traditional gender expectations. Limited and biased media coverage of women's sports and women managers was also highlighted, contributing to the invisibility of their achievements. Participants additionally pointed to restrictive or selective interpretations of cultural and religious norms that were used to justify exclusion. A lack of social and professional support networks intensified feelings of isolation, with one interviewee remarking, "There are very few mentors or role models for us, and most of the time you feel you are navigating this path alone."

The analysis also identified a range of individual and professional challenges that interacted with broader structural and cultural constraints. Participants frequently referred to limited opportunities for leadership training and professional development, noting that capacity-building programs were often inaccessible or informally reserved for men. Balancing professional responsibilities with family roles emerged as a significant source of strain, particularly given the demanding nature of sports management. One participant explained, "The workload is heavy, and at the same time society expects you to fulfill all family responsibilities without compromise." Psychological barriers such as reduced self-confidence, fear of failure, and feelings of impostorism were commonly reported, often arising from prolonged exposure to discrimination and undervaluation. Several interviewees described gradual erosion of motivation and professional commitment due to repeated setbacks and lack of recognition. Restricted access to influential professional networks and ambiguity surrounding job roles and authority further undermined women's sense of efficacy and career progression within sports organizations.

Finally, organizational culture and management practices were identified as a key category reinforcing gender inequality in sports management settings. Participants described organizational climates as predominantly masculine, characterized by informal norms and practices that implicitly excluded women. Managerial attitudes, particularly resistance or conditional support from male supervisors, were frequently cited as barriers to effective leadership. One interviewee stated, "Support is often verbal, but when it comes to real authority or trust, it disappears." Evaluation and promotion systems were widely perceived as subjective and biased, relying on informal criteria that disadvantaged women. Limited access to training and development opportunities, exclusion from informal communication channels, and restricted participation in decision-making meetings further constrained women's managerial influence. Participants also highlighted gendered approaches to conflict management, noting that assertive behavior by women was more likely to be labeled negatively. As one participant concluded, "The



same behavior that is praised in men is seen as problematic when it comes from women, and this affects how conflicts are handled and careers are shaped.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study reveal that the challenges of women’s sports management in Tehran are multidimensional and deeply embedded in structural, sociocultural, individual, and organizational contexts. At the structural level, participants’ accounts demonstrated that formal policies and governance mechanisms, while ostensibly supportive of gender equity, often fail to translate into meaningful authority or stable career pathways for women. This finding aligns closely with international evidence indicating that increases in women’s numerical representation within sport governance structures do not necessarily lead to substantive power redistribution or influence over strategic decision-making (2, 7). Similar to observations in international sport federations, women in the present study were frequently positioned in roles characterized by limited autonomy and high precarity, reinforcing symbolic rather than transformational inclusion. These results are also consistent with research emphasizing the paradox of gender diversity in sport organizations, whereby diversity initiatives coexist with recruitment, promotion, and evaluation systems that continue to privilege masculine norms and informal power networks (5, 6). From a broader governance perspective, such dynamics mirror patterns observed in public and educational institutions, where gender-inclusive policies are undermined by entrenched institutional cultures and political interests (11, 12).

Sociocultural and normative challenges emerged as a second core dimension shaping women’s managerial experiences. Participants’ narratives highlighted the persistence of gender stereotypes that frame sports leadership as inherently masculine, thereby questioning women’s competence and legitimacy as managers. This finding strongly corroborates previous studies demonstrating that women in sport-related occupations are often evaluated against gendered expectations that disadvantage them regardless of performance outcomes (3, 4). Cultural resistance from families, communities, and broader social environments further compounded these challenges, reflecting the ways in which sport organizations are embedded within wider gender regimes. Similar patterns have been documented across diverse contexts, including Europe, Africa, and Asia, where sociocultural norms intersect with institutional structures to constrain women’s leadership opportunities (9, 10). Moreover, participants’ emphasis on limited media visibility and biased public narratives resonates with research showing that the marginalization of women’s achievements in sport contributes to their continued exclusion from leadership pipelines (1, 20). These findings underscore the argument that gender inequality in sport management cannot be addressed solely through organizational reforms without broader cultural change.

At the individual and professional level, the results indicated that prolonged exposure to structural and cultural barriers has significant psychological and career-related consequences for women managers. Participants reported diminished self-confidence, fear of failure, and gradual erosion of motivation, which were often framed not as personal deficits but as outcomes of persistent undervaluation and exclusion. This interpretation aligns with prior research emphasizing that women’s self-perceptions in leadership contexts are shaped by organizational feedback and gendered power relations rather than intrinsic capability (4, 13). The strain associated with balancing professional responsibilities and socially prescribed family roles further intensified these pressures, reflecting global findings on the gendered distribution of care work and its impact on women’s career trajectories in sport and beyond (14, 21). Limited access to leadership training, mentoring, and influential professional networks also emerged as a

critical constraint, echoing studies that identify sponsorship and informal networking as decisive factors in leadership advancement within sport organizations (2, 8). Collectively, these findings suggest that individual-level challenges should be understood as relational and systemic phenomena rather than isolated personal shortcomings.

Organizational culture and management practices constituted another central explanatory layer in the findings. Participants consistently described sport organizations as masculine environments characterized by informal norms, exclusionary communication patterns, and gender-biased evaluation systems. Such accounts are highly consistent with research on gendered organizations, which argues that everyday practices, rather than formal rules alone, reproduce inequality by normalizing male dominance in leadership (1, 5). The perception that assertive behavior is penalized in women but rewarded in men aligns with broader evidence on double standards in leadership evaluation across sport and non-sport sectors (3, 12). Furthermore, participants' reports of conditional or superficial support from senior managers mirror findings from studies of international and national sport bodies, where gender equity is often endorsed rhetorically but inconsistently implemented in practice (7, 17). These organizational dynamics not only restrict women's advancement but also undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of sport governance systems more broadly.

The findings of this study also contribute to ongoing debates about performance and meritocracy in sport management. Participants challenged implicit assumptions that link leadership suitability to narrowly defined performance criteria, arguing that women are often denied access to resources and opportunities necessary to demonstrate competence. This perspective is supported by empirical research showing that observed performance differences are highly sensitive to contextual factors such as resource allocation, institutional support, and opportunity structures (15, 16). The persistence of merit-based justifications for exclusion, despite evidence of structural disadvantage, reinforces the need to critically interrogate dominant discourses of competition and efficiency within sport organizations. In this regard, the present findings align with multidisciplinary approaches to equality and diversity in sport, which emphasize the interdependence of governance, culture, and performance outcomes (18, 22).

Overall, the discussion highlights that the challenges of women's sports management in Tehran are not unique but reflect globally documented patterns shaped by local sociocultural and institutional conditions. By foregrounding participants' lived experiences, this study extends existing literature by illustrating how macro-level structures and policies are enacted, resisted, and negotiated in everyday managerial practice. The convergence between the present findings and international research underscores the relevance of feminist and gender-sensitive approaches to sport management analysis, while also pointing to the need for contextually grounded interventions that address both formal governance mechanisms and informal organizational cultures (1, 20).

One limitation of the present study is its reliance on a relatively small, purposively selected sample drawn exclusively from Tehran, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other regions or organizational contexts. Additionally, as with all qualitative research, the findings are shaped by participants' subjective experiences and interpretations, which may be influenced by personal, professional, or situational factors at the time of the interviews. The exclusive use of semi-structured interviews also means that observational or documentary data were not incorporated, potentially constraining the triangulation of findings.

Future research could expand on this study by examining women's sports management challenges across different cities or regions, enabling comparative analyses that capture regional variation in institutional and cultural dynamics. Longitudinal qualitative studies could also provide valuable insights into how women's managerial



trajectories evolve over time and how policy interventions or organizational reforms impact lived experiences. In addition, mixed-methods designs integrating qualitative insights with quantitative indicators of representation, performance, and organizational outcomes may offer a more comprehensive understanding of gender inequality in sport management.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest the need for targeted interventions at multiple levels, including the development of transparent promotion systems, leadership training programs specifically designed for women, and organizational cultures that actively challenge gender stereotypes. Sport organizations may also benefit from formal mentoring and sponsorship schemes, as well as accountability mechanisms to ensure that gender equity policies are meaningfully implemented rather than symbolically adopted. Finally, broader efforts to enhance media representation and public recognition of women leaders in sport could contribute to shifting dominant narratives and supporting more inclusive pathways to sports management leadership.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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