

Global sports governance: three decades of gender equality, diversity and inclusion policies and strategies in the Olympic movement

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Abstract

Purpose – This study analyses the evolution of the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) gender equality, diversity and inclusion (GEDI) strategies. Specifically, it examines the disparity between formal policies and substantive implementation across the Olympic Movement. It argues that, although achieving historic milestones (e.g. athlete parity), the IOC’s approach is characterised by nested newness, with equality measures incorporated into existing institutional structures without real transformation.

Design/methodology/approach – Employing qualitative document analysis, the study reviews the IOC’s GEDI strategies from the 1990s to 2024, using the theoretical framework of feminist institutionalism and Bacchi’s “What’s the Problem Represented to be?” (WPR) approach. The evolution is examined in three phases, maintaining a critical focus on implementation issues.

Findings – The analysis reveals a persistent gap between formal policy changes and substantive institutional transformation. Namely, the IOC’s reliance on quantitative targets and soft governance mechanisms is not sufficient to disrupt deeply embedded masculine norms, leading to a lack of progress in leadership, coaching and resource allocation. Ultimately, the analysis points to participation parity as just symbolic co-optation.

Practical implications – Policymakers and stakeholders in transnational sports governance can leverage these insights to enhance GEDI, thereby addressing existing gaps and fostering sustainable progress.

Originality/value – This study provides a novel critical analysis of the IOC’s gender equality projects through an integrated theoretical lens. By applying feminist institutionalism and WPR concepts, it offers new insights into why implementation issues persist despite 3 decades of policy innovation, thereby contributing to critical policy analysis in transnational sports governance.

Keywords Gender equality, Feminist institutionalism, Sports governance, Olympic movement, Nested newness

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Although gender equality is a value generally endorsed worldwide, in many ways, its implementation in sports governance remains a profound paradox. This is particularly notable when considering the impact of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), as the key body overseeing the Olympic Movement, which wields significant symbolic authority to shape gender norms through its policies (Chawansky, 2020). The IOC’s gender equality initiatives align with broader global governance trends, notably the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which emphasises gender equality and women’s empowerment. However, despite this normative alignment, a significant gap persists between rhetorical commitment and substantive change. While the IOC champions gender equality as a core value, its historical roots in Western elite masculinities (Connell, 2005) and commercial imperatives create a complex landscape in which progress is often symbolic and subject to trade-offs, and where transformative change is constrained by deeply embedded institutional resistance and



power dynamics. In this paper, I argue that the IOC's gender equality efforts, while expansive in scope, have been more successful in accommodating women in the existing Olympic structure rather than in fundamentally transforming gender power dynamics. For my analysis, I apply the theory of feminist institutionalism (Krook and Mackay, 2011), which critiques how gendered power structures persist even within allegedly neutral policies. I apply two key feminist institutionalism concepts, namely that of the gendered substructure (Acker, 1990) and nested newness (Mackay, 2014). Thus, the analysis moves beyond a descriptive timeline to critically examine the limits of reform in a constrained and contested transnational governance field.

2. Theoretical framework

Feminist institutionalism (Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Krook and Mackay, 2011) illuminates how formal rules and informal organisational cultures simultaneously promote and constrain gender equality. Among its two pivotal concepts, the first, Acker's (1990) concept of gendered substructures, posits that gender inequality is embedded in an institution's processes, practices and ideologies. At the IOC, this includes its historical foundation in Western elite masculinities (Connell, 2005), its committee-based decision-making reliant on informal networks, and the consistent prioritisation of commercial logic. The second, Mackay's (2014) concept of nested newness, provides a lens for understanding the type of reform pursued by the IOC. This concept suggests that new gender equality initiatives are often nested within existing institutional arrangements. Nested reforms are easier to achieve, but are constrained by old rules, leading to a paradox in which change is simultaneously achieved and limited. This explains why athlete participation quotas (a nested reform) succeed, whereas transformative changes in leadership or resource allocation do not.

Complementing this institutional analysis, this study employs Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) approach to deconstruct the discursive dimensions of the IOC's gender equality framework. The WPR approach shifts the analytical focus from how policies solve problems to how they define or represent them. It suggests that every policy contains an implicit representation of what it considers to be the core problem. Operationalised in this study, the WPR approach was integrated with the feminist institutionalism lens to critically interrogate how the IOC has framed the problem of gender inequality. Specifically, it guided the analysis to ask: How do the IOC's policies implicitly define the root cause of gender inequality? What underlying assumptions does this definition rely upon? And, crucially, what potentially transformative solutions are silenced or marginalised by this problem representation? For example, it reveals that the IOC's policies often represent gender inequality primarily as a technical governance issue of under-representation, solvable through numerical targets and benchmarks. This representation, in turn, directs attention towards inclusion metrics while largely sidestepping more radical critique of the gendered political economy and power structures of global sport. The Gender Equality Review Project's (2018) 25 recommendations, with the overwhelming focus on numerical benchmarks and limited attention to resource redistribution or cultural transformation, serve as a clear example of this framing.

While these theoretical frameworks are key to analysing internal policy discourse and gendered institutional logics, to understand completely the IOC's efficacy as a change agent completely requires examining it within the broader hierarchy of transnational sports governance. Thus, we need to recognise that the IOC is not a supranational government agency with legislative or coercive power but rather a central node in a complex network of autonomous actors, including International Federations (IFs), National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and commercial partners (Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbott, 2008; Forster and Pope, 2004). This structure primarily relies on soft governance mechanisms such as agenda-setting, persuasion, capacity building and symbolic power, rather than hard enforcement (Abbott and Snidal, 2000; Geeraert, 2018). Therefore, the IOC's pursuit of gender equality is inevitably constrained by the imbalance between its normative goals and other paramount organisational imperatives, such as commercial revenue generation, geopolitical stability, and universal

diffusion of the Olympic brand. Challenging the gender regimes of influential IFs or NOCs from member states with conservative social norms carries significant political and economic risks. The profound heterogeneity of its constituency, which encompasses more than 200 NOCs with vastly divergent cultural, political and economic contexts, presents a fundamental obstacle to a uniform top-down enforcement model. Hence, I find that the IOC is not merely a policymaker, but a strategic actor navigating a field of complex interdependencies where its authority is contested and its capacity to impose change is intrinsically limited.

3. Literature review: global perspectives on gender equality in sports governance

In my review of the literature, I examine key developments in gender equality policies across diverse national contexts to identify and compare various approaches to sports governance and gender regimes. The definition of gender equality in sports, as summarised by the [Swedish Sports Confederation \(1990\)](#), emphasises equal rights, obligations and opportunities for women and men in all sports. Early studies primarily focus on women's positions in sports ([Messner et al., 2003](#)), whereas contemporary research has adopted broader sociological perspectives that examine gender issues in relation to other social structures, such as gender order ([Anderson, 2011](#)), social hierarchy ([Sage, 2015](#)), and cultural resistance ([Walseth, 2016](#)). Furthermore, an intersectional perspective ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)) reminds us that gender inequality in sport is compounded by other forms of discrimination based on race, class and sexuality.

Certain national cases reflect important geographic and cultural differences in sports policies. For example, in North America, *Title IX* in the United States (1972) established crucial protections against sex-based discrimination in educational sports programmes. This has served as a foundational legislative approach to gender equality, although scholars have also shown that its implementation has often depended heavily on external pressures rather than institutional commitment ([Bower and Hums, 2013](#)). Similarly, Canadian research demonstrates how both institutional bodies and individual actors play essential roles in advancing gender equality policies in sports organisations ([Krahn, 2019](#); [Myers and Doherty, 2007](#)).

In Europe, individual governance structures have approached gender equality differently. In the United Kingdom, distinct policies have been developed across its constituent nations, including the *Women in Sport Policy Framework* by the Sport Council for Northern Ireland in 1996 and *Changing the Rules: Women, Girls and Sport* in Wales. These cases illustrate a devolved approach to gender equality policy implementation. At the continental level, the European Commission's *Gender Equality in Sport: Proposal for Strategic Actions 2014–2020* and the Council of the European Union's *Conclusions on Gender Equality in Sport* represent broader regional initiatives. However, there are few studies on the implementation of these policies, with most being media-focused analyses.

Research in the 2020s has continued to expose significant disparities in media coverage, confirming that gender disparities in sport media coverage have proven stubbornly persistent. The longitudinal research by [Cooky et al. \(2021\)](#) demonstrates that televised news and highlight show coverage of women's sports has not progressed in decades, remaining strikingly low. Furthermore, studies have begun to critically examine the framing of gender equality itself in media narratives around mega events such as the Olympic Games, often noting a tendency towards post-feminist celebration that obscures enduring structural inequalities. This critical lens has also been applied to the IOC's foundational documents. For instance, [Teetzl \(2011\)](#) argues that the Olympic Charter itself, through policies such as gender verification and eligibility restrictions, continues to normalise the differential treatment of female athletes, thereby reinforcing rather than dismantling gender hierarchies. Scholarship on gender quotas in sport governance has also evolved to critically assess their implementation and the challenges of sustaining meaningful change ([Burton and Leberman, 2017](#)). Many question whether quotas lead to meaningful participation or merely tokenistic representation ([Adriaanse, 2016](#); [Adriaanse and Schofield, 2013](#)). Furthermore, research highlights the phenomenon of homosocial reproduction and the resilience of informal old boys' networks

that can subvert equality policies, ensuring that power remains concentrated in the hands of a masculine elite (Sveinson *et al.*, 2022). Contemporary studies have also examined the branding and consumption of female athletes in digital economies (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2021) and their visual representation on social media platforms (Coche, 2022).

Australia presents another valuable case study of the tension between elite sports performance priorities and social policy objectives. Although the country's strategic planning features gender equality, empirical studies suggest that it is frequently subordinated to the objective of achieving competitive advantage (Cortis, 2009; Green and Houlihan, 2005). Thus, organisational priorities can constrain gender equality initiatives.

In Asia, Japanese and South Korean examples illustrate different cultural approaches to gender equality in sports. Japan's focus on medical and scientific support for female athletes reflects a technical approach to enabling participation (Takamine, 2018), whereas South Korean policies demonstrate a complex relationship between international success and domestic gender equality. The significant medal achievements of South Korean female athletes have not translated proportionately into leadership opportunities, highlighting implementation gaps that persist despite competitive success (Park and Lim, 2015).

Recent research has also examined what happens once quotas are met, exploring the conditions needed for women to have a meaningful influence, rather than just a numerical representation. Adriaanse and Schofield (2013), for instance, highlight that meaningful influence is contingent upon factors such as inclusion in key decision-making networks and a critical mass of women in leadership to overcome tokenism. Qualitative studies further reveal that achieving numerical targets through quotas does not automatically dismantle exclusionary cultures, with female leaders often reporting experiences of isolation and tokenism (Sveinson *et al.*, 2022), a phenomenon sustained by homosocial reproduction processes.

However, despite this growing scholarly attention, critical gaps remain in our understanding of how international sports organisations navigate the interplay between institutional reform and persistent gender inequalities. While existing studies have documented historical exclusion (Lenskyj, 2003) and analysed specific policies (Adriaanse and Schofield, 2013), my study fills three significant gaps in the literature. First, the study moves beyond descriptive or compliance-based assessments by applying feminist institutionalism to explain why certain reforms succeed, while others stagnate. Second, it breaks new ground by analysing how the IOC's gender equality framework intersects with structural constraints as a soft power actor in a transnational field. Third, through critical policy analysis (Bacchi, 2009), I expose how the IOC's representation of the problem (e.g. framing inequality as a participation gap) has constrained its policy effectiveness. By bridging these gaps, I offer new insights into why international sports organisations remain gendered institutions (Connell, 2005) that systematically reproduce masculine dominance despite progressive rhetoric.

4. Methodology: data collection and analysis

This study employs a qualitative document analysis methodology (Bowen, 2009) to systematically examine the evolution of the IOC's gender equality policies from 1990 to 2024. For this, I gathered data from an extensive corpus of primary documents, including IOC policy texts (Olympic Charters, Gender Equality Reports, Olympic Agenda 2020/2020+5), institutional records (executive board meeting minutes, session reports) and public statements by the IOC leadership. These documents were identified and retrieved through a comprehensive desktop search of the IOC's official website. This search employed targeted keywords related to gender equality, diversity and inclusion, and all materials analysed are publicly accessible. These were complemented by secondary sources from international organisations (e.g. UNESCO, UN Women), IFs, NOCs, and scholarly literature. Document selection followed a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) focused on materials that explicitly addressed gender equality, diversity and inclusion (GEDI) initiatives, with particular

attention to policy turning points identified through the feminist institutionalism periodisation framework (1990–2008: Formal Equality; 2009–2016: Substantive Equality; 2017–2024: Neoliberal Inclusion).

I adopted a two-stage coding process, explicitly informed by the dual theoretical lenses of feminist institutionalism and Bacchi's WPR approach. First, documents were chronologically organised and subjected to descriptive coding to identify basic policy instruments and implementation mechanisms. Second, theoretical coding included the specific feminist institutionalism and WPR concepts to examine how formal policies interacted with informal institutional norms. The coding framework was not developed inductively but rather operationalised directly from the theoretical frameworks, while focusing on five analytical dimensions: identifying whether policies represented transformative change or were nested within existing institutional logics (Mackay, 2014); demonstrating how policy documents constructed the problem of gender inequality using Bacchi's WPR approach (e.g. a lack of participation versus a power imbalance); analysing how policies addressed or failed to address informal norms, networks, and masculine-coded priorities constituting the gendered substructure (Acker, 1990); evaluating the material impact of policies on resource allocation and decision-making authority; and identifying the rhetorical justification and language used to promote policies.

This systematic application of foundational theories in the coding directly determined the focus and organisation of my subsequent findings. The thematic analysis reflects four dimensions: leadership, safe sports, portrayal and resource allocation. Using these dimensions, I ensured that the discussion arose directly from a theoretical investigation of the data rather than a descriptive summary. To enhance reliability, a second coder independently analysed a sample of documents using the same theory-based coding framework, achieving inter-coder agreement on theme identification. NVivo 12 software facilitated systematic data management and pattern recognition across the three-decade timeframe, enabling both longitudinal tracking of policy evolution and critical examination of implementation gaps between rhetoric and practice grounded in the specific theoretical constructs.

5. Findings and discussion

For the study, I analysed the IOC's gender equality policies, focusing on the tensions between formal commitment and practical implementation. Below, I begin by reporting a brief overview of key policy developments, before examining the specific thematic challenges discovered.

5.1 Policy development: from evolution to inclusion

The history of the IOC, founded in 1894, reveals a gap of almost a century before women's participation was accorded serious consideration as a matter of institutional priority. Although the IOC's approach to gender equality has evolved significantly since the 1990s, important implementation issues have persisted. Rather than detailing the full historical chronology, I focus here on key policy turning points that illustrate the broader patterns of the institution's response.

The historical trajectory of the IOC's gender equality initiatives reveals a complex evolution from exclusion to incremental progress. According to Leder *et al.* (1996), women were excluded from the Olympic Games dating back to 776 B.C., with their first participation occurring in Paris in 1900. The 1920s ushered in radical changes in women's sports, marked by a notable increase in both women athletes and women's sporting events. The post-World War II era, particularly the 1948 London Olympics, heralded a period of rising female athlete profiles. Statistically, female participation has grown from 2.2% in Paris in 1900 to 50% in Paris in 2024, representing significant quantitative progress.

However, the nested nature of the IOC reforms becomes evident through closer chronological analysis. The early phase (1990–2008) established quantitative targets

through what Mackay (2014) identifies as classic nested reforms, adding women to existing structures without changing the selection criteria or power dynamics. The 1990s marked the beginning of formal efforts, with the first woman elected to the IOC Executive Board in 1990, followed by the 1991 requirement that new sports include women's events. The establishment of the Women Working Group in 1995 and its evolution into a full commission in 2004 demonstrates growing institutional commitment. Nonetheless, these structures operated within the existing gendered substructure, identified by Acker (1990) as nested reforms. The subsequent phase (2009–2016), saw a stronger strategic shift towards partnerships, particularly with the UN Women, which is an example of leveraging a feminine-coded agenda (e.g. human rights, social justice), to push internal reforms against reported masculine-coded resistance. This resistance was exemplified, for instance, by the contentious debates and pushback from traditional sporting constituencies within the IOC against the initial gender equality quotas, often framed as undermining meritocracy or tradition. This period included the adoption of the Olympic Charter's Principle 6 in 2015, prohibiting discrimination and the inclusion of gender equality as an Olympic social legacy in 2016. The most recent phase (2017–2024) broadened the comprehensive frameworks, including the Gender Equality Review Project's 25 recommendations and Gender Equality and Inclusion objectives. However, the reframing of gender equality within the broader, less politically charged discourse of diversity and inclusion acts as a form of symbolic co-optation (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017), which may strategically reduce focus on gendered power structures.

5.2 *The policy implementation paradox: formal progress nominal success*

Thus, the IOC's three-decade policy evolution reveals a fundamental paradox in that while formal commitments to gender equality have expanded significantly, substantive implementation across the Olympic Movement remains uneven and often superficial. The achievement of gender parity in athlete participation in Paris 2024 represents the culmination of a target-driven approach, yet this celebrated milestone exemplifies nested newness, reform within existing structures rather than transformative change.

The persistence of significant gender disparities in leadership positions demonstrates how quantifiable participation goals can be achieved while power structures remain intact. Women held only 33.3% of executive board positions across IFs in 2022 (IOC, 2022), reflecting Acker's (1990) concept of the gender substructure, where informal norms and networks continue to encourage masculine leadership models despite formal equality policies.

Therefore, the documented progression from quantitative targets to partnerships and broader inclusion frameworks represents a linear refinement of strategy and a pragmatic adaptation to the IOC's limited enforcement capabilities. However, the gaps between rhetoric and implementation, particularly in leadership and resource allocation, may be more than merely policy failures but represent deeper structural constraints and competing priorities inherent to the IOC's position in global sports.

5.3 *Thematic analysis: implementation challenges across policy domains*

5.3.1 *Leadership representation challenges.* The IOC's approach to leadership equality includes both coercive regulations (numerical targets) and encouraged rules (soft indicators). Despite setting progressive targets requiring 10%, 20% and 30% female representation in NOCs by 2001, 2005 and 2020, respectively, implementation has faced persistent barriers. The IOC's Gender Equality Review Project further recommends that NOCs and IFs aim for at least 30% of their leadership positions to be held by women by 2026 (IOC, 2018, 2021), reflecting the organisation's commitment to fostering institutional change through measurable accountability mechanisms. However, the research indicates that women face many obstacles, including gender stereotypes, exclusionary informal networks and a lack of mentorship opportunities (Adriaanse and Schofield, 2013; Burton, 2015). These barriers are compounded by the gendered division of labour within sports organisations, which often relegates women to

administrative or support roles rather than decision-making positions (Claringbould and Knoppers, 2012).

This persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership is not limited to a numbers game. Feminist institutionalism points to gendered substructures, which refer to the systematic disadvantages of informal networks, sponsorship patterns and definitions of a qualified leader that are inherently masculine-coded (Adriaanse and Schofield, 2013; Burton, 2015). As Krook and Mackay (2011) argue, institutional reforms must go beyond formal rules to address the informal norms and practices that sustain masculine dominance in governance. Quotas, a nested reform, are insufficient to transform the substructure. Moreover, the IOC's reliance on statistical targets has been criticised for prioritising numerical representation over substantive change, as these measures do not necessarily address the underlying cultural and structural factors that perpetuate gender inequality.

The analysis suggests that the recent election of Kirsty Coventry as IOC President in 2025, while a symbolic progress, marking a historic moment as the first woman to hold this role and demonstrating the organisation's commitment to gender equality at the highest levels of governance, can also be interpreted through the lens of nested newness. The single high-profile appointment operates within the existing institutional structure, and its impact on transforming the broader gendered substructure of leadership across the Olympic Movement remains an open question, illustrating the paradox where change is simultaneously achieved and limited (Mackay, 2014). As Burton (2015) notes, the presence of women in leadership roles does not automatically translate into gender-equitable outcomes. Symbolic progress needs to be accompanied by structural reforms to ensure that women in leadership positions have the resources, support and authority required to affect meaningful change. The persistence of male-dominated governance structures requires transformative strategies to address root causes rather than compliance-based approaches alone. This includes challenging gender stereotypes, fostering inclusive organisational cultures that value diverse perspectives, and creating pathways for women to access genuine decision-making power rather than merely symbolic positions.

5.3.2 Safe sport implementation gaps. Since its 2007 Consensus Statement on Sexual Harassment and Abuse, the IOC has put in place comprehensive safeguarding frameworks. This marked a turning point in formal recognition of the need for such systematic protective measures. The 2016 Safeguarding Initiative and its provision of resources, training and guidance for NOCs and IFs, along with mandatory safeguarding officers at the games, also demonstrates institutional commitment. The IOC has enhanced these efforts through other initiatives such as the Safeguarding Officer Training Programme, which is aimed at training stakeholders involved in the Olympic Movement to recognise signs of abuse and respond to harassment reports (IOC, 2021).

Yet, challenges to implementing such programmes persist because of cultural norms and a lack of awareness, particularly in regions where gender equality and athlete protection may not be prioritised within local legal frameworks (Lang and Hartill, 2014), and inconsistent application across NOCs and IFs. This inconsistency reflects a significant obstacle to establishing universal safeguarding standards, as some organisations lack the resources or commitment to implement comprehensive measures effectively. Women and girls remain particularly vulnerable because of power imbalances and gender stereotypes (Mountjoy *et al.*, 2016), facing unique challenges such as sexual harassment by authority figures and societal pressures that discourage reporting. Male-dominated power structures within sports organisations create environments where abuse can go unchecked (Kerr and Stirling, 2019), a situation compounded by the lack of female representation in leadership and coaching roles.

The IOC has acknowledged these gender dimensions by developing gender-sensitive safeguarding policies, including specific guidelines for addressing female athletes' needs and ensuring gender diversity among safeguarding officers (IOC, 2007). Furthermore, the organisation has prioritised the integration of safeguarding measures into all aspects of sport governance, as outlined in the Gender Equality and Inclusion Report (IOC, 2022), and

emphasised collaboration with external partners (e.g. UN) to address root causes of harassment and abuse. Despite these efforts, significant issues remain, including the stigma associated with reporting abuse, especially when perpetrators hold positions of power, and the lack of standardised reporting mechanisms across the Olympic Movement. Looking ahead, the IOC has identified key priorities for advancing safe sports, including developing standardised reporting mechanisms, promoting gender-sensitive practices and better integrating safeguarding policies with broader gender equality initiatives. These challenges highlight the complex implementation issues between formal policy development and effective protection mechanisms for athletes across diverse cultural and organisational contexts.

5.3.3 Media portrayal and representation. The IOC's guidelines for gender-equitable portrayals address language, imagery and coverage balance, providing comprehensive recommendations to media outlets, broadcasters and sports organisations to avoid gender stereotypes and focus instead on athletes' achievements, skills and contributions. These guidelines specifically advocate for avoiding emphasis on physical appearance or personal relationships, ensuring balanced coverage across media platforms, using inclusive language and imagery, and amplifying female athletes' accomplishments.

However, deeply ingrained gender stereotypes continue to influence how female athletes are depicted and perceived (Billings *et al.*, 2010; Cooky *et al.*, 2015), as evidenced by the commentary during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, where female athletes were frequently described in terms of physical appearance or emotional qualities rather than athletic prowess. The underrepresentation of women in sports media leadership contributes to this biased coverage (Franks and O'Neil, 2016; LaVoi *et al.*, 2007), with male-dominated leadership in sports journalism resulting in coverage that marginalises female athletes and reinforces traditional narratives. Increasing gender diversity in media leadership and production teams is essential to addressing these structural biases (LaVoi *et al.*, 2007).

As media coverage continues to focus on traditional gender norms rather than athletic achievements, commercialisation has not led to equitable representation (Fink, 2015; Kane and Maxwell, 2011). Instead, it has reinforced the perception that women's sports are less competitive or important. For example, representations of women's sports frequently fail to challenge societal perceptions, thereby perpetuating existing gender hierarchies (Messner and Cooky, 2010).

The IOC's guidelines on fair portrayal, although well-intentioned, still rely on soft power and persuasion with media partners. This approach reflects the organisation's recognition that equitable portrayal requires not just increasing the quantity but also fundamentally improving its quality by depicting female athletes as skilled, competitive professionals rather than as gendered stereotypes. However, the core issue remains that the masculine-dominated ownership and leadership structure of global sports media, which systematically reproduces gendered stereotypes through institutional practices, has not been adequately addressed (Cooky *et al.*, 2021; Franks and O'Neil, 2016). This structural barrier highlights the limitations of voluntary guidelines in transforming deeply embedded media practices and power dynamics.

The persistence of these challenges highlights the need for more comprehensive strategies that address both media content and the institutional environment in which it is produced. Meaningful progress could be achieved through the continued diversification of leadership and ownership within sports media organisations, which could enhance the effectiveness of the IOC's initiatives aimed at transforming representation practices. Such developments could contribute to sustained improvements in challenging established patterns and promoting equitable portrayals in sports media.

5.3.4 Resource allocation disparities. The equitable distribution of resources remains another area in which practice consistently fails to align with official policy mandates. As a fundamental aspect of achieving gender equality in sports, fair resource allocation ensures that all athletes have equitable access to funding, facilities, training opportunities and the nonfinancial support necessary for their development and success (IOC, 2019). Despite

initiatives such as the Olympic Solidarity programme, which provides financial support to NOCs for developing gender-inclusive sport programmes and initiatives, and the Women in Sport High-Performance Pathway, which offers funding, mentorship and training opportunities to advance women in coaching and officiating roles, resource allocation remains tied to a masculine-coded value economy.

The IOC has continuously updated its approach to resource allocation to reflect its evolving commitment to gender equality, defining this commitment as ensuring the fair distribution of resources during the implementation of integrated and targeted initiatives. However, research shows that sports and activities traditionally associated with men (e.g. high-budget team sports) often receive disproportionate funding and media coverage compared with those associated with women, despite formal equality policies (Fink, 2015). This disparity persists despite the IOC's efforts to address the historical disadvantages that have hindered women's ability to compete at equal levels and ensure that female athletes have access to the same level of support, infrastructure and opportunities as male athletes do.

Notably, the IOC's commitment to equitable resource allocation is evident in its data-driven approach to monitoring and evaluating the impact of gender equality programmes that enable it to identify gaps and reinforce its strategies (IOC, 2021). However, the IOC's soft governance approach, while enabling broad engagement across its diverse memberships, lacks effective enforcement mechanisms to ensure equitable resource distribution and the mandates needed to challenge deeply embedded allocation patterns. These implementation issues highlight the tension between the IOC's progressive policies and the persistent influence of gendered valuation systems that privilege traditionally masculine sports, demonstrating the need for more transformative approaches to resource allocation that directly address these structural inequalities.

5.4 Structural constraints and strategic limitations

The implementation issues need to be understood within the context of the IOC's position as a non-state actor operating through soft governance mechanisms. The organisation has to balance gender equality against commercial partnerships, geopolitical considerations and Olympic development. This tension is evident in the uneven implementation of the 2018 Gender Equality Review Project recommendations, in which technically straightforward measures achieved wider adoption than those requiring resource redistribution or cultural change.

My analysis revealed consistent patterns of resistance explaining the policy-implementation gap, involving the culture of compliance over commitment created by quantitative targets, the lack of focus through broader diversity frameworks and the absence of a robust enforcement mechanism. These patterns illustrate the limitations of the current approach and highlight the need for more transformative strategies that address deeper structural and cultural barriers to gender equality.

This differential adaptation across policy domains reflects Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach to problem representation. When gender inequality is framed as a technical governance issue, implementation succeeds; when it requires confronting power structures and resource distribution, progress stalls. This suggests that the IOC's framework remains constrained by its reluctance to challenge economic structures that underpin gender inequality in global sports.

6. Conclusions

The development of gender equality within the Olympic Movement as promoted by the IOC reflects a globally endorsed value that has evolved in three distinct phases since the 1990s. Each phase has been characterised by different priorities and approaches, yet persistent challenges remain in achieving substantive equality. The evolution of the IOC's policy, although progressing on the surface, demonstrates a clear pattern of nested newness. The first

stage (1990s–2008) focused on establishing compulsory quantitative targets, particularly in athlete participation and leadership representation. Thus, the early phase established quantitative targets for women's representation. Even though these improved the numerical gender balance, their effectiveness was limited by a lack of enforcement mechanisms. As Pfister (2010) noted, the absence of sanctions for noncompliance allows NOCs to treat these targets as aspirational rather than mandatory, undermining their impact. These were classic nested reforms since they aimed to add women to existing structures without changing the selection criteria, cultures or power dynamics of those boards, exemplifying Acker's (1990) concept of the gendered substructure. In the second stage (2009–2016), the IOC shifted towards more qualitative measures, including partnerships with international organisations such as the UN and UN Women. Feminist institutionalism analysis interprets these not just as collaborations, but as strategies that use external, feminine-coded legitimacy (human rights) to push an internal agenda precisely because internal resistance within the masculine-coded sporting domain is too strong. This outsourcing of legitimacy at that time was a soft-governance tactic that acknowledged internal constraints. Although these collaborations emphasised advocacy and education, critics argued that they lacked measurable outcomes (Adriaanse and Schofield, 2013). The reliance on non-statistical targets, although progressive in theory, failed to address structural barriers such as unequal funding and media representation for women in sports (Bruce, 2016). In the most recent stage (2017–2024), the IOC has reframed gender equality within a broader discourse on diversity and inclusion (IOC, 2021). The critical feminist institutionalism lens questions if this expansion strategically dilutes the focus on gendered power structures by subsuming gender under a broader, less politically charged umbrella, a potential form of symbolic co-optation (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). Other scholars, such as Chawansky (2020) agree that this approach risks diluting the focus on systemic gender inequities by conflating them with other forms of diversity. While the IOC has expanded its policies to include coaching and leadership roles, the persistence of gendered norms in sports governance suggests that the ability to implement this policy remains uneven (Shaw and Frisby, 2006).

Despite the progress made over time, policies in the Olympic Movement have been criticised for reinforcing rather than dismantling gender hierarchies. Such regulations perpetuate inequality by framing women's participation as conditional rather than intrinsic to the Olympic ethos. Wheaton and Thorpe (2018) contend that gender equality in the Olympic Movement needs to be addressed at both macro (i.e. IOC) and micro (i.e. subordinated sports organisations) levels. While the IOC advocates women's inclusion, many NOCs lack the resources or political will to enact meaningful changes (Henry and Robinson, 2010). This disconnect highlights the need for accountability mechanisms such as mandatory gender audits and funding contingencies for noncompliant NOCs, which would operationalise Acker's (1990) concept of the gendered substructure by systematically exposing and addressing informal barriers to equality.

The feminist institutionalism perspective points to the fundamental issue underlying the IOC's three-decade journey towards gender equality, that significant formal progress coexists with persistent substantive inequality. The concepts of gendered substructures and nested newness demonstrate how the IOC's reforms have been consistently constrained by the institutions they seek to change. The achievement of gender parity in the field in Paris in 2024 is therefore not an endpoint, but a symbol of a specific type of change. This is a highly visible nested reform that leaves the underlying power dynamics of the Olympic Movement largely intact. My conclusion is that without a concerted effort to transition from nested to transformative change by targeting informal norms, resource distribution and power networks that constitute the gendered substructure, the IOC's equality project will remain symbolically potent but substantively limited. Therefore, moving forward, the IOC must transition from nested to transformative change. This requires strategies that directly address the deeper structural and cultural barriers to gender equality. Future efforts need to prioritise strategies that disrupt rather than accommodate the institutional status quo, focusing on transformative

leadership development, radical transparency in resource allocation and constituent bodies held accountable not only to quantitative targets but also to qualitative changes in institutional culture.

Thus, although the IOC has been advancing gender equality in sports, especially in the Olympic Movement, its effectiveness has been fundamentally mediated by its governance structure. The IOC's policy evolution reflects a strategic pivot from ambitious yet largely unenforceable mandates towards softer, collaborative approaches. This shift constitutes a tacit acknowledgement of its constrained authority and limited power to impose change on autonomous IFs and sovereign NOCs (Chappelet, 2016). Persistent gender gaps in leadership, coaching and resource allocation should not be overlooked. These are direct consequences of the complex trade-offs that the IOC has to navigate between its gender equality agenda and other priorities such as commercial viability and geopolitical universality.

Hence, recommendations for the IOC need to be pragmatic and multi-layered. Instead of solely advocating for top-down sanctions since these have limited utility, future strategies should leverage the IOC's unique assets more effectively. One approach is conditional resource allocation, whereby Olympic solidarity funding and technical assistance are tied directly to the development and execution of verified GEDI action plans. This would shift the focus from simple quota attainment towards sustainable institutional reform, while acknowledging the different starting points of various NOCs. Furthermore, the IOC could engage in strategic coalition-building. By strengthening alliances with other powerful actors such as top-tier sponsors and athlete commissions, the IOC could create a broader ecosystem of pressure and accountability. This multi-stakeholder coalition could generate influence that extends far beyond the IOC's direct authority, making noncompliance increasingly difficult for autonomous IFs and NOCs. In addition, the IOC could pursue knowledge diplomacy, which prioritises the IOC's role as a central hub for productive practice sharing, data collection and capacity building. By systematically collecting and disseminating evidence, and providing targeted training, the IOC could empower reform-minded advocates within IFs and NOCs. This approach would foster change from within, equipping internal champions with the tools and legitimacy required to advance gender equality agendas locally. Ultimately, achieving substantive gender equality in the Olympic Movement requires the recognition that the IOC cannot mandate it alone. Meaningful progress depends on a sophisticated strategy that is as complex, adaptive and networked as the global governance landscape.

Although the relevant international sport governing bodies have made strides in promoting gender equality as a global value, their policies remain aspirational without systemic reform. Future efforts need to prioritise structural accountability and inclusivity to ensure meaningful progress. Specifically, the implementation of mandatory gender audits can provide a systematic mechanism for tracking progress and identifying persistent barriers, while linking funding to demonstrate compliance can create meaningful incentives for transformative change.

Acknowledging the inherent limitations of a document-based analysis, a vital future direction involves interviewing officials and policymakers within international sport governing bodies (e.g. IOC, IFs, NOCs). To address the persistent gap between policy rhetoric and implementation, future research should prioritise qualitative investigations into the life experiences of women in coaching and leadership positions to provide crucial insights into the informal barriers that sustain masculine dominance in sports governance. Ethnographic approaches could also be employed to critically examine the micro-dynamics of power within IFs and NOCs decision-making bodies, unpacking how gendered norms are reproduced through informal interactions and cultures. Expanding the research agenda will enhance our understanding of how gender inequality intersects with other forms of discrimination in global sport. Such research will continue to be essential for understanding the interpretation, negotiation and implementation of GEDI strategies from the perspective of the institutional actors, revealing the actual complexities of policy enactment within a complex transnational governance field.

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