Analysis of career pathways of British postholders in international sport governance

Executive Summary
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KEY DEFINITIONS

Junior position in international sport: A subordinate role to the senior decision-makers of the organisation, such as being a chair or member of a committee, commission or working group.

Senior position in international sport: A decision-making role such as a president, vice-president, secretary-general, or member of an executive board.

1. INTRODUCTION

There continues to be a significant underrepresentation of women within decision-making positions in international sport organisations. Since the first research studies about gender exclusion and inclusion appeared in the 1980s, a growing body of knowledge has developed to try to explain the continual lack of significant change in gender ratios in sport leadership and governance positions. Findings have revealed barriers, obstacles, and processes that lead to the exclusion of women, such as the preference for men as leaders, the use of male-oriented selection procedures, the prevalence of sexist acts and talk in sport departments and organisations, and the challenges that women face in combining motherhood and a career in sport administration. As far as we are aware, there is no existing research exploring the gendered experiences of individuals progressing from national to international sport governance. Instead, the focus has been *either* at the national *or* international level.

This report presents findings from a two-phase mixed method project.

The research objective for the first phase was to survey all UK postholders within international sport organisations and collect and analyse data about their demographics, backgrounds, career pathways, and leadership experiences.

The second phase of the research aimed to interview a smaller sample of postholders to provide an in-depth exploration of their career pathways in international sport governance, including an examination of gendered differences, intersectional barriers, and factors for success.

Our findings are separated across eight sections and, when combined with the recommendations listed at the end of this document, are intended to be used by UK Sport, national governing bodies and other stakeholders to inform applied practice in the sector to improve gender equality and support more women into senior leadership roles in international sport governance.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study had a two-phase, mixed methods design: 1) an electronic survey and 2) in-depth interviews.

2.1. Electronic survey

In total, 136 individuals who hold senior and junior positions in international sport were emailed a weblink for an online survey. Fifty-five people responded, meaning a response rate of 40%. Just under two-thirds of the respondents were men (n=35; 64%) and just over one-third were women (n=20; 36%). No respondent answered 'non-binary/gender-fluid', 'other', or 'prefer not to say'.

Men: 64%
(n=35)

Women: 36%
(n=20)
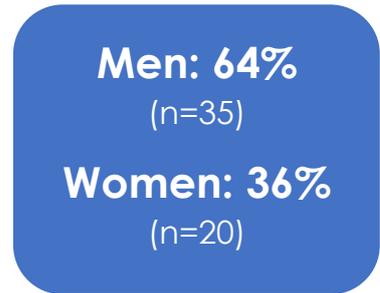
The survey was split into three sections and comprised multi-choice and open-answer responses:

1. A demographics section
2. A career pathway section
3. A leadership experience section

The survey data was analysed across four phases:

1. A descriptive analysis of the social characteristics from section one.
2. A descriptive analysis of the responses to the multi-choice questions in sections two and three.
3. Qualitative responses to questions in section three were split according to gender and thematically coded.
4. A chronological and descriptive analysis of responses relating to career pathways of the respondents.

2.2. In-depth interviews

Our interview sample was 12 British senior postholders:

6 women, 6 men

9 heterosexual people, 3 LGBTQ+ people

Age groups range from 35-44 to 75+

Representing 10 summer Olympic and 2 summer Paralympic sports

1 disabled person, 11 non-disabled people

3 people with caring responsibility
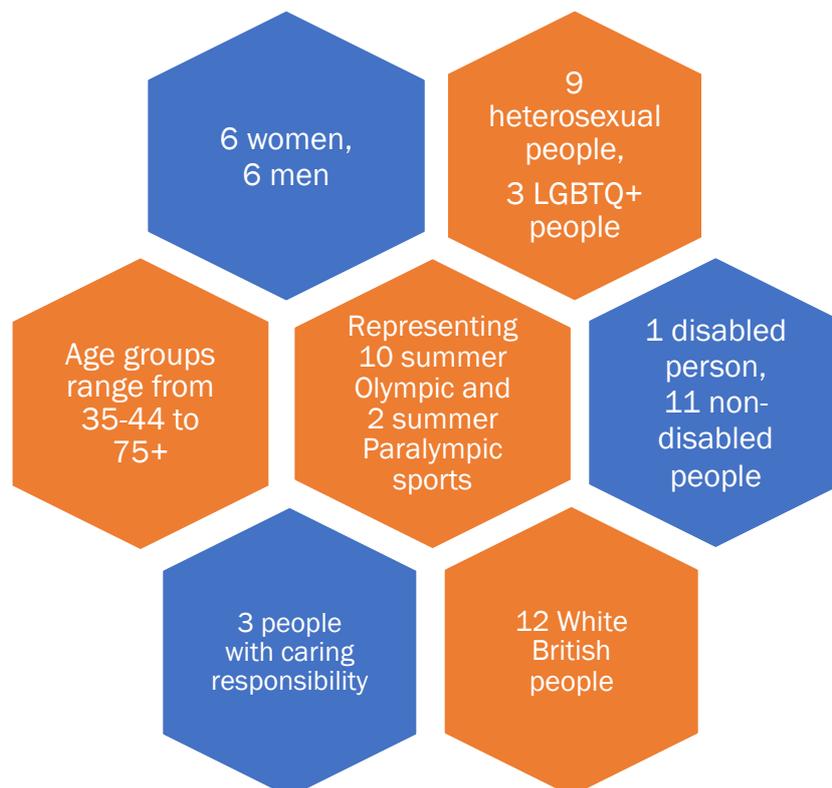
12 White British people

Figure 1: Sample characteristics

The interview guide was comprised of five sections: 1) introduction, 2) career pathway and journey into sport governance, 3) networks, 4) sport governance experiences and challenges, and 5) debrief.

Interview data was thematically analysed, with codes being drawn from the empirical data. The women's and men's interviews were analysed separately to aid the examination of gender differences across the data and themes. Several levels of themes were developed, with the main themes being: 1) background, 2) journey, 3) motivations, 4) barriers and challenges, 5) enabling factors, and 6) recommendations. During the analysis process, all participants and accompanying quotes were anonymised, ensuring that neither the individuals nor the organisations could be identified.

Within the report, interview quotes are presented in italicised orange text, whilst qualitative survey responses are presented in italicised blue text.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Sample characteristics/demographics

3.1.1. There was a notable lack of diversity amongst the survey sample of British postholders in international sport (from which the interview sample was also drawn).

Figure 2 demonstrates the dominance of certain characteristics amongst the sample whilst indicating differences between men and women:
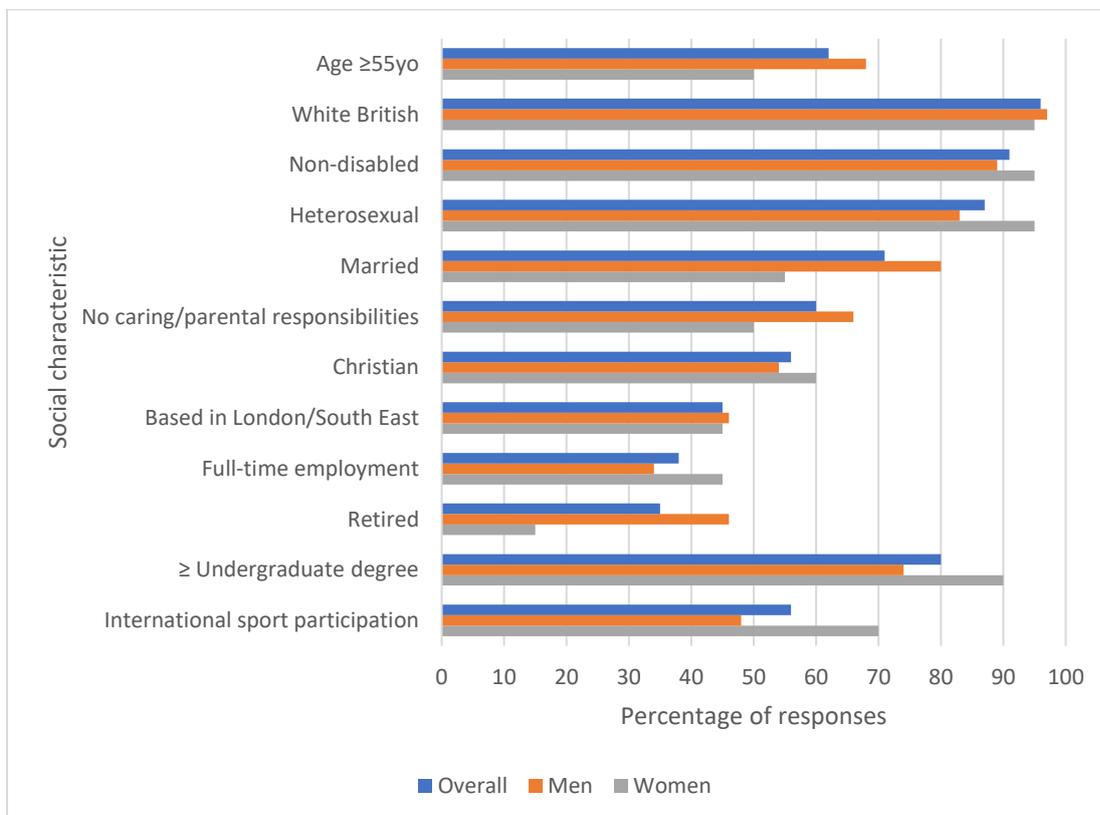

Figure 2. Social characteristics of the sample by gender (%)

3.1.2. When the analysis of social characteristics was split by gender, some differences were seen:

- Men in the sample were older.
- More men were married.
- There was more diversity in the responses to sexuality amongst men than women.
- More women were educated to a higher level.
- Women competed at a higher sporting level.
- Slightly more women had caring responsibilities.
- A greater prevalence of men were retired than women, though more women were self-employed.
- There was a greater geographic spread amongst men than women.
- Men held senior positions slightly more than women, whilst slightly more women than men held junior roles.

3.2. Career pathways

3.2.1. People serving in a decision-making or administration capacity at a national or continental level form a major pipeline for international governance.

3.2.2. Female survey respondents identified a greater prevalence of national (75%) and continental (50%) experience than men (66% and 29%, respectively).

3.2.3. On average, men in the survey sample were 46 years old when they achieved their first post in international sport governance whereas women were slightly younger at 44 years old.

3.2.4. Almost the entirety of the survey sample only had experience of one sport.

3.2.5. Just over half of the survey respondents (51%) stated that a role outside of sport was influential in helping them to obtain their current post. The gender split was also near-identical.

3.3. Obtaining an international post

3.3.1. Survey data suggests that women and men become aware of their first post in international sport in different ways. Men appear to benefit more from existing networks whilst women are more supported by their NGB.

3.3.2. This was repeated when asked what the influential factors are in obtaining their first international role. Men identified networking skills and IF support whereas women highlighted their experience, motivation, and achievements.

Figure 3 shows how the survey sample became aware of their first post in international sport. Respondents could select more than one answer, thus figure 3 indicates the percentage of the sample to select that answer as well as the percentage by gender. Accordingly, there are some differences in the responses by gender.
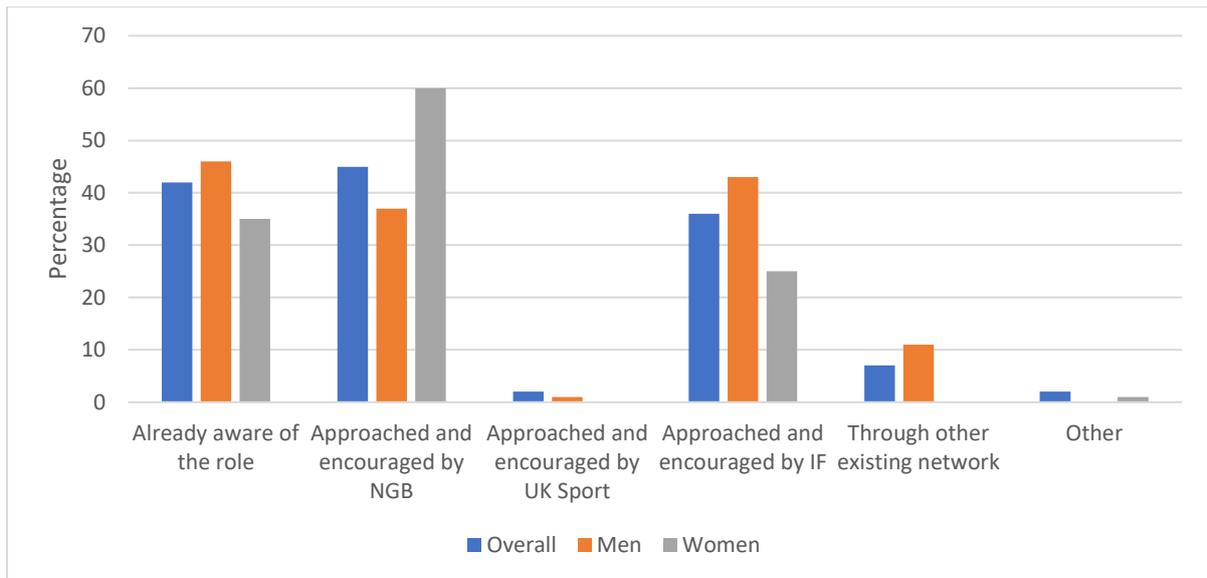
Figure 3. Percentage of responses overall and by gender for how the sample became aware of their first post in international sport.

Figure 4 demonstrates the key factors that were instrumental for the sample obtaining their first post in international sport. As with the previous topic, respondents could select more than one answer.

Figure 4. Percentage of responses overall and by gender for key factors that were instrumental for the sample obtaining their first post in international sport.

3.3.3. Figure 4 shows that nearly two-thirds of survey respondents were supported by their NGB in obtaining their first post in international sport. This demonstrates the

key role these organisations have in nurturing colleagues into the international arena.

3.3.4. Experience of sport governance below international level was seen as instrumental by just over half of the survey sample in obtaining their first post, whilst networking skills, professional qualifications, sporting achievements, and support from their IF followed thereafter.

3.3.5. Significantly more female survey respondents reported the influence of their previous sporting achievements in obtaining their first post (women: 45%; men: 23%). Female interviewees also gave examples about how their careers as elite athletes directly led to their engagement with junior positions in international sport governance:

3.3.6. Men identified networking skills and support from their IF more than women in being influential in obtaining their first international role.

3.3.7. Across interviewees, men and women both alluded to how their NGB was important and influential during their election experiences. This included encouragement to go for a position, support in the election process, and one example of an NGB strategically manoeuvring a candidate into their position.

3.3.8. Interviewees also cited examples where their NGB had a lack of influence or support in the election process. This included a lack of NGB understanding about role eligibility or role requirements, a lack of training and development available, and an example of when an NGB opposed a candidate's candidacy.

3.3.9. Female interviewees discussed the influence of gendered election rules and processes in obtaining their roles, such as informally steering election processes to meet organisational aims of increasing female Council representation, and formal rules to ensure the election of women.

3.3.10. Overall, election success rests upon the effectiveness of the individual, and in some cases their support team, to engage informally with the voting membership to endorse them. This includes building a profile, lobbying for support with campaigns and manifestos, and enhancing existing networks to ensure success.

3.3.11. The success of these efforts can be heavily influenced by internal politics, however, such as deals being made across nations and/or regions during elections.

3.4. Inclusivity in international sport governance

Figure 5 shows the extent to which the survey respondents felt that international sport governance is inclusive to all:
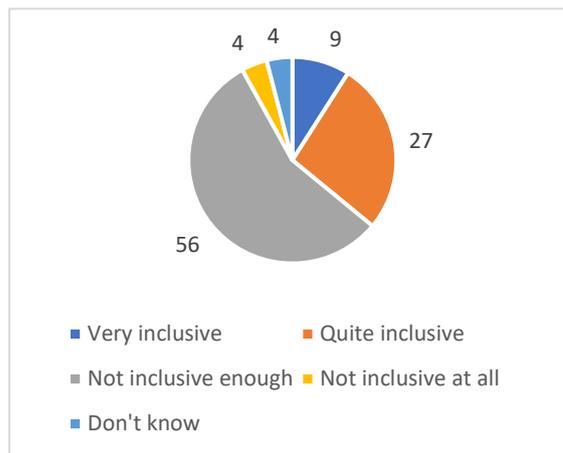

Figure 5. The extent to which international sport governance is inclusive to all (%).

3.4.1. Over half of the sample (56%; n=31) responded that it is not inclusive enough. There were no significant differences in responses by gender.

3.4.2. Qualitative survey responses and discussions within interviews mirrored the quantitative findings in acknowledging that international sport governance requires progress to be more diverse. Here, it was acknowledged that international sport governance is very white, Western, and male dominated.

3.4.3. Vertical gender segregation was identified by interviewees who reported that, as positions or bodies become more senior, the fewer the women.

3.4.4. An important observation expressed within qualitative survey responses was that some organisations are performing well in some areas of diversity (e.g., geographic and cultural diversity) but not in other areas (e.g., female and para representation).

3.4.5. Formal factors reported within the survey as contributing to a lack of inclusivity within IFs include: the need for strategies and initiatives such as quotas and term limits; the need for a more diverse pipeline; a lack of governance support for IFs; biased recruitment practices; a lack of organisational understanding of top-down governance practices; and limited positions providing limited opportunities for change.

3.4.6. Some of these formal issues were also discussed in more depth within the interviews. For example, interviewees discussed: challenges in translating top-level (IOC/IPC) gender equity policy into practice at the IF level; facing resistance in attempting to introduce new rules or statutes that would guarantee increased female representation and align with top-level policy; ineffective or biased election processes; a lack of qualified women in the pipeline for IF governance positions (notably observed by male, not female, interviewees); and that gender inclusive recruitment issues were even more challenging for IFs governing Paralympic sports.

3.4.7. Informal factors reported within the survey as contributing to a lack of inclusivity within IFs include: IFs failing to recognise the value of diversity; the existence of old boys' clubs; traditional ways of working; and an overall lack of inclusive culture.

3.4.8. Problematic informal practices discussed within the interviews included 'laddish' cultures, problematic gender stereotyping, and gendered dress codes. Some of

these practices were influenced by the wider culture of the sport and were reported to create spaces where women and minorities can feel othered, unwelcome, or unsafe. To be an insider within these cultures, it was discussed how one's relationship to individuals within positions of power is key.

3.5. Challenges faced by individual postholders

3.5.1.   Both female and male postholders reported a diversity of challenges faced in their international sport governance careers.

3.5.2.   Formal factors reported as challenges in the survey included the volunteer structure, travel requirements and family responsibilities, financial costs, lack of support, Covid-19, term limits, and poor management/leadership practices.

3.5.3.   Interviewees discussed some of these formal factors in more depth, including: how the volunteer structure meant that their workload and travel requirements were challenging to manage, particularly for those with small children; financial challenges in receiving funding to attend important events which can create a (gendered) uneven playing field for those who can/cannot afford to fund themselves; and poor governance such as disorganisation, archaic statutes, and a slow pace of change.

3.5.4.   Informal factors reported in the survey included navigating politics, power conflicts, working with cultural differences, marginalisation, abuse/harassment, maintaining motivation, lack of self-confidence, and developing skills and knowledge.

3.5.5.   Within interviews, some challenges were discussed that were experienced by a diversity of interviewees, such as: challenges that stemmed from lacking knowledge and/or experience when first being elected into their position; navigating politics, which was deemed to be highly influential in the success of one's international governance career; political personal attacks that have undermined them and their role; and negative perceptions related to being British.

3.5.6.   Other challenges discussed had a clear gendered dimension. For example, female survey respondents and interviewees discussed personal experiences related to an underrepresentation of women and experiences of marginalisation or, worse, harassment. It was also highlighted how challenges can be experienced differently or to different degrees based on the intersectional identities of women (e.g., their race/ethnicity, nationality, or sexuality).

3.5.7.   Other social characteristics also led to unique challenges for some interviewees, such as prejudice related to coming from a small national governing body, challenges for those under the age of 40 being perceived as a threat to older postholders, and LGBTQ postholders experiencing concerns in working with people from diverse cultures and visiting countries where LGBTQ people are marginalised.

3.5.8.   As a result of the challenges faced, some male and female interviewees spoke of feeling a lack of energy or motivation to continue in their roles.

3.6. Enabling factors

3.6.1. Interviewees discussed a range of enabling factors that positively influenced their experiences in international sport positions.

3.6.2. Enabling factors reported at the personal level were: gaining respect and being seen as having integrity by others; being resilient to overcome challenges (like those presented in section 3.5.); working hard and showing a strong volunteer ethic; positive influences of perceptions of being British, such as being good at governance, and being native English speakers; having sporting capital as a result of the respect and benefits afforded to the cultural significance and embodied practice of having been an elite athlete within the sport; identity factors such as gender or age when IFs aim to recruit a more gender diverse or younger volunteer workforce; and mentors and sponsors supporting election processes and access to powerful informal spaces.

3.6.3. Enabling factors at the organisational-level were: gendered strategies such as rules, statutes, events, and seminars aiming to benefit gender equity in the organisational structure; welcoming and inclusive environments for women; collaborative and respectful cultures resulting from a greater involvement of women in IF governance; and the impact that strong or improved governance can have on increasing efficiency and reducing workload.

3.7. The role and impact of networking

3.7.1. One theme that repeatedly emerged from the survey data as being influential in the experiences and successes of postholders was networking.

The repeated mentioning of networking within the survey responses led us to explore this topic in more depth within the interviews. In analysing the interview data, we developed a '5 P's' typology for the requirements reported by interviewees for successful networking in international federations:

Figure 6: The 5 P's typology for successful networking in international federations
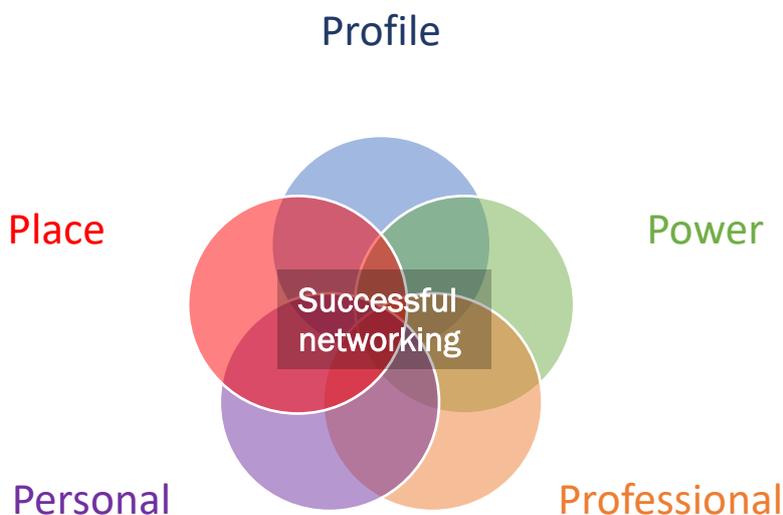
As can be seen within Figure 6, all '5 P's' are required to achieve successful networking, and all five are interrelated.

3.7.2. Interviewees spoke about the importance of building a strong networking *profile* in being successfully elected to a senior post, and subsequently having influence once in post. That is, it is important to be well-known within the IF to stand a good chance of being voted into a senior role. No difference was seen in the needs or experiences of female and male interviewees in this regard.

3.7.3. To build a large, strong network, participants spoke of the importance of accessing networking *places* and spaces, such as congresses and major championships or events, to build a large and influential network.

3.7.4. At formal organisational events, postholders discussed how much of the influential and strategic networking occurs outside of formal meeting spaces. Interviewees spoke of how most influential conversations have already happened prior to arriving at the meeting (either in person or on the phone), and so being available to capitalise on opportunities for casual, informal conversations is important.

3.7.5. It was also discussed how informal networking spaces can be exclusionary and undemocratic in that not all elected representatives are included in decision-making.

3.7.6. Other interviewees spoke more specifically about how much of the informal, casual conversations that happen around meetings involve drinking alcohol at a bar (often within the hotel). To thrive within the influential bar networking environment, there is also an expectation to buy drinks for other postholders. This again exposes inequalities in who can capitalise on important informal networking opportunities based on the financial status of individuals.

3.7.7. Some of the interviewees discussed issues and challenges related to networking occurring within hotel bar settings, such as feeling discomfort. This highlights the need to achieve a balance between supporting women and other underrepresented or marginalised groups to effectively engage in influential informal networking spaces, and to work to change these spaces to be safer and more inclusive for all.

3.7.8. One female interviewee did discuss an example from her organisation where a strategy had been implemented to try to develop more inclusive networking spaces, and a male interviewee spoke of how he has individually tried to make informal networking spaces more inclusive. These are inclusive practice that other IFs could also learn from to reduce negative (gendered) outcomes from exclusive networking spaces.

When accessing networking places to build a networking profile, interviewees spoke about different qualities needed to conduct successful networking. In our analysis, we grouped these into personal and professional factors.

3.7.9. In relation to *personal* factors, interviewees spoke about the need for certain skills and personalities that enable interaction with others on a personal level, such as being friendly, approachable, confident, conversationally proficient, and good at

listening. Family was also seen to be an important topic to connect with others on a personal level, particularly within some regions and cultures.

3.7.10. For some interviewees, networking on a personal level was heavily influenced by their gender or other elements of their social identity such as nationality and native language. This caused some postholders to migrate together into groups of similar people. One participant conceptualised this as 'spaces of comfort'.

3.7.11. One interviewee discussed their experiences of physical challenges of networking within standing spaces as a wheelchair user, due to being at a different height to the usually dominant group of non-wheelchair users. This interviewee's reflections demonstrate how networking opportunities, experiences, and challenges are different for different individuals and social groups. However, such experiences and challenges often go unseen or unspoken within spaces that continue to privilege and normalise non-disabled people.

3.7.12. In addition to personal qualities, interviewees also spoke of the importance of *professional* skills when engaging in successful strategic networking. For several interviewees, professional networking is related to promoting a particular agenda, which could be, for example, on behalf of an organisation, nation, group of athletes, or gender.

3.7.13. It was discussed how agenda-driven networking needs to be strategic to ensure the best chance of achieving a favourable outcome.

3.7.14. For others, 'professional networking' is also linked to sharing good practice and transfer of knowledge to improve sport governance:

3.7.15. Finally, *power* was something that many of the interviewees considered when discussing the components of successful networking. For example, several spoke of the importance of understanding who key influencers are, and in turn focusing their networking efforts towards these individuals in order to maximise resultant benefits. The influence or prestige of one's own role was also seen to be important in their opportunities to network.

3.7.16. Overall, networking was discussed as being an important source of power for both individuals' careers and organisational success. Our findings show the complex and nuanced ways in which networking plays out in IFs across the '5 P's', which makes it a challenging practice to effectively carry out.

3.8. Support received

3.8.1. There was a mixed picture from the survey when it came to the extent that respondents feel supported in their current role in international sport. Nearly three-quarters of the sample (74.5%; n=41) responded positively here ('very', 'quite', or

'satisfactorily'), as per figure 7. This was mirrored when analysed by gender, with near identical results provided per answer by men and women.

3.8.2. Men in senior positions (86%) felt supported more than men in junior positions (67%). However, the opposite occurs for women, with women in junior positions (85%) feeling supported more than women in senior positions (57%). Older men and women (≥55 years and older) felt supported more than their younger peers. Thus, more support is needed for younger individuals and women in senior positions.
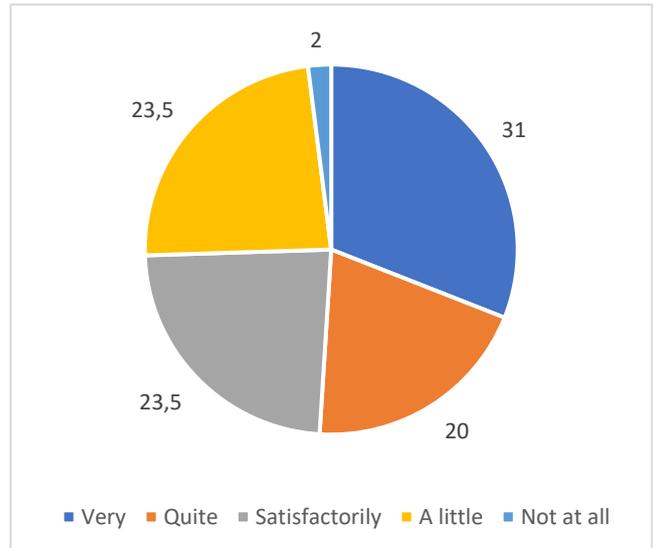

Figure 7. The extent that respondents feel supported in their current role in international sport (percentage).

When survey respondents and interviewees discussed support received from UK Sport, three elements stood out:

- The International Leadership Programme (ILP)
- International Relations (IR) funding to influence agendas
- Strategic support and development of individuals

3.8.3. The ILP was praised for its content, such as cultural training, as well as its mentoring and networking components.

3.8.4. Both survey respondents and interviewees acknowledged the benefits of IR funding by UK Sport to influence agendas within IFs or international sport more broadly. The funding is used for important projects within international sport and supporting others toward positions of significance.

3.8.5. Finally, there were personal recollections of how UK Sport strategically supports and develops individuals. One interviewee offered an extensive reflection of the targeted support available for those going for senior roles that UK Sport has prioritised. His reflections show that support appears to have been long-term and was manifested through different phases as he progressed to a senior position in his IF.

Interviewees also offered insights into how UK Sport can better support them. We split these into two parts: training and development and strategic and resource adjustments.

3.8.6. Nearly half of the interviewees identified areas where the ILP could be revised and enhanced. The majority of these offered ideas toward how the content of the programme could better reflect greater awareness of what is important to other cultures. It was also questioned whether the structure of the ILP could be repackaged to include some ongoing CPD for alumni.

3.8.7. Interviewees also offered detailed suggestions about strategic information sharing. There was a desire here to have more information available and leadership about the most contemporary and political topics. Each recognised

that this knowledge exists amongst the UK Sport network and its postholders but wished for a mechanism to share this knowledge.

3.8.8. The importance of a talent identification approach was also discussed, with a need for UK Sport to attract and nurture people into sport governance. This may include how athletes are cultivated when they begin to consider their post-career options, how talented individuals are supported and developed within the sport system to make a difference, and how sport governance is positioned as an attractive proposition for those external to sport.

3.8.9. Finally, financial resource was considered by the interviewees. Unlike many of the topics mentioned in this section, this did appear to be gendered. For example, two female interviewees reflected upon how the ability to self-fund attendance at conferences or congresses often enabled men to continue to consolidate their power. Therefore, they suggest UK Sport continue to lobby and influence national and international sports to ensure gender balance amongst those attending influential events.

4. LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Share UK Sport's database of British postholders in international sport organisations with all postholders to provide opportunities for these individuals to connect (with the consent of all postholders).

2. Establish a talent identification programme and pathways for senior (female) athletes interested in pursuing a career in sport governance to ensure a clear succession of UK athlete representatives in international bodies.

3. Create a bank/dataset of forthcoming opportunities in international sport governance (e.g., end-of-terms for positions and committee membership) with a mechanism to circulate and promote these to individuals who have indicated an interest in such positions.

4. Collaborate with NGBs and European Federations to review what support is being provided at the national and European levels to prospective and current IF postholders. Where a lack of support is found, provide guidance to NGBs and EFs on how to better support candidates (using examples from this report as guidance where needed).

5. Regularly share information and resources with senior postholders to help them make informed decisions on strategic issues such as international relations, transgender inclusion, anti-doping, integrity, major event hosting, term limits, conflicts of interest, third party event organisers, athlete relations and representation at Board/Council level, safeguarding, diversity and inclusion etc.

6. Regularly disseminate information on key governance policy and trends within the international sport landscape (e.g., new IOC or IPC policy or announcements) to British international postholders.

7. Expand/update the ILP to:

   a. Include more content on cultural differences and challenges within IFs.

   b. Consider the '5 P's' of successful networking discussed by postholders.

    c.   Avoid one-size-fits-all training that fails to appreciate difference amongst postholders.

    d.   Involve ILP (female) alumni as facilitators to provide role models who can speak from personal experience.

    e.   Include ILP 'refresher' modules for alumni

8. Consider expanding financial support for postholders to include young children and their carer to remove parental barriers.

9. Consider ways to ensure that NGBs use UK Sport funding to send gender equal delegations to congresses and other important events.

10. Support British international postholders in navigating safeguarding issues (e.g., reporting forms of discrimination and abuse) when IF safeguarding policies are either absent or not fit for purpose.

11. Ensure that support offered to postholders does not stop once in post but continues throughout their sport governance career.

12. Have dialogue with NGBs and IFs about how to create inclusive and safe spaces for informal networking to take place.

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