Understanding Gender (In)Equality in Leadership Positions in Sport
A Multilevel Perspective
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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

To be presented, with the permission of the Faculty of Management and Business of Tampere University, for public discussion in the Paavo Koli Auditorium of the Pinni A building, Kanslerinrinne 1, Tampere, on 25 August 2023, at 12 o'clock.
MARJUKKA MIKKONEN

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FOREWORDS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I first applied for my doctoral studies in October 2019, I had no idea of the journey that would lay ahead of me. Now, as I am finalizing this last section of my doctoral dissertation, the acknowledgments, I am grateful for the highs and lows that have shaped my experience. Time has flown by so quickly that it seems hard to believe that this is the end of this chapter of my life. Yet, as they say, time flies when you're having fun. And that is exactly, what this journey has been – a lot of fun. I am filled with gratitude for the people who have shaped this journey and supported me along the way.

First and foremost, I want to thank my first supervisor and custos, Professor Jari Stenvall. Thank you for guiding me through this journey and opening the doors for me into research and academic life. Especially your belief in my skills and your ability to always see the positive have been an invaluable asset. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Elias Pekkola, for his support and guidance. Your critical comments and discussions with you were instrumental in this process.

I want to also thank my pre-examiners Professor Janne Tienari and Associate Professor Laila Nordstrand-Berg, who gave valuable comments and insights in the final stage of this process. I am grateful to have such inspiring academics to pre-examine my dissertation. With the help of your critical comments, I was able to finetune the last pieces of my dissertation. Thank you, Professor Janne Tienari, for also accepting the invitation to act as my opponent.

I want to thank Tampereen Kaupungin Tiederahasto and the Faculty of Management and Business for the financial support that enabled me to work full time with my dissertation and Tampereen liikesivistyssäätiö, The University of Tampere Foundation and Finnish Section of the Nordic Federation of Public Administration (NAF) for the smaller grants that enabled me to take part in mobility activities and conferences.

I am also grateful to my colleagues on the 4th floor, including Professor Jan-Erik Johanson, Johanna Liljeroos-Cork, Mikko Mykkänen, Luiz Andrade de Alonzo, Dr. Íris Santos, Dr. Motolani Peltola, Hemmo Taira and all the rest for creating a unique, fun, and supportive atmosphere that made it a pleasure to come to work every day.
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Furthermore, I want to thank Dr. Malla Mattila for recognizing the research potential in me and hiring me for her research project Robins. Thank you and the rest of the Project Robins crew for showing me the ABC of research.

Thank you also Dr. Kati Lehtonen. Collaborating with you on two of the dissertation articles has been truly inspiring and I have learned a lot during those processes. Furthermore, thank you Minttu Korsberg for co-authoring one of the dissertation articles with me. Working with you was not only thought-provoking but also great fun! Lastly, a big thank you for the members of our unofficial after-work group, Aira Eirola, Dr. Aleksi Niittymies, Dr. Ulla-Maija Sutinen, and Outi Vehka-aho. You have been a super important group of peers and colleagues. I am glad that I got to know you already during the first months of this journey and hope that our AW-meetings keep on running regularly irregularly.

Finally, I want to thank my friends outside the academia, who kept me busy doing other things outside work, whether it was a run (pitkis) in the Kauppi woods, baking waffles, having a phone call or just hanging out somewhere. You know who you are, you mean a lot to me. I would also like to thank my family for cheering for and supporting me not only during my PhD studies but throughout my life. No matter if it was a day or night, you were always there for me whether I wanted to share a random thought I got during the day or needed someone to bounce my ideas with. This was especially important as the Covid-19 hit within two months after I had entered the academia and thus overshadowed the process for a long period of time.

The very last thank you goes to my partner in crime, Lauri. Thank you for always being there for me, during the highs and lows. Together we’re just unstoppable!

On a cloudy summer day at home in Tammela, 6th June 2023,

Marjukka Mikkonen
ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in leadership positions in sport is a global challenge, manifested through factors such as the low representation of women in these roles, discrimination, and experiences of inequality. Despite the Nordic countries, Finland included, are often seen as pioneers of gender equality, gender inequality in sports leadership positions remains a challenge in these countries as well. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to increase our understanding of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport organizations in the context of Finnish organized sport.

This research topic is significant from several perspectives. Firstly, gender equality is ethically important in its own right. Thus increasing our understanding of why gender inequality occurs and persists, as well as of how to support equality, is socially desirable. Secondly, gender equality in sport leadership positions reflects the democratic values of modern societies. Equality is one of the fundamental principles of the Nordic welfare state. Women constitute half of the population; therefore, they should be adequately represented in decision-making and leadership positions. Thirdly, gender diversity within leadership positions may contribute to organizational benefits, as women may provide different and diverse perspectives into organizational decision-making. Furthermore, women often strive to promote equality policies and practices that benefit the entire community. Lastly, sport holds immense societal importance and impacts one way or another the lives of many individuals. For instance it employs more volunteers than any other third-sector actor in Europe and is the largest civic movement in Finland. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure gender equality in leadership positions in this influential institution.

As stated above, this dissertation focuses on gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport. Specifically, I ask why gender inequality persists in leadership positions in sport and how to enhance gender equality in leadership positions in sport. I approach the research problem through four sub-studies and an integrative chapter. Each sub-study provides a distinct perspective and approach for examining the research problem, while the integrative chapter consolidates the results and findings from these sub-studies to present a comprehensive analysis.

Methodologically, I employ a mixed-methods approach utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods. The first sub-study provides a contextual backdrop for
the dissertation by describing and analysing Finnish sport policy and its
development. The primary data for this sub-study consist of documentary sources,
including government reports, previous research, and other publicly available
archives and documents. In the second article, I analyse survey data to examine the
perspectives of male and female board members on board governance in national
governing bodies of sport. Specifically, I investigate whether women and men offer
differing views on governance or whether their perceptions are similar. In the third
article, I explore the reasons for gender inequality and the low number of women in
leadership positions within Nordic football organisations through semi-structured
interviews. Finally, in the fourth article, I analyse interview data collected from
women in leadership positions and examine their perceptions on how
institutionalised gender inequality in sport leadership positions can be changed.

This dissertation contributes to the academic debate on gender (in)equality in
leadership positions in sport by incorporating from the disciplinary perspective of
administrative sciences. Empirically, this study expands the current body of
knowledge by examining the phenomenon within the hitherto unexplored context
of organised Finnish sport. The findings of this dissertation provide boundary
conditions for the more general theory of gender (in)equality in leadership positions
(in sport) by highlighting the contextual nature of gender (in)equality and challenging
previous assumptions about its causes. Furthermore, this dissertation provides an
understanding of how to promote gender equality in these positions.

Methodologically, this research enriches the existing literature by employing a
mixed-methods approach and utilising survey methods, both of which are rare in the
literature on gender (in)equality and leadership positions in sport.

For practitioners, this dissertation offers an understanding, framework and
illustrative examples of why gender inequality persists in leadership positions in sport
and how gender equality can be advanced. The findings of this dissertation provide
conge concrete examples of barriers to gender equality in Finnish sport organisations, as
well as factors and means that can support gender equality and drive change. These
new understandings can serve as a foundation for evidence-based decision-making
benefiting sport managers, decision-makers, other sport policy actors and advocates
for gender equality.
TIIVISTELMÄ


Käytännön toimijoiille tämä väätöskirja tarjoaa ymmärrystä, viitekehyksen ja esimerkkejä siitä, miksi sukupuolten epätasa-arvo urheilun johto)teemissa näyttää niin pysyvänä ilmiönä sekä siitä, miten sukupuolten tasa-arvoa voidaan edistää urheilun päättökehto)teamissa. Väätöskirjjan löydöiset tarjoavat konkreettisia esimerkkejä esteistä sukupuolten tasa-arvolle suomalaisissa urheiluorganisaatioissa sekä tekijöistä ja keinoista, jotka voivat tukevat sukupuolten tasa-arvoa ja muutosta. Väätöskirjan tarjoamaa uutta tutkimu)tehtaa voidaankin käyttää pohjana tietopohjaisen päättökehto)elle ja ovat siten hyödyksi urheilijohtajille ja päättäjille sekä muille urheilupoliitikkojen toimijoin ja tasa-arvotyö)tekeville.
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Mikkonen, M. (2022) 'We are going to the right direction… but we are not in ideal world yet': understanding gender (in)equality within leadership positions in Nordic football governance. Sport in Society. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2088358

Sub-study IV
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Sub-study IV  
Mikkonen, M. Envisioning institutional change for gender equality – Women’s perspectives on fostering gender equality in decision-making positions in sport. Manuscript submitted for publication.
AUTHORSHIP ROLES

Sub-study I
This article was co-written with Minttu Korsberg, Kati Lehtonen and Jari Stenvall. As the corresponding author, I was responsible for the initial idea and publication process. Korsberg and I were the principal designers and writers of the manuscript, with guidance and critical commentary from Lehtonen and Stenvall. I wrote the drafts of Chapters 2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 5 and Korsberg drafted Chapters 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 4. Korsberg and I wrote the draft of Chapter 3.4. However, while revising, both Korsberg and I contributed to all chapters. Lehtonen and Stenvall critically revised the manuscript and made important contributions to its structure and content.

Sub-study II
This article was co-written with Jari Stenvall and Kati Lehtonen. I was the main author and had a major role in conceptualization, data analysis, writing process and revision process of the article. Stenvall and Lehtonen were responsible for gathering data (designing and conducting the survey), guidance and critical commenting, thus providing important contributions.

Sub-study III
I was the sole author of this study.

Sub-study IV
I was the sole author of this study.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this dissertation is to increase the understanding of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport organizations in the context of Finnish organized sport.

In this introductory chapter, I first introduce the research background and motivation for my dissertation. I then continue to define the main purpose of this dissertation and the research questions that I set out to answer.

In the third chapter of this chapter, I discuss the roles of the four individual articles in relation to my dissertation and the main research questions.

In the fourth chapter, I briefly introduce the context, namely Finnish organized sport.

In the last chapter, I explain the structure of my dissertation.

1.1 Research background and motivation

'We live in 2022; yet the same clumsy practices continue. Many of us have seen for decades how the small circle spins. One of us was once told that you can’t be chosen because you can’t come to the sauna with us. The second one was told that you cannot be selected because the field does not accept women. The third of us was considered "far too difficult", the fourth was too soft and the fifth's expertise was underestimated; many of us were nagging bitches. One of us had to fight an incredibly long battle in the courts and we all feel insulted. Nowadays, more and more of us have heard that you don’t fit the "profile".

(Open letter by women in decision-making positions, 2022; unofficial translation by me)
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This extract of an open letter was sent by a group of women in sport leadership after a harassment case in which a top manager resigned from the Finnish Olympic

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¹ Original text in Finnish: Elämme vuotta 2022; silti samat kähmäiset toimintatavat jatkuvat. Monet meistä ovat nähneet vuosikymmenet, miten piiri pieni pyörii. Yhdelle meistä sanottiin aikoinaan, että sinua ei voi valita, koska et voi tulla saunaan meidän kanssa. Toiselle, että sinua ei voida valita, koska kenttä ei hyväksy naista. Kolmas meistä koettiin ”aivan liian vaikeaksi tyypiksi”, neljäs oli liian pehmeä ja viidennen asiantuntumus aliarvioitiin; iso osa meistä oli räkyttäviä akkoja. Yksi meistä sai käydä luokattoman pitkän taistelun oikeusasteissa ja me kaikki tunnemme itsemme loukatuiksi. Nykyään yhä useampi on kuullut ettei sovi ”profiliin”.

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Committee after the media revealed his inappropriate behaviour against women. The extract illustrates women’s experiences of how little things have changed over the years in sport leadership, even if increasing gender equality in sport and sport leadership has been an explicitly stated aim and a central principle of both EU-level and national-level sport policy (European Commission, 2014; Lehtonen et al., 2022; Finnish Government, 2020). There have been some improvements in the state of gender equality at different levels in sport. For instance, the Ministry of Education and Culture grants equal amounts of athlete grants for women and men athletes, the number of women coaches is increasing (Lehtonen et al., 2022) and men’s and women’s national teams in football receive equal pay. However, when looking at leadership positions in sport, especially elected leadership positions, the development seems stalled (Lehtonen et al., 2022). Naturally, numbers as such are not direct indicators of gender (in)equality. However, combined with the experiences of inequality and harassment experienced predominantly by women, for example, the above case in the Finnish Olympic Committee or the cases of inappropriate behaviour in volleyball (Yle Urheilu, 2023) and Finnish baseball (Yle Urheilu, 2021), it can be concluded that gender inequality exists in Finnish sport and sport leadership.

Gender inequality and the scarcity of women in leadership positions in sport is a global phenomenon (Adriaanse, 2016). It also occurs in the Nordic countries (e.g. Fasting & Sisjord, 2019; Hedenborg & Norberg, 2019; Lehtonen et al., 2022), countries, which are perceived as forerunners in gender equality. However, throughout history, the sport sector has been built on the gender binary and the survival of the fittest. Gender binary and institutionalised gender inequality manifest at different levels of sport, such as kids playing in girls’ and boys’ teams, adult athletes competing in women’s and men’s leagues and women and men volunteers, employees, and leaders often being treated differently (e.g. women may be given gendered tasks “below” their position, such as cleaning the office or washing clothes, or women may be excluded from the unofficial networks [Allison, 2017; Welford, 2011]). In other words, gender binary and institutionalised gender inequality manifest in everyday life practices and experiences of women (and men) in sport. The sport sector is one of the only sectors in contemporary society in which intentional regulatory gender/sex segregation exists (at the level of athletes). Finnish sport offers a unique even paradoxical context with built-in tensions regarding gender. Finland is perceived as one of the most gender-equal countries, while simultaneously Finnish sport (leadership) shows gender inequalities. I seek to explore this contradiction and
This body of work is already critical from an ethical perspective: gender equality is important in its own rights (Razavi, 2017). Second, gender equality in leadership positions reflects the democratic values of modern societies (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016). Women constitute half of the population and should thus be represented in different decision-making and leadership positions. Furthermore, gender equality is a fundamental value of a welfare state society in which the ethos is based on the social democratic ideal of equality in all sectors. Sport is an important part of society; for instance, sport involves more volunteers than any other non-profit sector in Europe and has a substantial financial impact on the European economy (Groeneveld, 2009; Mikkonen et al. 2021). Lastly, women in leadership positions in sport serve as role models and offer support and mentoring for other women; they may bring different kinds of perspectives to organisations and tend to advocate for equality and fairness policies and practices that support equality and non-discrimination, thus benefiting all members, not just women (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016; Cunningham, 2019b; LaVoi, 2016).

Gender (in)equality and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in sport has received growing attention in academia. The literature has often focused on explaining the factors behind the scarcity of women in leadership positions (see, e.g. Burton 2015). On a macro (sociocultural) level, studies have considered, for instance, the impact of gender quotas on gender equality (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014; Sisjord et al., 2017), institutionalised sexism and masculinity (Fink, 2016). On a meso (organisational) level, studies have considered, for instance, the relationship between (gender) diversity and organisational outcomes (Gaston et al., 2020; Lee & Cunningham, 2018; Wicker et al., 2022), recruitment or selection processes of sport organisation boards (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Hovden, 2000), gendered practices and duties in sport organisations (Sibson, 2010), (gendered) organisational culture (Cunningham, 2008), organisational change and gender equality (Pape, 2020; Piggott, 2021), informal organisational practices on gender equity and gender balance (Piggott & Pike, 2020), networks (Katz et al., 2018), preventing discursive practices and limiting implementation of gender equality measures (Knoppers et al., 2021; Spaaij et al., 2020) and women managers’ experiences of sexism and organisational culture (Hindman & Walker, 2020; Taylor et al., 2018). On a micro level (individual), the current body of knowledge is narrower. Studies have considered, for instance, human and social capital (Sagas &
Cunningham, 2004) as well as the self-limiting behaviour of women (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007).

However, the current body of work has remained rather narrow, focusing on specific country contexts, especially on the North American context and its intercollegiate system² (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Lehtonen et al., 2022; Hancock & Hums, 2016). The context differs largely from that of the Nordic countries because of the Nordic welfare state ideology and its emphasis on equality at all levels (Skille, 2014) and because of the different sport systems in the United States and the Nordic countries. Even if gender inequality is a global phenomenon, it is context-dependent (see Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Therefore, the existing body of knowledge cannot be adapted to the Nordic welfare state context without further inquiry (Mikkonen, 2022). Rather, these studies offer a point of departure for understanding in other contexts.

In the Nordic context, many studies have focused on elected leadership positions (e.g. Elling, Hovden et al., 2019). For instance, Hovden (2010) studied dominant leadership discourses on boards of sport organisations and in another study (2012) how gender has been framed, negotiated and understood as a policy issue in Norwegian sport. More recently, Alarve (2022) explored the “problem” of gender equity and how it is described, perceived and experienced by female and male board members in Swedish national governing bodies of sport (NGBs), while Hedenborg and Nordberg (2019) explored the number and proportions of women and men in different leadership positions in Swedish sport governance. In the Finnish context, studies on gender (equality) and leadership positions in sport organisations are rare. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Heinilä touched upon the theme of leadership positions and gender by studying the position of women in the Finnish sport culture (Heinilä, 1977) and the portrait of a Finnish sport leader (Heinilä, 1974). More recently, the theme has been explored as part of some doctoral dissertations. Laakso (2016) studied the careers of elite sport managers in Finland. Even if the focus was on exploring how the careers of Finnish elite sport managers were constructed, the gender aspect was meaningful for the study, as women interviewees brought up gender issues in relation to their career development, while men told their stories as gender neutral. The women saw gender both as a promoting and a hindering factor on their careers. Aalto-Nevalainen (2018) studied differences in the career success of women and men managers in the sport sector. She found that career success in

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² Intercollegiate system refers to college athletics and sports in the United States, in which the sport and athletic competitions are organised and funded by universities and colleges (see Rosandich, 2002 for a description and analysis of the system)
sport management requires more effort from women than from men (see also Laakso, 2016), that the career success variables of men and women differ and that the gender gap exists between the men and women managers. On a policy level, Hakamäki et al. (2022) explored the number and status of women in leadership positions by identifying a three-stage model of gender equality promotion as a sport policy process, while Isosomppi et al. (2019) analysed gender equality policy discourses in sport organisations. Besides the above, the themes of gender equality and leadership positions have mainly been considered in reports (e.g. Lehtonen et al., 2022; Turpeinen et al., 2011; Turpeinen & Hakamäki, 2018).

1.2 Aim and research questions

Based on the previous section, it can be concluded that there is academic, practical and societal relevance to study gender (in)equality in leadership positions in Finnish sport. The literature on gender (in)equality and leadership is often general, embracing stereotypical ideals with no distinctions between different groups of women and men or different historical or cultural settings (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Mikkonen, 2021). Furthermore, the empirical evidence and understanding of leadership positions in sport and gender has often focused on specific country contexts and aspects (North America and the intercollegiate system; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Leberman & Burton, 2017). Acknowledging that context sets the possibilities and constraints within which gender (in)equality occurs (see, e.g. Apfelbaum, 1993; Ottesen et al., 2010), new understandings are needed in a variety of different contexts to deliver a deeper understanding of gender inequities in the highest echelons of sport (see also Hartzell & Dixon, 2019, p. 89). Recognizing that the demands and prerequisites for women’s advancement in leadership positions in sports vary depending on contextual dynamics and limitations, the aim of this dissertation is to tackle this gap and increase the understanding of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport organizations in the context of Finnish organized sport. More specifically, I seek to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: Why does gender inequality persist in leadership positions in sport?
RQ 2: How can gender equality in leadership positions in sport be enhanced?

This dissertation builds upon emancipatory request for knowledge (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Habermas, 1972) and comprises four sub-studies (see Table 1) that
address the above research questions and the main aim of this dissertation. In the next section, I discuss the role of these sub-studies as the building blocks of this dissertation.

1.3 Sub-studies as the building blocks of this dissertation

This dissertation consists of four independent pieces of research (sub-studies) in the form of research articles, which ultimately come together in this compilation to answer the above-defined research questions. As is often the case in compilation dissertations, in my case as well, the dissertation process was not a neat, linear process. Instead, the main research questions of this dissertation, as well as the final forms of the sub-studies, developed throughout the dissertation process, as did my own understanding.

I started with an aim of understanding why women are underrepresented in sport leadership, which is the main focus of sub-study III (Mikkonen, 2022). Even if, in this dissertation, this study is introduced as the third sub-study, in practice, it was the first one I started to conduct (see Figure 5 for an illustration of the research process). In this sub-study, I constructed a broad overview of women’s underrepresentation and gender (in)equality in the context of Nordic sport. In the article, I also highlight the contextual nature of gender and (sport) leadership, thus laying the foundation for this dissertation.

In the second article (sub-study II; Mikkonen et al., 2021), I shifted my worldview towards a more post-positivist approach and focused on gender and diversity in the boards of NGBs. More specifically, I was interested in the following contradiction: on the one hand, (sport) organisations emphasise (gender) diversity in boards because different kinds of people are supposed to bring diverse viewpoints into decision-making. On the other hand, it seems that homogeneous people are often selected into these key decision-making positions. Thus, I wanted to explore whether the men and women in NGB boards bring diverse perceptions to board governance or whether their perceptions are similar regardless of their gender. The study provides this dissertation with a different kind of view of gender (in)equality, and the results reiterate that gender equality is not just about the representation of women and men but also about being open and valuing different things equally. During these first two articles, I understood the importance of context in studying complex phenomena, such as leadership and gender, which are both heavily contextual in nature.
Therefore, in the third article that I conducted (sub-study I; Mikkonen et al., 2022), I shifted my focus to understanding the context of Finnish organised sport. More specifically, I aimed to describe and analyse Finnish sport policy and its development. In this dissertation, this article is sub-study I, and it is introduced as the first in the results section (Chapter 5) so that readers have a more profound understanding of the context prior to delving deeper into the themes of gender (in)equality and leadership positions.

In my last article (sub-study IV; Mikkonen, 2023), I shifted my focus again. Instead of focusing on the barriers to and reasons for gender inequality, I wanted to understand what works and how gender equality can be enhanced in leadership positions in sport. I had already touched upon this theme in the previous sub-studies, especially in sub-study III, but in the last article, I wanted to focus solely on this aspect. More specifically, I explored how to change institutionalised gender inequality in sport leadership. The fourth article is the fourth sub-study in this dissertation.

I have summarised the four sub-studies and their roles in Table 1. This compilation part of my dissertation builds upon these sub-studies and thus deepens and intertwines their insights. In this section, I aim to bind the results and insights into a coherent piece of research and eventually answer the main research questions introduced in the previous section.
### Table 1. Sub-studies and their roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main research questions</th>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Research aim/question/hypotheses</th>
<th>Methods and data</th>
<th>Main concepts/t theory</th>
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<tr>
<td>RQ 1: Why does gender inequality persist in leadership positions in sport? RQ 2: How can gender equality in leadership positions in sport be enhanced?</td>
<td>Sport policy in Finland &quot;Sub-study I&quot; (Mikkonen et al., 2022)</td>
<td>The Paradox of Gender Diversity, Organizational Outcomes, and Recruitment in the Boards of National Governing Bodies of Sport &quot;Sub-study II&quot; (Mikkonen et al., 2021)</td>
<td>&quot;We are going to the right direction… But we are not in ideal world yet&quot;: Understanding gender (in)equality within leadership positions in Nordic football governance</td>
<td>Envisioning Institutional Change for Gender Equality – Women’s Perspectives on Fostering Gender Equality in Decision-Making Positions in Sport &quot;Sub-study IV&quot; (Mikkonen, 2023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aim: To describe and analyse public sport policy in Finland, the key actors in the sport system and the political sphere in Finnish sport</td>
<td>Aim: To explore and test whether the men and the women in NGB boards bring diverse perceptions into board governance Hypotheses: H1: Women and men board members’ perspectives regarding the key constructs of board governance are different. H2: Women and men board members’ perspectives regarding the key constructs of board governance are similar. RQ: Why women in leadership positions are underrepresented in Norwegian and Finnish football organisations?</td>
<td>Case-study, document analysis Survey, cross tabulations, comparing means</td>
<td>Sport policy &amp; governance models (Henry, 2009, Lehtonen &amp; Mäkinen, 2020) Information/decision-making perspective (Williams &amp; O’Reilly, 1998) Concept of the right fit (Claringbould &amp; Knoppers, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aim: To increase understanding of gender (in)equality in managerial leadership positions in football</td>
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</table>
**Table 1. Questions and Data**

| Research Questions | Empirically, the dissertation and its sub-studies contribute to the current body of knowledge on gender (in)equality and leadership positions by extending it to the hitherto nearly unexplored context of Finnish sport organisations. | This study contributes to the literature on sport policy and governance by providing new comparable knowledge and a broad overview of a sport policy system in a single country context, thus providing a starting point for further (comparative) analyses, thus, increasing our understanding of the mixed model sport system. | This study contributes to the literature on gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport by proposing a new theoretical model explaining a contradiction in the selection processes of board members and aspirations towards diversity in sport organisations. Furthermore, this article contributes methodologically by utilising quantitative methods, which have been minimal in research on gender equality and leadership positions in sport. | This study contributes to the literature on institutional work and gender (in)equality in leadership positions (in sport) by showing how institutional actors work to shape definitions of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport in relation to the surrounding society and thus increasing understanding on how to foster gender equality in these positions. I show how institutional change for social challenges (such as gender inequality) is a multifaceted phenomenon requiring work at the micro and meso levels. Thus, studies should also incorporate multilevel approaches. | This study contributes to the literature on sport policy and governance by providing new comparable knowledge and a broad overview of a sport policy system in a single country context, thus providing a starting point for further (comparative) analyses, thus, increasing our understanding of the mixed model sport system. | This study contributes to the literature on gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport by proposing a new theoretical model explaining a contradiction in the selection processes of board members and aspirations towards diversity in sport organisations. Furthermore, this article contributes methodologically by utilising quantitative methods, which have been minimal in research on gender equality and leadership positions in sport. | This study contributes to the literature on institutional work and gender (in)equality in leadership positions (in sport) by showing how institutional actors work to shape definitions of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport in relation to the surrounding society and thus increasing understanding on how to foster gender equality in these positions. I show how institutional change for social challenges (such as gender inequality) is a multifaceted phenomenon requiring work at the micro and meso levels. Thus, studies should also incorporate multilevel approaches. |

1.4 Context: Organised sport in Finland

Considering and understanding context plays a vital role in research as it fundamentally shapes the interpretations of empirical material (Alvesson, 2003; Slack, 1998, as cited in Laakso, 2016). This is even more crucial in studies on leadership and gender, which are contextual by their nature (see, e.g. Apfelbaum, 1993; Tienari et al., 2005). Contextual underpinnings set possibilities and boundaries within which gender (in)equality takes place. The importance of context and contextual understanding is further evidenced by Ottesen et al. (2010) and Elling, Knoppers et al. (2019), who demonstrated that national contexts affect women’s possibilities in leadership positions in sport. Despite the Nordic welfare model, equal opportunities and gender equality are perceived differently in Nordic countries (Ottesen et al., 2010). Furthermore, Hancock, and Hums (2016) concluded how
women’s experiences of barriers to leadership career vary: “a barrier in one context for one participant may actually be a support for another” (p. 208).

My understanding of context aligns with the theoretical foundation of this dissertation, which is based on the multi-level framework (see Chapter 2.3). Accordingly, I conceptualize context as a multi-level construct comprising the local (micro level), organizational/field (meso level), and socio-cultural (macro level) contexts, all interconnected with each other (see Tienari et al., 2005). In this dissertation, the macro level context encompasses Finnish society (and more broadly, the Nordic society). The meso level context focuses on (organized) sport, while the micro level context pertains to local contexts such as organizational spaces (e.g., national governing bodies of sport). In sub-study III, which examines gender (in)equality in football associations, the football context introduces an additional contextual layer situated between the meso and micro levels.

Next, I will provide a brief overview of the macro and meso level contexts of this study, including the Finnish society and organised sport. These contexts and their interplay are explored in more detail in sub-study I, especially from a general policy and structural point of view. Therefore, after a short general introduction of (the gendered nature of) Finnish society and of the structure and system of Finnish organised sport, I will focus more on the gender perspective and introduce some statistics on gender and sport in Finland.

Finnish society represents the social democratic welfare state system of Nordic countries, which is based on the ethos of equality for all (see Esping-Andersen, 1990). On a global scale, Finland, along with its Nordic neighbours, is widely regarded as a relatively gender equal state. Finland consistently ranks high in various gender equality assessments (e.g. the Global Gender Gap Reports by the World Economic Forum and the Gender Equality Index by the European Union). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that gender inequalities still persist in Finland, including in various leadership positions in the realm of sports and beyond.

In terms of gender equality in work life, the historical trajectory of Finland and the development of a welfare society have played their part (Kangas & Kvist, 2019). On a global scale, women have participated in work life for a relatively long period of time in Finland (Niemistö et al., 2021). Women’s participation took the first leap during the 2nd World War, as most of the men were forced to take part in military actions; therefore, women had to go to work in order to keep society moving. The poor economic situation after the war forced and kept some women in work life, which normalised women’s positions in work life and encouraged women’s agency and independence (Nevala & Hyytönen, 2015). Another longer step towards women’s
inclusion in work life was taken in the ’60s and ’70s through urbanisation, increased gender role debate, and the development of the welfare society, including children’s day care, which enabled women to participate in work life (Julkunen, 2010, pp. 89–93, 125–130; Kurvinen, 2014). Finland exemplifies a weak male-breadwinner model, which distinguishes it from stronger male-breadwinner societies like the UK or Germany, where women often face a choice between a career and motherhood (Tienari et al., 2005). However, it is worth noting that Finland has developed a gender-segregated labour market, where certain occupational fields have a disproportionate number of women (typically characterized by relatively lower wages, such as nursing, education, and the public sector), while others have a disproportionate number of men (typically offering better salaries, such as business, technology, and construction). In addition to this horizontal segregation, the Finnish labour market also exhibits vertical segregation, meaning that men tend to dominate the highest power positions within organizations, such as CEOs and directors (Julkunen, 2010, pp. 137–139).

Another macro-level phenomenon relevant to discussions on gender and leadership positions in sport and beyond is the educational aspect. In the Finnish context, women tend to have higher education than men, but this has not translated into women having higher positions in work life or elected leadership positions (Julkunen, 2010, pp. 127, 135–137; Vuorinen-Lampila, 2016). This also applies to the sport sector (Aalto-Nevalainen, 2018; Mikkonen et al., 2021). Women tend to apply for fields such as education, health, welfare or humanities, from which it is rather difficult to reach leadership positions. Men tend to apply for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, in which there are naturally more possibilities to further a leadership career (Statistics Finland, 2021). These tendencies are impacted by the meso and macro levels and thus do not (necessarily) represent women’s and men’s natural biological or genetic tendency to choose certain fields.

The Finnish sport system has developed parallel with Finland’s independence and development of the welfare society in the ’60s and ’70s. In a wide framework, the Finnish sport system includes the third sector sport organisations, public sector actors at the national, regional and local levels, private sector actors and the 4th sector, namely households and families (Heikkala, 1998; Koski, 1998; Lehtonen, 2017, p. 14). However, in this dissertation, I explore organised sport from a slightly narrower perspective and define it mainly as the third sector sport organisations, the “sport movement” (which, however, also governs and regulates elite/high-performance sport in Finland) and the public sector actor (such as the Ministry of
Organised sport in Finland is based largely on volunteering, even if steps have been taken towards professionalisation (e.g. sport clubs have started to hire professional coaches and full or part-time workers). I have left professional or elite sport clubs and professional leagues out of the scope of this dissertation because of the differing operating logics and differing purposes for existing between elite sport organisations and third sector organisations. Whereas professional leagues and clubs tend to be limited liability companies and to operate more on the logics of market economy, the sport movement and third sector organisations tend to operate as registered associations or non-profit organisations and to base (or has at least traditionally been based) on the logics of “sport for all” and civil activity (Ala-Vähälä et al., 2021; see Lehtonen & Mäkinen, 2020 for a discussion of the position of sport movement; Mikkonen et al., 2022). Furthermore, professional sport is a rather small phenomenon in Finland. Full professional leagues in Finland include men’s ice hockey leagues and, to some extent, men’s football leagues (based on the number of professional athletes; Lämsä & Aarresola, 2021). In 2019, there were 1,092 professional athletes in Finland, most of which were ice hockey players (619), football players (287) or players of some other team sport (181) (Lämsä & Aarresola, 2021).

Finnish organised sport represents the European sport model (i.e. the pyramid structure), where grassroots clubs and organisations form the base of the sport system, and NGBs act as links in certain sports in combining international and grassroots practices (Henry, 2009; Mikkonen et al. 2021; see Figure 1).
Even if the Finnish sport model shares many similarities with the Nordic model, such as the emphasis on voluntary-based sport organizations (see, e.g. Tin et al. 2020), it also shows differences, such as the role of the state, and can, thus, be defined as the Mixed model (Henry, 2009; Lehtonen & Mäkinen, 2020; see sub-study I). The state has a strong role in steering sport policy through norms, resources and information, while sport organisations play important roles in implementing the policy. The primary responsibility of managing, developing, and reconciling sports policy in the public sector lies with the Ministry of Education and Culture. The National Sport Council acts as an expert panel assisting the Ministry of Education and Culture. At the local level, municipalities play important roles in organising sport services and facilities. The third sector sport organisations include two service organisations, the Finnish Olympic Committee and the Finnish Paralympic Committee, which aim to represent all sport-related matters, including elite sport, competitive sport, grassroots sport and sport for all. Recently, the Finnish Olympic Committee has aimed to increase its influence in matters concerning citizens’
physical (in)activity, health and well-being. This creates an interesting contradiction within the organization, as traditionally, these two aspects – competitive or high-performance sport and people’s physical activity for well-being – can be seen to operate through different values (e.g. health vs. winning; equality vs. ranking; inclusivity “sport for all” vs. exclusivity “best of the best”) and towards different goals but to compete for the same resources. In addition, the Finnish sport system includes 71 NGBs, 15 regional sport organisations and 24 other national organisations that promote physical activity (Mikkonen et al., 2022). Two sub-studies in this dissertation examine gender (in)equality in the context of NGBs (Sub-studies II and IV). NGBs play an important role in the Finnish sport structure by acting as umbrella organisations for specific sports. NGBs are responsible for youth, amateur and elite sport and therefore have the power to steer and organise sport activities that affect people of all ages and genders (Mikkonen et al. 2021). Lastly, at the grassroots level, there are around 8,500 active sport clubs in Finland.\(^3\)

Numbers and statistics alone are not definite measures of the state of gender equality. However, they offer a numeric, comparable perspective of the representativeness of women and men, which is one aspect of gender equality. The progress of gender equality in leadership positions has been slow in Finland when considering the third sport organizations (Mikkonen et al. 2021). In general, the number of women has increased more in selected (e.g. chief executive officer [CEO]) than in elected (e.g. board member) leadership positions over the past decade. The following three tables (Tables 2, 3 and 4) show the share of women and men in leadership positions in Finnish sport organisations (n = 116, including NGBs [n = 74], regional sport federations [n = 15], other organisations promoting physical activity [n = 25] and service organisations [n = 2] between 1995 and 2021; the tables base on latest available data by Lehtonen et al., 2022).

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3 There are no accurate statistics about the exact number of sport clubs in Finland. This estimation is based on different statistics, calculations and estimations (Seuratietokanta, 2022; Finnish Register of Associations, n.d.)
Gender distribution varies between different sport organisations. For instance, as of 2020, in the two service organisations (the Finnish Olympic Committee and the Finnish Paralympic Committee), there are more women (57%) than men (43%) board members. In other organisational groups, the boards are male dominated: 72% men and 28% women in NGBs, 61% men and 39% women in regional sport federations and 60% men and 40% women in other organisations promoting physical activity. When considering the share of women and men as the chairs of sport organisations, the trend is similar. In service organisations, the gender distribution is 50/50, but in other sport organisations, men dominate chair positions.

### Table 2. Share of women and men on boards of sport organisations (Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 81)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women %</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men %</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. The share of women and men as the chairpersons of sport organisations (Adapted from Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 82)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women %</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men %</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. The share of women and men as operational directors in sport organisations (Adapted from Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 82).

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women %</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men %</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In NGBs, 84% of the chairs are men and 16% are women; in regional sport federations, 93% are men and 7% are women, and in other organisations promoting physical activity 92% are men and 8% are women (Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 79).

Two of my dissertation’s sub-studies are situated in the NGB context. Therefore, I will provide a closer examination of the shares of women and men in NGBs in the following three tables (Tables 5, 6 and 7).

**Table 5.** Share of women and men on the boards of NGBs (Adapted from Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 83)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men%</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.** Share of women and men in chair positions in NGBs (Adapted from Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 84)

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men%</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7.** The share of women and men as operational directors in NGBs (Adapted from Lehtonen et al., 2022, p.84).

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men%</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tables show that the share of women is higher amongst operational directors compared to chairpersons. The share of women on NGB boards rose from 12% (in
1995) to 28% (in 2021). However, when looking at the past decade, the number of women on NGB boards has only risen 4 percentage points, from 24% to 28%. The statistics show that the share of women has doubled in all three types of positions during the past 25 years. However, when looking at the total shares, the shares of women continue to be low in leadership positions in NGBs.

Considering Finnish sport from a gender perspective more broadly, the share of girls and women taking part in sport club activities is rather even compared to boys and men. Around 56% of girls and 58% of boys (under 20 years of age) participate in sport club activities, at least from time to time (Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 45). However, the share of boys who participate in organised sport several times a week is larger than that of girls. Furthermore, boys are more likely to compete and aim to compete at a higher level than girls (Lehtonen et al., 2022, pp. 47–48).

Football is the most popular sport for all kids aged 9–15 years. For boys, the most popular sports were team sports, including football, floorball, ice hockey and basketball. For girls, the most popular sports include dance, gymnastics, horseback riding and football. Some sports are very gendered (Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 46). Based on the licence data, there are 18 NGBs in which either women and girls or boys and men hold less than 10% of the total number of licenses (e.g. cheerleading – 89% women and 2% men; rink ball – 98% men and 2% women; Cricket – 98% men and 2% women). In some other sports, gender representation is quite even. There are 13 NGBs in which the distribution of licences between men and women is 40/60 or less (e.g. swimming, dance sport and Finnish baseball). Boys and men account for 74% of license holders in team sport, whereas in individual sport, the gender distribution is rather even (56% men; 44% women) (Lehtonen et al., 2022, pp. 50–55).

In terms of volunteering, men tend to be more active in voluntary work in sport and physical activity (Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 56). According to the latest report, 23% of men and 18% of women did voluntary work related to sport and physical activity (Aarresola et al., 2019).

In terms of competitive and high-performance sport, women have achieved more medals in the Olympic games, world championships and European championships since 2007 compared to men (excluding 2013–2014). The number of women receiving government grants for athletes (established in the mid-1990s) has grown over the years. While in 2015 approximately 50 women received the grant, in 2018, the number was already over 130 women. Since 2018, the number of grants awarded for women and men athletes has been rather equal (Lehtonen et al., 2022, pp. 58–64). In professional sport (sport that not only focuses on achieving sporting results
but also enables individuals to earn a living from it, while also aiming to generate financial profits for owners; Ala-Vähälä et al., 2021), women’s league operations account for 4.2% (9 million euros) of the total economic volume of 215.8 million euros, which includes the 14 most major Finnish sport leagues for women and men. Both women and men watch and follow high-performance and professional sport through the media nearly equally, but men (61%) tend to watch sport more often in person compared to women (39%) (Lehtonen et al., 2022, p. 70).

When considering coaches, there are no precise data on the total number of coaches in Finnish sport. Based on available data (Arresola et al., 2019), 6% of women and 13% of men are involved as voluntary coaches, assistants or instructors in sport and physical activity. Approximately 33% of the total of 2,979 coaches are women (as of 2019; Särkivuori et al., 2020). Women tend to coach girl and women athletes (81% women; 39% men) in individual sport (38% women; 21% men), whereas men tend to coach boy and men athletes (65% men; 28% women) and in team sport (75% men; 64% women). Women coaches tend to be younger and coach part-time. Around 67% of all part-time coaches are involved with girl and women athlete(s), whereas full-time coaches tend to coach boy and men athletes (65%). Women coaches ten to get salary more often compared to men (56% women; 27% men) The proportion of men who do not receive any kind of financial compensation (inc. reimbursement, grants) is higher (36%) than that of women (16%) (Blomqvist et al., 2019; Lehtonen et al., 2022, pp. 64–65).

In general girls and women tend to face discrimination and bullying more often compared to boys and men; however, boys and men are more likely to experience discrimination and bullying in their leisure-time sport and physical activities than girls and women (Laine et al., 2021; Lehtonen et al., 2022, pp. 65–66). Experiences of sexual and gender-based harassment are more common among girls and women compared to boys and men. In a study on competitive athletes over the age of 16, 32% of women had experienced sexual harassment, and 23% had experienced gender-based harassment. For the same age group, 19% of men had experienced sexual harassment, and 3% had experienced gender-based harassment. Young age, gender and competition at a high level increase the risk of sexual and gender-based harassment. Sexual and gender-based harassment is most often done by men, both when it is experienced by women and men (Lahti et al., 2020; Lehtonen et al., 2022).

Summarising the above, even if there are some differences between participation and behaviour in sport and physical activity between women and men in terms of the numbers, the often-alleged women’s lack of participation in sport and physical activity does not seem to explain the scarcity of women in leadership positions. Apart
from team sport license holders, the shares of girls/women and boys/men are rather equal. Furthermore, acknowledging how leadership positions in sport are often legitimised through prior sporting success (see, e.g. Aalto-Nevalainen, 2018), the success of women athletes contradicts the low number of women in leadership positions. Lastly, boys and men tend to experience discrimination and bullying in sport and physical activities in general more often compared to girls and women. However, women and girls tend to experience sexual and gender-based harassment and discrimination in sport more often compared to men.

**Policy perspective**

On a policy level, the Finnish government and sport policy have tried to leverage gender equality and diversity in sport and its leadership positions. Legislation, different criteria and public grant policies all support increasing the number of women in sport leadership (Mikkonen et al., 2021).

The norm base includes The Act on Equality between Women and Men 1329/2014, which forbids gender-based discrimination and obligates Finnish government committees, advisory boards, working groups and other equivalent preparation, planning and decision-making bodies follow the 40-40-20 rule (40% women, 40% men, 20% either). This obligation applies to public sport organisations but not to third (or private) sector organisations, such as NGBs or sport clubs. The Act on the Promotion of Sports and Physical Activity (390/2015) also considers gender equality as gender equality is one of the seven cross-cutting principles of the act. Furthermore, the law states that the promotion of gender equality and non-discrimination are matters taken into account when considering the allocation of government grants (Lehtonen et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the extent and quality of the equality and non-discrimination plans required from beneficiaries applying for government grants vary widely across clubs and organisations (Turpeinen & Hakamäki, 2018). Furthermore, the level of monitoring the fulfilment of different grant criteria and their impact by the state has been criticised (Mikkonen et al., 2022). In addition to the above, the Government Decree on the Promotion of Sports and Physical Activity (550/2015) states that the National Sport Council is to submit initiatives and issue statements on issues related to gender equality. Furthermore, the decree states that an organisation applying for an operating grant must detail how it has promoted gender equality.

Naturally, other state level norms, decrees and decisions, such as the Prime Minister’s Government Programme impacts sport policy. The latest programme (as
of Spring 2023), the Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s Government 2019 (Government Programme, 2019) aims to establish Finland as one of the leading nations in gender equality. To achieve this, several measures are proposed in the programme, including a monitoring system for gender equality that covers different administrative branches. Furthermore, all ministries are advised to integrate gender impact assessments into their operations. In the section on culture, youth and sport, the promotion of gender equality is proposed as a tool to improve the conditions of club activities and high-performance sport. Other governing bodies and norms by state include the Government Action Plan for Gender Equality, which outlines the measures for which various ministries are responsible, the Council for Gender Equality (TANE), which is a permanent advisory council appointed for each parliamentary term, and the Gender Equality Unit, which is also responsible for the preparation and coordination of the government’s gender equality policy. The Ombudsman for Equality is an independent authority responsible for monitoring compliance with the Act on Equality between Women and Men (Lehtonen et al., 2022, pp. 10-11).

Besides steering through norms, the central government’s policy instruments include resource and information steering. The objectives and criteria of state grants advance policy goals and the crosscutting principles of sport policy, such as gender equality. Furthermore, some state grants (approximately 4 million euros annually) are directly targeted at promoting equality and non-discrimination (Roiha et al., 2022, p. 45). Steering by information is primarily implemented through state-funded national programs, networks, and stakeholders, including the Finnish Olympic Committee, Finnish Centre for Integrity in Sports, research institutes, and other relevant parties. For instance, the state has financially supported development programmes aimed at increasing gender equality and women’s possibilities in coaching (Coach Like a Woman programme [fin. Valmentaa kuin nainen]) and leadership positions in sport (Lead Like a Woman programme [Johtaa kuin nainen]; Women exerting influence in the playing fields of sport [Naiset vaikuttajina liikunnan pelikentillä]; New Leaders programme) and awards the Piikkarit recognition award (Lehtonen et al., 2022, pp. 87–90).

International regulations, agreements and recommendations, such as the human rights declaration, United Nations Agenda 2030 and European Union’s (EU) and Council of Europe’s recommendations and conventions, also impact gender equality in the Finnish sport sector, both directly and indirectly. Gender equality is a core value of the EU and a central principle of EU-level sport policymaking (Lehtonen et al., 2022). Even if the EU does not have direct competencies in sport-related
matters, it can enact conclusions and resolutions and steer by information and resources. For instance, through the Erasmus+ programme, the EU grants financial support for programmes and networks in line with the EU’s policy aims. In regard to steering by information, the EU has, for instance, established a project in cooperation with the Council of Europe, which aimed to support public authorities and sport organisations in designing and implementing policies and programmes tackling gender inequalities in sport (ALL IN: Towards gender balance in European sport 2018–2019, see Council of Europe & European Union, n.d.). In addition to the above, the International Working Group of Women & Sport network has been an important actor promoting gender equality in Finnish sport policy (Hakamäki et al., 2022).

1.5 Outline of the dissertation

In this introductory chapter, I have first outlined the background and motivation for this dissertation and continued by presenting the main purpose, research questions and the roles of the sub-studies in this dissertation. Lastly, I concluded by describing the context of this study. In Chapter 2, I discuss the theoretical and conceptual frame of this dissertation, which consists of three streams of literature in the context of sport: gender, organisations and leadership positions. Chapter 3 focuses on detailing the research design and methodological choices of this study. In Chapter 4, I provide summaries of the results of the four sub-studies. In the final chapter, Chapter 5, I discuss the general conclusions and contributions of this study and conclude the chapter with a short discussion on the limitations of this study, along with suggestions for further research. The four sub-studies are reprinted after this integrative part in their original form. Figure 2 summarizes the structure of this dissertation.
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter, I will introduce the theoretical background of this study. This dissertation is positioned at the intersection of three main streams of literature: gender in sport, leadership positions in sport and organizations (Figure 3). Of these three streams of literature, gender provides a cross-cutting lens that operates within the theories of organizations and leadership positions.

Before introducing the theoretical building blocks, I would like to note that even if gender inequality in leadership positions in sport is a global phenomenon, I follow the school of thought that perceives social constructions and processes, such as leadership and gender, contextual (see, e.g. Billing & Alvesson, 2000). The literature on gender and leadership tends often to be general and to embrace stereotypical ideals of women, men and leadership, with no distinctions between different groups of women and men or different historical or cultural settings (Billing & Alvesson, 2000).

Empirically, the current body of knowledge is largely based on English-speaking nations, especially the North American context and the United States intercollegiate system (Leberman & Burton, 2017). Thus, this literature cannot be adapted into the Nordic context without further contextualisation and scrutiny because of the differing sport models (European model vs. North American model and the intercollegiate system; see Nafziger [2008] for a comparison of these systems) and governing principles of the state (Nordic welfare state model [Esping-Andersen, 1990] vs. market-oriented mixed economy [Ikeda, 2002]).

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2.1 Gender and gender (in)equality in sport

In this dissertation, I conceptualise gender as a social structure; it organises social life and is time and place bound (Lorber, 1994; Risman, 2004). Gender is not binary; rather, it is a fluid, changing mixture of social identities embedded in all social life, including individuals and institutions (P.Y. Martin, 2004). As gender is socially constructed, gender categories are not limited to women and men. For instance, individuals may not be comfortable with the gender assigned to them or may feel unfitting into the more feminine or more masculine gender and thus have a separate set of rules and expectations for gender (Lips, 2014, pp. 1–23). In academia, they are often referred to as the third gender (even if this categorisation fails to capture all the complexity of these individuals (Lips, 2014, pp. 1–23). In my dissertation, I have decided to focus on two of the gender categories – men and women (femininities and masculinities) – so that the language is in line with the national and international administrative and governing terminology relating to gender equality (in sport).
However, I acknowledge the differences and variability within these two categories. Not all women or all men are the same. Their backgrounds and intersecting social identities impact their experiences related to gender equality and leadership positions (Crenshaw, 1990; Melton & Bryant, 2017). However, certain methods, especially statistical methods, often necessitate simplifications of realities. This requires operationalization of theoretical constructs that can be complex and multifaceted, such as gender (Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne, 2007). As I will describe in Chapter 3, I have utilized survey data and statistical analysis methods in one of the sub-studies (sub-study II) and therefore operationalised gender into three categories (men, women, I do not want to specify).

Even if gender is rather stable in its given culture, it is constantly (re)shaped by (and [re]shaping) identities, interactions, cultural symbols and discourses (P.Y. Martin, 2003; Risman, 2004). In essence, in this dissertation, I understand gender to refer to the cultural expectations and roles associated with women and men or them as a social group and sex to refer to biological aspects and to the physical bodies of women and men (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2011). However, these two dimensions are interconnected and thus cannot be separated from each other because often the social expectations for being a woman or being a man are shaped by biology and the physical bodies of men and women. For instance, the ability of the female body to become pregnant creates social expectations and socially constructed barriers for women in female bodies in their leadership careers (see, e.g. Elling, Knoppers, et al., 2019; Koca & Öztürk, 2015), whereas men’s tendency to have a lower voice and physically larger and stronger bodies create social annotations that reward them in their leadership careers (Lips, 2014, pp. 1–23).

As genders, femininities and masculinities are socially constructed categories defined within a culture and created “out of a complex of dynamic interwoven, cognitive, emotional and social forces” and essentially connected to the bodies of men and women (Billing & Alvesson, 2000, pp. 145–146). They are often seen as mutually exclusive, and throughout history, males and females have been opposed using contrary traits such as rationality/emotionality, objectivity/subjectivity and culture/nature (Billing & Alvesson, 2000). In this dissertation, instead of fixed categories, I understand gender and femininities and masculinities as intersecting continuums, in which the hyper forms of femininity and masculinity or, in other words, the ideal forms or exaggerated forms of masculinity and femininity (Holland & Harpin, 2015) represent the ends of the continuums, onto which the other forms of masculinities and femininities are set. This conceptualisation acknowledges the
differences between the gender categories of women and men and between individuals’ gender representations through femininities and masculinities.

Sport is one of the few domains in western societies, in which gender/sex segregation (at the level of athletes/players) still exists. Segregated leagues for women and men in various sports are argued to contribute to gender equality, as male puberty and the male physique are believed to confer advantages in sport, where physical stamina and strength impact an athlete’s success. However, the assumption that sport should be gender-segregated is often taken for granted (Pape, 2020). On the contrary, scholars have argued that while gender/sex-segregated leagues and sports aim to create equality for women athletes, they simultaneously perpetuate a system, in which women are afforded a lesser status compared to men (less powerful, less capable, less strong; Wackwitz, 2003), reinforcing sexist and separatist thinking (Anderson, 2008). Therefore, segregated women’s and men’s sport and leagues may work to reinforce sexism and inequalities at various levels of sport, including sport leadership positions (Anderson, 2008; Joseph & Anderson, 2016; Pape, 2020).

I have chosen to discuss gender equality instead of gender equity in this dissertation. I acknowledge that for some, the concept of gender equality refers to saving the existing structures privileging men or, in other words, “fixing the women”, while gender equity refers to fair treatment of everyone considering their individual situations and backgrounds (see Leberman & Burton, 2017). However, I see that the dichotomy between the two terms is not black and white. Lorber (1994) defined gender equality as follows: “[Gender equality] does not mean sameness or even similarity; it means that different talents and contributions are equally valued and rewarded” (p. 294). This definition highlights that not everyone is (nor should be) similar and hence should not be treated or evaluated the same way; rather, different people with different genders should be treated, valued and rewarded fairly. This is the nature of gender equality that I have followed in this dissertation. Furthermore, considering the Finnish context, many governmental documents and legislative acts tend to favour the term gender equality, so by this choice, the terminology is more in line with the empirical environment of this dissertation.

I acknowledge that the number of a minority group (such as the number of women in leadership positions in sport) is not a straight indicator of equality or inequality. Thus, merely increasing the number of women in leadership positions does not directly lead to increased equality. For instance, the subordination of women athletes (e.g. lower pay and media coverage compared to men, objectification and sexualisation in the media) has continued despite an increase in their number (Pape, 2020). However, I argue that the underrepresentation of women in leadership
positions (compared to, e.g. the number of women and girls playing and doing sport; see Chapter 1.4) may indicate something of the state of gender equality and power relations in sport organisations, especially when the numbers are considered in combination with the experiences of (in)equality of women (and men). Increasing the number of different kinds of women and different kinds of men is important, as individuals shape and create the structures in which they are embedded (Leberman & Burton, 2017). People act and behave, not organisations (Kozłowski & Klein, 2000).

**Power**

Power (‘production, in and through social relations, of effects on actors that shape their capacity to control their fate’ [Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 42]) is a contested concept that works and is expressed in different ways. Consequently, scholars’ conceptualisations of power differ. One often-cited conceptualisation is the six sources of power (e.g. Kane, 2019; Raven, 2008). However, the six sources of power approach tends to overlook the different extents of the specificity of the social relations through which power can operate. Therefore, I base my understanding on Barnett and Duvall (2005), who argue that to understand power, two aspects must be considered: a) how, why and when actors have power over others and b) how social structures and processes frame different social capacities for actors to use power. Accordingly, their conceptualisation of power has two analytical dimensions: “the kinds of social relations through which power works; and the specificity of social relations through which effects on actors’ capacities are produced” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 42). The first dimension refers to the social relations of interaction and constitution. This means that power is either (almost as) an attribute of particular actors and their interactions that these actors can use to shape the action of others or social relations of constitution, in which power works through social processes representing the social nature of the actors, such as their social identities and capacities. From the constitutive perspective, power is irreducibly social. To conclude, power can, thus, operate through many means, including more explicit means (e.g. coercing or rewarding), or through implicit means operating through underlying social structures and systems of knowledge, thus advantaging some and disadvantaging others (Barnett & Duvall, 2005).

The second analytical dimension refers to the extent to which social relations are direct and immediate compared to the relations being the opposite (diffused and scattered). The specific relations of power refer to relations that are, to some extent,
immediate or there is some sort of tangible causal or constitutive link between the actors. The diffuse relations allow for power in connections that may be detached and mediated or operated at a distance; for instance, they may be located in the rules of institutions and operate in ways that were not intended by the creators of the institution. To conclude, power can operate in direct social relations, for instance, when a CEO directs an employee to do something, or it can operate in diffuse processes, for instance, in (un)formal interactions, in which it is decided who is given what kind of role or task or who is being included in decision-making (Barnett & Duvall, 2005).

Based on these two dimensions, four types of power can be identified: compulsory power, meaning direct control by one actor over another; institutional power, meaning actors’ indirect control over socially distant others; structural power, meaning direct and mutual constitution of subjects’ capacities; and productive power, which refers to power operating through diffuse social relations to produce and shape situated social capacities of actors (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Even if the four categories are distinct, they can co-exist. In this dissertation, power is discussed mainly from institutional, structural and productive angles because instead of exploring direct exercise of power between actors, the aim is to explore gendered power relations (how power, authority and control are divided between and among different groups, such as women and men; Adriaanse, 2017, p. 9) that are underlying in the structures, cultures and interactions in sport organisations.

Power and power relations are embedded in institutions and in the positions occupied by different actors (Hardy & Maguire, 2017). Furthermore, power and power relations are intertwined with gender, as women and femininities are given lower values and rewards compared to men and masculinities (Acker, 1990). This also applies to the context of sport, as sport is often linked with masculinity, and in sport, women and femininities are often defined as less competent (Allison, 2017; Hovden & Pfister, 2006). The gendered hierarchy, in which the number of women decreases as the power of the position increases, naturally affects gender equality and women’s positions in sport (Adriaanse, 2016; Hovden, 2006; Lehtonen et al., 2022), shaping the culture and formal structures of sport as well as the day-to-day experiences of individuals. Formal positions of power in sport (e.g. CEO or chair of the board) are often occupied by a few individuals belonging to traditional majority groups in Western sport, namely by “white, heterosexual, Protestant, and able-bodied men” (Cunningham, 2019a, p. 142).

Building on Barnett and Duvall (2005) and Hardy and Maguire (2017) and understanding power as something more complex than just an actor’s attribute, as
something that can be provided by the subject position occupied by an actor, indeed, the number of women in leadership positions becomes relevant for studies on gender (in)equality (even if numbers as such do not equal to gender [in]equality as discussed above). Furthermore, at the moment, men are in better positions to tackle and change many of the barriers to gender equality because of their higher power positions in (sport) organisations. However, men (as the majority group) may not understand the barriers or experiences of women (as a minority group) because they, as the majority group, have formed the culture, structures and practices and therefore do not often face these barriers. Men may not be concerned about the underrepresentation of women or question the present situation sustaining men’s dominance (Sheridan & Milgate, 2003). On the other hand, men may not be willing to give up their positions of power (Ottesen et al., 2010; Pfister, 2010), and that may hinder the change towards gender equality and more balanced power relations between women and men. Indeed, men possessing and desiring to maintain power but at the same time holding the key to women’s inclusion in leadership is challenging for gender equality.

2.2 Leadership positions and gender in sport

Before delving deeper into the theoretical constructs of leadership positions and gender in sport, a few terminological issues related to leadership positions in sport must be discussed. Different countries use different terms to refer to different structures and positions in sport. Furthermore, in academia and in the current body of knowledge, the terminology related to different kinds of positions of authority differ between different authors, contexts and publication forums. In this dissertation, I have chosen to use the term leadership positions (and the term decision-making positions in sub-study IV) when I refer to positions such as CEOs, managers, general secretaries, board members and chairs of boards. The concept of leadership position is frequently employed to encompass both managerial positions and voluntary leadership roles in sport-related studies (see, for example, Burton, 2015; Piggott & Pike, 2020; Spaaï et al., 2020). Nevertheless, I acknowledge the inherent ambiguity associated with this concept. Some may argue that a board member is not a leadership position; however, in the current body of knowledge, board positions are often referred to as leadership positions (see, e.g. Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016; different chapters in Elling, Hovden, et al., 2019; Hovden, 2000). Similarly, some may advocate for the use of management positions instead of
leadership positions when referring to positions such as CEOs, directors or heads of sections. However, the term "leadership position" is commonly employed in academic literature in the sport context (and beyond) to encompass positions such as CEOs, directors, heads of sections, and managers (see, for example, Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Cook & Glass, 2013; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). It can be concluded that within the current body of knowledge, the conceptualization of "leadership position" remains ambiguous. It has been used to reference ‘everything from captains or coaches on elite sport teams, to top administrators in college athletics, to presidents or owners of professional sport teams, and to representatives on national sport governing boards’ (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019, p. 80). On one hand, this broad concept allows for discussions pertaining to positions of high authority and decision-making power. However, it may also lead to misunderstandings, and it lacks conceptual clarity. The two types of leadership positions share numerous similarities but also significant differences (Algahtani, 2014). Consequently, there are instances where it becomes necessary to distinguish between the two types. In this dissertation, when I refer only to leadership positions, such as a board member or a chair, which are often voluntary by nature, into which people are often elected and which do not include employment contracts, I use the term elected leadership positions. When I refer to positions on the operational side of organisations, such as the CEO or a manager, in which there is often an employment contract and salary, I use the term selected leadership positions.

Several metaphors have been used to explain the scarcity of women in leadership positions, including “the leaking pipeline”, which illustrates the progressive decrease of competent women in the pipeline to leadership positions as well as the poor feeding at the start of pipeline (Hancock & Hums, 2016), “glass ceiling”, which illustrates an invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching the highest leadership positions (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000), and leadership labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2012), which illustrates how it is not the glass ceiling, or any single barrier in a specific stage of women’s careers that excludes women from leadership positions; instead, it is the many challenges and obstacles women may face when aiming for leadership positions. The metaphor is meaningful, as it captures the notion that I discussed shortly in the previous chapter (Chapter 2.1.): not all women or men are the same. Even if many women face barriers and challenges in their leadership careers, not all women face the same barriers or obstacles or fail to make it into leadership positions. I will further elaborate on some of these gendered aspects of leadership careers in Chapter 2.3.2.
The current body of knowledge has identified one instance in which women seem to be more likely to be selected into leadership positions: times of crisis or uncertainty. The phenomenon is also known as the glass cliff phenomenon because these positions may involve a higher risk of failure compared to more predictable times (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Even if this phenomenon has not been widely studied in sport settings (Grappendorf & Burton, 2017), it seems to be likely in contexts of male-dominated leadership (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) proposed two reasons for the glass cliff: status quo bias and stereotypes about gender and leadership. Status quo bias means that if an organisation is performing poorly, there is no need for a change and therefore leaders tend to resemble one another. When an organisation performs poorly, a need for change is often perceived, and a woman may be seen as one option to be “transformational”. Similarly, times of crisis may also change the stereotypical assumptions of an ideal leader. Whereas in times of success, the stereotype is think manager–think male, in times of crises, people tend to think crises–think female as stereotypically feminine characteristics, such as being intuitive or empathic, are seen as important (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010).

**Gendered constructions of an ideal leader**

As argued in Chapter 2.1, there are different kinds of masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1987; Messerschmidt et al., 2018). Traditionally, the discourses about sport, leadership and management tend to highlight a certain type of masculinity emphasizing qualities such as mental and physical toughness and competitiveness (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Hovden, 2010; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003) or, as Hovden (2000) described, a “male heavyweight profile”. Masculine traits and qualities are perceived as managerial competence (see, e.g. Hovden, 2000, 2010; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). Consequently, these gendered discourses, stereotypes and prejudices have an impact on who is seen as a proper leader. If the attributes and characteristics of effective leaders are associated with dominant masculinity and maleness, many women (and men who do not represent and behave in accordance with the frame of dominant masculinity) are automatically in weaker positions.

In practice, this role incongruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) manifests for instance in recruitment or selection processes, in which only certain types of people with certain traits and qualities are selected. Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) refer to this set of traits and qualities as the “right fit”. This fit consists of gendered and socially
constructed ideas of qualifications, skills, traits, knowledge, characteristics and needs. These ideas are often not based on a systematic assessment of the organization’s requirements for a leader or manager, but rather on how the current individuals in these positions (who are mainly men) have qualified themselves for the positions (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Hovden, 2000; Knoppers et al., 2021). The fit includes qualities such as good education, high-level jobs, no young children, flexible time schedule, “proper” behaviour, not openly feminist, substantial knowledge of and commitment to their sport (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007). Men as the majority can frame these selection or recruitment processes and perpetuate the male-dominated culture that aligns with their own habits and preferences (Knoppers et al., 2021; Piggott et al., 2019). The frame of the right fit is reproduced because only individuals (men and women) who resemble and act according to the right fit are selected as candidates for leadership positions (Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019; Sotiriadou et al., 2017). In other words, homologous reproduction (preference to select a member that resembles oneself; Kanter, 1977) continues even if some women were included in leadership positions because all selected individuals comply with the frame of the right fit.

This practice is challenging from a gender equality perspective because it can be unconscious, meaning that gendered and normative practices and arrangements are often assumed to be gender neutral, even if they are based on the masculine norm (Acker, 1990; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008; Knoppers & Spaaij, 2022). In practice, selection or recruitment processes for leadership positions in sport are often perceived as being gender neutral, based on merit and, above all, conducted in a “proper” manner (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Schull et al., 2013; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). Therefore, gender balance is rarely an objective in these processes because people in charge of selections or recruitment do not recognise a need for it.

In addition to fitting to the gendered frame of an “ideal leader” in sport (i.e. complying with the right fit), women are also expected to behave according to the frame of accepted femininity, including being nice, compliant, empathic and sensitive (Knoppers et al., 2021; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). These contribute to the “double bind” of women (Grappendorf & Burton, 2017; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002), meaning that on the one hand women must comply with the masculine norm of an ideal leader; however, when doing so, women are seen to break the gender roles, which is often perceived as negative and unnatural. On the other hand, if a woman decides to act according to the gender role and behave in a more “feminine” manner, she is not seen to be fit into the role of a sport leader. Gender roles and
associated stereotypes of men, women and leadership create and reinforce prejudices, which put women in an unfair situation.

However, regardless of the thick body of work on gendered leadership and gendered associations of leadership positions, the polarisation of masculinity and femininity in leadership may be fading, if not entirely, at least to some extent and in some contexts. Recent conceptualisations of leadership and management are increasingly in line with values and orientations that are traditionally perceived as feminine (e.g. empathy and listening; Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Therefore, the assumption that management and leadership are inherently constructed as culturally masculine or that women in leadership roles deviate from these constructions cannot be assumed (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Pullen & Vachhani, 2018). Empirically (both in sport and general management and leadership contexts), women and men in leadership positions tend to be relatively alike in terms of, for example, aims, values and characteristics (Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Handley et al., 2017; Mikkonen et al., 2021). For this reason, I argue that contextual understanding and conceptualising gender and leadership as time, place and context bound are essential when trying to understand gender (in)equality in leadership positions (in sport). Consequently, the current body of knowledge requires more studies conducted in different sport contexts, as well as national contexts.

### 2.3 Organised sport and gender

This dissertation is based on a multilevel understanding of organisations, meaning that I understand organisations as social systems that consist of different actors and various intertwined levels that shape and are shaped by the actors and actions on different levels (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). On the one hand, these levels may be related in a top-down manner, meaning that the higher levels shape and set the boundaries of lower levels, for instance, when institutional isomorphism shapes and constrains how individuals behave. On the other hand, the levels may be related in a bottom-up fashion, meaning that the actions and behaviour of lower levels may impact higher levels, for instance, when an institutional entrepreneur shapes the institution around them. To fully understand a phenomenon, theoretical models must sometimes include both top-down and bottom-up approaches because both approaches include a “blind spot”. In macro-level scrutiny, the meaning and role of individual behaviour, perceptions and interactions tend to be neglected; in micro-level scrutiny, the meaning and role of contextual factors leading to collective
responses tend to be omitted (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). In this dissertation, I have included both bottom-up and top-down approaches.

In the context of sport, this multilevel understanding of organisations has also been adopted to understand women’s experiences and gender (in)equality in sport organisations (e.g. Burton & LaVoi, 2016; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Cunningham, 2010, 2019a). In these writings, the framework consists of micro, meso and macro levels. According to the theorisations of Kozlowski and Klein (2000), the different levels are seen as intertwined and connected also in these writings. Therefore, actions at the micro level may impact the meso level and eventually the macro level, and macro- or meso-level actions may impact the other levels (Cunningham, 2019a). However, it is important to note that actions done at one level may not always lead to anticipated results at the other levels. In some cases, the impacts and effects may be uncontrollable and unknown beforehand.

In my dissertation, I have based my understanding on Cunningham’s (2019) version of the multilevel model to understand gender (in)equality in sport organisations (see Figure 4), but I am also inspired by and have drawn upon versions of other academics, including Burton (2015), Burton and LaVoi (2016), Burton and Leberman (2017), Sotiriadou and de Haan (2019) and Hartzell and Dixon (2019). In the framework, the macro-level perspectives include sociocultural perspectives, such as geographical location, political climate, employment and anti-discrimination laws, institutional sexism and stakeholder expectations. Meso-level perspectives include organisational perspectives, such as diversity policies, bias in decision-making, organisational culture and power relations. Lastly, micro-level perspectives operate at the individual level and include human and social capital and the self-limiting behaviour of women (Cunningham, 2019a).
2.3.1 Sociocultural (macro) perspectives

Macro-level perspectives to understand gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport include the broader sociocultural context, such as the geographical location and political climate, employment and anti-discrimination laws (see Chapter 1.4), institutional sexism and stakeholder expectations (Cunningham, 2019b; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). Sport is closely intertwined with society and reflects the wider societal norms and practices of society (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Fink, 2016). For instance, Finnish society represents the social democratic welfare state system of Nordic countries, which is based on the ethos of equality for all (see Esping-Andersen, 1990). The system differs fundamentally from the market-oriented mixed economy operated, for instance, in the United States (see Ikeda, 2002). These differences in governing systems are naturally also reflected in the sport sector, which must be considered when creating an understanding of gender inequality and leadership in sport. Furthermore, geographic location and historical trajectories have moulded the contemporary sociocultural context in which gender equality and leadership in sport take place. As described in Chapter 1.4, women have participated in work life for a
relatively long period in Finland. These broader historical trajectories impact gender equality in sport and sport leadership.

Institutional sexism is embedded in social life. It refers to the ideas about gender, appropriate roles and behaviours of women and men that become taken for granted in a given culture (Cunningham, 2019b; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). These ideas, values, norms and practices about gender and appropriate roles become embedded in the institutions and everyday life, thus influencing the way people think and behave. Institutional sexism and the idea of appropriate roles not only impact how women and men are seen in relation to certain roles but also how they see themselves in relation to those roles. In the context of sport, values, norms and the visible and invisible rules of organisations are often based on masculine norms and the dominant form of masculinity and men are seen to possess proper qualities for leadership (Grappendorf & Burton, 2017; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). However, the general assumption is often that work and these values, norms and organisational practices are gender neutral (Acker, 1990; Burton & Leberman, 2017). This reinforces gender discrimination and inequality. Institutionalised sexism also manifests in the segregation of work life (Cunningham, 2019b; see Chapter 1.4). Horizontal segregation refers to women being overrepresented in some sectors and roles, such as nursing, education and clerical work, but underrepresented in others, such as engineering and manufacturing. Vertical segregation refers to women being underrepresented in the highest leadership roles but overrepresented in the lower levels.

Women are often perceived as an “other” in the social institution of sport and thus experience heavy scrutiny (Acker, 1990; Fink, 2016). They may have to use more time and energy to adapt to the masculine culture of sport and sport leadership,⁴ or they may feel that they must prove their competence to a greater extent compared to men (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2010). For these reasons, it may be difficult for women to adapt to organisations and further their leadership careers because of masculine values, ideals and procedures. Women may feel trapped as a minority because they cannot change the masculine culture and procedures; they must adapt or decide not to join (Liff & Ward, 2001).

Lastly, internal and external stakeholders’ (e.g. players, coaches, colleagues, community members and financial supporters) expectations tend to reinforce gendered norms and stereotypes (Cunningham, 2019b). These expectations are naturally entwined with institutionalised sexism and the stereotypes intertwined with

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⁴ See Section 2.2 for a further discussion and criticism “masculine” leadership.
it. Stakeholder expectations reinforcing current norms and stereotypes can be either unconscious or deliberate.

## 2.3.2 Organisational (meso) perspectives

Meso-level perspectives include organisational-level barriers, such as organisational practices, bias in decision-making, organisational culture and power relations (Cunningham, 2019b; see Chapter 2.2 for a discussion on power and power relations). Sport organisations are gendered institutions that marginalise women through informal processes, taking for granted norms and values and assumptions that base on masculine norms (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Cunningham, 2008; Grappendorf & Burton, 2017). These gendered cultures have been passed on and maintained over time, so they have become institutionalised (Cunningham, 2019b). Therefore, it may be difficult for people to critically question the structures, values and cultures privileging men over women.

On a behavioural level, sport organisations are often environments in which bias (stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination), traditional gender roles and discourses are reproduced and norms, practices and values that perpetuate dominant masculinity are supported (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Hindman & Walker, 2020). Stereotypes refer to socially constructed characteristics, abilities and expectations of men and women in a given time and culture (Cunningham, 2019b). As cultures, stereotypes are rather stable because they have been passed on for decades from one generation to another. Therefore, stereotypes are often subconscious and difficult and slow to change (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002). As discussed in Chapter 2.2, common stereotypes for women in sport leadership include women being in more serving types of leadership roles (such as human resource [HR] managers) and are presupposed to be nurturing, caring and empathic, whereas common stereotypes of men in sport leadership include them being strong, direct and in charge of things (Cunningham, 2019b).

Prejudice refers to the differential evaluation of one group relative to another (Brewer, 2007). People in leadership positions in sport are still associated with masculine managerial behaviour, and for this reason, women are less likely to be considered leaders, as they oppose women’s traditional gender role (Grappendorf &

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5 Following Schein (2010, p. 18) I understand culture in this dissertation as ‘a pattern of shared assumptions… that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct ways to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems’.
Burton, 2017). The strength of the “think manager, think male” association (Burton et al., 2009; Schein et al., 1996) has decreased over the years; nevertheless, it is still vivid in the structures and cultures of sport (Cunningham, 2019b). As discussed in Chapter 2.2, particularly challenging for women is their double bind: women are expected to be feminine, but as leaders, they are expected to fit into the traditional masculine leadership style (Grappendorf & Burton, 2017; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019).

Women may face two types of gendered discrimination in (sport) organisations that reinforce gender inequality: access and treatment discrimination (Greenhaus et al., 1990). Access discrimination refers to members of a certain group being excluded from entering an organisation or leadership position, whereas treatment discrimination refers to members of certain groups receiving fewer organisational resources than they legitimately deserve. Discriminative recruitment and promotion processes represent one form of access discrimination. For instance, these processes may include homosociality and homologous reproduction (Aicher & Sagas, 2009; Kanter, 1977; Regan & Cunningham, 2012). Furthermore, some open positions or other career-furthering job opportunities may not be publicly advertised. Because women are often not included in important unofficial networks of men in leadership positions, women may not learn about all the opportunities available (Katz et al., 2018; Wells & Hancock, 2017). The informal networks of men – “the old boys’ clubs” – seem to be highly cohesive, whereas women’s networks are the opposite. The cohesive networks of men benefit them in obtaining and retaining leadership positions by providing access to information and other interpersonal communication with powerful people (Katz et al., 2018). From the treatment discrimination perspective, discriminative actions in recruitment and promotion include men being hired for challenging positions that further their careers, whereas women often being hired for supportive and traditionally more feminine positions (e.g. HR manager), from which it is difficult to advance to top management (Aicher & Sagas, 2009; Cunningham & Sagas, 2007; Welford, 2011).

In a general management setting, Eagly and Carli (2012) suggested that difficult work-family relation is a major barrier for women in leadership positions. Leadership positions tend to include travelling, challenging hours and overtime work. Furthermore, women are often expected to take the main responsibility for the home and family; therefore, family-work relation, especially in leadership positions, is seen only as women’s problem. Even if women are able to share family responsibilities with spouses, family or paid work decision-makers often assume that women have the primary responsibility over the home and family. Therefore, women are not deemed suitable for demanding positions (Eagly & Carli, 2012). Similar findings...
relate to leadership positions in sport, both in selected positions (e.g. Hindman & Walker, 2020; Piggott & Pike, 2020; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003) and elected positions (e.g. Claringbould & van Liere, 2019; Pfister & Radtke, 2006).

2.3.3 Individual (micro) level perspectives

Micro-level factors that influence gender (in)equality operate at the individual level and include factors such as personal identity, human and social capital and self-limiting behaviours (Cunningham, 2019b). Similar to the macro and meso levels, the micro level is intertwined with other levels. If this interplay is left unrecognised, micro-level scrutiny may falsely turn into blaming only women (Cunningham, 2019b; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, individuals have agency and therefore the ability to take action, do things expected from them or do things unexpected. Therefore, individual-level perspectives are also important in the quest to understand gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport.

Investments in human and social capital seem to deliver different returns for women and men (Cunningham, 2019b). Human capital refers to individual development through means such as education, work experience and training (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). In the case of human capital, women may not receive as great returns, for instance, in terms of career development or pay, even if they have greater human capital compared to men (Aalto-Nevalainen, 2018; Cunningham, 2019b). As described in Chapter 1.4, women tend to have higher education than men, which, however, has not translated into women having higher positions in work life or elected leadership positions. Another aspect of human capital in the context of leadership positions in sport is playing and/or coaching experience, especially at a relatively high level, which is often seen as an important merit in relation to leadership positions (Aalto-Nevalainen, 2018; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Laakso, 2016). As also discussed in Chapter 1.4, boys and men tend to take part in competitive sport and work voluntarily in sport organisations (e.g. as a coach of a junior team) more often than girls and women, whereas women have been more successful in terms of medals from international competitions.

Social capital refers to networks and relationships with peers, supervisors and subordinates (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). Both the size of the network and the quality of the network are important for leadership careers (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Wells & Hancock, 2017). Particularly important is the number of weak ties in one’s network because it creates visibility and reaches into further arenas. Furthermore,
people with power, high status and authority are naturally beneficial for one’s network (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004). From the gender equality point of view, networks and networking are challenging because these (unofficial) networks are truly important, if not essential, in leadership careers (see Wells & Hancock, 2017); however, networks tend to develop better with people that are similar to self (McPherson et al., 2001), for instance, same gender. As I have discussed in earlier chapters of this dissertation, there are only a few women in leadership positions; therefore, it is harder for women to create these networks and have as many powerful people in them compared to men (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). Furthermore, as women and men tend to play and do sport in different teams and leagues, the network created as a player or athlete may remain rather homogenous (Pape, 2020).

Another micro-level factor impacting women in leadership positions in sport is the self-limiting behaviours of women (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Women tend to underestimate and conceal their achievements, whereas men often tend to do the opposite (Drakou et al., 2022). Furthermore, women may unconsciously produce self-limiting behaviours by comparing themselves to the socially constructed meanings established in the male-dominant sport leadership context shaped by the dominant masculinity (Cunningham, 2019b). Individuals create ideas and images of leaders and leadership through examples and role models. If the majority of top leaders in sport are men and perform a certain leadership style, this may decrease the confidence of women (and men) who are not comfortable with that particular leadership style (Lips, 2014). This may prevent women from seeing themselves as leaders and consequently acting as leaders. Even if it seems that same-gender role models are important, the question is still under debate: whether women role models actually empower and boost women’s confidence in leadership careers, and if so, in which conditions, or whether women tend to feel threatened when presented with successful women in leadership positions as role models (Asgari et al., 2012; Hoyt & Simon, 2011; Lips, 2014; Rudman & Phelan, 2010).

### 2.3.4 Concluding the organised sport and gender section

As discussed in this chapter, factors impacting the state of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport emerge from several different levels and operate through varied mechanisms, processes and actions by different actors. Focusing only on a single level may lead to a partial understanding of the phenomenon by neglecting an individual’s agency and experiences or by neglecting the larger
sociocultural context that impacts the experiences and behaviours of individuals. Therefore, I utilise the previously discussed multilevel model and the current body of knowledge on the factors influencing gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport as a starting point for interpretation. This theoretical base understanding enables me to root my analyses and consequently create more understanding of why gender inequality persists in leadership positions in sport and how to enhance it in these important positions.

2.4 Institutional work and institutional change

In my dissertation, I follow the definition of Greenwood et al. (2008) and define institutions as “more-or-less taken-for-granted repetitive social behaviour that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order” (pp. 4–5). Institutions are time-, place-, and context-bound. Institutions, such as sport, do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are intertwined with the societies around them (Hampel et al., 2017). Therefore, even if by nature institutions are somewhat stable and resistant to change, they can evolve through time by reacting to various social and institutional pressures or changes in the general environment (e.g. political changes, megatrends and crises). As institutions shape their contexts, contexts also shape institutions. Furthermore, institutions may co-exist, intertwine with each other and occur at multiple levels. Therefore, defining the institution(s) considered is important. In this dissertation I mainly refer to the institutions of sport and leadership positions in sport, with the latter inherently entwined with the institution of sport. In other words, while sport can be regarded as an institution in itself, at times, such as in sub-study IV, in which I explore the institution of leadership positions in sport (sub-study IV), sport becomes a context like meso level construct for the study.

The use of institutional theory in studies on leadership positions and sport has followed the more general trend and developed from the classical concept of isomorphism to more actor-centric approaches, such as institutional work and institutional entrepreneurship (Nite & Edwards, 2021). Isomorphism emphasises the dominant impact of institutions on organisational structures and practices that maintain and reproduce institutions, whereas institutional work highlights the role of actors influencing the institutions (i.e. agency) in which they are situated.
The concept of institutional work is largely based on two theoretical constructs: practices and embedded agency (Hampel et al., 2017). Practices are “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki, 2001, p. 11). Institutional work focuses on certain sets of practices that aim to impact a certain institution (Hampel et al., 2017). Embedded agency refers to the paradox of “How can actors change institutions if their actions, intentions, and rationality are all conditioned by the very institution they wish to change?” (Holm, 1995, p. 398). Actors embedded in the current institution often cannot see beyond the status quo and thus cannot come up with new, alternative ways of doing things (Hardy & Maguire, 2017). At the same time, actors who are more on the periphery, and thus not that embedded in the current institution and its arrangements, often lack the power and resources to enact change.

Institutional work refers to “the practices of individual and collective actors aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence et al., 2011, p. 52), or as Hampel et al. (2017) define, “actors endeavours to build up, tear down, elaborate and contain institutions, as well as amplify or suppress their effects” (p. 558). It includes various everyday activities and different forms of agency, which can be either intentional or unconscious; additionally, the effects of institutional work can be intentional or unintentional (P.Y. Martin, 2004; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Through agency, actors may reproduce the prevailing institutions by complying with the present norms, cultures and ways of doing or, on the other hand, do things unexpected, thus resisting and changing the present institutional arrangements. One important outcome of institutional work is to ensure the institution’s legitimacy, meaning that the institution is seen as proper and desirable by its internal and external stakeholders (Nite & Edwards, 2021; Suchman, 1995) so that it can obtain essential resources from key resource providers, including regulators, the media and investors (Hampel et al., 2017).

In my dissertation, especially in sub-study IV, I am interested in actors’ agency: the “capacity to be in or take action – for example, by doing [or refusing to do], saying and interpreting” (P.Y. Martin, 2006, p. 259) in institutional change for gender equality in leadership positions in sport. As discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 2.1), I understand gender as being embedded in all other institutions (Hawkesworth, 2003). Therefore, changing towards gender equality is difficult. Changing gendered practices or deinstitutionalising gender inequality on an individual or an individual institutional level (such as in leadership positions in sport) will likely fail because gender is co-constructing all other social institutions (P.Y. Martin, 2004). Accordingly, change towards gender equality is often beyond the
efforts of a single heroic actor (i.e. institutional entrepreneurs; see, e.g. Battilana et al., 2009) because the change requires more than actions in a single institution or organisation. To avoid a simplistic understanding of gender and gender (in)equality, I utilise the multilevel perspective in this dissertation (Cunningham, 2019) and the concept of institutional work in my analyses of how to enhance gender equality in leadership positions in sport. This approach enables me to scrutinise actors’ agency in institutional changes. Furthermore, it enables me to consider the actions of different actors at multiple levels and hence to look beyond institutional entrepreneurs. I draw especially upon the conceptions of Hampel et al. (2017), who describe an institutional work perspective to focus especially on “understanding how, why and when actors work to shape sets of institutions, the factors that affect their ability to do so, and the experience of these efforts for those involved” (p.558). More precisely, I explore the how (actors do institutional work) and who (engage in institutional work) aspects of institutional work (Hampel et al., 2017) in relation to institutionalised gender inequality in leadership positions in sport (sub-study IV).
3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I introduce the research design of this dissertation and four sub-studies. The sub-studies of this dissertation are separate pieces of research with their own methodological starting points, research questions, empirical material and theoretical underpinnings, which ultimately come together and scrutinise the same phenomenon from different angles. This chapter is organised as follows: First, I introduce the overall research design of this dissertation, which is followed by a discussion of the research paradigm underpinning this dissertation. In the third section, I describe the data and data-gathering processes, followed by a description of the analysis methods and a concluding visualisation of the research process. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the quality criteria.

3.3 Research design

3.1.1 Mixed methods

The research design of this dissertation is based on mixed methods. This means that I have utilised different underlying worldviews and methodologies in this dissertation (see Table 8). I have not used a mixed methods approach in the sub-studies; instead, I have utilised different sets of data and different qualitative and quantitative methods in the sub-studies. The mixed methods approach is visible when considering this dissertation as a whole, as the individual pieces of research (the four sub-studies) come together to answer the main research problem. Mixed-method research is characterised by methodological eclecticism, which means that the researcher selects and integrates the most suitable techniques of qualitative and quantitative traditions to study a phenomenon (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2015). Naturally, this choice rejects the incompatibility of the methods thesis, which states that the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is epistemologically inherent and adopts the compatibility thesis, which states that the use of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is actually appropriate in many
cases. Another characteristic of mixed methods studies is the “paradigm pluralism”, meaning that a variety of underlying worldviews or paradigms, including those that are more post-positivistic and constructivist, can be utilised in mixed methods approaches (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2015). In this dissertation, I have cherished both of these characteristics by utilising varied datasets, qualitative and quantitative methods as well as underlying worldviews in my sub-studies to create a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena studied. In the following sections, I will justify and elaborate on my methodological choices in each sub-study.

Furthermore, mixed method research is often characterised by its focus on the research question in determining the methods of the study rather than on the epistemological or ontological debate (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2015). I relate to this line of thought; in the end, the research question or problem is the one determining the selection of methods that are the most suitable for studying that particular problem. Nevertheless, I believe that one must understand the epistemological and ontological assumptions based on the methodologies one chooses to use, but in the end, if we only try to see the world through one set of glasses, we may be left with partial understanding. I do understand that for some, the underlying worldview may be so strong that one does not even come to think of questions outside their stance, but I, as a pragmatist, enjoy switching stances and exploring different ways to look at phenomena.
Table 8. Description of the research design and summarised data and methods of each sub-study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall research design: Mixed methods</th>
<th>Worldview and approach</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Date of collection</th>
<th>Analysis method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-study I</strong></td>
<td>Interpretivist</td>
<td>Policy documents, reports, scholarly articles</td>
<td>Documents and literature ranging up to 2022</td>
<td>Qualitative document analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Qualitative Case study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-study II</strong></td>
<td>Post-positivistic</td>
<td>Survey (n = 197, response rate 33%) targeted at board members in Finnish NGBs</td>
<td>October-November 2020</td>
<td>Parametric statistical tests (Fisher’s exact test, independent sample t-test) and non-parametric test (Mann–Whitney U-test)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-study III</strong></td>
<td>Interpretivist</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews (n = 9) with managers in the Football Associations of Finland and Norway; documents (including strategies, equality plans)</td>
<td>March–April 2019</td>
<td>Reflexive thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Qualitative Case study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-study IV</strong></td>
<td>Interpretivist</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews (n = 22) with women in leadership positions in Finnish sport</td>
<td>January–February 2022</td>
<td>Reflexive thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.1.2 Case study

In two of the four sub-studies of this dissertation (sub-study I and sub-study III), I utilised the case study approach, which is one of the most common approaches for qualitative studies (Stake, 2003). It is not just a research method; rather, it is a research approach in which several different data-gathering and analysis methods can be utilised. The case study approach is suitable for sub-studies III and IV because instead of grand generalizations, the case study is valuable in refining theory, identifying boundaries of generalizability and enhancing understanding of public policy settings and individual’s experiences (Stake, 2003). Furthermore, the case study approach allows phenomena to be studied in depth in a real-life context (Yin, 2017). This was particularly important for sub-study III because the factors influencing women in leadership positions are complex and, to some extent, unconscious; thus, they must be studied in their contexts.

Several scholars, such as Yin (2017), Eisenhardt (1989) and Stake (2003), have established their own versions of case study research, with their own specificities and worldviews guiding the case study process. Whereas Yin (2017) and Eisenhardt
and worldviews guiding the case study process. Whereas Yin (1989) represent a more positivistic tradition of case studies, Stake (2003) promotes a more interpretative approach. Considering the purpose of the two sub-studies, I chose to utilise Stake’s (1995, 2003) underpinnings to guide my research processes as they emphasise and allow for the interpretation of the meanings in the data.

The selection of cases is important in case study research (Stake, 1995). In this study, the case selection was not guided by theory but by considerations of learning (i.e. which case(s) provide an opportunity to learn and extend understanding; Piekkari & Welch, 2018). In sub-study III, the Football Association of Finland and the Norwegian Football Federation were selected as the case organisations for several reasons. First, Finland and Norway are widely acknowledged as top countries regarding gender equality in work life (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). Second, football associations are among the largest and thus the most powerful sport governing bodies in these countries. Third, despite the growing participation of women and girls in football-related activities (e.g., playing, watching), the representation of women in leadership positions within the sport remains low. Lastly, football offers an interesting paradoxical context for this study: football is one of the most popular sports for girls and women in these countries but, at the same time, it is male dominated (Skille, 2014). The aim is not to compare the two units of analysis, namely the Football Association of Finland and the Norwegian Football Federation, rather to examine them monolithically as an example illustrating the phenomenon (gender inequality in leadership positions) in Nordic football governing bodies. In other words, the selected case is a case of football governing bodies, more specifically Nordic football governing bodies. In sub-study I, I chose the Finnish sport policy system as the case because it represents a unique case within Nordic countries. Even if the sport policy system has developed in parallel with the welfare state model, the past and present of Finnish sport differs from that of the other Nordic countries (c.f. Fahlén & Stenling, 2016; Skille & Säfvenbom, 2011) because of the rather long-lasted politically polarised sport movement in Finland and because of the mixed model sport system (compared to the Nordic model with strong sport movement; Henry, 2009; Lehtonen & Mäkinen, 2020; Mikkonen et al., 2022).

Stake (1995, 2003) distinguished between intrinsic and instrumental case studies. The former represents interest in the case itself, such as the evaluation of a programme or an interesting organisation. Hence, the aim of an intrinsic case study is not to learn more about other cases or some phenomena but of that particular case. The latter, an instrumental case study, refers to a study that utilises the case(s) as an instrument to increase our understanding beyond that particular case to learn...
about a more general phenomenon. In sub-study III, I chose the instrumental case study approach because the aim was to increase the understanding of gender (in)equality in selected (managerial) leadership positions in Nordic football governance. Thus, the cases were an instrument for understanding the phenomenon of gender inequality in leadership positions in football governing bodies, especially in Nordic football governing bodies. However, I see the dichotomy of intrinsic and instrumental case studies more as a continuum instead of mutually exclusive and clearly defined categories; additionally, I argue that some intrinsic characteristics can be identified in sub-study III as well. In sub-study I, the study’s position is more inclined towards the middle of this continuum, as the study’s aim was to analyse and describe Finnish sport policy and its development; thus, the interest was in that particular case. However, in the study, the co-authors and I draw more general conclusions and use the Finnish case as an instrument to increase our understanding of a more general phenomenon, namely politico-administrative systems of sport.

3.2 Pragmatism as the underlying worldview of this dissertation

Social science research is guided by philosophical assumptions and understandings, which guide the research process, the questions we ask, the ways we conduct research, the data we gather, our analysis methods and interpretation of our data. Some call these assumptions and understandings worldviews (e.g. Creswell, 2009), some paradigms (e.g. Lincoln et al., 2018), some traditions and some epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies (Harding, 1987). In this dissertation, I have chosen to discuss worldviews. These worldviews are often divided roughly into more positivistic and more interpretivist types. Some argue that these worldviews or paradigms could not co-exist and use similar vocabulary (see, e.g. the Kuhnian perspective and paradigm incommensurability; Kuhn [1962]).

However, in this dissertation, I have chosen a view that differs from the traditional dichotomy, namely the worldview of pragmatism (Morgan, 2014; Rumens & Kelemen, 2010). The foundations of pragmatism and methodological pluralism suggest that worldviews are complementary, showing a different facet of the phenomenon studied (Barker & Pistrang, 2005; Ghiara, 2019). Thus, instead of committing to any single philosophical approach, pragmatism emphasises the research problem and enables all approaches available that best answer the research problem (Creswell, 2009). Relying only on a certain set of worldviews and
methodological choices could lead to a partial understanding of a phenomenon (Barker & Pistrang, 2005; Ghiara, 2019). Thus, truth is what works at the time, and pragmatic researchers first and foremost consider the research problem and questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 47–48). The aim is to create (constructive) knowledge for change (Goldkuhl, 2012).

Pragmatism is well suited for this dissertation, as it allows for the mixed methods approach (see Chapter 3.1.1; Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 47–48), in which I utilise a more post-positivistic worldview in sub-study II, rely more on interpretative approaches on sub-studies I, II and IV and include notions of feminist worldview in this dissertation (Rumens & Kelemen, 2010). I see these differing worldviews as instrumental to the pragmatist approach (Goldkuhl, 2012) and briefly introduce their basic sets of beliefs in the following paragraphs. Lastly, pragmatism suits the pragmatic roots of the field of administrative sciences (see Laitinen et al., 2014), into which this dissertation is positioned.

Post-positivism refers to a view that sees an objective reality that exists out there in the world and that this reality can be observed and measured through empirical examination. However, knowledge is always conjectural—that is, absolute truth can never be found; rather, the hypotheses are either rejected or fail to be rejected (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). In post-positivism, a researcher aims to develop statements that explain a situation or describe causality between the variables studied. Post-positivism is based on reductionism, meaning that post-positivistic research often aims to reduce ideas into sets of variables and hypotheses that are tested. Based on the results of these tests, hypotheses and variables are refined or abandoned for other claims (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 44–45).

The second set of assumptions is based on interpretivism (which is often combined with social constructivism [Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 45–46]). People develop subjective meanings of their experiences, which are often socially, culturally and historically negotiated. The researcher is interested in this complexity of views instead of narrowing them down into small sets of variables and statistical generalisations. The aim of an interpretivist researcher is to interpret the meanings the informants have about the world and to create theories from these (in contrast to post-positivism, in which the aim is to test theories). Interpretivism acknowledges that their own backgrounds impact their interpretations of the data (e.g. positionality; Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 45–46). Interpretivism is mixable with pragmatism, and they share many similarities, such as an orientation towards understanding (Goldkuhl, 2012). However, whereas in pure interpretivism, understanding is an
intrinsic value, pragmatism sees understanding as instrumental in relation to a change in existence (Dewey, 1938).

The third set of assumptions that I have utilised in this dissertation is a feminist worldview, which manifests in my aim of uncovering both obvious and subtle gender inequalities and creating change by reducing inequalities through my research (J. Martin, 2003). I have aimed to increase the understanding of women’s experiences and knowledge by including gender as a distinct category of inquiry and giving women an opportunity to voice their experiences and perspectives in relation to gender (in)equality (Hesse-Biber, 2015). This is particularly important for women in men-dominated environments (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Furthermore, the careers of women and men in leadership positions are different and the career success factors vary between genders (Aalto-Nevalainen, 2018). This study advocates social change for gender equality, thus taking a stance on how things should be done (Hesse-Biber, 2015). This also aligns with pragmatism and differentiates from the more traditional stances of post-positivism and interpretivism. Another important concept in relation to the feminist approach I have utilised in this dissertation is situated knowledge. Following Haraway (1988), I believe that knowledge and the knower are situated in their social environments. Therefore, their descriptions, as well as their context descriptions, are vital for understanding knowledge. Therefore, I have tried to include as much information about the informants as possible without compromising their anonymity throughout this dissertation, especially in sub-studies I and IV, which are based on qualitative interview data.

As mentioned above and further discussed in Chapters 3.3 and 3.4, I have utilized quantitative methods in sub-study II. The applicability of quantitative methods for feminist research has been under debate, with major criticism stemming from the linkage of quantitative methods, reductionism and the positivist tradition (e.g. reducing people’s contextualized lives into numbers; see, e.g. Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne, 2007; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). However, in line with many feminist researchers (e.g., Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2015; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019) I argue that quantitative research also holds many benefits for feminist research and provides alternative perspectives to explore different phenomena.

Besides worldviews, social science research may be categorized based on the knowledge interests that underpin the research. Habermas (1972) identified three types of knowledge interests: technical (or work), practical and emancipatory. The technical interest aims to predict and explain casualisations, often found in natural
sciences such as physics and biology. The practical interest focuses on interpreting and understanding phenomena rather than explaining them, as often seen in historical-hermeneutic disciplines like history and literature. Lastly, emancipatory knowledge interest aims to critique and liberate from obvious and subtle structures and practices that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. Disciplines associated with this knowledge interest include for instance feminist and critical studies. This dissertation aligns with the emancipatory knowledge interest by revealing practices and structures that give rise to gender inequality in leadership positions in sport and by striving for social change (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Habermas, 1972).

### 3.3 Data and data collection

I have utilised different kinds of data (interview data, survey data and document data) to get a holistic view of the phenomenon I am studying (namely gender [in]equality in leadership positions in sport). I used different datasets in each sub-study of this dissertation. Sub-study I is based on document data, sub-study II is based on survey data and sub-studies III and IV are based on interview data (separate datasets). I have visualised the research process and the data collection phases in Figure 5. In the following sections, I will discuss and argue for my data collection choices and introduce the datasets utilised.
3.3.1 Document data

I utilized secondary data in the form of documents in sub-studies I and III. In sub-study I, I used document data as the main data, and in sub-study III, I used document data as complementary secondary data to create a holistic image, especially of the contextual angles. Documents are "any written, printed, photographed, painted or recorded material that can be used to provide information or evidence" (Dolowitz et al., 2008, p. 39). In a broad sense, documents thus include, for instance, interview transcripts. For clarity reasons, I refer to interview transcripts as interview data in this dissertation, and by documents, I refer to secondary document data, such as policy documents, reports and organizational documents.

The document data utilized in sub-study I consist of relevant accessible policy documents, reports and scholarly literature. These documents included, for example, government reports, proposals, budgets, publications of the National Sports Council and the Ministry of Culture and Education, web pages and other documents of different bodies in the Finnish sport policy system, as well as scholarly literature and reports and publications by sport research institutes (Research Institute for Olympic Sport [KIHU] and LIKES Research Centre for Physical Activity and Health). All the relevant documents utilized in the article are detailed in the reference list of Article I. I gathered the data in cooperation with the second author (Korsberg) by conducting a thorough search for relevant accessible policy documents, reports and scholarly literature on Finnish sport policy. Most of the data were in Finnish.

Secondary document data utilized in sub-study III consist of information on the case organizations' webpages, pieces of news and publicly available organizational documents, such as gender equality plans and strategies. I gathered the data through online search. The documents considering the Norwegian Football Federation were often in Norwegian, and the documents considering the Football Association of Finland were in Finnish. I used these secondary data to provide more in-depth contextual understanding, such as an image of the organizational structures and the aims and aspirations towards gender equality of the organizations, and as supplementary research data to complement the interview data gathered from the case organizations (see Bowen, 2009).

3.3.2 Survey

Sub-study II is based on a survey targeted at all Finnish NGB board members (n=590). The survey data were collected from October 29 to November 2023.
3.3.1 Document data

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3.3.2 Survey

Sub-study II is based on a survey targeted at all Finnish NGB (n = 74) board members (n = 590). The survey data were collected from October 29 to November
15, 2020, with an online survey tool (Surveypal) as part of a larger research process focusing on board governance and NGBs (see Lehtonen & Stenvall, 2021). The survey questions are in Finnish and are based on 17 interviews with present and former NGB board members and executive personnel. The aim of the interviews was to develop a preliminary understanding of board governance in Finnish NGBs. Acknowledging that board governance is contextual, the interviewees themselves identified key themes, issues and practices related to board governance in the context of Finnish NGBs, upon which the survey questions were based. The survey had five main themes: 1. background information and general information of board work and composition, 2. functionality and practices in board governance, 3. strategy in board governance, 4. factors impacting the future strategic choices of the board and 5. development of board governance (see Lehtonen & Stenvall, pp. 41–52 for the survey questionnaire). The second and third authors (Stenvall and Lehtonen) were responsible for forming the survey sheet and collecting the data. For the purpose of this article, together with the co-authors, I constructed five key constructs of the survey items (1. transparency and openness, 2. skills and capabilities needed in the future in NGBs, 3. board composition, 4. board work and 5. impact on future strategic decisions), which were utilised in addition to background factors to test the perspectives of men and women board members regarding board governance. The survey measures individual board members’ perspectives on their own board’s board governance.

The survey link was emailed to the target population (the email addresses were collected mainly from the NGB’s webpages and through chairpersons). After these inquiries, 19 (3.1%) e-mail addresses of nine NGBs were missing compared to the total population (NGB board members). The survey was thus sent to 590 board members, of which 47 inquiries were returned (not able to deliver). In 39 cases, the email addresses had spelling mistakes; these were corrected and re-sent. The remaining eight addresses belonged to people who were either not involved with their board anymore or whose addresses were no longer in use; these were rejected (loss of email addresses and queries 1.5%). A total of 247 respondents started to respond to the survey, of which 50 did not complete. These 50 responses were excluded from the analysis. Eventually, after two reminders, the total number of respondents who finished the survey was 197 (response rate 33%), of which 44 (22.3%) were women, 150 (76.1%) were men, and three (1.5%) chose the gender option ‘I do not want to specify’. Because of the small number of respondents that chose the option ‘I do not want to specify’, only the responses from participants who identified as either women or men were included in the analyses. Women
respondents (22.3%) were slightly underrepresented compared to the overall share (28%) of women on NGB boards (Lehtonen et al., 2022). The survey was conducted in Finnish and only after analysis were the results translated into English. Most of the items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = fully disagree... 5 = fully agree).

3.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview is one of the most common methods for gathering data in qualitative research; it is particularly suitable for gathering in-depth data on personal experiences (Braun et al., 2016), which makes it appropriate for sub-studies III and IV. In accordance with the underlying worldview of this dissertation (and especially the more interpretive approach in sub-studies III and IV), I follow the school of thought that perceives interviews as active, participatory events, in which the interviewer and interviewee co-construct the data generated in the interviews (see, e.g. Given, 2008). The semi-structured interview includes predetermined questions or themes, and interviewer may go back and forth between the questions as the conversation proceeds with the interviewee (Given, 2008).

The interview guide constructed prior to the interviews may be very specific, with detailed questions, or on the hand, just a list of topics to be covered in the interviews (Given, 2008). In both sub-studies, my interview guide conformed with the latter style, as it mainly consisted of topics and some example questions. The aim was to have discussion-like interviews and make the interviewees feel safe and comfortable instead of a very structured “shoot and answer” type of interview (see the interview guides as appendices). The discussion-like interviews also enabled new themes and issues to emerge, as the questions were not strictly decided beforehand. This allowed for open answers from the interviewees and for me to ask follow-up questions, if needed.

To set expectations and calm down the interview situation, I started all the interviews with a short introduction to my research and the aim of the interview. In addition, I recapped the interview protocols, such as recording the interviews, and offered the interviewees the possibility to ask any questions before we started or whenever during the interview. After this, I started with a warm-up question and asked them to briefly talk about who they were and their backgrounds. In sub-study III, the following questions considered, for instance, the experiences, actions and thoughts of the interviewees about organisational culture and structure, gender equality, gender roles and so forth. Example questions include ‘How would you
describe the state of gender equality in your organisation?', ‘Do you have any
everyday life examples how does this state show in your organisation?’ and ‘Have
you come across gendered practices or stereotypes during your time in the
organisations; if yes, can you elaborate?’ In sub-study IV, the interview guide was
designed to gather data for a larger research project studying women decision-makers
and their perspectives on sport, sport leadership and gender equality (see Appendix
II). Examples of questions that were particularly used in sub-study IV included ‘Who
is or are the key actor(s) in the process of changing institutionalised gender inequality
in sport?’, ‘How can this happen?’ and ‘What kind of circumstances can enable
change?’ However, the open structure of the interviews enabled the interviewees to
elaborate on and/or return to a previously mentioned topic. Because the interview
themes were interrelated, relevant data could be found throughout the transcripts.
Consequently, the transcripts were read and analysed thoroughly instead of simply
focusing on selected topics. Acknowledging the ambiguity surrounding the term
“institutionalised” and its various interpretations, I provided interviewees with
examples to clarify my understanding of institutionalized gender inequality in my
study. For instance, we discussed about established practices (fin. vakiintuneista
käytänteistä), taken-for-granted structures and/or cultures that create or maintain
gender inequality in leadership positions in sport. As mentioned above, the open
structure of the interviews enabled interviewees to bring up issues and thoughts that
were relevant to my research question throughout the interview. Consequently,
during the analysis phase, I took great care to consider not only sections where the
term "institutionalized" was explicitly mentioned, but also those in which we
addressed topics and concerns associated with it, even if not explicitly referred to as
such.

I conducted nine and 22 interviews in sub-studies III and IV, respectively. In
both studies, the interviewees were purposefully selected because it is important in
qualitative interviews that the interviewees know as much as possible about the
phenomenon studied or that they have experience with the phenomenon (Patton,
2014). Qualitative research aims at describing phenomena, understanding complex
psychosocial issues and finding theoretically meaningful interpretations of
phenomena, not at counting opinions, people or statistical generalisations (O’Reilly
& Parker, 2013). Thus, sampling in qualitative research considers the richness of
information, not the number of respondents per se. A sufficient number of
respondents depends on the topic and resources available. Considering this
dissertation, especially sub-study III, including its explorative and descriptive nature,
the small number of leadership positions in the football associations in total, the
interviewees’ experience in the case organisations and the guiding theoretical framework, it can be said that the interviewees chosen can deliver meaningful understandings of the phenomenon studied (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Regarding sub-study IV, I argue that even if the number of interviewees was larger (n = 22), the same arguments are valid; the theoretical framework and the chosen interviewees’ experiences about the phenomenon were robust; therefore, these purposefully selected interviewees could deliver meaningful data and understandings.

In sub-study III, I contacted 10 possible interviewees from the Football Associations by email, of which nine agreed to the interview. Five of the interviewees were women and four were men. The interviews took place between the 7th of March 2019 and the 25th of April 2019 and were conducted via Skype (except for one interview, which was conducted via email, as I am able to read Norwegian but cannot understand spoken Norwegian well enough). Five of the interviews were conducted in Finnish, which is the native language of both the interviewees and me, and four were conducted in English, which was not the native language of either the interviewees or me, but we all were fluent in the language. The interviews varied from 40 to 80 minutes and were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. On average, the interviews conducted in English were shorter and the interviewees were not as talkative compared to the interviews conducted in Finnish. Additional questions and prompts were needed to get the interviewees to elaborate and deliver deeper answers. This may be (at least) partly explained by the fact that the interviewees were not speaking in their native language and thus may have felt it more difficult to elaborate on the topics, even if their language was fluent.

In sub-study IV, 22 interviews were conducted via Teams in Finnish, which was the native language or the other native language of the interviewees. The interviewees were women in varied leadership positions in sport, including different public and third sector organisations (such as NGBs, sport clubs and other sport organisations). The interviewees were identified and recruited through a leadership development programme for women. The women had taken part or were now participating in the programme. I first conducted a short survey (the survey has not been utilised in this dissertation) that was sent to all the women who had taken part in the programme. At the end of the survey, the respondents had the possibility to leave their contact details if they would be willing to be interviewed about themes including gender (in)equality in leadership positions, their own career and leadership in sport in general. Twenty-five women left their contact details. However, I was not able to
reach three of them through the contact details they provided; therefore, I eventually interviewed 22.

I have considered the possible “selection bias” of my choice of interviewees; however, the benefit lies in these women’s interests in gender and leadership. I expected these interviewees to be willing to share their ideas on how gender equality can best be achieved. Moreover, the interviewees could provide insights into their own experiences but also speak as experts in Finnish sport, possessing insider knowledge of this field due to their varied occupations at different levels in the field of Finnish sport (including sport clubs, national sport organisations, regional organisations and other sport organisations). The women held both selected leadership positions (e.g. executive directors and managers; n = 10) and elected leadership positions (e.g. chairpersons and board members; n = 12). The interviews took place in January and February 2022 and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Seventeen interviews were transcribed by the researcher and five were transcribed verbatim by an external transcriber.

3.4 Data analyses

3.4.1 Analysis of secondary document data

Qualitative document analysis is a systematic process in which documents are reviewed or evaluated. As in other qualitative methods, document analysis requires interpretation of the data to elicit meaning, create understandings, create empirical knowledge and learn (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Because secondary documents are created without the researcher’s involvement, document analysis and interpretation must be handled with care. In practice, this would mean considering who has created the document, for what purposes and in what context, what is said (and not said) in the document, what is the relation of the document to other related documents and what kind of effects the document has had (Tight, 2019). In this dissertation, I utilised Bowen’s (2009) work on document analysis.

In sub-study I, the aim was to describe and analyse the history and current state of the Finnish sport policy system, including the administrative framework for sport, key actors, current key themes of policy and critical discussion of the future. The document analysis is based on careful reading, evaluation and interpretation of the gathered document data (such as policy documents and current literature; see Bowen’s (2009) work on document analysis. We discussed through ord comment tool and online...
Chapter 4.2.3). The second author (Korsberg) and I familiarised ourselves with the data and started to analyse its relevant parts in relation to the research aim. During this process of constant analysis and writing, we consulted with the research aim to focus our analysis. We discussed through the Word comment tool and online discussions about the interpretations we were making, as well as about the concerns and questions that arose during the analysis. This practice increased the robustness of our analysis. All four authors engaged in critical group discussions regularly, in which the analysis manuscript was read and scrutinised to determine whether it captured the main characteristics of Finnish sport policy and whether we agreed on the interpretations made. Through these critical discussions and critical commentary by the third and fourth authors (Lehtonen and Stenvall), the analysis was refined several rounds until all the authors felt the manuscript fulfilled its aim of providing a description and creating an understanding of public sport policy, key actors in the sport system and the political sphere in Finnish sport in a satisfactory manner.

### 3.4.2 Analysis of survey data

I analysed the survey data (see Chapter 4.2.4) with computer-assisted statistical analysis software (IBM SPSS). The data were analysed with parametric statistical tests, namely independent sample t-tests (to compare means) and Fisher’s exact test (to examine statistical significance). Most of the items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = fully disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = I do not know, 4 = agree and 5 = fully agree). The items in which answers represented ‘I do not know’ were excluded from the independent sample t-test but included in cross-tabulations. The responses to some items were not entirely within a normal distribution. These items were then tested with a Mann–Whitney U test, which is a non-parametric test suitable for use when the sample size is rather small and normal distribution is not assumed (Taanila, 2020). The Mann–Whitney U test confirmed that the items had no statistical difference.

### 3.4.3 Reflexive thematic analysis

I used the reflexive thematic analysis by Braun et al. (2016) in sub-studies III and IV. Reflexive thematic analysis is not tied to any particular theoretical framework, and it does not have any methodological restrictions regarding how to sample data, which makes it a fairly flexible method for robust data analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis...
is an appropriate method to study people’s experiences in relation to something, to study the factors underlying and impacting a phenomenon and to identify patterns in people’s behaviour or their views on an issue. Data analysis with reflexive thematic analysis is based on the process of identifying and interpreting patterns. Furthermore, it is suitable not only for interview data but also for textual data, such as diaries, newspapers and vignettes. These characteristics made the analytical approach appealing for sub-studies III and IV.

Because reflexive thematic analysis is not restrained by any specific ontological and/or epistemological perspectives, the researcher must make active choices when utilising it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the researcher must consider whether to use semantic or latent-level codes. The former refers to obvious, explicitly stated ideas, concepts, meanings, experiences and such expressed by the informant, whereas the latter refers to more implicit meanings and frameworks underpinning the explicitly stated things. The second consideration concerns the data-coding approach, whether it is inductive or deductive. Inductive coding refers to a data-driven approach, whereas the deductive approach refers to an analysis that is process-driven or informed by theoretical concepts. The last consideration concerns whether the study is grounded in some conceptual, epistemological or ontological frameworks, such as realism, positivism, critical realism or constructionism. However, regarding the first two choices, the answers are not mutually exclusive. Rather, it is common to use both semantic and latent coding, as well as inductive and deductive approaches, in the same study (Braun et al., 2016).

I followed the six-phase analysis model of reflexive thematic analysis in sub-studies III and IV (see Figure 6; Braun et al., 2016). While Figure 6 presents a comprehensive overview of the broader analysis process, it is important to note that the actual analysis was not a strictly linear or sequential process, as is often the case in qualitative studies. Rather, it was an iterative and dynamic process that involved constant interaction with the data, consulting literature, and writing, with steps taken forward and backward as needed.
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I followed the six-phase analysis model of reflexive thematic analysis in sub-studies II and IV (see Figure 6; Braun et al., 2016). While Figure 6 presents a comprehensive overview of the broader analysis process, it is important to note that the actual analysis was not a strictly linear or sequential process, as is often the case in qualitative studies. Rather, it was an iterative and dynamic process that involved constant interaction with the data, consulting literature, and writing, with steps taken forward and backward as needed.

I have already discussed my paradigmatic underpinnings in Chapter 3.2, but as a recall, I have based my assumptions on an interpretivist worldview in these two sub-studies. In this section, I will briefly focus on the other two considerations raised by Braun et al. (2016).

The analysis process and coding included both inductive and deductive elements. The first phase, familiarisation with the data, included transcribing the interviews, simultaneous listening and reading of the interviews, reading and re-reading of the transcripts and taking notes of things that felt interesting in relation to the research question, such as ideas and/or concepts. In both sub-studies, I was able to formulate some initial ideas inspired by the data during this phase. The next phase, coding,
included reading and coding the data. I utilised a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti) for coding. The coding processes included both semantic level codes (such as ‘lifting sisters’, ‘leadership style depends on the persona’) and latent-level coding (such as ‘long careers in leadership positions hamper change’, ‘double standards for women’). I consulted the relevant literature between the coding rounds to reflect on the thoughts and interpretations I had. After coding, I organised the codes and the coded data into preliminary themes relevant to the research questions. Theme development involved clustering codes into themes that capture meanings above just a single, specific idea. As an example, in the analysis process of sub-study IV, I initially began by clustering the themes based on the actors involved in institutional work and the different types of actions, resulting in four preliminary themes. Subsequently, I carefully reviewed and refined these themes, cross-referencing them with the coded data and my research questions, until I arrived at the final themes that effectively addressed the research question. Throughout this phase, I also consulted relevant literature to assist in defining and refining the themes. After that, I further developed a detailed analysis of each theme and developed the focus and scope of each theme. As the result of this phase, I identified an additional theme, increasing the total number from four to five. Finally, I drafted a more analytic narrative and wrote the analysis as part of the journal manuscripts (Braun et al., 2016). In Table 3, I provide examples of the analysis steps from codes to main themes. In sub-study III, in which the interviews were conducted in two different languages, the analysis process took a bilingual approach, meaning that I coded the data in English. However, the Finnish interviews were not translated into English prior to the analysis; only the relevant quotes from the raw material were translated. In sub-study IV, I did the analysis in Finnish and translated the relevant raw material quotes used in the manuscript.
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Table 9. Examples of analyses and construction of the main themes in sub-studies III and IV

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<tr>
<th>Sub-study III</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Main themes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased appreciation of women’s football</td>
<td>Appreciation of the sport not transferring into appreciation as a (leadership) competence</td>
<td>Football culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s experience often derived from women’s football</td>
<td>Experience of women’s football less valued in leadership positions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women lacking “football competence”</td>
<td>“Feminization” of leadership in football</td>
<td>Changing perceptions of appropriate sport leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in football a highly valued asset for leadership positions</td>
<td>Leadership styles seen as gender neutral</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Women not wanting to use time to “proving oneself” in a male-dominated environment</td>
<td>Some women unwilling to fight against gender roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Feminine” characters highlighted as important for leaders</td>
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<td>Leadership styles have transformed towards “more “feminine” styles”</td>
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<td>Leadership style depends on the persona</td>
<td>Leadership styles seen as gender neutral</td>
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<td>Double standards of women</td>
<td>Gender roles and stereotypes</td>
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<td>Female leaders must be tough</td>
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<tr>
<th>Sub-study IV</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<td>Codes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women proving their capabilities</td>
<td>Women's agency</td>
<td>Micro-level actions and agency</td>
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<td>Women disproving gendered stereotypes</td>
<td>Role of men</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lifting sisters</td>
<td>Role of younger generations</td>
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<td>Creating a women’s network</td>
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<td>Including (other) women in top positions</td>
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<td>Men holding (institutional) power</td>
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<td>Leaders’ self-reflection key for change</td>
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<td>Younger generations are more conscious of (in)equality</td>
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<td>Long careers in leadership positions hamper change</td>
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<td>Present leaders embedded in the current institution</td>
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<td>Micro level (e.g. ‘self-reflection’; ‘proving one’s capabilities’)</td>
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<td>Meso level (e.g., ‘max number of terms in boards’; ‘increasing the number of women in leadership positions’)</td>
<td>Change requires actions at multiple levels</td>
<td>Collective multilevel actions and agents</td>
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<td>Macro level (e.g., ‘steering by the state’; general discussions about the state of gender (in)equality’)</td>
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<td>Many different actions needed for change</td>
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3.5 Discussion of quality criteria

In this Chapter, I will critically analyse the quality of this dissertation. As discussed in Chapter 3.2, I have based this dissertation on pragmatism and utilised different worldviews and qualitative and quantitative approaches in different sub-studies. There is no single set of criteria that should or could be used to evaluate this dissertation and its sub-studies. Rather, there are some criteria that are applicable to all research and some criteria that are better fitted to qualitative or quantitative approaches (Barker & Pistrang, 2005). On a general level, I have tried to be transparent in my research, explicitly stating the steps I have taken during the research process. Furthermore, I have tried to describe the context and conceptual background in enough detail so that the reader can evaluate my dissertation and its interpretations. Lastly, I have conducted the dissertation in an ethical manner and in accordance with the ethical considerations and recommendations of Tampere University and the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. Prior to gathering the data, the participants received information about the research process and their rights (such as the opportunity to withdraw from the studies at any time) by email. Furthermore, the participants gave their written or oral consent to participate. I have treated the research data confidentially with care and meticulousness to protect the anonymity of the interviewees to the best of my knowledge. In the following sections, I will further discuss the quality of this dissertation using two sets of criteria. First, I will discuss the survey and survey analyses through the concepts of validity and reliability. Second, I will use the concepts of reflexivity and positionality in relation to qualitative data and analyses.

3.5.1 Validity and reliability of the survey

Validity and reliability are established concepts used to assess quantitative research. Validity can be divided into external and internal validity, of which the former refers to the extent to which the research findings are generalisable from the particular study to other contexts or samples and the latter refers to the study’s findings in a specific context and specific sample (Hanasono, 2017). The response rate of the survey conducted in sub-study II was 33% (n = 197), which can be seen as representative of the total population. However, considering the number of respondents, it is good to note the rather low number of female respondents (n = 44). Furthermore, it must be noted that the results reported in sub-study III measure
only the items included in the survey. Other items may have given different results. Therefore, more research with larger samples is needed to further test the theoretical model proposed in this study. The female respondents were slightly underrepresented (22.3%) compared with the overall share (28%) of women in the NGB boards (see Lehtonen et al., 2022) in this study. However, as I mainly compared women’s responses to men’s responses (i.e. the perspectives of individual board members instead of analysing NGB boards), this did not have a major impact on the interpretation of the results.

The survey was originally designed for a broader research project that focuses on board governance in Finnish NGBs (e.g. the role of the board, strategic board practices and future know-how needs; see Lehtonen & Stenvall, 2021). Therefore, the characteristics of secondary analysis must naturally be considered in relation to internal validity and reliability. Secondary analysis of survey data refers to analyses that have not been (a) collected by the researcher or (b) for the purpose of that particular study (Dale et al., 2008). In this study, I did not participate in data gathering (including planning of the questionnaire). However, the data were gathered by the second and third authors; thus, as experts in this dataset, they were able to discuss and inform me about any questions I had about the data or the data-gathering process, as I was conducting the analysis and interpreting the results.

Another common challenge for validity in secondary analyses is that the survey questionnaire is not designed for that particular study. For this reason, I rely on simple analysis methods, which, nevertheless, provide meaningful insights about gender and board governance. I have also considered these challenges and boundary conditions when interpreting the results of the survey. During the analysis process, we, all the authors, engaged in discussions about the interpretations made of the results as well as about the challenges of secondary analysis, such as the survey items, translations and interpretations. I believe that this is a fitting strategy for overcoming and mitigating some of the threats to validity and reliability. Lastly, I see quantitative survey studies in the social sciences as similar to other methods in the sense that we, the researchers, impact the results and interpretations made of the data (see, e.g. Dale et al., 2008).

3.5.2 Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity is key to a credible qualitative study (Rheinhardt et al., 2018). Reflexivity is “ambiguous and complex” and addresses “researcher positionality, identity and
power” (Corlett & Mavin, 2018, pp. 377–378). Notions of reflexivity are stated throughout the dissertation, for instance, above, as I argue for my decisions to utilise certain data and certain methodologies or paradigmatic standpoints (see Corlett & Mavin, 2018). In this chapter, I focus especially on self-reflexivity and positionality. Overall objectivity refers to being outside the phenomenon – being a neutral spectator. However, following the paradigmatic stances of this study, the overall objectivity of a researcher is not possible, as one is not able to detach from oneself and disregard their ideas, thoughts, values and experiences, making them who they are. The researcher is always somehow positioned (Harding, 1991, 1992). This is also why I use the pronouns “I” and for this integrative chapter of my dissertation instead of “the researcher” or “the author” – to not distance myself from this research or downplay the role I, as the researcher, have in producing the knowledge.

Self-reflexivity concerns questions about researcher motivation and how our values, experiences and political commitments shape our research, for instance, what kind of motivations do we have for the study, what are our assumptions regarding this study and how these affect the study (Haynes, 2012, p. 78). However, the aim of reflexivity is not to provide a lengthy life story or confession piece; rather, the aim is to offer the reader the possibility to understand who is producing knowledge and how the underlying ontological, social and political positionings may impact the work and interpretations (Haynes, 2012).

In addition to the more theoretical motivations to increase the understanding of the interplay of gender and leadership positions in sport organisations, I also had more personal motives for this study. I, as a woman and a former football player, having played and lived in Finland and Norway, and as a current sport enthusiast, have seen in practice the scarcity of women in leadership positions, the rough and gendered humour often used in sport, the differing valuations of men and women in sport, gendered power relations and so forth. However, as a player, I did not always pay attention, nor did I feel the need to pay attention to some of the gendered instances I encountered in football and, more broadly, in the sporting community. I was embedded in ways to think and be in the sport community. By doing this study, I also wanted to understand my own experiences, in addition to my broader aspirations of theoretical advancement and societal impact.

Because of my background in sport, I may be regarded as an insider when it comes to the culture, norms and values in sport, especially in football. Field-specific knowledge and experiences may help interpret meanings in the context of sport and sport management (Aalto-Nevalainen, 2018; Laakso, 2016). On the other hand, I have never worked in the sport sector (apart from being a player) or have been in
any top leadership position. Therefore, I feel I have the possibility to look at the phenomena I am studying in a way also from the “outside” and to create my interpretation from that position. As such, I would position myself somewhere in between the outsider–insider continuum, perhaps slightly more inclined towards the outsider end of the continuum or as partial insider with a degree of distance of the phenomena I am studying (see Chavez-Reyes, 2008, p. 475).

The feminist approach and feminist theories (see Chapters 3.2 and 2) have been building blocks for this dissertation. The prevailing assumption of this study is that gender equality is positive and ethically desirable and that it should be enhanced and worked for. This assumption and the emancipatory request for knowledge can be seen throughout the dissertation, for instance, in my voice (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Habermas, 1972). Acknowledging that my experiences, values and societal surroundings impact the way I conduct research, for instance, the methodological and theoretical choices and my interpretation, I have tried to remain open in the analysis by reflecting and questioning my taken-for-granted thoughts and ideas, digging deeper into the analysis, and allowing different kinds of interpretations to form in a way that enables entering into the discomfort zone of my thoughts in order to learn and create new understandings.
4 SUMMARIES OF THE RESULTS OF SUB-STUDIES

In this chapter, I summarise the results of the four sub-studies in this dissertation. The articles are independent pieces of research with their own research problems, findings and contributions (see Table 1). However, they all consider the same phenomenon (gender [in]equality in sport leadership positions) and combined, they ultimately answer the main research problem of this dissertation, providing different facets of the complex phenomenon of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport organizations. In this chapter, I will introduce the main results of the articles and provide some insights. The main discussion and conclusions in relation to the aim and research questions of this dissertation are presented in Chapter 5, and the detailed discussions and conclusions in relation to the aims and research questions of the individual articles in the reprints are provided at the end of this dissertation.

4.1 Sub-study I – Sport policy in Finland

In sub-study I (Mikkonen et al., 2022), I explore Finnish sport policy and its development. More specifically, the aim of the sub-study is to describe and analyse the past and present of Finnish sport policy, including the organising model of sport and the key actors in sport policy. Thus, this study serves as a contextual backdrop for this dissertation. Contextual understanding is particularly important in this dissertation because gender (in)equality and leadership are complex phenomena embedded in their contextual surroundings. To reach the aim of this study, in collaboration with my co-authors, I adopted an intrinsic case study approach and analysed secondary data, such as policy documents, government reports and other publicly available relevant data, as well as scholarly literature.

The data show that the development trajectory of Finnish sport policy is characterised by a confrontation of two opposing ideals, such as the relatively long-lasting period of politically divided organisation of sport, powerplays of the state and the sport organisations and the opposition of voluntary sport and professionalisation of sport. The paradigmatic development of Finnish sport policy parallels that of the
central government, which is at least partly explained by the state’s strong role in Finnish sport policy. Accordingly, the contemporary sport system in Finland can be considered a mixed model (Henry, 2009; Lehtonen & Mäkinen, 2020), which is characterised by the state’s strong role in directing sport policy (especially through resource steering), while the role of sport organisations is implementation. Municipalities are central to creating conditions for sport and physical activity.

Structurally, the Finnish sport system comprises many different actors, and all policy actors have relatively high autonomy in their operations. The sequel reform processes of Finnish sport have led to a rather scattered sport field, in which different actors produce different parts of sport policy and the roles and responsibilities of different actors seem unclear. Besides the unclarity of roles, a lack of leadership in Finnish sport may hamper the adoption of effective sport policies and the achievement of sport policy goals, such as tackling the population’s inactivity, elite sport success, sustainable development and (gender) equality.

The state’s strong role in sport policy is also reflected in decisions regarding gender equality. Equality for all is a central value of the welfare state model applied in Finland, and this value has naturally impacted sport policy as well. For instance, the state has set gender equality and non-discrimination as cross-cutting principles regarding sport policy. Furthermore, the state uses financial incentives to nudge sport organisations towards gender equality (e.g. requirement of an equality and non-discrimination plan to receive government grants). However, regardless of the state’s policy initiatives towards gender equality in sport, gender inequality and discrimination clearly exist in Finnish sport at different levels.

Sport policy, governmental guidelines and steering are a rather national phenomenon, as the EU has no competencies in sport-related matters. The EU can only enact conclusions and resolutions. However, other competencies, such as case laws in the single market, also apply to the sport sector. International aspects occur on a more practical level through cooperation and international agreements (e.g. sustainable development) that impact sport policy decisions at the national level. For instance, the ambitious objectives for sustainability of the Finnish government (especially by the latest Marin’s Cabinet) have set requirements for contemporary sport policy. In addition to sustainable development, other key issues in contemporary sport policy include tackling the population’s increasing physical inactivity and the lack of elite sport success. These issues have driven the central government to seek new solutions, such as a cross-sectoral administrative approach, evidence-informed policy-making practices and centralisation.
This study contributes to the literature on sport policy and governance by increasing our understanding of a mixed model sport system. Furthermore, the study provides comparable knowledge and a broad overview of a sport policy system in a single-country context, which enables cross-country comparisons and, on the other hand, acts as a base for deeper sport policy analyses (see, e.g. Fahlén & Stenling, 2016; Skille & Säfvenbom, 2011, for other Nordic sport policy analyses). Empirically, this study broadens the current literature by extending its scope to the Finnish context, which is a rarely explored context compared to, for instance, its Nordic neighbours.

4.2 Sub-study II – Gender and diversity in board governance in National Governing Bodies of Sport

Sub-study II (Mikkonen et al., 2021) bases on a conflicting situation in (sport) organisations. On the one hand, (gender) diversity is a desired value in these organisations, and they aim for it (Knoppers et al., 2021; Spaaij et al., 2020). However, at the same time, only individuals who fit the set frame of a proper leader (resembling the present leaders) tend to be (s)elected into different leadership positions in sport (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Hovden, 2000). Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore this contradiction and the effects it may have on board governance. This sub-study provides the dissertation with a view into gender (in)equality in elected leadership positions in Finnish NGBs and further discusses board composition and conceptions of the “right fit” for leadership positions. Hence, this study contributes especially to research question 1.

This article builds on information/decision-making theory (Williams & O’Reilly, 1998) and the concept of the right fit (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007). Information/decision-making theory proposes that diversity has a positive impact on organisational outcomes (to the extent that different viewpoints are considered in leadership positions and in decision-making) because diverse groups consist of people with different backgrounds and experiences. These differences are likely to affect how they approach problems, as well as the knowledge and experiences they are able to bring into organisations. The concept of the right fit consists of gendered and socially constructed ideas of a proper leader (e.g. competence, skills, background and characteristics). These ideas are based on (dominant) masculine norms of who is the right fit to be in a leadership position (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007). If only men (or women) who fit the conception of the right fit are elected as board
members, homologous reproduction (preference to select a member of the dominant group because they are seen as the best fit; Kanter, 1977) can occur, regardless of whether members of a subordinate group (in this research, women) are involved in the board. Hence, the variance in perspectives that the information/decision-making perspective emphasises, and the organisations aim for, may not be realised. Based on these theoretical constructs, I propose a theoretical model (see Mikkonen et al., 2021, p. 4), which suggests that the gender-biased selection processes of board members (based on the concept of the right fit) in NGB boards may limit the variance of perspectives on board governance between men and women board members and, thus, ultimately the organisational outcomes of Finnish NGBs.

In the empirical part, I test the model’s assumption, namely whether the women and the men board members’ perspectives about board governance are different? Based on the literature, I have two hypotheses (H1). The perspectives of women and men board members regarding the key constructs of board governance are different. (H2) The perspectives of women and men board members regarding the key constructs of board governance are similar. The empirical data consist of a survey targeted at all board members of Finnish NGBs (n = 590) conducted between the 29th of October and 15th of November 2020. The response rate was 33% (n = 197). For the purpose of this study, in collaboration with my co-authors, I formed five key constructs of board governance of the survey items based on our preliminary knowledge and the expert interviews conducted prior to the survey. I used computer-assisted statistical analysis software (SPSS) to analyse these key constructs and respondents’ background factors (e.g. age, educational background and work experience). The data were analysed mainly with parametric statistical analyses.

The empirical analyses support the assumptions of the theoretical model by suggesting that the perspectives of men and women board members on the key constructs of board governance tend to be similar. Therefore, H2 (The perspectives of women and men board members regarding the key constructs of board governance are different) was supported, and H1 (The perspectives of women and men board members regarding the key constructs of board governance are different) was disproved. This finding is interesting because, based on the interviews, NGB boards tend to acknowledge the importance of diversity (Lehtonen & Stenvall, 2021; previous studies have also cited sport organisations to value diversity; see, e.g. Knoppers et al., 2021; Spaaij et al., 2020). However, based on the interviews, diversity in sport organisation boards is seen more from a business angle than from the angle of representation and social identity (such as gender and race). In other words, background in marketing, financing or a
big corporation may be seen as an advantage, whereas gender is not considered as a quality that brings new value to the board. Knoppers et al. (2021) echoed a similar idea: having women on boards is not seen as adding (symbolic) capital.

The study contributes to the current body of knowledge on gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport by proposing a new theoretical model that explains the paradox emerging from the gendered construction of the right fit and sport organisations’ aspirations towards diversity. Thus, this study provides a new angle and a point of departure for understanding the interplay of board governance, selection of board members and gender. The focus of this dissertation and this sub-study is on gender; however, the model may also provide understandings to other diversity discussions (e.g. race and sexual orientation) in sport organisations as different, oppressed minority groups face many similar barriers in leadership positions in sport (for a broad overview, see different chapters of Cunningham, 2019a). Methodologically, this article broadens the current body of work by using quantitative methods, which have been minimal in research on gender equality and sport leadership (Elling, 2015; Elling, Knoppers, et al., 2019). Empirically, this study extends the current body of work to the hitherto nearly unexplored context of Finnish NGBs.

4.3 Sub-study III – Understanding gender (in)equality in management positions in Nordic football associations

In the third sub-study (Mikkonen, 2022), I explore gender (in)equality in leadership positions in Nordic football governance. The aim of this study is to increase the understanding of gender (in)equality in selected leadership positions (managerial positions) in sport. Specifically, I asked why women in leadership positions are underrepresented in Norwegian and Finnish football organisations. Nordic football governance offers an interesting, paradoxical context for studying gender and leadership positions, as it is one of the most popular sports for girls and women in Nordic countries, but at the same time, it is dominated by men and masculinity (Fasting et al., 2019). Furthermore, it contributes to the literature by extending the empirical focus beyond North America and the US intercollegiate system (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019), providing nuanced understandings in a single sport context and focusing on inequality in managerial leadership positions in football – a perspective that is understudied in the literature (Valenti et al., 2018).
This study provides the dissertation with a view into the lived experiences of women and men in Nordic football governance and explores the meanings they give to gender (in)equality and the reasons for inequality in the context of Nordic football governance, thus contributing especially to research question 1 of this dissertation. Moreover, based on the findings, I suggest how to enhance gender equality in leadership positions, thus contributing also to research question 2.

The study is based on Cunningham’s (2019a) theoretical framework of multilevel factors influencing women in leadership positions in sport, as it enables exploring the interrelated and dynamic factors influencing women in leadership positions. The original framework consists of micro, meso and macro levels. However, for the purpose of this study, I added a sport-specific context level (football) to the framework to emphasise the importance of considering the characterising qualities of different sport (see Mikkonen, 2022, p. 4). In the study, I emphasised especially the cultural aspects of the macro, meso and context levels but, nevertheless, considered the interplay of all four levels and the interrelated factors in the analysis.

Empirically, I adopted an instrumental case study approach for this study (Stake, 2003) and studied the two units of analysis, the Football Association of Finland and the Norwegian Football Federation, monolithically, as an example illustrating the phenomena in Nordic football governance. The main data consisted of nine interviewees (5 women, 4 men), which I complemented with organisational documents, such as gender equality and non-discrimination plans, strategies and the organisations’ web pages, to acquire a holistic perspective of the case organisations. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016).

The analysis led to the identification of five intertwined themes affecting gender (in)equality in leadership positions in football governance. The first theme, ‘Gendered organisational culture’, focuses on gendered cultural factors at the organisational level that may limit women’s possibilities in leadership. A gendered “locker-room” culture, even if decreased, was still visible in the case organisations, which may hamper women’s possibilities in leadership. Furthermore, the interviewees (both men and women) identified gendered discrimination against their own gender and not that often against the other. Therefore, having both genders represented in decision-making seems essential to ensure that the views and aspirations of both genders are heard and considered. In addition to cultural barriers, the low level of employee turnover in leadership positions sets a structural bottleneck: even if more women managers were wanted in football governance, the process of change is slow, as the positions do not open until old managers, mostly men, retire.
The second theme, ‘Attitudes of the case organisations towards families’, challenges the assumption in the current body of knowledge that because women have the main responsibility for home and family, this limits women’s possibilities in their leadership careers. In the data, being a mother was not experienced as restricting one’s possibilities in a leadership career to any greater extent than being a father. Organisational support (such as flexible hours and equal perspectives on parental leaves) is important in creating equal opportunities for women and men.

The third theme, ‘Importance of gender-balanced leadership’, focuses on the meanings the interviewees gave to gender balance in leadership positions and how these meanings may influence women’s possibilities for leadership positions. As noted in previous studies on gender (in)equality in other contexts, also in Nordic football governance, women tend to hold positions traditionally regarded as “feminine” (e.g. HR manager). An interesting contradiction in the data is that, on the one hand, gender-balanced leadership is seen as important, but simultaneously, when assessing one’s own organisation, the gender-imbalanced management group is seen as good and gender-equal. Moreover, only one interviewee (a woman) was concerned with the low number of women in leadership positions at the Football Association of Finland (c.f. Sheridan & Milgate, 2003). This mismatch may be unconscious, meaning that individuals may be “blind” to recognising inequalities when assessing one’s own organisation, or conscious, meaning that people say “the right things” (such as gender equality is important) because of societal pressures. Regardless of the (un)consciousness, satisfaction with the status quo may limit the work done to attract and hire competent women.

The fourth theme, ‘Football culture’, focuses on the role of context (i.e. football and football culture) in (re)producing gender (in)equality in leadership positions. Football-specific competence is essential in many leading positions. However, the data suggest that competence in men’s football is more valued in recruitment decisions. Thus, women are automatically handicapped in the recruitment process because women’s experiences are often derived from women’s football. As former players, women have played in women’s leagues because of the gender binary in sport. Furthermore, the gender binary continues in coaching, administrative and other non-playing roles because women may not be willing to, may not be able to or may not be selected to work in men’s football because of the masculine (locker room) culture of football, among other disadvantaging factors.

The last theme, ‘Changing perceptions of appropriate sport leaders’, focuses on the one hand, on the gender roles still visible in football and, on the other hand, on the changed image of a proper leader in football. The interviewees argued for many
reasons behind the change, such as the outside pressure and the culture of Nordic
countries that emphasise gender equality, formal organisational processes to
promote gender equality and promotion of women’s football in general. Furthermore, the data indicated that the leadership styles of both women and men are more inclined towards characteristics traditionally described as feminine, such as empathy, listening and discussion. The polarisation of masculinity and femininity in leadership styles seems to be fading (Billing & Alvesson, 2000). However, women in leadership positions are still underrepresented in football. Thus, men in leadership positions have also adopted a softer leadership style (considering the long careers in the case organisations). Men’s adaptation may just be a manifestation of popular, modern leadership theories, a consequence of social pressure or a result of finding it to be more effective; however, it may be that men do not want to relinquish their positions of power (Ottesen et al., 2010; Pfister, 2010). Along with the popularisation of leadership styles that base on values and characteristics traditionally perceived as “feminine”, men must adapt – or at least pretend they have adapted – to the new demands to keep their power positions.

In this sub-study, I also discuss how to enhance gender equality in leadership positions in sport. Based on the data, it seems that even if there are several different means aimed at enhancing gender equality, the mechanisms tend to focus on changing women or including women in the present structures and cultures (e.g. fix the women, add women and stir; Evans & Pfister, 2021), or the mechanisms operate (solely) at the organisational level (for instance, gender equality and non-discrimination plans). However, because there are more men than women players in football and as the data indicate, player experience is often seen as essential for many leadership positions, the gender (im)balance in leadership positions partially comes down to numbers. If men bring with them the “locker room” culture from their sporting past, their leadership is a continuum of those learned ways to be and act in football. Therefore, changing the culture and challenging dominant masculinity at the grassroots level and in men’s football is essential in bringing about gender equality. If men and masculinities do not change, promoting gender equality becomes difficult, if not impossible (Hearn, 2021, p. 68).

This sub-study shows how some major barriers identified in the current literature hampering gender equality, such as family–work balance and the heroic-masculine ideal of sport leadership (e.g. Burton & Leberman, 2017; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003), have been broken down, at least to some extent, in Nordic football. This underlines the importance of contextual understanding in studies on gender (in)equality and leadership positions in sport. This descriptive and exploratory study contributes to
the continuing conversation on women and leadership in sport by offering a broad overview of the topic in a single-sport context, thus opening up relevant avenues for further research. To my knowledge, this is the first study to examine the phenomenon with empirical evidence in Finnish and Norwegian football contexts.

4.4 Sub-study IV – Envisioning institutional change for gender equality: Women’s perspectives

In sub-study IV (submitted for publication), I focus on institutional change, agency and institutionalised gender inequality in leadership positions in sport. More specifically, I ask how institutional work can reshape institutionalised gender inequality in decision-making positions in Finnish sport. I study the phenomenon through the perspectives of women in leadership positions. This study provides the dissertation with a view to women’s experiences and perceptions of institutional change for gender equality. Furthermore, I critically discuss these perceptions in relation to the literature on institutional work and gender. Thus, this sub-study contributes especially to research question 2 of this dissertation. As I discuss institutionalised gender inequality in this sub-study, I naturally reflect upon the reasons behind it, thus contributing to research question 1.

The theoretical framework is based mainly on the body of knowledge on institutional work. I base my theoretical understanding, especially on the work of Hampel et al. (2017) and focus on the how and the who aspects of institutional work. Empirically, this sub-study is based on 22 interviews with women in elected (e.g. chairpersons and board members; n = 10) and selected (e.g. CEOs and managers; n = 12) leadership positions at different levels of Finnish sport (e.g. national sport organisations, regional sport organisations and sport clubs; please see the manuscript for a table of the interviewees). I analysed the interview data with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016) and, as a result, constructed five themes of institutional work.

The first theme, ‘Microlevel actions and agency’, focuses on individual-level actors and agency. The findings supported the literature on embedded agency (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009). In the discussion, I argue how men and women in leadership positions are embedded in sport, its operating logics and institutionalised gender inequality. Therefore, they are often too “blind” to notice the current inequalities. In contrast, actors coming from outside of sport (who are not [yet]
embedded) may lack the power needed to enact change, thus supporting the literature on embedded agency.

The second theme, ‘Macrolevel actions and agency’, focused on institutional work at the societal level and highlighted sport’s embeddedness in its surrounding society. I discuss how institutional pressures and institutional work done at the societal level may lead to “ambivalent” institutional work in sport organisations. The decision-makers must comply, or at least seem like they comply, with the set of norms and rules given above, even if they actually use their agency to maintain the status quo, in which gender inequality has been institutionalised in leadership positions in sport. This finding highlights the need for more emancipatory and critical studies of institutional work to develop a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena.

The third theme, ‘Intentional and unintentional maintenance work’, focused on institutional work maintaining gender inequality in leadership positions in sport. I identify two types of maintenance work – an intentional type and a more discrete type – which are done by men and women in sport leadership. In the discussion, I highlight how tackling the two types of institutional maintenance work requires different strategies and suggest that the former requires tackling individuals’ values and ideologies, whereas the latter requires self-reflection and education, because this *liminal awareness* (P.Y. Martin, 2003) prevents actors from understanding that their actions are reproducing gender inequality.

The fourth theme, ‘Reshaping perceptions of gender and leadership’, focused on the importance of self-reflection and examples to question taken-for-granted thoughts about gender and leadership. However, I discuss how self-reflection is often proposed based on a “gender-blind” approach. This manifests a liberal feminist approach that sees men and masculinity as the norm according to which women should be measured. This finding further highlights how embedded women are in the institution of sport (leadership) as well as in the institution of Finnish society, in which gender policies have traditionally reflected the liberal feminist paradigm.

The last theme, ‘Collective multilevel actions and agents’, emphasised the need for institutional work on multiple levels to enact change. I argue that because institutionalised gender inequality in leadership positions in sport is deeply rooted and because gender is embedded across all institutions, if gender equality is tackled only at the individual level or individual institutional level, such efforts are likely to fail. I further discuss how institutional work aimed at tackling societal challenges, such as gender inequality, needs to move beyond the level of an institutional field. Institutional work cannot focus exclusively on fostering gender equality in leadership
positions in sport; rather, leadership positions represent only one important mechanism through which institutional work is done.

This study contributes to the current body of knowledge on institutional work by increasing the understanding of how actors work to shape definitions of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport in a given societal context (Hampel et al., 2017). I show how institutional change for gender equality is a highly contextual, multifaceted phenomenon requiring institutional work at the micro and meso levels. Furthermore, the study answers the call of Evans and Pfister (2021) by increasing the understanding of how to foster gender equality in sport’s leadership positions.
5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss the main findings and the overall conclusions of this dissertation. This dissertation consists of four sub-studies and a compilation section, as described in Chapter 1. In this chapter, I focus on more general conclusions and contributions based on the main aim and research questions. I discuss the conclusions and contributions of each article in more detail in their reprints, which are found at the end of this dissertation. The concluding discussion that follows is organised based on the main research questions. After the concluding discussion, I argue for the theoretical and practical contributions of my dissertation and conclude this chapter by discussing the limitations of my dissertation and suggesting fruitful avenues for further studies on the theme of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport.

5.1 Concluding discussion

The aim of this dissertation was to increase the understanding of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport organisations. Finnish sport has provided an interesting context for this study, as Finland is a country that is perceived as one of the forerunners of gender equality but, at the same time, shows signs of gender inequality in leadership positions in sport (see, e.g. Aalto-Nevalainen, 2018; Laakso, 2016; Lehtonen et al., 2022). I operationalised the aim into the following research questions, which I will answer in the remainder of this section: RQ1: Why does gender inequality persist in leadership positions in sport? and RQ2: How can gender equality in leadership positions in sport be enhanced?

**RQ 1: Why does gender inequality persist in leadership positions in sport?**

The empirical findings of my dissertation support the theoretical tenets of the multi-level framework by Cunningham (2019b): gender inequality in leadership positions in sport is a multifaceted, multilevel phenomenon. The factors and barriers affecting gender equality emerge at different levels and are entwined and dynamic by their
nature. This is further evidenced in this study, for example, in instances where a barrier to gender equality has been tackled on one level, but nevertheless, the status quo remains. In sub-study III, I show how, in the context of football, some barriers, such as family-work relations or idealisation of masculine leadership style, have been tackled (at least to some extent); however, it has not had a fundamental impact on the state of gender equality in these organisations. I argue that this occurs because other cultural and structural bottlenecks remain untouched and thus work to maintain the status quo and hinder or even prevent change. This finding strengthens the conclusions of previous studies by suggesting that factors influencing gender inequality are intertwined and occur on multiple levels, including individual, organisational and sociocultural levels (e.g. Burton, 2015; Burton & LaVoi, 2016; Cunningham, 2019b; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019).

However, even if, on a more abstract level, the findings support the current body of knowledge concluding that gender inequality in leadership positions in sport is a multifaceted, multilevel phenomenon, the findings of this dissertation emphasise the contextual nature of gender (in)equality and leadership. In other words, contextual factors set the boundaries within which gender (in)equality takes place in a given context, such as in leadership positions in sport (Apfelbaum, 1993; see also Elling, Knoppers, et al., 2019; Ottesen et al., 2010). The individual barriers and factors influencing gender (in)equality may differ from context to context, even if, at the surface level, the state of gender equality appears to be rather similar between different contexts, such as different countries or different sports. This contextuality is evidenced in this dissertation, for instance, in the discussions about the role of national legislation and historical trajectories on gender equality and how these contextual and socio-cultural level (macro level) contextual factors play a role in shaping gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport. Further evidence includes the specific factors and barriers influencing gender (in)equality in leadership positions identified in the context of Nordic football, emphasising both macro and meso level contexts.

In addition to considering the underpinnings of national and sport-specific contexts when studying gender (in)equality and leadership positions in sport, I argue that organised sport is a social context that has unique characteristics from the perspective of the more general theory that must be considered when studying gender (in)equality and leadership positions. What makes sport an interesting context is that sport is one of the only, if not the only, social institutions in which intentional and regulated sex/gender segregation still exists. In some sections of sport, intentional gender/sex segregation is seen as a mean enhancing gender equality,
whereas in other sections, intentional segregation is seen to create inequality (Pape, 2020; Wackwitz, 2003). Furthermore, the segregation created for equality in one section may create (unintentional) inequality in other sections, thus creating a paradox. In accordance with the multilevel understanding of gender (in)equality in sport (e.g. Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2019a; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), this highlights that actions at one level may create unwanted or even unforeseen results at the other. Separating women’s sport from men’s sport and allowing women to compete against other women is directed towards gender equality in sport because in many sports (of course not in all), the physiological differences between the male and female bodies may create too much of a benefit for male bodies compared to female bodies (see Chapter 2.1). This difference is likely to be the most visible in sport in which physical strength or speed has a great impact on the results. When considering leadership positions in sport, these physiological differences should not matter because leadership competence does not depend on physical strength or stamina (see Megheirkouni, 2017). However, as gendered bias affects gender (in)equality in sport leadership (Cunningham & Ahn, 2019; Grappendorf & Burton, 2017), gender/sex segregation at the level of women and men athletes may work to strengthen these gendered stereotypes and prejudices at the level of leadership positions.

Moreover, the findings of this dissertation show that expertise and competence derived from women’s sport may not be valued to the same extent as competence derived from men’s sport. This is another mechanism through which gender segregation at the level of athletes aimed at supporting gender equality turns against itself and works against the inclusion of women because women’s expertise is often from women’s sport (see also Anderson, 2008; Pape, 2020). Because of the highly contextual nature of gender (in)equality and leadership positions in sport, I argue that it is crucial not to uncritically adapt general “grand” theories and apply them blindly from context to context. Instead, considering the contextual and unique underpinnings when studying multifaceted, complex phenomena, such as gender inequality and leadership positions, can provide more holistic understandings, whereas the general theories may serve as starting points for these new understandings and interpretations, as studies in different contexts provide boundary conditions for more general theories.

Based on the findings of this dissertation, it seems that also in Finnish sport, one concrete barrier for gender equality in leadership positions is the tendency to select people into leadership positions that resemble one another (see, e.g. Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Kanter, 1977; Sotiriadou et al., 2017; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019).
This finding is interesting because contemporary sport organisations often tend to value diversity because diverse decision-making groups may provide organisational benefits (Knoppers et al., 2021; Spaaij et al., 2020), such as the possibility to learn from others, role modelling, idea generation and higher decision-making and problem-solving capabilities (Cunningham, 2008; Lee & Cunningham, 2018; Wicker et al., 2022). This causes a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, sport organisations aim for diverse decision-making groups, while on the other hand, only certain types of people who resemble one another and have similar perspectives on leadership tend to get (s)elected in leadership positions. People who conform to this frame of the “right fit” tend to be older men (See Cunningham, 2019b; Lehtonen et al., 2022). Interestingly, my study shows that similarity of thought occurs regardless of gender (sub-study II). This homologous reproduction (preference to select a member of the dominant group because they are seen as the best fit; Kanter, 1977) based on my findings seems to occur regardless of the candidate’s gender on Finnish sport organisation boards. In other words, women who are in these important board positions also think similarly about sport organisations and their governance, thus not bringing different kinds of perspectives into decision-making compared to their male colleagues. This finding may have several interpretations.

First, this finding questions the interpretation that women would bring too “radical” or different perspectives into leadership groups, which would frame all women as difficult and thus contribute to women not being selected into leadership positions (see Kanter, 1977). Instead, the perspectives of women and men in leadership positions (about board governance in the case of this dissertation) seem to be more similar than different from each other. Second, this finding questions one of the arguments used for gender diversity and women’s inclusion: women bring unique skills, knowledge and experience and different kinds of perspectives into the organisation and its decision-making (e.g. Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016; Gaston et al., 2020; LaVoì & Baeth, 2018; Terjesen et al., 2009). One explanation for this may be that, in general, the perspectives of men and women may not be that different about board governance in contemporary society. Much of the literature tends to build on ideas constructed and studies conducted over 10 or even 40 years ago, such as those of Terjesen et al. (2009) and Kanter (1977). The gap between the perspectives of men and women in leadership may have narrowed, as I will discuss later about the declining role of gender in leadership. Sport culture may also play a part in homogenising perspectives. People (s)elected for leadership positions tend to have a robust background in sport. Acknowledging that culture shapes the pattern of taken-for-granted beliefs, values and norms and shapes the correct ways to
perceive, think, feel and behave in a given context (Schein & Schein, 2017), background in sport may also explain this similarity. For the above reasons, I argue that more studies and contemporary empirical data are needed to verify and/or shape older theories (e.g. Kanter, 1977; Terjesen 2009) to fit the context of contemporary sport organisations.

The above-mentioned tendency to (s)elect individuals who conform to the frame of the “right fit” (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007) that favours certain kinds of people is troubling and may posit further challenges for gender equality because its construction is gendered: men tend to fit this frame of an ideal leader more often than women (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Sotiriadou et al., 2017). There seems to be no other logical explanation for this, apart from gendered aspects. One counter argument could be that men tend to compete more often at a higher level compared to women, do more voluntary work in sport and be in general more engaged with sport (Lehtonen et al., 2022). These could provide sport-specific competence in men, which, according to my findings, is valued in (s)election processes. Furthermore, these tendencies to be more engaged with organised sport may also contribute to a larger pool of men candidates compared to women candidates for a leadership position in sport.

However, in these discussions, it must be noted that these situations do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are impacted and shaped by different kinds of factors on different levels. As an example, men may have more possibilities to compete at a high level already because of financial possibilities (i.e. men are more often better paid and able to do professional sport; Yle Urheilu, 2017), or they may have more time to do voluntary work and engage with sport. For example, even if the amount of time men use for childcare has increased in the 2020s, women still use more time to take care of the home and children (Statistics Finland, 2022). This leaves women less time to use on activities that may advance their careers. These findings support previous studies, such as Patricia Martin (2004) and Barbara Risman (2004), which argue that gender is embedded in all aspects of social life.

Second, considering the effects of the right fit and homologous reproduction in leadership positions more broadly, it may decrease the number of perspectives in decision-making processes provided by different kinds of women and men, thus preventing gender equality and eventually proposing a threat to the ideal of representativeness and democratic principles cherished in the Nordic sport movement (Mikkonen et al., 2022). However, as argued above, more empirical studies are needed to understand why this similarity occurs, for example: is there a certain frame into which people in leadership positions must fit and how is this frame
constructed, or do women and men in general perceive contemporary sport organisations and board governance as rather similar or are there some other explanations?

As discussed above, previous studies have often attributed the scarcity of women in leadership positions (at least partly) to the masculine leadership style and masculinity of an ideal leader in sport. However, the findings of my dissertation (sub-study III) problematise the perspective that a masculine or heroic view of leadership would limit women’s possibilities in leadership (see, e.g. Ryan & Dickson, 2018). Interestingly, the findings show that in modern Nordic football organisations, it may not be the so-called masculinity of leadership that excludes women from leadership positions and creates gender inequality. Instead, the ideas of leadership and of an ideal leader are constructed mainly through traits and competencies often perceived as “feminine”, such as empathy, discussion and listening skills. These findings empirically support the ideas of Billing and Alvesson (2000), who conceptually argued for the diminishing role of gender in leadership. Based on the findings of this dissertation, I further argue that it may be the stereotypes and prejudices connected to the physical bodies of women that exclude women from leadership positions, not the femininity or masculinity of the leadership style as such (Spaaij et al., 2020; van Amsterdam et al., 2017). This finding supports contemporary understandings of gender and sex, in which gender and sex are perceived as interrelated (Lips, 2014). Therefore, the findings underline the importance of considering bodies and the embodied nature of gender and leadership in future studies on gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport and beyond sport.

Another interesting angle that may impact gender (in)equality and women’s inclusion in leadership positions in sport arises from structural changes in the Finnish sport policy system. The findings of my study suggest that sport-specific competence (e.g. as a player or coach) is often seen as very important for a person aiming for a leadership position. However, when considering contemporary discussions about the value and meaning of sport in Finnish society, the arguments tend to be based on the societal and health benefits of sport. For instance, the arguments of the Finnish Olympic Committee about elite sport funding include perspectives, such as sport teaches life skills, builds a sense of community and gives more than takes from society (Finnish Olympic Committee, n.d.). Furthermore, sport is often linked to the broader concept of physical activity, and accordingly, the positive impacts of physical activity are underlined, such as better learning abilities and the wellness of citizens, as well as inclusivity in relation to discussions about
sport. This connection between physical activity and sport has become even more relevant because of recent reforms in Finnish sport.

As discussed in previous chapters, the Finnish Olympic Committee is now, after a series of reforms, the central organisation of all aspects of Finnish sport (apart from adapted sport, which is under the Finnish Paralympic Committee), including sport for all, children and youth sport, as well as competitive and elite sport. Recently (in 2021), the Finnish Olympic Committee renewed its strategy and included the perspective of increasing the “movement” and physical activity of citizens as one of its core tasks (Finnish Olympic Committee, 2021). Previously, the core tasks of the Finnish Olympic Committee included organised sport and high-performance sport. This shift of Finnish organised sport from sport towards physical activity and from competitiveness to “softer values” (such as communality and well-being) is interesting, as it could potentially influence what kind of skills and expertise are seen as important for people in leadership positions in sport. As the social and healthcare sectors (both at the education and occupation levels) are women-dominated in Finland, the shift could provide more opportunities for women, as they possess skills and expertise from these sectors that are new to Finnish sport. However, even if this was the case logically – that the shift would lead to a “natural” increase in the demand of skills that many women possess and thus result in more women being (s)elected for these positions – the reality may not be as simple.

As discussed above, gender (in)equality is a multifaceted, multilevel phenomenon (e.g. Cunningham, 2019b; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). Therefore, even if one barrier were to break down (such as the mismatch between women’s expertise and what is expected of a leader), other factors may work to maintain the status quo. The findings of this study support this conclusion empirically. The study shows how a change towards a more “feminine” leadership style in Nordic football organisations did not lead to an increased number of women in these positions; instead, it seems that men changed their leadership styles towards the contemporary demands. On an abstract level, as one barrier was tackled, other barriers worked to maintain the status quo. Therefore, I argue that this structural and cultural shift in Finnish sport may provide possibilities to enhance gender equality in leadership positions by providing opportunities for people with different kinds of expertise. However, acknowledging the institutionalised nature of gender inequality in leadership positions in sport (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Walker et al., 2017; Walker & Bopp, 2011), other factors and forces work to maintain the status quo, thus stalling the development if there are no other means employed.
RQ 2: How can gender equality in leadership positions in sport be enhanced?

As discussed above, the findings of my dissertation suggest that enhancing gender equality in leadership positions in sport is difficult because of the complex and highly institutionalised nature of gender inequality. This is empirically evidenced by showing how, regardless of some bottlenecks identified in previous literature (such as the ideal of a “masculine” leader; see, e.g. Burton et al. [2009]; Hovden [2000]; work–family conflict; see, e.g. Claringbould and van Liere [2019], Hindman and Walker [2020] and Piggott and Pike [2020]) have been tackled, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions in sport. Furthermore, the findings of this study highlight that reshaping a highly institutionalised societal issue, such as gender inequality, requires collective actions by different actors at different levels.

In the previous section, I discussed some of the factors identified in this study that maintain gender (in)equality in leadership positions and argued for the multilevel and highly institutionalised nature of gender inequality in leadership positions in sport. Sport organisations do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are multilevel entities embedded in their larger sociocultural surroundings (Cunningham, 2010; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Therefore, if changes are made only in a single institution, factors at the other levels may backlash the desired improvements. Consequently, the findings of this study suggest that enacting change for gender equality requires institutional work from multiple actors on multiple levels. If a change is enacted only on a single level or in a single organisation, the impact and outcome of the change may be limited. This finding supports previous studies by strengthening the conclusion that a change that focuses only on the macro or micro level may fall short of enacting overall change (Piggott & Pike, 2020).

Considering the findings in the light of gender literature, the stable nature of gender inequality in leadership positions in sport stems from gender being embedded in all other institutions – also beyond sport and its leadership positions (P.Y. Martin, 2004; Risman, 2004). This perspective also supports the conclusion on the need for collective multilevel actions to enhance gender equality. I further argue that if reshaping gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport requires actions by multiple actors on multiple levels, naturally, studies aiming to explore institutional change and/or change for large societal issues should consider both micro- and macro-level perspectives. Otherwise, the understandings created may remain limited (Fahlén & Stenling, 2019).

The findings of my dissertation also show that the means through which gender equality in leadership positions in sport is promoted tend to be based on liberal feminist approaches, meaning that the focus is often on “fixing the women” or
increasing the number of women (‘add women and stir’; Evans & Pfister, 2021). Based on the discussions above, this is logical because sport is embedded in the larger sociocultural contexts and the trajectory of gender equality work in Finland is, in general, based on liberal feminist ideology (Julkunen, 2016). One concrete measure that I suggest in this dissertation, which goes beyond the liberal feminist approach, is to tackle the gendered cultures of different sports.

Cultures that marginalise women are common in sport (Cunningham, 2008). The learned ways to behave in a given sport culture are shaped when future leaders are kids and adolescents – during the time when they are still players and other grassroots actors in sport. Leaders’ behaviours are therefore a continuum of those learned habits and practices that have been adopted in the past (as I show in sub-study III with the example of “the locker room culture” in football organisations). Therefore, I argue that moving beyond liberal feminist approaches and enhancing gender equality in leadership positions in sport requires interventions also at the grassroots level – in other words, during the stage in which individuals inherit the culture of that sport, meaning the pattern of taken-for-granted beliefs, values and norms that become considered as valid in that group and are consequently taught to new members as the correct ways to perceive, think, feel and behave, which eventually drop out of awareness (Schein & Schein, 2017, p. 6). This naturally applies to boys’ and men’s sport clubs, leagues and organisations, as well as to those of girls and women. However, in light of the findings of my study, I argue that in the case of male-dominated sport, such as football, attention should be paid especially to the boys’ and men’s side of that sport as they form the majority and thus have more power to create and maintain the culture in that sport. Furthermore, as with the current majority, they form the pool from which many future leaders will be selected. The empirical data of my study did not cover women-dominated sport from this perspective. However, it may well be that similar approaches are valid in creating gender equality in women-dominant sport. However, acknowledging the high level of contextuality of gender (in)equality as discussed above, further studies are needed to explore this aspect. Lastly, it is worth noting here that intervening in the gendered culture of sport at the grassroots level is one mean to create change. However, as discussed above, tackling gender inequality by a single solution on a single level may result in limited results because of the multilevel nature of factors impacting gender (in)equality (e.g. Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2019b) and gender being embedded in all other social institutions (e.g. P.Y. Martin, 2004; Risman, 2004). Therefore, a more fundamental change requires a broader approach.
Another interesting angle for understanding how to enhance gender equality in leadership positions in sport, based on the findings of this dissertation, is insight into the contextuality of gender (in)equality and leadership positions (Apfelbaum, 1993; Elling, Knoppers, et al., 2019; Ottesen et al., 2010). This contextuality impacts the measures for change when the aim is to tackle dynamic and multilevel social issues, such as gender inequality. As discussed above, enhancing gender equality requires collective actions by different actors at multiple levels. However, based on the findings of this dissertation, I argue that the strategies, actions and agents needed for change differ in different contextual settings. Compared to the current body of knowledge on reshaping institutionalised gender inequality (e.g. Li et al., 2020), the findings of my study suggest that the barriers and factors maintaining gender equality are different in different contexts and thus are the adequate measures through which change could be enacted. Therefore, I argue that enacting change in highly institutionalised societal issues, such as gender inequality in leadership positions in sport (Fink, 2016; Walker et al., 2017), requires contextual understanding upon which the strategies for change can be based. Institutional change should not be considered the same across different contexts. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution; rather, accurate measures depend on the barriers and factors occurring in that specific context, and collective multilevel actions should be designed to match those barriers and factors.

### 5.2 Theoretical and practical contributions

From a theoretical perspective, my dissertation contributes to the academic debates on gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport organisations. I adopted a multilevel framework and combined literature on gender, leadership positions and sport organisations. From a disciplinary perspective, I introduce an administrative science perspective to this body of knowledge. This combination provides a new interdisciplinary approach that contributes to our understanding of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport. In the following section, I will discuss the contributions in more detail.

First, this dissertation contributes to the discussions on how to enhance gender equality in leadership positions in sport, which is a perspective that has been neglected in the current body of knowledge (Evans & Pfister, 2021). I propose a measure to tackle gender inequality in leadership positions in a single-sport context, namely football (sub-study III). Furthermore, I extend the current body of
knowledge by highlighting how socio-political changes at the macro level may provide opportunities for gender equality and the inclusion of women, which however are restricted by the multilevel nature of gender inequality in sport leadership positions. Moreover, I contribute to this gap by identifying five themes of institutional work aiming for a change towards gender equality (sub-study IV). Thus, this study extends institutional theory and, especially, the current debates on institutional work by adapting the perspective of institutional work to broad societal challenges, such as gender inequality. I show how institutional actors may shape definitions of gender and leadership positions in relation to the surrounding society in sport organisations (Hampel et al., 2017).

Second, my dissertation contributes to the current body of knowledge on gender (in)equality and leadership positions in sport by highlighting the contextual nature of gender (in)equality in leadership positions and questioning some of the taken-for-granted thoughts in the current body of knowledge by showing how the role of gender in leadership may be decreasing in contemporary Nordic sport leadership (see, e.g. Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Ryan & Dickson, 2018) and how the perspectives of men and women in leadership positions are rather parallel. These insights contribute to the gap identified by scholars, indicating that previous studies have rarely considered the role qualities associated with men in relation to leadership in creating and sustaining gender inequality in leadership positions in sport (Knoppers et al., 2021; Knoppers & Spaaij, 2022).

Third, I propose a new theoretical model that explains the paradox emerging from the gendered construction of the right fit (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007) and sport organisations’ aspirations towards diversity, which, I hope, sparks interest in more empirical studies, verifying and fine-tuning the theoretical considerations of the model (sub-study II). The model extends the current body of knowledge by providing a new point of departure for understanding the interplay of gender, board governance and selection of board members.

Empirically, my dissertation contributes to the current body of knowledge by offering new empirical evidence in the hitherto unexplored context of Finnish organised sport. As several scholars have identified, the majority of the literature on gender (in)equality and underrepresentation of women in leadership positions tends to be in the North American context (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Leberman & Burton, 2017); therefore, one of the contributions of this study is the extension of literature into a new empirical context, namely the Finnish organised sport. In addition, studies have tended to treat sport as a monolithic block, disregarding the characterizing cultures, structures and nuances of different sport. In this dissertation, I tackle this
pitfall and provide a more nuanced empirical understanding by exploring gender (in)equality in a single-sport context (sub-study III).

New understandings based on empirical evidence contribute to identifying contextual differences and underpinnings. These findings create boundaries for the more general core theories explaining gender (in)equality in leadership positions (in sport). As I have argued above, contextual aspects are essential when studying contextual phenomena, such as gender (in)equality and leadership positions. However, in line with Kinder (2012, as cited in Vellamo, 2022, p. 144), the findings of this dissertation may also provide mid-range-level conclusions. This means that the conclusions and results of this study may provide insights and a starting point for interpretations in other contexts, such as other country contexts or sport, or to other diversity discussions (e.g. race and sexual orientation), even if the results and conclusions would not be generalisable as such without recontextualization.

Methodologically, this dissertation enriches the literature by applying a mixed methods approach, as I incorporate both qualitative and quantitative approaches for my study. In the current body of knowledge, the use of quantitative approaches, especially survey methods, has been minimal compared to qualitative methods or studies that “count the numbers”, even if these approaches could provide a different perspective to understand gender (in)equality in leadership in sport and contribute to transformative policymaking (Elling, 2015; Elling, Knoppers, et al., 2019). In this dissertation, I apply various methodological approaches, including post-positivistic and interpretivist approaches. Consequently, I apply different data-gathering and analysis methods, including surveys, semi-structured interviews, reflexive thematic analysis and document analysis, which eventually comprise the mixed methods approach of this dissertation.

Lastly, my dissertation also offers food for thought for practitioners, such as people in leadership positions, other sport policy actors and advocates of gender equality in sport. Hartzell and Dixon (2019) argue that the “first and most obvious need for advancement in women’s sport leadership representation is for research in other contexts beyond American collegiate athletics” (p. 89). Accordingly, this dissertation provides practitioners with an understanding, framework and examples of why gender inequality in leadership positions in sport appears as such a persistent phenomenon and how gender equality can be enhanced. This dissertation’s findings provide concrete examples of barriers to gender equality in Finnish sport organisations, as well as factors and measures that can support gender equality and change. The new understandings of this dissertation may be used as a basis for
evidence-based decision-making and are therefore beneficial for sport managers and decision-makers, as well as other sport policy actors and gender equality advocates.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research

All studies have their limitations. In this dissertation, the limitations stem mainly from the methodological choices of the sub-studies that are the building blocks of this dissertation. First, in sub-studies I and III, I have utilised a case study approach and qualitative data and analysis methods. The limitation of a case study approach is the limited possibility of generalisations, especially statistical generalisations (Stake, 2003). This provides an avenue for further quantitative studies to provide statistical generalisations within and across different contexts. Further qualitative studies are also needed in varied contexts, including various country and sport contexts. The results of this dissertation show that context plays a pivotal role in shaping gender (in)quality. Qualitative and quantitative studies would contribute to the current body of knowledge by exploring and identifying contextual differences and similarities, hence creating a greater understanding of boundary conditions for the more general theory of gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport (and beyond). Furthermore, comparative designs across different contexts may provide a useful lens through which to explore and identify these boundary conditions.

Second, in sub-study II, I utilised a quantitative approach and analysed survey data to test the sub-study’s theoretical assumptions. Naturally, the survey tested only the items included in the survey, and other items may have given different results. Furthermore, the theoretical model’s assumptions need further empirical testing. The model presented in sub-study II was built on information/decision-making theory. However, competing theoretical perspective, the social categorization perspective suggests that group variance may have a negative impact on organizational outcomes. This contradiction offers a fruitful avenue for further scrutiny. From a feminist perspective, the limitation of a survey method is that the respondents may feel difficult to reply if their gender is more fluid and does not fit the pre-determined (Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne, 2007). Furthermore, the survey method offers a limited possibility for nuanced and detailed answers. Therefore, I call for more studies, both quantitative and qualitative, to explore the theoretical modelling I set out in sub-study II. Where quantitative data may provide results that contribute to statistical generalisations, qualitative data may provide us with deeper understandings about the meanings and understandings of women and men board
members about board governance and sport organisations as well as the reasons behind these meanings and understandings.

Third, my interview data (sub-studies III and IV) consist of interviews with individuals, most of which already are in a leadership in sport – in an elected or selected position. Interviews with people who have aimed for a leadership position but have not attained one or have decided to step down could have provided different kinds of understanding of the phenomenon. This provides a venue for further studies on gender (in)equality in leadership positions in sport (Evans & Pfister, 2021).

In addition to the above, I have identified two additional streams of inquiry for future studies, based on the discussions of my dissertation. First, in this study, I have included both the perspectives of women and men in leadership positions. In one of the sub-studies, I solely explored women’s perspectives. I agree with scholars that providing women with the opportunity to voice their experiences and perspectives on gender (in)equality is important, especially in men-dominated contexts in which their voices are often suppressed (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hesse-Biber, 2015; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). However, in line with Ryan and Dickson (2018), I encourage further studies to explore men and masculinities and their roles in gender (in)equality and its promotion. This study suggests that the dominant form of masculinity restricts women’s possibilities and gender equality in sport. Exploring different masculinities and femininities in different sport and how to reshape the dominant forms to be more inclusive could provide fruitful understandings of gender equality and social justice.

Second, exploring the recruitment or selection processes in elected and selected leadership positions in Finnish sport was beyond the scope of my dissertation. However, the findings suggest that the recruitment and selection processes for leadership positions in sport may be gendered. The current body of knowledge has identified that recruitment practices and processes vary between different organisations and different levels of organisations, as well as between elected and selected positions in Finnish sport (Lehtonen & Stenvall, 2021). However, less is known about the actual processes that take place in different sport organisations; for instance, what are the types of processes used, what kind of decisions are made, how they are made during different steps of the processes, who applies for these positions, how are the candidates identified and what kind of skills, qualifications and qualities are required from the candidates. The recruitment and selection processes provide fruitful venues for further studies on the theme of gender (in)equality and leadership positions in sport.
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Yle Urheilu. (2021, December 22). Valmentajien taustojen tarkistuksia ja kyselyitä pelaajille – näin pesäpalloväki havahtui häirintäkovuun [Background checks for coaches and questionnaires for players - this is how the Finnish baseball community became aware of the harassment scandal]. Yle Urheilu. https://yle.fi/a/3-12243623


7 APPENDIXES

Appendix I  Interview themes for sub-study III
Appendix II  Interview themes for sub-study IV
Appendix I Interview themes for sub-study III

- Background (education, work experience, sport experience)
- How have the interviewees ended up in the position they are now?
- Leadership and management skills and expertise (individual & football governance)
- Gender and sport management/leadership
- Family-work-family
- Networks & mentors
- Organizational level (e.g., recruitment process, organizational culture, position of women in the organization [and in football], future needs of leadership/management in the Norwegian Football Federation/the Football Association of Finland, perceptions of the current gender ratio in leadership positions)
Appendix II Interview themes for sub-study IV

1. Background information
   - Please tell a little about yourself and your background (e.g., education, work, sport, elected and/or selected leadership positions)
   - What made you get into sport management and leadership?
   - What kind of goals do you currently have in relation to leadership and management in sport?
     - How have the goals changed over the years?

2. Leadership development program and its contents
   - Career stage and career developments
   - Perceived benefits & changes
     - leadership skills and expertise
     - gender equality

3. Sport leadership and sport leader identity
   - Discussion on sports leaders in general
   - Interviewee’s identity as a sport leader
   - Gender and leadership positions
   - Self-limiting behaviours/uncertainties

4. Networks and mentoring
   - Meaning of networks and mentoring
   - Perceptions on the network and mentoring gained from the development program

5. Recruitment process of NGB/international sport federations (if applicable)

6. Institutional change for gender equality
   - How to create change for gender equality in sport and its leadership positions (actors, actions resources, different levels etc...)
8 ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS
Sport policy in Finland

Marjukka Mikkonen, Minttu Korsberg, Kati Lehtonen & Jari Stenvall

International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics 14(4), 715–728
https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2022.2127837

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Marjukka Mikkonen, M. Korsberg, K. Lehtonen & J. Stenvall

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Sport policy in Finland
Marjukka Mikkonen, M. Korsberg, K. Lehtonen and J. Stenvall

ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to provide a description and create an understanding of public sport policy, the key actors within the sports system, and the political sphere in Finnish sport. The development of sport policy in Finland has been characterised by a relatively long-lasting, polarised, and highly politicised sports sector and a series of structural reforms. The contemporary sports system in Finland represents a mixed model, in which the state has a strong role in directing sport policy (especially through resource steering), while the role of sports organisations is implementation. Further, municipalities play a central role in creating conditions for sport and physical activity, and all sport policy actors have high autonomy in their operations. In particular, the population’s increasing physical inactivity and lack of elite sport success in Finland have driven the central government to seek new solutions, such as centralisation, a cross-administrative approach, and evidence-informed policy-making practices. Sport policy is also impacted by international trends and agreements, such as sustainable development, in which Finland’s ambitious goals affect the sports sector. In the future, the unclear roles of different actors and a lack of leadership could cause further challenges to the adoption of effective sport policies.

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KEYWORDS
Finland; sport policy; sports governance; country profile; sports organisation

1. Introduction
The characteristics of Finnish sports culture contextualise the country’s identity as a welfare state. As stated by Esping-Andersen (1990), the foundation of the Nordic welfare system relies on social benefits that are provided to all citizens while also ensuring their safety and well-being. This ideal appears prevalent in both Finnish society and sport, in which the sports system and welfare state have developed in parallel, similar to other Nordic countries (cf. Norberg 1997, Andersen and Ronglan 2012). In this state–civil society alliance, sports and other civic organisations act as a link between the citizens and their government (Alapuro and Stenius 2010, Giuliani et al. 2019). However, regardless of the shared welfare state model, Finnish sport policy differs from that of other Nordic countries (c.f. Fahlén and Stenling 2016, Skille and Säfvenbom 2011, see Lehtonen and Laine 2020). Thus, the purpose of this article is to provide a description and create an understanding of public sport policy, key actors in the sports system, and the political sphere in Finnish sport.

Sport is a popular recreation pastime and constitutes the most common form of civic activity in Finland. Finland is among the most active nations in Europe regarding sports participation (European Commission 2018). By contrast, elite sports success has declined in

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recent decades, causing criticism of Finnish sport policy (Lipponen 2017). Furthermore, as in all Western countries, decreased everyday activity, estimated to cause a cost of at least EUR 3 billion in Finland (Kolu et al. 2022), has created another complex societal challenge for sport policy, as most of the population does not meet national recommendations for physical activity (Parikka et al. 2021).

The article begins with a historical review of Finnish sport policy development, followed by a description of the current administrative structure, policy guidelines, and funding. Finally, the key contemporary phenomena in sport policy are discussed, concluding with a reflection on the issues and challenges facing the future of Finnish sport.

2. History of Finnish sport policy development

Finnish sport policy and its development can be divided into three distinct periods: the politically polarised sports movement (1917–1993), the domain structure (1994–2012), and the centralised sports structure (2013→) (Figure 1). In the following sections, these periods and their key events are described and analysed.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sport policy stage</th>
<th>Key events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Agrarian society</td>
<td>Poverty ➔ Economic growth Little free time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Industrial/service society</td>
<td>Increased free time and consumption, increased prosperity Urbanization, migration from north to south</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Administrative-legalist society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Welfare state</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>New Public Management, turn of 1980s and 1990s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>New Public Governance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Centralized sport structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Sport policy tools | |
|--------------------| |
| 1917–1990 | Governmental committees: The Act on the Promotion of Sports and Physical Activity Long-term planning Norm-based funding system |
| 1994–2012 | Working groups (strategies): The Act on the Promotion of Sports and Physical Activity Results-based funding system of National Sports Federations Contract or contract-like relationships |
| 2013→ | Working groups (diminishing amount): The Act on the Promotion of Sports and Physical Activity Programs and networks Cross-sectional cooperation (ministries) |

| Public sector actors | |
|----------------------| |
| 1994–2012 | Finnish Olympic Committee Young Finland Association Finnish Sport for All Association |

| Sport organisations | |
|---------------------| |
| 1917–1990 | Finnish Central Sport Federation SiVL (bourgeoisie) Työväen urheilutilo Tui (workers sport federation) |
| 1994–2012 | Finnish Olympic Committee Young Finland Association Finnish Sport for All Association |

Figure 1. Development of Finnish sport policy (Adapted from Vasara 2004, Stenvall et al. 2016, Mäkinen et al. 2019).
2.1. The politically polarised sports movement (1917–1993)

Finnish sport and sport policy developed simultaneously against the backdrop of WWI and Finland’s declaration of independence in 1917. Therefore, sport policy was tilted towards nationalism with aims such as strengthening national identity, integrating the nation, and maintaining citizens’ good military functionality (Juppi 1995). The birth of a deliberate state sport policy occurred between 1919 and 1920. During that time, state subsidies for third-sector sports organisations and the National Sports Council (NSC), which allocates the subsidies, were established. NSC consisted of advocates of the most major sports organisations: the Suomen Valtakunnan Urheilulitto (SVUL; the bourgeoisie), the Työväen Urheilulitto (TUL; the workers), the Suomen Naisten Voimistelulitto (the women), and the Svenska Finland Idrottsförbundin (SFI; the Finnish-Swedes) (ibid.).

The Finnish Civil War (1918) was a critical moment that affected sport policy and its development. The war heralded the start of a long-lasting polarised sports sector with two major central sports federations, each with its own local sports clubs: the SVUL and the TUL. Given that sports was highly politicised and due to the struggle between bourgeois and workers’ sports movements, contradictions in sport policy materialised that affected operations of the NSC, funding decisions, and foreign policy with respect to sport (Juppi 1995). This polarisation of central sports federations and their inability to cooperate may have pushed government involvement in sports (Järvinen 1980 in Juppi 1995). After the civil war, the central government attempted to address the fragmentation of Finnish society and gain international recognition through international sporting success (Vasara 2004). At the time, Finland was successful in elite sports.

The MEC was chosen as the leading ministry in sports in 1922 instead of the Ministry of Defence, which was the other option discussed (Juppi 1995). Previous studies have reasoned that sports’ educational aspects were already taking over the military aspects. Moreover, in many European countries, sports governance was situated within the Ministry of Education, and the NSC was already situated in the MEC. Among others, the decision may be considered a win for the political centre and social democrats over the right wing (ibid., Vasara 2004).

Despite the poor economic situation after WWI, the state continued to support sports (Vasara 2004). A national betting agency (Veikkaus) was also established in 1940 to fund Finnish sport. Subsequently, a turbulent political climate and shifting power relations between the left- and right-wings hampered sport policy development throughout the 1940s. However, a new subsidy criterion was introduced in 1945, which represented the leftist majority of the ruling parties. The previous (1924) subsidy criteria emphasised the military condition of citizens, discipline, and order as well as Finland’s international position; the new statute emphasised the health, well-being, sports, and exercise of citizens, and the financial balance of sports organisations. During the 1950s, the power play between the NSC and the MEC intensified and manifested in many ways, such as the MEC starting to grant state aid directly to stakeholders without the NSC’s involvement (ibid.).

During the 1960s and 1970s, Finland changed from an agrarian society towards a more modern industrial and service society, thus increasing citizens’ free time. This challenged the sports sector, and the state’s attention was increasingly drawn to the promotion of citizens’ physical activity (Itkonen 2021). The state perceived the provision of sports services as an important tool for education and public health, thus positively affecting the public economy. However, the relationship between sports organisations and the state was difficult, with the state steering organisations towards health-enhancing physical activity, while the organisations focused on competitive sport. From the 1980s onward, Finnish sports culture widened and scattered, further hampering political steering (ibid.).

The Act on the Promotion of Sports and Physical Activity 984/1979 came into effect in 1980. Initially, the act was unique internationally, as it directed state subsidies to local governments, national and local sports organisations, and research and international activities in the field (European Commission 2016). The act also served as a compromising function between the state and sports organisations, clarifying their responsibilities: the state was now responsible for providing
facilities and conditions for sport and exercise, whereas the sports organisations were responsible for the organisation of sport (Itkonen 2021).

Voluntary sports organisations played a central role in early Finnish sport policy. However, the state’s role has also been central, especially through funding. Historically, Finnish sport represented a corporatist system that relies on working groups, committees, and councils comprising a limited number of privileged and politically divided actors that outline and decide on policy (Mäkinen et al. 2019). In comparison to Sweden and Norway, sport in Finland is more fragmented because of polarisation, high politicisation, shifting power relations between the bourgeoisie and the working class and power plays between the different government bodies in sport (ibid.; Mäkinen et al. 2016).

2.2. 1994–2012: Era of the domain structure

During the 1990s, Finnish sports governance experienced one of its largest reforms due to result-based management, and the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm (see Temmes 1998), which had affected the general public administration since the end of the 1980s (Mäkinen et al. 2016). In 1994, the bankruptcy and collapse of SVUL, which was the largest sports organisation in Finland, ended the prevailing corporatist culture in Finnish sport policy, resulting in long and difficult discussions about new directions for sport policy, including its content, goals, and governance models (Mäkinen et al. 2019). The collapse faded away the highly political nature of Finnish sport, which had lasted a relatively long time compared to other Nordic countries, in which it had disappeared already by the 1950s (Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020). Due to criticism of the old bureaucratic sports movement and the flourishing NPM paradigm, a new multi-centred government model was established that included a new central sports federation – the Finnish Sport Confederation (SLU). There were three domain organisations within the SLU: the Young Finland Association, the Finnish Sport for All Association, and the Finnish Olympic Committee (NOC) (Mäkinen et al. 2019). The operations of the TUL and the SFI continued as members of the SLU.

The Finnish reform was distinctive from an international perspective. The sport policy of many other countries shifted towards coordination between various actors, concentration of power, and creating a unified sports culture, which was opposite of Finland’s direction (Koski and Lämsä 2015, Mäkinen et al. 2016). Most of the sport policy processes in the new model were domain-specific: the three organisations planned and implemented policy through their own ideologies. However, these various ideologies and overlapping tasks, combined with decreasing elite sports successes, elicited criticism of the domain structure (Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020).

Another central feature in the 1990s was the gradual shift of power from sports organisations to the state, (Mäkinen et al. 2019). Reflecting the NPM paradigm, which had affected all of Finland’s central government, a new results-based funding system was introduced for sport in 1995, shifting power relations towards the state (ibid.). In the new system, the state controlled sports subsidy policies by directing grants straight to national and regional sports organisations. Previously, the state had allocated resources to national sports federations (e.g. TUL and SVUL), which were responsible for directing the subsidies (Koski and Lämsä 2015). In the 2015 renewed Sports Act, sports organisations were no longer the only actors responsible for organising sport and physical activities (Lehtonen 2017, pp. 45–50).

2.3. Centralised sports structure from 2013 onward

The planning and implementation of the new, more centralised sports system occurred between 2008 and 2013, resulting in a new structure. A new central sports organisation, VALO, was established by merging the SLU and two previous domain organisations (Sport for All and Youth Sport). VALO was responsible for a broad range of activities, such as the promotion of physical activity, sports club activities, and Sport for All. The reform brought the Finnish system (structurally) closer to the Nordic model (Lehtonen 2017, Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020; see Tin et al. 2020 for a description
of the Nordic model). In 2013, an independent high-performance unit was established within the NOC. This was followed by another reform in 2017, when VALO merged with the NOC, forming a new NOC. The idealistic proposal involved shifting towards a centralised, non-governmental structure and merging Sport for All and elite sports actions into the agenda of one organisation – the NOC (Mäkinen et al. 2019, Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020).

Reflections on the emerging public administration paradigm of New Public Governance (see Osborne 2006) also affected sport policy and governance. Since the turn of the 2010s, the MEC and central sports organisations have manifested the importance of networks and (government) programmes in solving the contemporary challenges faced by Finnish sport policy, such as physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour, as well as the lack of elite sports success. Moreover, the Finnish sports system has expanded from an organisational model to an era of network-based national programmes that aim to increase physical activity (Lehtonen and Laine 2020).

In the 2010s, Finnish sport policy was scattered with several reforms, miscommunication between the government and 3rd sector, contradicting aims between different parties, and competition for resources and power (Itkonen 2021). In the latest reform, the NOC is responsible for both elite sport and Sport for All operations. However, this has caused tense discussions regarding the NOC’s credibility and legitimacy as a Sport for All organisation and its unstable and unclear role in relation to the state and its members (Lehtonen et al. 2021).

To summarise Section 2, despite similar societal systems within the Nordic countries, there are variations in the expression of the Nordic sports model, which includes characteristics such as voluntarism-based sports organisations, democratic decision-making structures, and overall sports systems. The past and present of Finland’s sports movement have stood apart, and its sports culture is not as traditional as those of other Nordic countries (c.f. Skille and Säfvenbom 2011, Fahlén and Sterling 2016, Seippel and Skille 2019). What sets Finland apart is the state’s strong role as a coordinator of sport, especially regarding funding and guiding sport policy. Moreover, sports organisations are strongly involved in implementing sport policies. Accordingly, the Finnish sports system is regarded as a mixed model (Henry 2009). The reforms undertaken by the Finnish sports system over the last 25 years indicate the instability of its sports movement (Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020). However, the trajectory of the Finnish sports system reflects and parallels the general public administration in Finland, which is characterised by cyclic development (see Stenvall et al. 2016).

3. Contemporary sport policy in Finland

3.1. Administrative structure

As described in Section 2.3, the Finnish sports system represents a mixed model (Henry 2009). According to the Sports Act (390/2015), the MEC has the main responsibility of managing, developing, and reconciling the sport policy. The NSC acts as an expert panel assisting the MEC by, for instance, evaluating the impact of government actions, issuing statements and submitting initiatives to develop sport policy.

The municipalities (309 in 2022) operate at the local level and are responsible for creating the prerequisites of physical activity for their residents by providing physical activity and sports services, and constructing and maintaining sports facilities. Compared to other Nordic countries, municipalities own a vast number (71%) of sports facilities (Norway 54%, Sweden 57% [operator], Denmark 47% [operator]) (Bergsgard et al. 2019). Municipalities play an important role in Finnish sports, as they have extensive autonomy to organise sports services as they see fit. Furthermore, they often focus on providing sport and physical activity for groups overlooked by the third sector, such as people with disabilities and the elderly.

The third sector sports organisations include 2 national service organisations (NOC and Finnish Paralympic Committee), 71 Sports Federations, 15 regional sports organisations, and 24 other national organisations that promote physical activity (MEC 2021a). The NOC’s operations aim to
cover the development of physical activity of the entire population as well as organised sport and elite sport (NOC 2021). However, the NOC’s responsibility as a leader of sport and physical activity seems rather ostensible. As described in this section, Finnish sport is rather scattered and consists of several self-governing actors. The NOC represents organised sport only through its member federations. The lack of legitimacy through representation, combined with the absence of (financial) power, may hamper the development of Finnish sport.

There are approximately 8,500 local sports clubs in Finland, and voluntary-based operations define the overall characteristics of Finnish sports culture. Although most sports clubs still rely entirely on volunteers, many clubs have paid employees (Koski and Mäenpää 2018). Reflecting the NPM paradigm, the increased demands for efficiency have also reached the work of sports clubs. As in other Nordics, professionalisation has been one of the most significant changes in club activities in Finland over the last decade, due to increased expectations and quality demands, as well as difficulties in finding volunteers. This has increased the costs of club membership, which has sparked discussion on whether today’s sports clubs act as drivers for socio-economic polarisation. This is critical from the perspective of the welfare state, its values and the ideal of equal opportunities. This may also contribute to further polarisation of healthy lifestyles, and harm elite sport if all potentially talented individuals are not able to engage in sports.

The Finnish education system is based on public schools, where the content of physical education teaching is guided by the national core curriculum. The government funds programmes based on policy objectives (such as Schools on the Move) to establish a physically active operating culture in Finnish schools and to reduce differences in pupils’ health and wellbeing. In contrast to some countries, schools in Finland have not played a strong structural role in competitive sports. However, efforts have been made to include sports (e.g. morning training) in the school environment in recent years from the perspective of competitive sports (Nieminen et al. 2020).

In addition to the strong public sector and civil society typical of Nordic countries, the private sector also plays a role in Finnish sports culture, with private companies owning and maintaining sports facilities besides the municipal facility network. The turnover of companies providing sports-related services (Ala-Vähälä et al. 2021) and the number of members in commercial gyms (Laine and Vehmas 2020) increased sharply during the 2010s. Private companies are nowadays important providers of sports services, especially for women (Lehtonen et al. 2022, p. 29). However, there seems to be potential for further growth, as in other Nordic countries, where, for instance, health or fitness centre membership is still far more popular compared to Finland (European Commission 2018).

3.2. Administration of elite sport

According to the Government Report on Sport Policy (2018), the MEC defines elite sport as an important part of Finnish culture in the 21st century. The report states that elite sport should operate in an ethical and socially responsible manner while being internationally successful, visible, and valued by citizens.

The management of elite sports systems follows a mixed-model system, in which both the state and sports organisations play key roles (Lehtonen et al. 2021). The MEC and the NOC have agreed that the NOC’s high-performance unit is responsible for managing and directing Finnish elite sports networks, including Paralympic sports (Target document 2021–2024). However, public funding for elite sport is mainly allocated by the MEC.

In recent decades, several working groups and reorganisations have been targeted at tackling the decline in Finland’s elite sports performance. According to the recent evaluation, it seems that the structure around talent identification and development has improved in recent years (Storm and Nielsen 2022). However, criticism has been levelled, especially towards elite sports administration, including notes of inefficiency and unclarity of roles between sports organisations and the state (Lipponen 2017). The NOC, as a leader of elite sport, also currently searches for trust and legitimacy.
among its members and other stakeholders (Storm and Nielsen 2022). Furthermore, the links between goal setting, strategy, implementation, and evaluation appear weak (ibid.).

3.3. **Sport policy guidelines and governmental steering**

In Finland, the central government’s sport policy is guided by national legislation (mainly the Sports Act), the current Government Programme (2019), the Government Report on Sport Policy (2018), and the impact objectives set for sport policy in the Government Budget proposal (2022).

In addition to the division of responsibilities, the Sports Act (390/2015) outlines the overall aims of sport policy, which are to promote physical activity, elite sports, and related civic activity. Sport is seen as a way of enhancing the population’s health and well-being and supporting the growth and development of young people. The crosscutting principles in the Sports Act are equality, nondiscrimination, social inclusion, multiculturalism, healthy lifestyles, respect for the environment, and sustainable development.

In 2018, the Finnish Parliament approved the first-ever Government Report on Sport policy, in which a significant increase in people’s physical activity in all population groups was outlined as the most important sport policy objective in Finland in the 2020s. Furthermore, all the other previously mentioned Finnish sport policy guidelines share this objective. Other priorities defined in all policy guidelines are to support civic activities and elite sport while developing facilities and conditions for sport and physical activity.

In addition to steering by norms, the central government steers sport policy through resources and information. The objectives and criteria of state grants advance policy goals and the crosscutting principles of sport policy. The state’s role has been significant in raising discussions and demands on ethical conduct (Roiha et al. 2022). Steering by information is largely implemented through state-funded national physical activity programmes, other networks and stakeholders such as the NOC, the Finnish Centre for Integrity in Sports and research institutes.

The European Union (EU) has no competencies in sport-related matters and can only enact conclusions and resolutions. However, other competences (e.g. in the single market) have impacted sport through measures such as case laws by the Court of Justice of the European Union (e.g. the Bosman case). On a practical level, EU cooperation in Finnish sport policy manifests as the MEC’s participation in preparing sport-related matters in the EU and cooperating with international sports organisations. The focus in international cooperation has been on strengthening integrity in sports, prerequisites for civic activity, legislative and administrative development, and issues related to the status of athletes (MEC 2022).

Despite several glorious policy objectives and measures, several evaluations have questioned whether Finland’s central government’s actions fully correspond to the set objectives and have highlighted that the impacts and effectiveness of the actions have not been sufficiently monitored (e.g. NSC 2015). For instance, it has been suggested that state funding mainly reaches those who are already physically active (Itkonen et al. 2018). Therefore, the fundamental question is how to reach the least physically active people, who would benefit the most from increased physical activity. Furthermore, criticisms have been levelled at the level of monitoring fulfilment of grant criteria and their impact, and whether government grants are more like an annual automation that preserves the current structures (NSC 2015, Lehtonen and Stenvall 2019). Lastly, one of the fundamental sport policy dilemmas is identifying the extent to which the government should and can steer civic activity without intervening in its intrinsic autonomy and casting the responsibilities of the public sector to the third sector.

3.4. **Funding**

Public funding for the sports sector is approximately EUR 700 million annually in Finland, of which municipalities account for EUR 550 million and the state for EUR 150 million (Ala-Vähälä et al. 2021).
Table 1. Government funding & trends (not indexed) (MEC 2021b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Funding object</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports civic activity</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal access to sport and physical activity (inc. sports facility construction)</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal sports services</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Institutes</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite sports</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting an active lifestyle</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research/development organisations and education</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports science and research</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other subsections</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>47.1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>154,944</td>
<td>178,562</td>
<td>171,795</td>
<td>159,302</td>
<td>190,729*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The large increase in 2020 is explained by the additional discretionary government grants awarded due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Until recently, the state sports budget almost entirely consisted of National Lottery funds (97% as of 2019), which is revenue outside the universal state budget. The government funding trends for the previous five years are represented in Table 1. State funding for municipal sports services is granted as an unearmarked central government transfer, meaning that municipalities decide how to use the money independently. Funding by private companies through sponsorship has increased over the last decade, from EUR 95 million in 2009 to EUR 162 million in 2019. However, there was a slight reduction in 2020 (129 M EUR), mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sponsor Insight 2021).

Currently, state funding for sports and physical activity is undergoing a historical change. Revenue from the National Lottery increased steadily from the beginning of the 2000s, increasing resources for the sports sector. However, these proceeds started to decrease slightly in 2017, and there was a significant reduction in 2020. This was mainly due to COVID-19 restrictions and stricter requirements for responsibility and preventing harm caused by gambling<sup>2</sup> (Liikanen et al. 2021). Proceeds from gambling activities are expected to decrease further due to responsible gaming measures and international gaming operators. The central government is currently preparing a reform to be enacted at the beginning of 2024, in which funding of the sports sector, and other sectors funded by the lottery will be transferred to the central government’s universal budget. Although dismantling this link between gambling and the funding of civic activities has been widely perceived as positive, the downside could be that the sports sector will need to negotiate for its annual funding as part of the major state budget framework.

Compared to other Nordic countries, public funding for sport and physical activity in Finland is relatively less (€166 per capita) than in Sweden (€185) or Norway (€194) but higher than in Denmark (€139) (Stenbacka et al. 2018). The funding in other Nordic countries has a clear focus compared to Finland, where the state funding is rather scattered, reflecting the bigger picture of sport policy. Funding of elite sport accounts for only a marginal proportion (1%) of the state appropriations to sports and physical activity in Finland, similar to other Nordic countries (1–2%) (ibid.). Statistics reflect that the focus in Nordic societies, including Finland, is on creating preconditions and promoting the physical activity of the entire population rather than allocating public resources for the search of success in international competitions. In contrast to Finland, other Nordic countries have also achieved extensive success in elite sports, which has been explained, among other things, by larger private investments in performance sports (see Storm and Nielsen 2022).

4. Key contemporary issues in sport policy

All the sport policy guidelines highlighted in Section 3.2 share a strong focus on the need to increase the population’s level of physical activity. Although an increasing proportion of the Finnish population engages in sports and exercise, the total amount of physical activity has decreased with diminishing everyday activity. This has led researchers and specialists, slowly followed by sport policymakers, to consider whether this complex challenge can be solved solely by the sports sector...
using traditional sport policy measures. Lately, solutions have been sought through a phenomenon-based cross-administrative approach, as well as evidence-informed policymaking practices. Contemporary sport policy at all levels is also challenged by increased demands for sustainable development.

4.1. Cross-sectoral promotion of physical activity

Traditionally, Finnish sport policy has focused on supporting the population’s prerequisites for engaging in sports and exercise. However, increased attention has recently been given to intervening in the decrease in everyday physical activity (Government Report on Sport Policy 2018). As people’s everyday lives (and physical activity) are mostly beyond the reach of the sports administration’s measures, the sports sector has turned to cross-sectional co-operation. Such a systems thinking approach to tackle a population’s physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour is increasingly recognised internationally (WHO 2015).

A coordination body for sport policy (including representations from 11 of the 12 ministries) was established in 2020 to compile and work on all ministries’ measures related to physical activity (Supplemental material). For example, a method for physical activity ex-ante impact assessment was developed to be integrated into various decision-making processes in public administration (MEC 2020).

The state-financed national On the Move programmes have been the main concrete achievement in developing a cross-sectoral approach over the past decade in Finland. The aim of these programmes is to holistically promote a physically active lifestyle for different age groups in the framework of early childhood education, schools, educational institutions, working life, and services for the elderly (MEC 2021b, pp. 105–109). However, several practical barriers, such as the specific responsibilities and budget processes of each administrative branch, confront this cross-sectoral work. Similar observations are from other European countries, for instance Gelius et al. (2021) recognised room for improvement in regarding the contribution of sectors beyond sport and health, and Van Hoye et al. (2019) indicated cross-sectoral policies being currently at their early stage.

4.2. Evidence-informed policy making

Evidence-informed policy making (EIPM) (e.g. Head 2015) has been discussed for over a decade in Finnish sport policy (Heikkala and Oravainen 2006, Valtonen and Ojajärvi 2013). In addition to the decrease in physical activity, the current decline in National Lottery revenue and the ensuing threat of reduced appropriations for sports have increased the call for better impact monitoring and evaluation.

One objective set by the state sports administration is to strengthen the evidence base in the sector and make use of knowledge effectively in decision-making (Government Budget proposal 2022). At a practical level, many challenges occur in EIPM practices, such as the separate and unclear roles of actors and the lack of public debate and interaction (Valtonen and Ojajärvi 2013). Studies have indicated that the use of evidence is unsystematic and non-transparent (Hämäläinen et al. 2015, Korsberg et al. 2021). Accordingly, development needs have been identified, especially in monitoring and evaluation (Korsberg et al. 2021).

Over the last decade, the MEC has funded the development of a knowledge base on physical activity, with the aim of building a comprehensive research system to monitor physical activity among different population groups. Further, state funding has been used to launch several population research projects, such as the PIILO study for small children, Move! measurements and LIITU (a study for school-age children and the youth), and Kunnon Kartta (a study for adults and the elderly).

Research evidence on the amount of physical activity (and any changes) is currently widely available in Finland. However, the knowledge base on the impacts and effectiveness of different sport policy measures remains inadequate (e.g. NSC 2015). Public spending on promoting physical
activity is strongly justified by its effectiveness in reducing societal costs. The Ministry of Finance (2021) has called for higher-quality evidence on the cost effectiveness of different measures, which has created pressure on sport policy to develop EIPM practices. These include broader development related to multiple perspectives, such as human competences, documentation, communication, and monitoring and evaluation (Korsberg et al. 2021).

### 4.3. Sustainable development

Finland has committed to implementing the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 aiming for sustainable development. From an international perspective, Finland has ambitious sustainability objectives (Government Programme 2019), which also affect the sports sector.

Environmental perspectives have become inescapable in sports. Traffic related to sports engagement constitutes the main environmental load in the sports sector (Mäkinen 2019). Regardless of urbanisation, Finland is a sparsely populated country, which challenges local governments to consider the placement of sports facilities and event locations based on sustainable transport connections. Due to climate change, warming winters in southern and central Finland present a challenge to certain traditional winter sports, such as cross-country skiing. The changed environment has caused discussions on whether all kinds of sports will be or should be achievable in the future through various artificial, nature-consuming solutions. According to Roiha et al. (2022), environmental responsibility is considered in state sport policy, although not comprehensively. Moreover, central government funding and legislation have been identified as key drivers of sustainable development in both the municipal sector and sports associations.

Equality and non-discrimination considerations have received increasing attention since the 1960s in Finnish society, which has also affected sport policy. Changes include Sport for All approaches and the MEC’s efforts to embed and disseminate gender equality and non-discrimination ideology through means such as policy funding (Pyykkönen 2016) or requiring all sports organisations that receive government grants to create an equality and non-discrimination plan (MEC 2021a). Furthermore, the revised Sports Act (2015) and other sport policy guidelines (Section 3.3) emphasise equality and non-discrimination as cross-cutting principles. Regardless of long-term development work, various equality and non-discrimination problems clearly exist in Finland’s sports culture on different levels, such as inequality, harassment, and even abuse. Often, discrimination occurs against minorities, namely people with disabilities, and gender and sexual minorities (Hakanen et al. 2019, Kwok et al. 2019, Mikkonen et al. 2021, Lehtonen et al. 2022, Mikkonen 2022). Simultaneously, as the dark side of sport is becoming ever more visible through the media, public authorities, sponsors, and the public are increasingly expecting ethical conduct in both grassroots-level operations and elite sports. This challenges the traditional narrative of sport being morally and ethically entirely good. The legitimacy of (elite) sport may be under threat if the ethical norms of society are not respected (see Storm and Nielsen 2022).

### 5. Reflection on future dilemmas

By international comparison, Finland has an active population in terms of exercising and volunteer- ing (European Commission 2018). Sport for All ideology is widely supported; civic activities are vital, and they are seen as a cornerstone of a democratic state. However, various challenges still exist that may hamper the achievement of sport policy goals in the future.

The development of Finnish sport policy has built on the confrontation of two opposing ideals. This started in the early 1900s between the leftist and rightist sports movements, continued with occasions such as power plays between the state and sports organisations, and now manifests in discussions such as professionalisation versus civic sport. However, tensions and confrontations as such are not unique, constituting a natural backdrop for policymaking in debates and discussions between two or more ideals. Finnish sport policy demonstrates that the content and characteristics
of confrontations can shape the continuum of the political sphere. As confrontations tend to remain in structures and cultures, at least to some extent, unsolved dissents can haunt policymaking in ways that are not always visible or conscious.

Finnish sport policy has been characterised by a series of forced reforms (Section 2), resulting in instability and a rather scattered sports sector. Further, the sector seems to be in a constant reformation process, where structural changes are used as a cure to improve the flaws of the previous system or tackle contemporary socio-cultural and structural challenges, such as physical inactivity or the lack of success in elite sports. Partly explained by the state’s strong role in sport policy, the paradigmatic development of the sports government parallels that of the central government, representing cyclic development typical of the Finnish public sector (Stenvall et al. 2016). The centralisation reforms of 2012 and 2017 resulted in the NOC’s becoming the umbrella organisation for all aspects of Finnish sport (elite sport, Sport for All, children and youth sport). However, the sports sector remains rather scattered, with several independent actors delivering small pieces of Finnish sport policy (Section 3). Furthermore, the roles and responsibilities of the actors remain somewhat unclear. The current context and sports system, in which sport policy is made and implemented in networks, require a shared target setting and responsibility between different actors. However, due to the aforementioned confusion regarding roles, taking responsibility may be difficult. This could cause challenges for policymaking, especially for achieving policy goals in the future (see also Lehtonen et al. 2021 in an elite sports context).

Apart from decentralised shared responsibility, the current context and system require leadership (Lehtonen et al. 2021). Currently, the state plays a strong role through resource steering. However, its role as a leader of sport policy appears rather weak. For example, the state is the leader of sport policy programmes (e.g. Schools on the Move), but its role as a leader in relation to actions, such as influencing others to achieve a change or a common goal, or more concrete measures, such as evaluating the effectiveness of different policy actions or rewarding/punishing through funding, appears mild. However, taking leadership is controversial. Although the government recognises the autonomy of sports organisations as free civic activities, it also seeks to steer NGOs to support the achievement of vast societal objectives.

Currently, the state acts in accordance with what is expected of a modern welfare state (guiding, instructing, and acting more in the periphery). However, current sport policy calls for debate on the changed role and position of the anterior sports movement (after sports organisation reforms) and the role of the NOC. The NOC’s position as the leader of all dimensions of sport and physical activity was strengthened in the latest reform. However, the latest reforms faded the democratic elements of the sports movement, and the status of the NOC as the democratic representative of sports organisations diminished (Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020). Moreover, faced with challenges of legitimacy and with no allocation of further financial resources, the NOC’s position as a leader of Finnish sport and physical activity is difficult. The NOC does not have the democratic, bottom-up position of power that is common in the Nordic sports system (Henry 2009) or a legitimate top-down position of power, as the state holds the financial resources and legitimate power. This results in a situation where policy is decided by the state with a top-down approach, although no one is clearly leading or managing the implementation of policy processes or collectively highlighting sports organisations’ needs and perceptions. Therefore, it is crucial to improve the openness of discussions between the state and sports organisations and to clearly delineate the roles of different actors in Finnish sport.

Notes

1. It should be noted that adapted physical activity and disability sports have a long history in Finland, which started after WWII. However, a detailed analysis of this sector is beyond the scope of this paper and will be examined in a future publication by Lehtonen and Saari (forthcoming 2022).

2. Since 2020, the decline in gambling revenue for the sports sector has been compensated by central government universal budget funding.
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Authors' contributions

Initial idea MM; MM and MK were the principal designers and writers of the manuscript with guidance from KL and JS. MM wrote the draft of the chapters 2., 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 5. and MK of the chapters 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 4. MM and MK together wrote the draft for chapter 3.4. While revising both MM and MK made important contribution to all chapters. KL and JS critically revised the manuscript and made important contributions to the structure and content. All authors have accepted the final version of the manuscript.

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The Paradox of Gender Diversity, Organizational Outcomes, and Recruitment in the Boards of National Governing Bodies of Sport

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Abstract: Diversity have become a desired value in sport organizations. However, regardless of the aspiration towards more gender diverse leadership, women leaders remain a minority. Diversity and its impact on group performance has also increased interest among scholars. Building on information/decision-making theory and the concept of the right fit, this paper introduces a new theoretical model that sheds light on the contradiction of gender-biased recruitment/selection processes in sports organization boards and the impact of diversity on organizational outcomes. The model is partly tested with survey data from the Finnish National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs).

This paper shows that, because of the gender-biased recruitment/selection process, the benefits of gender-diverse organization boards may not be fully actualized, which not only affects the functioning of sports organizations, but may also limit women's inclusion on sports organization boards.

Keywords: diversity; gender; sports governance; information/decision-making theory; recruitment

1. Introduction

Discussions and debates on gender equality and under-representation of women in sport leadership have increasingly included the diversity perspective. Diversity has become a desired value in sports organizations (Knoppers et al. 2021; Spaaij et al. 2020), and previous research has also shown that gender diversity on organization boards brings better organizational outcomes (e.g., Lee and Cunningham 2019). Regardless of the growing appreciation of (gender) diversity, women leaders in sports remain under-represented (Adriaanse 2016; Council of Europe 2020). This under-representation has received growing attention in academia, especially among sports management (e.g., Elling et al. 2019) and public management scholars (e.g., Breslin et al. 2017; Crosby and Bryson 2018; Park 2020). The literature has often focused on explaining the reasons for the under-representation of women (see, e.g., Burton and Leberman (2017) for a review within sport management). Furthermore, studies have considered, for instance, the impact of gender and diversity on organizational outcomes (e.g., Adriaanse and Schofield 2014; Gaston et al. 2020; Lee and Cunningham 2019; Park 2020; Suzuki and Avellaneda 2018; Wicker et al. 2020), as well as board selection processes (e.g., Elling et al. 2019; Hoye and Cuskelly 2007; Stenling et al. 2020). Previous studies have also given evidence that the recruitment processes in sports leadership are gendered; that is, only certain types of people possessing certain (masculine) traits and qualities are seen as a proper ‘fit’ for the organization boards (e.g., Adriaanse and Schofield 2014; Claringbould and Knoppers 2007; Hovden 2000). Only women who possess these qualities or who can adapt to the mould of these demands are considered proper candidates. This causes a paradoxical situation; organizations value and aim for diversity, but at the same time select leaders who fit to the present frame of a proper leader.
The Paradox of Gender Diversity, Organizational Outcomes, and Recruitment in the Boards of National Governing Bodies of Sport

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The aim of this study is to (1) shed light on this paradox and its impact on board governance and (2) test whether gender impacts board member’s perspectives regarding board
governance (whether the men and the women board members bring different perspectives into the board). This research problem is approached through theoretical development and empirical analysis. This study answers Crosby and Bryson’s (2018) call for more attention on gender within public leadership research, and extends the current literature by introducing a new theoretical model of the contradicting intersection of (gender-biased) recruitment processes and diversity, as well as the impact that this contradiction has on the diversity of perspectives regarding board governance in sports organization boards. Furthermore, this paper broadens the literature and transformative policymaking using quantitative methods, which are minimal in research on gender equality and sports leadership (Elling 2015; Elling et al. 2019, pp. 188–89; Greene 2012; Hughes and Cohen 2012). Survey data collected from Finnish National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) board members are used partly to test the model and its assumptions, namely the variance of perspectives on board governance between male and female board members. The research builds on information/decision-making perspective, have guided most of the studies on gender and organizational outcomes (Lee and Cunningham 2019; Nowy and Breuer 2019; Wicker et al. 2020).

The social categorization perspective, including similarity/attraction theory (Byrne 1969) and social categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987), suggests that diversity is not beneficial to group outcomes (Williams and O’Reilly 1998). Similarity/attraction theory claims that demographic similarity between group members increases their communication, because the group members feel more comfortable and perhaps more connected owing to their shared demographic characteristics. Therefore, the group members are more likely to communicate with each other and the increased communication enhances group outcomes (Wiersesma and Bantel 1992; Williams and O’Reilly 1998). Social categorization theory defends that individuals compare themselves to others to acquire or maintain self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987). In this comparison, other people are categorized into in-groups and out-groups (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). People sharing similar characteristics (e.g., gender) belong to the in-group, whereas people with different characteristics belong to the out-group (Cunningham 2004). This categorization decreases the integration and communication between the in- and out-groups, which may negatively influence the functioning of the whole group and its outcomes (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987). Accordingly, homogenous groups may perform better than heterogeneous groups (Horwitz and Horwitz 2007).

The other theoretical perspective, information/decision-making perspective, claims that diversity has a positive impact on organizational outcomes. The information/decision-making perspective (Williams and O’Reilly 1998) suggests that diverse groups consist of people with different backgrounds and life experiences. These differences are likely to affect how people approach problems and what kind of information and expertise they have, thus influencing which decisions are made and how (Nowy and Breuer 2019). To the extent these varied perspectives are considered and valued in decision-making processes, the group outcomes should improve even if diversity negatively influences the group’s functioning (Williams and O’Reilly 1998). The information/decision-making perspective is consistent with other theoretical frameworks such as the categorization-elaboration model (CEM) by van Knippenberg et al. (2004) and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). CEM, basing on the integration of information/decision-making and
social categorization perspectives, defends that the number of perspectives and ideas may increase with diversity. Social categorization may disrupt the elaboration of these perspectives. However, upon elaborating the number of ideas and perspectives in a group, group performance should improve. The vast amount of information available forces the board to process that information more thoroughly and consider wider perspectives in its decision-making (Williams and O’Reilly 1998). Resource dependence theory is based on the idea that diverse individuals provide different resources such as varied skills, experiences, values, networks, and access, which is beneficial for the board and thus organization’s performance (Hafsi and Turgut 2013; Hillman et al. 2007; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).

Previous studies have cited contradicting results on whether diversity has a positive or negative result on organizational results in (sport) organizations (Dula et al. 2020; Lee and Cunningham 2019; Milliken and Martins 1996; Wicker et al. 2020). For instance, studies have found gender diversity to decrease organizational problems (Wicker and Breuer 2013; Wicker et al. 2012, 2020) and increase organizational outcomes owing to, for instance, learning from others, role modelling, idea generation (Cunningham 2008), and higher decision-making and problem-solving capabilities (Lee and Cunningham 2019). However, contradicting results have also emerged showing diversity to have a negative impact (e.g., Brandes et al. 2009; Timmerman 2000). Lee and Cunningham’s (2019) meta-analysis to clarify the inconclusive findings found a significant positive impact of gender diversity on organizational outcomes, thus supporting the information/decision-making perspective. This current research thus applies the information/decision-making perspective. It must, however, be noted here that diversity per se may not improve organizational performance (c.f. Williams and O’Reilly 1998). Studies have shown that how diversity is managed and the impact of process variables (e.g. creativity, cohesion, conflict) and context factors (e.g., team tenure, complexity of the task, team’s geographical cohesion) influence whether and how diversity impacts the group’s performance (DiStefano and Maznevski 2000; Stahl and Maznevski 2021). Furthermore, there are naturally several kinds of nuances regarding what the negative or positive impact is depending on the context. For instance, the primary goal of the organization, who measures the impact, how it is measured, and what is valued by whom. In this study, as we refer to positive impact and improved group performance, we refer to the aforementioned processes and capabilities found in previous studies that have the potential to positively influence group performance and ultimately organizational outcomes if well harnessed in the organization (e.g., decision-making and problem-solving capabilities, possibility to learn from others, idea generation). Based on previous literature and the information/decision-making perspective, the following hypothesis is formed:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** Women and men board members’ perspectives regarding key constructs of board governance are different.

### 2.2. Recruitment and the Right Fit

NGB boards across the globe are homogenous, with the majority of board members and especially chairs older (white) men. This also applies to Finland (Särkivuori et al. 2020). Previous research has shown that, when recruiting new members to sports boards, only certain types of people possessing certain traits are seen as what Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) conceptualize a proper ‘fit’. The perceived proper fit consists of gendered and socially constructed ideas of qualifications, skills, traits, knowledge, characteristics, and needs, which are often not based on systematic identification of the board’s needs, but rather on the ways the present board members (i.e., men) have qualified themselves for board membership (Adriaanse and Schofield 2014; Claringbould and Knoppers 2007; Hovden 2000, 2010; Knoppers et al. 2021). However, sports boards’ selection and recruitment processes are assumed to be gender neutral and of good quality, which removes a gender balance as an objective in these processes (Claringbould and Knoppers 2007; Sotiriadou and De Haan 2019). Even if increasing the number of women on the board is seen as improving the board’s functions, the present board members may doubt the quality of
women candidates and sustain the current recruitment/selection procedures and policies to control the entrance of women into decision-making positions (Claringbould and van Liere 2019; Sotiriadou et al. 2017). Hovden (2000) characterized this fit as a ‘male heavyweight’ profile. Because only individuals (women and men) who fit this profile are included in male networks and selected as candidates for leadership positions, the board’s existing values are guaranteed and reproduced, which leads to the board staying homogenous (Hovden 2000, 2010; Sotiriadou et al. 2017). Men as the majority can frame the recruitment and selection processes of the board members, and thus maintain the male-dominated culture, into which their own habitus better fits (Knoppers et al. 2021; Piggott et al. 2019). Women aiming for board membership then tend to distance themselves from their gender and prove their ‘fit’ in order to be seen as possible candidates (Claringbould and Knoppers 2007; cf. Hovden et al. 2019). Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) suggested that, because only women who are considered to be the right fit (good education, high-level jobs, no young children, flexible time schedule, behave ‘properly’, not openly feminist, substantial knowledge of and commitment to their sport) are selected as board members, homologous reproduction (preference to select a member of the dominant group because they are seen as the best fit; Kanter 1977) can occur regardless of if members of a subordinate group (in this research women) are involved. Following the logic of the right fit, this research proposes that, if only individuals who are seen as the right fit are selected to boards (i.e., homologous reproduction occurs regardless of selecting members of a subordinate group), the variance in perspectives that the information/decision-making perspective emphasizes may not reach its full potential (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Theoretical model of the contradiction of diversity and gender-biased recruitment/selection processes of sport organization boards.
Another interesting angle related to fit is people in- and outside of a given sport. Substantial knowledge and commitment to a sport is often considered one quality a sports organization board member should possess (e.g., Claringbould and Knoppers 2007; Claringbould and van Liere 2019; Sotiriadou et al. 2017). People who have been attached to the sport and lived within that sport’s community for years may well have socialized into the community. In other words, adapted the ‘right way’ to be and think in that community. For this reason, the similarity of thoughts and values of the sport’s community may decrease perspective variance regardless of gender. Therefore, this research also proposes that individuals of either gender coming to an NGB board only from the NGB’s sport do not bring great variance of perspectives on board governance, whereas individuals coming from in- and outside of the sport have more variance in their perspectives. Figure 1 summarizes this proposed theoretical model. Based on the literature on the right ‘fit’ and recruitment, the second hypothesis is formed:

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** Women and men board members’ perspectives regarding key constructs of board governance are similar.

### 3. Context—The Finnish Sport Sector and National Governing Bodies of Sport

The sports sector and specifically Finnish NGBs serve as an interesting context for this research. Regardless of sports being an important part of society—for instance, involving more volunteers than any other non-profit sector in Europe and having a substantial financial impact on the European economy—the consideration of sports organizations within public management studies is very rare (Groeneveld 2009). Finland has tried to lever gender equality on a policy level, and in general, Finnish society values gender equality, with Finland rated as a top country in gender equality (World Economic Forum 2021). However, women leaders in sports remain a minority, even in Finland. Even if the number of women leaders in general has increased in Finland, the sports sector falls behind in this regard. The higher the position in a sport, the less women there are (see, e.g., Aalto-Nevalainen 2018; Mäkinen et al. 2019). On a societal level, the Finnish government and sports policy have tried to leverage gender diversity within leadership positions in sports. Legislation, different criteria and public grant policies all support increasing the number of women in sports leadership. According to Turpeinen and Hakamäki (2018), the progress of gender diversity in Finnish sport leadership has been slow, especially within the third and private sectors. For instance, between 1995 and 2017, the number of women on NGB boards rose from 16% to 32%. However, when looking at the development achieved this millennium, the number of women on NGB boards has only risen 2%, from 30% to 32% (Turpeinen and Hakamäki 2018). In the latest report, Särkivuori et al. (2020) stated that 28% of the board members and 18% of the chairs of the NGB boards are women.

NGBs play an important role in the Finnish sports structure. They are responsible for youth, amateur, and elite sports in Finland, and thus have the power to steer and organize sports activities that affect people of all ages and genders. The NGBs act as umbrella organizations for specific sports and manage competitions, rules, regulations, and championships for their sport. As a system, Finnish organized sports represent the European sports model, also called the pyramid structure, where NGBs act as links to certain sports in combining international and grassroot practices (Henry 2009). Statistics collected in 2019 showed that the boards of eight Finnish NGBs (of the total 76) consist of only one gender (seven of only men, one of only women), three boards have a 50/50 gender ratio, and almost half (37) of the NGBs have less than 20% women board members (Särkivuori et al. 2020).

### 4. Materials and Methods

This study’s data consists of an online survey targeted at all Finnish NGBs’ ($n = 74$) board members ($n = 590$). The survey data were collected from 29 October to 15 November 2020 as part of a broader research project focusing on the NGBs and their board governance...
(e.g., the role of the board, strategic board practices, and future know-how needs). The survey questions were based on 17 interviews with NGB board members, executive directors, and former NGB board members/executive personnel. The aim of the interviews was to develop a preliminary understanding. Furthermore, acknowledging that board governance is contextual, the interviewees themselves identified key constructs of board governance in the context of Finnish NGBs that were the base of the following survey. In this paper, five key constructs (1. transparency and openness, 2. skills and capabilities needed in future in NGBs, 3. board composition, 4. board work, and 5. impact on future strategic decisions) and background factors are used to test the variance in perspectives regarding board governance between men and women board members. The survey measures individual board members’ perspectives on their own board’s board governance. The survey was made with Surveypal. The link attached with information on the research project, consent form, and participants’ rights was sent to the respondents’ e-mail addresses, which were collected mainly from the NGBs’ webpages. As the survey did not include matters considered sensitive, separate approval from an independent ethics committee was not needed. In addition, two inquiries were sent to board chairmen to complete the list of e-mail addresses. After these inquiries, 19 connections (e-mail addresses) were missing (3.1%) and the survey was sent to 590 board members. After the first distribution, 47 addresses were retrieved/returned because of incorrect e-mail addresses. Eight of these belonged to people who were either not involved on their board anymore or whose address was no longer in use. These eight addresses were rejected and the survey was sent to the remaining 39 fixed addresses. The loss of e-mail addresses and queries was 1.5%. The total number of respondents was 197 (response rate 33%), of which 44 (22.3%) were women, 150 (76.1%) were men, and three (1.5%) chose the gender option ‘I do not want to specify’. Women respondents (22.3%) were under-represented when compared with the overall share (28%) of women on the NGBs (cf. Särkivuori et al. 2020).

The survey items relevant to this research (the five key constructs and background factors) were analysed with IBM SPSS software. Most of the items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = fully disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = I do not know; 4 = agree; 5 = fully agree). The data were analysed with independent sample t-tests and Fisher’s exact test. Answers of 3 to items represented I do not know, and were excluded from the independent sample t-test, but included in crosstabulations. The responses of some items were not entirely within a normal distribution. These items were then tested with a Mann–Whitney U-test, which confirmed that the items had no statistical difference.

5. Results
5.1. Background Factors

According to the survey, women tend to have higher scholarly education compared with men. In total, 61.4% of the women and 54% of the men had a university-level background. The difference between men and women found in this survey is not statistically significant \((p = 0.906)\). However, the findings show parallel trends compared with previous research on employed sports leaders in Finland (Aalto-Nevalainen 2018) and Finnish population in general (Statistics Finland 2019). When looking at the experience gathered from voluntary positions on different organization boards, 70.7% of men had over 10 years of experience, compared with women at 47.7%. This difference between men and women is statistically significant \((p = 0.013)\). Another factor related to years of experience is age. The survey shows that the majority of women (59%) were less than 45 years old, whereas the male NGB members tended to be older (73.3% were over 46 years old and 18% over 63). This finding is also statistically significant \((p < 0.001)\).

The survey provides indicators that men hold the highest leadership positions. From the results, 21.3% of the men and 11.4% of the women respondents were chairs. Additionally, 16% of the men and 13.6% of the women respondents were vice-chairs. These differences between men and women are not statistically significant \((p = 0.520)\). However, the findings support those of previous research, in which men tend to hold the highest lead-
ership positions in sports governance in Europe and Finland (Adriaanse 2019; Särkivuori et al. 2020).

According to the survey, women tend to be board members in larger NGBs. Specifically, 43.2% of the female respondents were in NGBs that have total expenditures over 1.5 million euros, whereas the male respondents’ responses were divided more equally between different-sized NGBs. From the results, 36% of the men were board members in NGBs with less than 0.5 million euro expenditures, 34% in those with 0.5–1 million euro expenditures, and 30% in NGBs with over 1.5 million euro expenditures. In contrast, 34.1% of the female respondents were board members in NGBs with less than 0.5 million euro total expenditures and 22.7% in NGBs with 0.5–1.5 million euro total expenditures. This difference between men and women is not statistically significant ($p = 0.207$). Another variable in the survey indicating the NGBs’ size was the number of board members. The difference between men and women is not statistically significant ($p = 0.109$). However, the findings give indications similar to the NGBs’ total expenditures; that is, women tend to work in larger NGBs. As such, 15.9% of the female respondents worked on a board with 11 or more board members, compared with the men’s rate of 6%. Additionally, 77.3% of the women and 82.7% of the men worked on boards with 7–10 members, and 6.8% of the women and 11.3% of the men worked on boards with 3–6 members.

5.2. Transparency and Openness

Survey items regarding transparency and openness considered the atmosphere of the board work, recruitment processes, and possibility to test one’s own thoughts within the board (Table 1). The data indicate that men’s and women’s perspectives are rather similar, though women have slightly more negative opinions about the openness and transparency of the board work. However, statistical differences are not present between the men and women for any items. Interestingly, for the item ‘I think the recruitment process for board members is open and transparent’, approximately one-fifth of all respondents chose the option I do not know.

| Question                                      | Man     | Woman   | Fisher test | t-test  | SD         | M     | n   | Fisher test | t-test  | SD         | M     | n   | Fisher test | t-test  | SD         | M     | n   | Fisher test | t-test  | SD         | M     | n   | Fisher test | t-test  | SD         | M     | n   | Fisher test | t-test  | SD         | M     | n   | Fisher test |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|---------|-------------|---------|------------|-------|-----|-------------|---------|------------|-------|-----|-------------|---------|------------|-------|-----|-------------|---------|------------|-------|-----|-------------|---------|------------|-------|-----|-------------|---------|------------|-------|-----|-------------|---------|------------|-------|-----|-------------|---------|------------|-------|-----|-------------|---------|------------|-------|-----|-------------|
| The board’s work atmosphere is open.          | I       | I       | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   |
| I think the recruitment process for board members is open and transparent. | I       | I       | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           |
| I have the opportunity to test my thoughts regarding the operations of our National Governing Body of Sport (NGB) on the board. | I       | I       | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           | I       | I          | I     | I   | I           |

5.3. Skills and Capabilities Needed in Future

Items regarding skills and capabilities needed in future considered the respondents’ understanding of national and international sports policy, openness and transparency, trust and interaction, and negotiation skills (Table 2). The results do not show great variance between the male and female respondents. Furthermore, no statistical difference emerged between the men and women for any of the items.
Table 2. Skills and capabilities needed in future in NGBs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Fisher test</th>
<th>Fully agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Fully disagree</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Fisher test</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>W</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of national sports policy</td>
<td>0.656</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td>0.774</td>
<td>0.890</td>
<td>0.620</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of international sports policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9.30%</td>
<td>18.20%</td>
<td>6.70%</td>
<td>6.80%</td>
<td>22.00%</td>
<td>22.70%</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
<td>15.90%</td>
<td>24.70%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>22.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of interaction and negotiation skills</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing trust between board members</td>
<td>0.360</td>
<td>0.816</td>
<td>0.969</td>
<td>0.983</td>
<td>0.824</td>
<td>0.659</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness and transparency between board members</td>
<td>0.347</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>0.596</td>
<td>0.609</td>
<td>0.581</td>
<td>0.482</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness and transparency between board members</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

M = man, W = woman.

5.4. Board Composition

For survey items concerning whether boards should have sport-specific knowledge and in principle represent NGB members, the men's and women's answers are similar (Table 3). A statistical difference was not found between the male and female respondents. An interesting notion is that 27.3% of the men and 22.7% of the women chose the option I do not know for the item 'Our NGB’s board must represent general knowledge of exercise and sports'.

Table 3. Board composition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Fisher test</th>
<th>Fully agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Fully disagree</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Fisher test</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>W</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our NGB’s board must principally represent our members.</td>
<td>0.658</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td>0.774</td>
<td>0.890</td>
<td>0.620</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our NGB’s board must represent general knowledge of exercise and sports.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9.30%</td>
<td>18.20%</td>
<td>6.70%</td>
<td>6.80%</td>
<td>22.00%</td>
<td>22.70%</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
<td>15.90%</td>
<td>24.70%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>22.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The board must have substantial knowledge of the NGB’s specific sport (e.g., understanding of the competition system, special features of the sport). *</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* non-normal distribution; M = man; W = woman.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.5. Board Work

Opinions regarding board work itself were measured with six variables. The variables considered knowledge-based operations and a shared vision of equality, non-discrimination, and disciplinary actions (Table 4). The results are rather similar, though the women tend to be more critical of board operations. A slight statistical difference emerged for the variable ‘The board has shared views on how information should be interpreted’. The mean for women is 3.41 and for men is 3.64. For the item ‘In the board’s decision-making, choices are made between different solutions based on knowledge’, 55.30% of the men agreed and 26.7% fully agreed with the statement, whereas 29.5% of the women agreed and 25% fully
agreed with it. Regarding other items, no statistical difference emerged between the men and women.

Table 4. Board work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Fully agree</th>
<th>Fully disagree</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Fully disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>t-test</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.943</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.218</td>
<td>0.264</td>
<td>0.423</td>
<td>0.989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.833</td>
<td>1.149</td>
<td>0.914</td>
<td>1.027</td>
<td>0.842</td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td>0.821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisher test</td>
<td>0.168</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>0.530</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.202</td>
<td>0.508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>150</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.6. Impact on Future Strategic Decisions

The men’s and women’s results regarding factors that influence strategic decisions are also similar (Table 5). Again, the male and female respondents’ results show a very similar pattern and no statistical difference when comparing means or crosstabulations.

Table 5. Impact on future strategic decisions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Fisher test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State sports policy guidelines</td>
<td>0.972</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>0.706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of public funding for sports</td>
<td>0.964</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>0.420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and grant policies *</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>0.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability issues in sports</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.312</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(equality, non-discrimination,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sustainable development, and so on)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Discussion

The theoretical model built in this paper suggests that the gender-biased selection processes of members (based on the concept of the right fit) on sports organization boards may limit the variance of perspectives on board governance between men and women board members, and ultimately the organizational outcomes of Finnish NGBs. This study’s analysed survey data support this model and hypothesis 2: the perspectives of men and women board members on key constructs of board governance tend to be rather similar. Therefore hypothesis 1 proposing the perspectives of men and women board members being rather different is disproven. For most of the items measured, there was no statistical
difference between men and women, and in items in which there was a statistical difference between genders, it was rather small. This section discusses the differences between the male and female board members’ backgrounds in relation to previous research to provide further understanding. Additionally, it presents biased selection processes and their impact on gender equality and perspective diversity.

6.1. Background Factors

The proportion of women chairs and vice-chairs is lower than the proportion of women board members. Not only does this mean that men remain with the most powerful positions in NGBs, but it may also prevent women from achieving higher national or international positions in sports organizations. The lack of women as chairs of sports organization boards results in fewer women having experience in chair positions in sports organizations. Experience in leadership positions is often one important factor that committees assess when selecting new board members or chairs, especially in high-level and powerful organizations. Furthermore, it seems that women may have more opportunities in larger NGBs compared with smaller ones. Larger NGBs, such as the Finnish national Football Association (FA), are under greater public scrutiny compared with minor NGBs. Public pressure may then be an external force guiding NGBs to be more inclusive. Meanwhile, with more resources to use, larger NGBs may have more opportunities to focus on gender equality and plan and execute actions and policies that promote more inclusive organizations, which are necessary to progress, as sports still form a gendered space (e.g., Burton and Leberman 2017). There may also be a shift in the cultural climate; that is, some NGBs have noticed the growth potential in girl and woman players, athletes, and hobbyists that may foster women’s positions in leadership (e.g., the FA’s strategic decisions to seek growth especially from girl and woman actors in sports, as elaborated by (Rinnetmäki 2020) in the FA’s strategy blog). Research has often argued that men’s dominance in sports leadership exists because women lack specific and necessary substantial experience (i.e., experience from men’s elite sports). Former male athletes also possess more symbolic capital that legitimates their role as leaders, which former female athletes lack (Knoppers et al. 2021). However, as more attention is given to increasing the number of girls and women in sports, naturally, with the same argument, one could assume that the need for individuals with specific substantial knowledge of women’s sports would also increase. This could inspire more women to gather leadership experience in sports, which is needed for them to climb towards higher leadership positions in sports. However, as previous research has shown, several different factors affect gender inequality in sports leadership (see, e.g., Burton and Leberman 2017). For instance, Knoppers et al. (2021) evidenced that diversity as a value on sports organization boards may not be internalized. Women on boards are not seen as adding value to board work, while increasing the number of women as participants in sports is considered a valid means of increasing economic and human capital. Therefore, it remains to be seen if this shift in the strategic attention of some NGBs affects the inclusion of women in sports leadership.

Men also tend to have more experience with voluntary leadership positions. In Finland, term limits vary between different NGBs (and other organizations). Some have a fixed limit of, for instance, two terms, while others have no limit at all. The lack of term limits may well be one factor influencing the absence of women on boards, especially in smaller NGBs, where governance practices may not have been given that much attention. The lack of term limits benefits men, because men are the majority on sports boards and can hold their seats for long periods of time (Pfister and Radtke 2009). This prevents younger women and men from achieving board positions, as positions do not become available until the older members decide to step down, which hinders the formation of gender-balanced boards and cultures. Another factor that may partly explain the gap in the years of experience between men and women is age. The majority of the women respondents in this study were less than 45 years old, whereas the men tended to be older. To note, first, the younger age of women does not allow them as many years to gather experience as does the
older age of men. Second, the younger age of female board members can indicate a slow, positive change in the culture of sports and sports leadership towards gender inclusivity. Even if the change has been slow, especially within decision-making positions (Fasting et al. 2014; Turpeinen and Hakamäki 2018), there have been some improvements regarding gender inclusivity in sports. Therefore, younger women may be more willing to reach for sports leadership positions. They may also see leadership positions as more ‘normal’ and achievable for women because of the changing culture in sports and sports organizations, and because of previous role models (i.e., women who have already achieved leadership positions in sports).

6.2. Perspectives of Male and Female Board Members on Board Governance

This survey’s results showed that the perspectives of the male and female board members on board governance are rather similar. On the one hand, this shows that, once on the board, the perspectives women bring in are not so radical or different that they would oppose the male board members. Following Kanter’s (1977) logic, a woman board member’s radical/different perspective could lead to all women being seen as difficult and hence them not being selected for board membership. On the other hand, women are still a minority on sports organization boards. In the context of Finnish NGBs, there are no obstacles to increase the number of women leaders. First, legislation, sports, and gender equality policies and grant policies all support increasing gender diversity. For instance, all NGBs must have a gender equality plan to support gender diversity to be eligible for public funding. Second, the number of women leaders in general is increasing. Third, women and girls are becoming athletes and players in the same sports as men. However, female sports leaders are still rare. Scrutinizing the recruitment/selection process of board members in Finnish NGBs is out of the scope of this paper. We do know that the criteria set for new members varies between different NGBs, as does the selection process itself (e.g., nomination committee, open recruitment, self-selection, election) (Lehtonen and Stenvall 2021). However, we do not know which of these procedures are the most used, who uses them, and how these may impact the concept of the right fit and board homogeneity. This offers an interesting venue for further research. In this study, we have chosen to base our understanding on the concept of the right fit in the board’s recruitment/selection processes and the related literature. These have shown that, in recruitment/selection processes, women are not seen as the right fit to lead sports organizations, and if they are, they share masculine ‘heavyweight’ profiles with the present, male board members (e.g., Adriaanse and Schofield 2014; Claringbould and Knoppers 2007; Hovden 2000). The model presented in this paper argues that this similarity in perspectives caused by gender-biased recruitment/selection processes may have a negative impact on board governance and ultimately the board’s success. Previous research has cited that variance, such as that in gender, improves the outcomes of sports organizations (e.g., Lee and Cunningham 2019). If only individuals who resemble the existing board members are selected for board membership, the positive impacts of gender diversity are not actualized. Could this absent perceived benefit of gender diversity partly explain the under-representation of women leaders in sports? Further, if only women, who are similar enough to the present board members, are selected to sports organization boards, the benefits of gender diversity may become hidden. Therefore, it may be easier to choose a person who resembles oneself even more (i.e., a man) than a woman who is not perceived as bringing the board any greater benefit.

NGB boards do acknowledge the importance of diversity (Lehtonen and Stenvall 2021). However, they view diversity more from a business angle instead of one of, for instance, gender or multiculturalism. Having a background in the board’s sport is important for a board member, but if the candidate possesses a certain business background (e.g., law, finance), the necessity of the sporting background may decrease. Board members see, for instance, a marketing, financing, or corporation background as a chance to bring new knowledge and perspectives, and thus new resources, onto the board, whereas gender
is not considered a quality that brings new value into the board (Lehtonen and Stenvall 2021). Knoppers et al. (2021) echoed this idea; adding women to the board of a sports organization is not seen as adding symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Another interesting angle emerging from the present literature on the right ‘fit’ (e.g., Claringbould and Knoppers 2007) and that Lehtonen and Stenvall (2021) reported is that sports leaders view sports as, for the most part, a business rather than a matter enhancing citizen health and well-being, even if the importance of sports is often argued with both, as sports contribute monetary and societal value to society. Besides elite sports, NGBs are responsible for grassroots and sports club activities. They thereby have the power to steer and organize sports activities that affect people of all ages and genders, not only elite sports or sports as businesses. This notion is important, as the labour market is already segmented vertically (and horizontally) by gender and age. Girls are more interested in traditionally feminine sectors, such as health and social sectors, whereas boys prefer traditionally masculine sectors, including technology, banking, and finance (Talous ja Nuoret TAT 2021). If this valuation of sports mainly as a business continues in NGBs and NGB boards, the reproduction of the tight sports leader profile may continue unchanged, creating fewer opportunities for women in the future owing to them not fitting the preferred profile.

7. Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature on sports governance, policy, and gender by introducing a new theoretical model to explain the paradox emerging from sports organizations’ aspirations to increase gender diversity and take advantage of the benefits of diverse boards, and the barriers that NGB boards’ biased recruitment/selection processes cause to these benefits and gender equality. Because of this paradox, the benefits of gender diverse boards may not fully actualize as the women, who are supposed to bring varied views into the board, may be too homogenic compared with the traditional majority in sport organization boards members (i.e., older, white men). This is at least partly caused by the requirement of the right ‘fit’ in selection/recruitment processes, which results in only homogenic individuals being chosen to join the board, that is, homogenic regardless of their gender. The paradox may not only affect the functioning of sports organizations, but also limit women’s inclusion onto sports organization boards. The theoretical model is based on information/decision-making perspective and on the concept of the right fit, onto which we have built our interpretation. However, it must be noted that diversity per se may not improve organizational performance (c.f. Williams and O’Reilly 1998; see Ely and Thomas 2020). Rather, it gives potential for attributes such as higher problem-solving capabilities, creativity, idea generation, and learning from others in organizations if harnessed correctly. Furthermore, apart from the right fit, other underlying factors may also impact the homogeneity of the boards, such as other organizational procedural and decision-making practices, as well as broader cultural contexts.

The study’s empirical part extends the current literature to the novel, hitherto nearly unexplored context of Finnish NGBs. Survey data from NGB board members were used to partly test the model’s assumptions, namely the assumption that the perspectives of the male and the female board members are in fact rather similar. The assumption was tested analyzing women and men board members views on key constructs of board governance. The data supported hypothesis 2: Women and men board members’ perspectives regarding key constructs of board governance are similar, thus supporting the model’s assumption and disproving hypothesis 1: Women and men board members’ perspectives regarding key constructs of board governance are different. The model presented in this paper creates a new angle and point of departure for understanding the interplay of sports board governance, selection of board members, and gender. In this paper, the focus has been on gender diversity. However, the model may also be applicable to other diversity discussions (e.g., race, sexual orientation) in sports organizations as different, oppressed minority groups face many similar barriers regarding inclusion within leadership positions in sport.
It must be noted here that the data presented consist of a rather small sample of Finnish NGB board members. Especially, the number of women respondents was rather low (n = 44), which may have caused the results to indicate no statistical difference between genders. Furthermore, the results reported in this paper measure only the items included in the survey. Other items may have given different results. Therefore, more research with larger samples is needed to further test the model. For anonymity reasons, the survey included no questions regarding the share of men and women in the respondent’s board or their breakdown between different positions. Therefore, comparison, for instance, between boards with low and high level of gender diversity was not possible. This offers an avenue for further research. Additionally, more qualitative research delivering a deeper, more nuanced understanding is required to explore even further why perspectives on board governance are similar in the NGB context. Further studies should also look into the concept of the right fit, and recruitment/segregation processes to further test the proposed theoretical model in Finnish NGBs: (1) How new board members are selected/recruited. (2) Why the board member’s perspectives are this similar. Is it because of the right fit and recruitment as proposed in this paper, and are there other factors playing a role, such as organizational procedures and decision-making practices (e.g., lack of learning orientation towards diversity (Ely and Thomas 2020), cultural contexts, women not fitting the profile, or women unwilling/unable to become a board member because of individual level factors (e.g., time/money, self-limiting behaviour, not wanting to join)). (3) Whether the recruitment of homogenic board members has been intentional or unconscious. The model presented in this paper builds on information/decision-making theory. However, the social categorization perspective suggests that group variance may have a negative impact on organizational outcomes. Additional research can also test to what extent the variance in group members (e.g., board members) and perspectives positively influences organizational outcomes in relation to the possible negative impact suggested by the social categorization perspective.

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‘We are going to the right direction… but we are not in ideal world yet’: understanding gender (in)equality within leadership positions in Nordic football governance

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‘We are going to the right direction… but we are not in ideal world yet’: understanding gender (in)equality within leadership positions in Nordic football governance

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ABSTRACT
The importance of gender equality and equity in sports is highlighted not only in practice but also in research; however, previous research has often treated sports as a single context and has disregarded game-specific differences and characteristics. This research addresses this gap by building on a multi-level framework and utilizing a case study approach to increase understanding of why women in leadership positions (employed staff) are underrepresented in the sport of football (soccer) in two Nordic countries, Finland and Norway. The findings show that regardless of the general good state of gender equality in the Nordic countries and even if major barriers have been removed, women aiming for leadership positions face structural and cultural bottlenecks that hinder their possibilities in Nordic football. In addition, this article identifies factors that have improved gender equality in case organizations and suggests new means to address inequality.

KEYWORDS
Leadership; gender; football; sport management; manager

Introduction

Regardless of the growth of women in leadership positions in general (OECD 2018; Gram 2021; Statistics Finland, n.d.) and women being players, consumers, and other actors in different sports, the number of women leaders in sports remains low, especially in the top management positions (e.g. Aalto-Nevalainen 2018; Burton 2015; Sartore and Cunningham 2007). This also applies to the Nordic countries, which emphasize gender equality and are forerunners in work-life gender equality, and to football, which is the largest organized sport in Norway and the largest ball game in Finland for girls and women (Fasting, Sand, and Nordstrand 2019; Lehtonen, Oja, and Hakamäki 2022; Pfister 2015). During last decades, research has increasingly paid attention to gender inequality in leadership position in sports (see Burton 2015; Burton and Leberman 2017 for reviews). Scholars have argued that this body of work is critical because it is ethically correct that gender should not prevent an individual from reaching decision-making positions (Adriaanse 2016). Moreover, women’s inclusion increases the talent available for these positions and enhances organizational outcomes (Adriaanse 2016). Finally, as sports are integral part of the society, inequality in...
sport-related organization arguably reflects to other parts of the society as well (e.g. Fink 2016).

However, previous research has been rather narrow, focusing on specific country contexts and treating sports as a single entity. This study bases on the idea that leadership must be contextualized. Contextual factors set the possibilities and constraints within which women’s advancement into leadership positions is built. For instance, treating sports as a monolithic block does not take into consideration the game-specific characteristics of different sports and the gendered and segmented nature of sports. Moreover, a large part of previous research focuses on the North American context, especially the US intercollegiate system (Burton and Leberman 2017; Hancock and Hums 2016). This context differs significantly from those of Nordic countries because of the Nordic welfare model and its ideology of equality at all levels and sectors (Skille 2014). In the Nordic context, many studies have focused on elected leaders and individuals in elected decision-making positions, such as in the boards of sports organizations (e.g. Elling, Hovden, and Knoppers 2019; Hovden 2000, 2010, 2012), leaving a gap for studies on women in managerial leadership positions in sports organizations. The demands and requirements for women’s advancement differ depending on contextual dynamics and boundaries. Therefore, it is relevant to focus on gender (in)equality within leadership positions in Nordic football.

The aim of this study was to increase the understanding of gender (in)equality in managerial leadership positions in football and thus to bridge the gap in the present literature and to answer the call of Valenti, Scelles, and Morrow (2018) for more research on gender (in)equality in managerial leadership positions in football. Football offers an interesting, paradoxical context for this study, as football is one of the most popular sports for women and girls while being male dominated and having a masculine environment (Fasting, Sand, and Nordstrand 2019; Skille 2014). More specifically, this research seeks to answer why women in leadership positions are underrepresented in Norwegian and Finnish football organizations by using an instrumental case study approach to study the cases of the Football Association of Finland (FAF) and Norwegian Football Federation (NFF) (Stake 2003). The aim of this article was not to compare the two cases but rather to study them as examples for exploring and describing the phenomenon in the Nordic countries, as Finland and Norway share similar contexts and aims regarding gender equality in sports.

This study contributes to the literature on women in leadership positions in sports by investigating the underrepresentation of women from the viewpoint of football organizations in their societal contexts. It offers new empirical evidence from this viewpoint, highlighting the cultural aspects and thus offering a broad overview into its topic in a specific sports context and opening up relevant avenues for further research. The article contributes to practice by identifying factors that have improved gender equality in the case organizations and by suggesting further actions to address the issue in Nordic football.

Theoretical frame and relevant literature

Researchers studying women in leadership positions have used several concepts and metaphors to explain women’s under-representation: ‘the leaking pipeline’ (Hancock and Hums 2016), ‘glass ceiling’ and firewalls (Bendl and Schmidt 2010); however, these concepts and metaphors tend to apply only one or two theories or analysis levels. Research on gender issues in the sport context is ‘situated in multi-level, sometimes subtle, and usually
taken-for-granted structures, policies and behaviours embedded in sport organizations’ (Fink 2008, 147). Cunningham (2010, 396) added that ‘sport organizations are multi-level entities that both shape and are shaped by myriad factors’. Hence, a multi-level framework (e.g. Burton 2015; Burton and Leberman 2017; Cunningham 2019; Cunningham and Sagas 2008; LaVoi and Dutove 2012) based on the multi-level organizational theory (Kozlowski and Klein 2000) and Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1979, 1993) ecological systems theory refined by Cunningham (2019) was chosen to guide the analysis. The framework captures the complexity of the multi-level entity of sports organizations and the many interrelated and dynamic factors influencing women leaders in football. Cunningham’s (2019) framework consists of micro, meso and macro levels. In this study, a sport-specific context level (football) was added to emphasize the importance of noting differences between different sports (see Figure 1). As the full reach of this comprehensive framework is beyond the scope of this article, the focus was on the macro, meso and context levels, especially their cultural aspects, although the interplay of all four levels is acknowledged.

**Gender and leadership**

Femininity and masculinity are defined within and created ‘out of a complex of dynamic interwoven, cognitive, emotional and social forces’, and essentially connected to the bodies of men and women (Due Billing and Alvesson 2000, 145–146). Femininity and masculinity are often seen as mutually exclusive, and throughout history, male and female have been opposed using contrary traits such as rationality/emotionality, objectivity/subjectivity and culture/nature (Due Billing and Alvesson 2000). Different kinds of masculinities and femininities exist (Collinson and Hearn 1996). However, the dominant form of men and masculinity in sport leadership tends to be heterosexual, white, able-bodied, middle-aged and physically dominant. The discourses about sport leadership highlight qualities traditionally perceived as masculine, such as mental and physical toughness and competitiveness (Burton and Leberman 2017; Shaw and Hoeber 2003) or, as Hovden (2000) described, a ‘male heavyweight profile’.

However, the idea that management and leadership are firmly constructed as culturally masculine or that females in leadership positions deviate from these constructions cannot be taken for granted (Due Billing and Alvesson 2000; Pullen and Vachhani 2018). Due Billing and Alvesson (2000) argue that recent conceptions of leadership and management are increasingly in line with values and orientations that the gender literature often labels as feminine. This means that the polarization of masculinity and femininity in leadership is fading. Empirically, women and men in leadership positions tend to be rather similar in terms of, for example, aims, values and characteristics (Due Billing and Alvesson 2000; Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; Lehtonen, Oja, and Hakamäki 2022).

The literature on gender and leadership is often general, embracing stereotypical ideals, with no distinctions between different groups of women and men or different historical or cultural settings (Due Billing and Alvesson 2000). Pullen and Vachhani (2018) continue that the current conceptions of feminine leadership cannot capture femininity in all its differences. This study acknowledges the challenges of the concept of feminine leadership (see e.g. Due Billing and Alvesson 2000; Pullen and Vachhani 2018) and thus uses feminine leadership as a critical concept (see Due Billing and Alvesson 2000); that is, the concept is not used to emphasize the stereotypes, idealized and essential views on skills and
orientations related to the female sex but rather as a concept de-masculinizing leadership, unwinding the relationship between leadership and its cultural connections to masculine men and dominant masculinity (Due Billing and Alvesson 2000).

**Socio-cultural (macro) perspectives**

Sports are closely intertwined with society and reflect wider societal norms and practices (Burton and Leberman 2017; Fink 2016). Regardless of gender inequality being a global phenomenon, it is context dependent (Due Billing and Alvesson 2000). Much of the existing literature is based on the North American context and thus cannot be applied to the context of Nordic welfare states without further scrutiny. They offer a point of departure for increasing the understanding of the phenomenon in other contexts.

Macro-level perspectives operate at the societal level, such as employment and anti-discrimination laws (see Chapter 3.1), institutional sexism, and stakeholder expectations (Cunningham 2019). Institutional sexism refers to ideas about gender and the appropriate roles and behaviours of women and men that become rooted in a given culture (Cunningham 2019; Shaw and Frisby 2006). For instance, sport organizations identify male activity as privileged and reinforce masculinity and masculine behaviour as the proper qualities for leadership, which reinforces gender discrimination in sport organizations (Burton 2015; Cunningham 2019; Shaw and Frisby 2006). Women are often perceived as an ‘other’ in the social institution of sport and thus experience heavy scrutiny (Acker 1990; Fink 2016; Welford 2011). Thus, they may have to use extra time and energy to adapt to the masculine culture and may feel that they must prove their competence to a greater extent compared to men (Kumra and Vinnicombe 2010). Partly impacted by institutional sexism, internal and external stakeholders’ (e.g. players, coaches, community members and financial supporters) expectations often serve to reinforce gendered norms and stereotypes, thus preventing women to achieve leadership positions in sports (Cunningham 2019).

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**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework (adapted from Cunningham 2019, 78).
**Football, management and gender in Finland and Norway**

Finland and Norway are Nordic welfare states and top countries in terms of work-life gender equality compared to the rest of the world. Norway is a small step ahead of Finland in some indicators of gender equality in work-life, such as the number of female senior managers and directors (OECD 2018; World Economic Forum 2019). Finnish and Norwegian women have higher educational attainments than men, but they are still a minority in top management positions.

The football culture is gendered: it is dominated and identified by masculinity (Fasting, Sand, and Nordstrand 2019; Pfister 2015; Skille 2014). The domination of masculine values, ideas, and meanings reinforce the gendered culture (Fasting, Sand, and Nordstrand 2019) and produce and reproduce symbolic and social gender orders, which shape gender relations in football (Hjelseth and Hovden 2014). Women in football are a new phenomenon compared to men. For instance, women’s football became part of the FAF in 1971 and the NFF in 1976 (approximately 70 years after the organizations were founded); however, women’s football has grown rapidly in recent years. The FIFA 2019 Women’s World Cup enjoyed global interest and success. The appreciation of the sport, the number of people following the sport, and the number of girls and women participating in the sport has all increased (FIFA 2019). Football is the largest organized sport in Norway and the largest ball game in Finland for girls and women (Fasting, Sand, and Nordstrand 2019; Lehtonen, Oja, and Hakamäki 2022; Pfister 2015). The women’s national teams in these countries have succeeded well and have held higher FIFA rankings than their male peers for many years. Nonetheless, women’s success in the football pitch and the increasing numbers of girls and women associated with football and women in leadership positions in general have not been matched with the number of women in leadership positions in the national governing bodies of football, the FAF and NFF.

**Organizational (meso) perspectives**

Meso-level perspectives operate at the organizational level, such as diversity policies (see Chapter 3.1), bias in decision-making, organizational culture and power relations (Cunningham 2019).

Stereotypes are the first component of bias and represent ‘traits that we view as characteristics of social groups, or of individual members of those groups, and particularly those that differentiate groups from each other’ (Stangor 2009, 2; Cunningham 2019). They are socially constructed and time bound in a given culture. Stereotypes have been passed on for decades from one generation to another; therefore, they are often subconscious and difficult and slow to change (Vinnicombe and Singh 2002). Sport leaders are still associated with men and masculine behaviour. Therefore, women are less likely to be considered as managers and leaders (Burton and Leberman 2017; Grappendorf and Burton 2017; Hovden 2010). The strength of the ‘think manager, think male’ association has decreased over the years; nevertheless, it still remains in the structures and cultures of sport (Cunningham 2019). The second component, prejudice, refers to the differential evaluation of one group relative to another (Brewer 2007). Particularly challenging for women in leadership positions is their double bind: women are expected to be feminine, but as leaders, they are expected to fit into the traditional, masculine leadership style (Grappendorf and Burton 2017). The
last component of bias, discrimination can be divided into access and treatment discrimination (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley 1990). Access discrimination occurs when members of a certain group are excluded from entering an organization or a leadership position. Treatment discrimination refers to members of certain groups receiving fewer organizational resources than they legitimately deserve.

The gendered cultures privileging men in sports may reinforce the assumption that men are also better suited for leadership positions. Following Schein (2004, 17), culture can be defined as ‘a pattern of shared assumptions... that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct ways to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems’. Values, norms, and the visible and invisible rules of sport organizations are often based on masculine norms (Burton and Leberman 2017; Grappendorf and Burton 2017). Therefore, it may be difficult for women to adapt to organizations and further their careers. Women may feel trapped as the minority because they cannot change the masculine culture and procedures; they must adapt or decide not to join (Liff and Ward 2001). Cultures have been passed on and maintained over time, so they have become taken for granted (Cunningham 2019). Therefore, it may be difficult for people to critically question the structures, values and processes privileging men over women. For instance, the general assumption is often that work and organizational practices are gender neutral (Acker 1990; Burton and Leberman 2017).

Eagly and Carli (2012) suggest that pressure related to family responsibilities is a major barrier for women in leadership positions. Leadership positions often include travelling, challenging hours and overtime work. Women are expected to take the main responsibility for the home and family; thus, combining family and demanding work is often viewed only as a woman’s problem. Even if women have shared childcare with their spouses or family, or paid work, decisions makers often assume that women are responsible for the home and family; therefore, they are not deemed suitable for demanding positions (Eagly and Carli 2012). Similar findings relate to the sport management setting (e.g. Shaw and Hoeber 2003).

Lastly, power and power relations impact women leaders in sport organizations (Burton and Leberman 2017). Often, power is held by a few individuals belonging to traditional majority groups in sport organizations: ‘white, heterosexual, Protestant, and able-bodied men’ (Cunningham 2019, 142). Previous research has also shown evidence that men may not be willing to give up their positions of power (Ottesen et al. 2010; Pfister 2010). Sheridan and Milgate (2003) evidenced that members of the dominant group (i.e. men) are not concerned about the underrepresentation of women and do not question the present situation sustaining their dominance. Men desiring to maintain power while holding the key to the inclusion of women in leadership are challenging.

**Individual (micro)-level perspectives**

Micro-level perspectives, such as human and social capital and self-limiting behaviour operate at the individual level (Cunningham 2019). Similar to macro- and meso-level factors, micro-level factors are interrelated with factors operating at the meso and macro levels. If this interplay is left unrecognized, micro-level scrutiny may falsely turn into blaming women (Cunningham 2019). ‘Human capital’ refers to individual development through, for example, education, work experience, and training and ‘social capital’ to networks and relationships with peers, supervisors and subordinates (Sagas and Cunningham 2004).
Regardless of whether women have greater human capital than men, they may not receive great returns (Cunningham 2019). Furthermore, social capital seems to be more beneficial for men than for women in a leadership career (Sagas and Cunningham 2004). Sartore and Cunningham (2007) suggest that women may unconsciously produce self-limiting behaviours due to the male-dominant sport context. 'Self-limiting behaviour' refers to internal identity comparison processes in which women compare themselves to the meanings established through social and sport ideologies, which may prevent women from viewing themselves as leaders and thus prevent them from acting as leaders (Sartore and Cunningham 2007).

Methodology

Instrumental case study perspective (Stake 2003), which means that cases were used as an environment to study the phenomenon, was chosen to examine and describe why women are underrepresented within leadership positions in Nordic football. This approach was chosen because factors influencing women in leadership positions are complex and, to some extent, unconscious and they must be studied in their context. The case study approach is appropriate for this study, as it allows phenomena to be studied in-depth in the real-life context (Yin 2018). The study has two units for analysis, the FAF and NFF, which were examined monolithically as examples illustrating the phenomenon in the Nordic countries. The main research data were obtained from nine semi-structured interviews. In addition, organizational documents (strategic and equality plans) and archives (data from the NFF and FAF websites) were used as secondary data.

The FAF and NFF were selected as the case organizations for several reasons. First, Finland and Norway are generally considered top countries regarding gender equality in work-life and are composed of increasing numbers of women leaders (OECD 2018; Statistics Finland n.d.; Gram 2021). Second, the football associations (FAs) are among the largest and thus most powerful sport governing bodies in these countries. Third, the numbers of women and girls playing, watching, and, otherwise, participating in football have been increasing, but the number of women in leadership positions remains low.

Case organizations

The FAF was founded in 1907. It joined the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) in 1908 and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) in 1954. The FAF has nearly 1000 member clubs and more than 140,000 registered players, of whom 32,500 (23%) are girls and women. The FAF has 81 employees, of whom 22 (27%) are women (as of December 2018). No women hold top leadership positions (five positions), and only two of seven of the middle-managers are women (Suomen Pallolitto 2019). As of 15 April 2021, the board of the FAF consists of eight persons, including two women. The chairperson is a man, and the first vice-chairperson is a woman. The FAF 2016–2020 strategy states that attention should be given and actions should be taken to increase the number of women in different football positions, especially in coaching and leading (Suomen Pallolitto 2016, 28).

The NFF was founded in 1902 and joined FIFA in 1908 and UEFA in 1954. The NFF has nearly 1800 member clubs and more than 337,000 registered players, of whom 96,000...
The FAF was founded in 1907. It joined the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) in 1908 and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) in 1954. The FAF and NFF were selected as the case organizations for several reasons. First, both the FAF and NFF are national football associations that have nearly 1800 member clubs and more than 337,000 registered players, of whom 96,000 (29%) are girls and women. The NFF has 118 employees, of whom 28 (24%) are women (as of April 2021). As of 15 April 2020, the NFF website lists seven top leadership positions, of which two are filled by women, and 16 middle-management positions, of which one is held by a woman. The NFF board consists of eight people, including four women. The chairperson is a man, and the first vice-chairperson is a woman. The NFF strategy states that one of its main goals is to increase the proportion of girls and women in football and to recruit, educate, and inspire more women players, coaches, referees, managers and representatives (Norges Fotballforbund 2021). The NFF had a female general secretary, Karen Espelund, for 10 years between 1999 and 2009.

Both Finland (Act on Equality between Women and Men 1986) and Norway (Act on Gender Equality 1979) have enacted gender equality laws that forbid gender-based discrimination in society, including sports and work. Both acts obligate public decision-making bodies (e.g., government committees, advisory boards and working groups) to be comprised at least 40% female and 40% male members. This obligation applies to public sport organizations but not at the association or club level, including national governing bodies of sports. In Norway, the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sport (NIF) enacted a quota regulation that concerns all levels of the NIF (including sports clubs). The regulation states that both genders should be represented in elected/appointed decision-making bodies. In bodies with a minimum of four persons, each sex should have at least two representatives (Hovden 2012). In Finland, no quota regulations have been imposed, but the state steers sport organizations by requiring them equality and non-discrimination plans to be eligible for government grants (Pyykkönen 2016). These regulations impact women’s opportunities at the meso level and have increased the number of women in leadership positions in sport organizations. However, these regulations only apply to elected/appointed positions, not employments.

**Interviewees**

The interview data were obtained from interviews with nine informants from the FAF and NFF. Interviewees F1, F2 and F3 were women, and Interviewees M4 and M5 were men from the FAF. Interviewees F6 and F7 were women, and interviewees M8 and M9 were men from the NFF. The interviewees were purposefully selected, as it is important in qualitative interviews that the interviewees know as much as possible about the phenomenon studied or have experienced the phenomenon (Patton 2014). All the interviewees were employed by the FAs. To include only interviewees with knowledge about the organizational culture and norms, newly hired leaders and chiefs were not chosen as interviewees. As no women and only a few women have held top leadership positions in the FAF and NFF, respectively, women in chief positions were also viewed as relevant informants for this research. Chiefs play managing roles and possess decision-making power in both organizations. All interviewees except for one woman have higher educational levels. However, she had robust coaching education and, at the time of the interview, was enrolled in a higher education programme. The women and men interviewees were approximately 30–55 and 50–60 years old.

The purposeful selection was based on a sample of nine informants (Miles and Huberman 1994). In qualitative research, the purpose is not to count opinions or people, or to make statistical generalizations but to describe a phenomenon, understand complex psychosocial
issues or find a theoretically meaningful interpretation of a phenomenon (Miles and Huberman 1994; O’Reilly and Parker 2013). Therefore, sampling in qualitative research considers the richness of the information, and the number of respondents depends on the topic and resources available (O’Reilly and Parker 2013). Considering this article’s explorative and descriptive nature, the small number of leadership positions in the FAs, the interviewees’ experience in case organizations and the guiding theoretical framework, the chosen number of respondents can deliver meaningful understandings of the phenomenon studied (Crouch and McKenzie 2006).

Data collection and analysis

The study received approval from the Norwegian Data Protection Official, after which the 10 chosen interviewee candidates were contacted. Nine agreed to the interview. The participants gave their written or oral consent to participate and had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews took place between 7 March and 25 April 2019. The duration of the interviews varied between 40 and 80 min. One woman from the NFF was interviewed via email, as the researcher could understand written Norwegian, and the other interviews were conducted via Skype and recorded with an external audio recorder. Five interviews were conducted in Finnish; and three, in English. The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. All nine interviews produced 91 pages of empirical data written in 11-point font and single-line spacing. The interviews were pseudonymized by coding.

Each interview began with a brief about the aim of the research and structure of the interview to set expectations, followed by a warm-up question about the background and journey of the interviewees to their present positions. Images and values are important in the interactions and practices with which organizations assign meanings to gender and vice versa (Acker 1990). Therefore, the following questions considered both the experiences and actions, and the thoughts of the interviewees about organizational culture and structure, gender equality, gender roles and so forth. Secondary data (organizational documents, such as strategic plans, equality plans and archives, such as data from the NFF and FAF websites) were used to complement the interview data to create a holistic image of the context, including organizational structures and culture, as well as the organizations’ aspirations towards gender equality.

The analysis was based on a reflective thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). First, the author familiarized with the data by reading, re-reading and taking notes. After which, the data were coded using both deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive approach was driven by the theoretical frame and relevant literature (Chapter 2). The inductive approach enabled possible new additional themes and patterns to be identified and to generate a further understanding of this phenomenon. Finally, the codes were refined into relevant themes in relation to the research question (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016).

Results and discussion

This section presents the empirical results and simultaneous interpretations and discussions based on the theoretical framework and relevant literature.
Gendered organizational culture

Gendered stereotypes and gender roles were still present in both FAs at least to some extent. Both men and women interviewees at the FAF showed that gendered behaviour and the presence of a masculine ‘locker room’ culture had decreased at the FAF; however, some female interviewees still had experiences with masculine culture. They reported that the locker room culture offends some employees, which may be the reason for gendered stereotypes, ‘bad humour’, and rough communication. They argued that the masculine culture may have a negative influence on the self-confidence of some women and thus on their willingness to accept responsibilities to enhance their careers. Male interviewees argued that gendered behaviour used to be more common but may still exist:

Yeah, of course there could be these kinds of things (gendered stereotypes and behaviour), but I cannot really say that there is or that I’ve come across them. But then again, I am not trying to argue that on an absolute level, these things do not ever take place. (Interviewee M4)

A female interviewee at the NFF reflected on a situation in which she was offered an opportunity to learn about organizing national team games; however, she found that she would be serving coffee to the media and not actually learn how to organize games: ‘I don’t think this task would’ve been offered to a man’ (Interviewee F7). Similar findings were reported in previous studies (Burton and Leberman 2017; Welford 2011). Women tend to be offered gendered duties that do not further their careers. It is interesting that men also experienced gender discriminating behaviour at the NFF. Men felt that their opinions and perspectives were often ignored or questioned by women in discussions related to women’s football and gender:

I think that in debates between women and men and when we discuss topics regarding that, it is easy to be described as an old man with old or old-fashioned statements and thoughts. So, people having the opposite view, they try to brand people and use it against us. We are not experienced when it comes to that topic—then we are just old. (Interviewee M8)

It seems that age and gender still influence opinions and motives. Furthermore, the interviewees identified discrimination against their own gender but not that often against the other. As women are a minority as leaders, discrimination against women may be unnoticed amongst leaders. Thus, the inclusion of both men and women in leading positions is important to ensure that the views and objectives of both genders are heard and considered.

In addition to cultural barriers at the meso level, the low level of employee turnover poses a structural barrier for women aiming for a leadership position. The interviewees reflected on how people tend to stay at the FAF and NFF for long periods. On one hand, this may be an indication of a good organizational culture. Those employed by these organizations enjoy working for them. If people felt unhappy, the employee turnover would be greater. On the other hand, if the employees want to secure leadership careers in football, they may not have options other than to stay at the FAs because they are the highest football organizations in these countries. Regardless, the low level of employee turnover negatively impacts women aiming for leadership positions: even if more women managers were wanted at the FAF and NFF, the process of change is slow, as the positions do not open until old managers, mostly men, retire. Changing the proportion of managers is more difficult than
that of people in elected decision-making positions (e.g. chairs/board members) because of the Nordic labour laws that protect employees’ rights. The organizations cannot discharge staff for new staff.

**Attitudes of the case organizations towards families**

Previous research has cited that the presumption of women having the main responsibility for the home and family hinders women’s leadership careers (Eagly and Carli 2012; Shaw and Hoeber 2003). Contradicting previous research, the interviewees did not feel that being a mother restricts one’s leadership possibilities to a greater extent than being a father. The attitude of the FAF towards family and personal life was described as supportive and flexible by all interviewees. Parental leave is viewed as equally natural for both men and women, and flexible hours are offered to both: ‘these days, both fathers and mothers are using parental leaves, and we encourage, or let’s not say that way but in this way, that we are not being an obstacle for using parental leaves in any case’ (Interviewee M5). The interviewees described the NFF as rather flexible and understanding towards family and work; however, both male and female interviewees highlighted that they work a lot, including weekends and evenings:

> You have to be aware of that ‘a lot of work is done on weekends, evenings and in the summer] when you apply for a job like this, especially if you have school-aged children.’ (Interviewee M9)

Considering the interplay of macro and meso levels (Cunningham 2019). The flexibility and understanding towards combining family and work may reflect the good general state of gender equality in Finland and Norway. The countries value gender equality in work life and have taken concrete actions for improvement. For instance, the states financially support both maternity and paternity leaves and thus encourage both parents to take responsibility, which impacts not only sport organizations but all organizations operating in the Nordics. The football culture is also changing. Women in football are a rather new phenomenon, and football is still regarded as a masculine sport. However, gender equality and women have received growing attention and appreciation to a higher level in football than in some other sports traditionally perceived as masculine (e.g. ice hockey). Both FAs have strategic goals to increase the number of women in football, and perhaps offering family-friendly work conditions is one of the easiest steps to take to support gender equality.

**The importance of gender-balanced leadership**

Similar to previous research, the data obtained in this study indicated that both organizations have fewer women than men in decision-making positions, men and women tend to hold different types of leadership positions, and women lead lower down in the hierarchy in the FAF and NFF (e.g. Aalto-Nevalainen 2018; Burton 2015; Hovden 2010; Sartore and Cunningham 2007; Welford 2011). At the FAF, men hold the five highest positions and form the executive management group. Women are employed as chiefs and middle managers. Four female chiefs holding a supporting management role are part of the extended executive management group. In the NFF, two women hold the highest leadership positions, of whom one is the human resource (HR) manager, and the other is the director of
elite football. In addition, four women are middle managers. Positions traditionally viewed as more feminine and as supportive positions (e.g. HR manager) are held by women, whereas more operational leadership positions are often held by men. Tharenou (2005) argued that this causes women to lack line management and operational experience, which may decrease women’s opportunities to acquire the holistic organizational knowledge needed in top management. The NFF interviewees mentioned that there has been a female general secretary at the NFF and believed this paved the way for other women reaching for a leadership position. At the FAF, there has never been a female top manager; however, almost all FAF interviewees viewed the current gender ratio within leadership positions as good and equal:

I feel that it [gender equality and the position of women] comes rather naturally at the moment, and I see that the base is ready for this kind of action to be continued also in the future without it being a big issue; however, I see it as important through our equality plan and other actions that gender equality is a matter that is written down, so that we don’t think that as it is equal now [the state of gender equality], it will also be in the future. (Interviewee M4)

Only one female interviewee felt that there are too few women leaders at the FAF. Therefore, a fundamental barrier to women’s leadership careers in the FAF may be satisfaction. Top management is often responsible for final recruitment decisions. If the top management of the FAF is satisfied with the present situation, the approach needed to find and attract competent women may not be sufficient. This finding is interesting, as it contradicts previous research in which only those part of the dominant group were not concerned with the low number of women, whereas women as the minority viewed their positions as challenging (Sheridan and Milgate 2003). Liff and Ward (2001) argued that women in leading roles must adapt to the present, more masculine leadership norms and culture. In the case of these organizations, it seems that requirements are set not by the leadership norms or culture (see Chapter 4.5) but by the masculine football culture impacting the organizations. However, following the logic of Liff and Ward, adaptation may be an explanation for the contradiction. As women leaders adapt to the culture of a male-majority football organization, their perceptions may shift towards the prevailing culture. On the other hand, it may be that only individuals seen to fit the present culture are recruited (irrespective of their gender) (c.f., Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; Lehtonen, Oja, and Hakamäki 2022). Regardless of the satisfaction with the current situation, all FAF interviewees reported that having both men and women leaders is important because it can broaden perspectives in discussions and decision-making processes. This contradiction is interesting: having both men and women leaders is viewed as important; however, when concretely assessing one’s organization, a gender imbalanced leadership situation is considered ‘good’ and gender equal. The interviewees were current managers of the organization, so some might have been ‘blind’ in assessing their own work and thus unable or unwilling to identify issues that were against their values. The general success in global gender equality ratings may also partly explain this blindness by lulling organizations into believing that gender equality has been reached in Finland. Furthermore, as gender equality is highly valued in the Nordics and as the FAF has openly communicated its goals of gender equality, an individual may have outside pressure to fit in and say ‘the right things’, such as that having both genders in leading positions is important even if the true opinion is contradictory.
Unlike at the FAF, only one male interviewee from the NFF was satisfied with the current gender ratio within leadership positions, and all but one male interviewee viewed having men and women leaders as important. This dissatisfaction with the current gender ratio may be a factor influencing the NFF to actively seek and attract competent women (e.g. in 2019, they hired a female director for elite football). The men also expressed that the current gender ratio at the NFF may reflect the general culture and attitude towards gender equality in Norway, which seems to be a step ahead of Finland (OECD 2018; World Economic Forum 2019). As sports and football are intertwined with society (Fink 2016), changes and developments in general gender equality also impact football organizations.

**Football culture**

On the context level, the lack of football-specific experience may pose a barrier influencing women's tendency to hold supportive leadership roles instead of core operational leadership roles. First, the interviewees saw football-specific experience as crucial in many leading positions at both FAs, especially within core departments (e.g. elite sport department):

> We have seen examples of people, of older women, that are well educated, with a good resume, good reputation, coming in here and not being able to function because they didn't understand football. They didn't understand how people think in a football club or in a football organisation. In this case, you're not suited, and then it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman. (Interviewee M8)

The number of women players and other actors in football is smaller than that of men in both countries. Therefore, in general, fewer women have football-specific experiences, so the number of possible male candidates is naturally higher.

Second, women's football competence is often derived from women's football, which may not be as highly valued as competence gained from men's football. An interesting contradiction in the data is that a male interviewee from the FAF argued that women's and men's football are equally valued in the organization. Regardless, the actions are contradictory. Women, whose competence is often from female football, are said not to have the right kind of football competence needed in leadership positions. Women's football as a sport is gaining appreciation at the FAF, although experience derived from it is not. This contradiction is especially harmful for women, who tend to work within women's football. Furthermore, it may be easier for a man to work within men's football and gather experience, whereas a woman in a men's football club, especially in a leading position, may have to prove her capabilities as a woman and may receive extra attention for breaking gender roles. Similar experiences were expressed by some of the women interviewed:

> At the moment, I am not interested. For instance, if someone came to ask me to do 'Heimebane' kinda thing, I could sign up for that if I could only focus on football. But as the time is not ready for that yet, I would have to be on barricades only because of this 'woman thing', and I would be assessed mainly as a woman and not as a professional, and I don't want to use energy for that right now. (Interviewee F2)

The extra challenges women experience decrease the time and energy women have for actual work, which may negatively influence the quality of their work. Some women do not even fight against gender roles and choose to stay within women's football, where they can...
solely focus on work. Liff and Ward (2001) suggested that women are not abandoning management per se, but rather the masculine management culture. This phenomenon may also be visible in the football context. Women are not abandoning football management but rather the excessive masculinity of men’s football; thus, they choose to act within women’s football; however, this choice may decrease the opportunities women have further on in their leadership careers in the football sector.

Third, football is still generally perceived as a masculine environment; however, the FAs are responsible for the development and operations of both men’s and women’s football and are under heavy public scrutiny. Therefore, they must answer the gender equality demands and expectations of the public, media and state government. In this case, stakeholder expectations are not against but for gender equality (c.f., Cunningham 2019, 137). Smaller organizations, such as smaller football clubs do not receive the same level of scrutiny. In smaller organizations, especially for male football, gender discrimination and male dominance may be more common owing to the traditional football club context. Therefore, women may face unscalable barriers or feel uncomfortable or unwilling to work in this environment. In relation to the previously discussed notion of football competence from women’s football being undervalued at the FAF, women are automatically handicapped in recruitments and promotions in which football competence is highly valued if they cannot or will not work at the men’s football club level.

**Changing perceptions of appropriate sports leaders**

As shown earlier, the effects of the gendered (football) culture are still visible in both organizations at least to some extent. However, the interviewees from both FAs felt that the organizations are moving towards a more equal state. The interviewees discussed outside pressure, Nordic culture and its emphasis on gender equality, and the equality challenge as a formal part of the organizations’ agendas and conscious efforts to increase the involvement of women in decision-making roles as factors positively influencing gender equality. Many top managers viewed gender equality as an important value and therefore have undertaken actions to enhance the position of women. For instance, the current male-to-female ratio is considered in recruitment situations. Without support from top management, change towards a more equal gender state would be difficult; however, changing the culture to be more gender equal is a slow process. Interviewee F2 described the situation at the FAF:

“We are going in the right direction, and a lot of work is being done for it. But we are not in ideal world yet, and we are behind the associations of Sweden and Norway; however, they have more money, and they can share it more. So, we do have work left, and the association recognizes it and is working more towards it [gender equality] than it has before.

In recent years, women have become more active in sports, and female football has increased its profile. For instance, the 2019 Women’s World Cup reached 1.12 billion unique viewers (FIFA 2019), and both associations introduced equal pay for the national teams. The numbers of girls and women playing, coaching, refereeing and participating in football have increased. This trend is visible also in both FAs. The interviewees noted that the numbers of female employees and women applying for leadership positions have increased: ‘It is getting better. I see now that we are recruiting, and for more junior positions, quite a lot of women are applying, and that is good. To become a top manager, you need to start somewhere’ (Interviewee M9). The numbers of women managers and leaders in general
have increased in both Finland and Norway (e.g. OECD 2018). This may also have a positive influence on football. The perception of a proper leader is changing, and women are being considered competent candidates for leadership positions. Regardless of the reported change to a more gender-equal state, the women still felt that they needed characteristics traditionally perceived as masculine to work in the environment. Female interviewees from the FAF emphasized that they are tough and used to working in a male-dominant field; thus, the locker room culture at the FAF, for instance, does not negatively influence them as it could other women. In other words, women must hold qualities that, according to the interviewees, are not typical for women or they must try to adapt to the masculine norms to cope in the environment. However, at the same time, traditional gender roles are still visible, and women are expected to act according to their gender roles (e.g. Burton 2015; Grappendorf and Burton 2017; Shaw and Frisby 2006). Interviewee F1 described the situation as follows:

Like if I as a woman said out loud all the same things [as men], it would surely raise some eyebrows. I guess this is an issue which is easy to hide behind — men are men, or well, he’s a football player. Especially in here.

This contradiction may put women in a challenging situation also known as the double bind (e.g. Grappendorf and Burton 2017).

In contrast to previous research (e.g. Burton and Leberman 2017; Grappendorf and Burton 2017; Hovden 2010; Shaw and Hoeber 2003), traditional heroic and masculine leadership characteristics were not viewed as important, and none of the interviewees described themselves as presenting this leadership style. Instead, more feminine characteristics, such as empathy, listening and discussion skills were emphasized:

I am a leader that is listening, that wants to have things on the table. I am not the kind of demanding leader who tells people what to do. At some point you need to do that as well… But my job is to facilitate. (Interviewee F7)

Furthermore, the interviewees did not feel that men and women lead differently or similarly. 'It depends on the persona,' reflected Interviewee F2. The findings are in line with Due Billing and Alvesson’s (2000) notion that polarization of masculinity and femininity in leadership is fading. Contemporary conceptions of leadership and management are increasingly in harmony with values and orientations often labelled as ‘feminine.’ Their notion that organizations in which men dominate senior positions may also emphasize actions, such as intuition, creativity, relations, importance of feelings seems to hold true also in this case. Management and leadership in Nordic football seem to be decreasingly constructed in masculine ways.

Although softer leadership qualities are valued in these organizations, women in leadership positions are a minority. The interviewees reflected that leadership styles in general have changed towards becoming more feminine. This means that male leaders have also adopted a softer leadership style (taking into account the long careers in the organizations). Men’s adaptation may just be a manifestation of popular, modern leadership theories, a consequence of social pressure or a result of finding it to be more effective; however, it may be that men do not want to relinquish their positions of power (Ottesen et al. 2010; Pfister 2010). Along with the popularization of leadership styles that emphasize more feminine characteristics, men must adapt — or at least act like they have adapted — to the new demands to keep their power positions. Lämsä and Sintonen (2001) argued that changing the
perception of who is capable and valid to lead an organization takes time owing to the masculinity associated with leaders. Interviewee F7 reflected, ‘It takes time to change a culture.’ However, the data suggest that it is not the so-called masculinity or femininity of ideal leadership styles that excludes women from leadership positions. Acknowledging the gendered nature of football and leadership, and the connectedness of masculinity and femininity with male and female bodies (Due Billing and Alvesson 2000), it may be that it is the female body and the images and stereotypes it represents that are new phenomena in football leadership; thus, women are seen as less fit to lead and manage.

**Concluding remarks**

The aim of this study was to increase understanding of why women in leadership positions are underrepresented in Nordic football. Studies on the underrepresentation of women leaders in sports have generally treated sports as a single context and focused on specific country contexts. To the author’s knowledge, this is the first study to examine the phenomenon with empirical evidence in the Finnish and Norwegian football contexts. Thus, this descriptive and exploratory study contributes to the continuing conversation on women and leadership in sports by offering a broad overview into the topic in a single-sport context, with special emphasis on cultural aspects, thus opening up new avenues for further research.

In comparison with previous studies (conducted mainly in the US, e.g. Burton and Leberman 2017; Shaw and Hoeber 2003), this study shows that some major barriers for women aiming for leadership positions have been broken down (e.g. family-work relation, and heroic and masculine leadership style) in Nordic football. Actions and changes at several different levels have been identified as factors positively impacting gender equality in this article. At the macro level, factors include the cultures of the Nordic countries that emphasize gender equality and state-level policy actions. The meso level includes factors, such as organizational-level policy actions and strategic goals, women pioneers, outside pressure and stakeholder expectations, top management’s conscious efforts to improve gender equality, and the changed leadership culture in the organizations. At the context level, the changing football culture, increased appreciation of women’s football and the increasing number of women and girls playing the sport help to change the football culture and to tackle structural barriers. In line with Cunningham” (2019) and Burton’s (2015) findings, this article shows that the barriers women leaders face are dynamic and multi-faceted and emerge from several levels. Thus, multi-level actions are needed to tackle gender inequality in football. However, regardless of the aforementioned actions and changes, women remain underrepresented within leadership positions in Nordic football.

As shown in this study, women in Nordic football face both structural and cultural bottlenecks at different levels in their leadership careers. However, the barriers seem largely intertwined with the following dilemma: football-specific experience (derived from men’s football) is seen as crucial in many leading positions at both FAs. Naturally, this is the case in many organizations and especially in sports, in which a deeper understanding of the national context and the inner workings of a particular federation are seen as crucial to career success. Owing to the fewer female than male actors in football (e.g. players, coaches and referees), the reproduction of male leaders partially comes down to numbers. If men bring with them the masculine/locker room culture from their sporting past into the organization, leadership is applied as a continuation of those socialization norms. To break the
reinforcing cycle, actions also addressing the (male) football culture are needed. Many of the present actions address women, such as increased appreciation of women's football and outside pressure or organizational actions towards gender equality. However, focusing only on women's football is not enough, as men as the majority shape the culture, values and norms in football. Other actions address increasing gender equality in the FAs. However, as it seems that men keep reinforcing the culture they learned in the past as players and other actors in the FAs, it becomes essential to intertwine the past. As umbrella organizations for football, the FAs have the power and means to steer (men's) football clubs towards a more inclusive culture. Furthermore, addressing the culture and organizations at the club level would help break the structural barrier of women lacking the right kind of football experience.

**Limitations and future research directions**

The limitation of a case study is the limited possibilities to generalize the results (Stake 2003). However, as in this case, the case study approach provides a possibility to gain in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon in a given context and thus a possibility to learn. Therefore, this article provides a valuable addition to the continuing discussion on gender, leadership and sports. The data obtained from this research were collected from people in leadership positions at the FAF and NFF. Interviews with people who have aimed for leadership positions but for some reason could not reach or have not reached them could have given a different understanding of the under-representation of women leaders in football. This perspective offers a venue for further studies to increase understanding. Another interesting perspective for further research is the level of football clubs. This research indicates that women are said to lack the right kind of football experience at the club level. More research at different levels of sport is needed to understand the bottlenecks and barriers affecting gender equality in sport management. Furthermore, an even closer examination of the football culture or some aspects of the culture (e.g. what kind of values or social norms form barriers to women pursuing leadership careers in football organizations) would be important for increasing understanding in single-sport contexts.

**Note**

1. In this study, managerial leadership position refers to a full-time, salaried, managerial position, thus excluding coaches, elected leaders and individuals in other elected decision-making positions.

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Envisioning Institutional Change for Gender Equality – Women’s Perspectives on Fostering Gender Equality in Decision-Making Positions in Sport

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Envisioning Institutional Change for Gender Equality – Women’s Perspectives on Fostering Gender Equality in Decision-Making Positions in Sport

The aim of this article is to study how institutional work can reshape institutionalised gender inequality in decision-making positions in sport from women leaders’ perspectives. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis and consisted of 22 semi-structured interviews, conducted between January and February 2022, with women in decision-making positions (selected and elected) in Finnish sport organisations. In the analysis, five main themes were identified: microlevel actions and agency, macrolevel actions and agency, reshaping perceptions of gender and leadership, intentional and unintentional maintenance work, and collective multilevel actions and agents.

Institutional work to tackle societal challenges, such as gender inequality, needs to move beyond the level of an institutional field. Institutional work cannot focus exclusively on fostering gender equality in decision-making positions in sport; rather, decision-making positions represent only one important mechanism through which institutional work is done.

This study contributes to the literature on gender equality and institutional work by furthering our knowledge of how actors shape definitions of gender (in)equality, as well as its place in society and its relationship to organised sport, and by increasing our understanding of how to enhance gender equality in decision-making positions in sport.

For practitioners, the study provides practical knowledge of how to foster gender equality in decision-making in sport.

Keywords: gender equality, institutional change, institutional work, decision-making positions, sport leadership
Understanding Gender (In)Equality in Leadership Positions in Sport

A Multilevel Perspective

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