

NATALIA ORGANISTA
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“The Top is Always Reserved for Men”: Gendering of Leadership Positions in Polish Sports Federations

Abstract: To date, women are under-represented in most positions of authority, including sport leadership, not only in Poland, but also in most countries worldwide. Until recently, there has been no research on gendering of positions within Polish sports federations. The presented analysis employs Acker’s theory of gendered organization (1990, 1992) to explore professional experiences of men and women in positions of sport leadership in Polish national sports federations. The findings, based on 24 in-depth interviews, revealed that gender-based practices maintain gender imbalance in the studied organizations. The studied male leaders demonstrated a significant degree of sexism in their statements and justified gender inequalities by referring to biological essentialism. Further, the assumptions regarding masculinities as associated with leadership positions, liminal gender awareness and gender role stereotyping are the major obstacles faced by women in Polish national sports federations.

Keywords: gender, gendering, management in sport, national governing bodies, sports organizations

Introduction

Male dominance in key positions in sports federations is maintained despite the fact that these organizations operate based on democratic principles and equal access strategies. The existing studies dealing with gendering of sports organizations have been conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries and in Western Europe, i.e. in a different cultural context and with a much longer tradition of democracy of the examined countries compared to Poland. To date, the reasons for the low presence of women in leading positions in Polish national sports federations (NSFs) have not been analyzed therefore the main purpose of the research was to explore the professional experience of women and men occupying leadership positions in those organizations.

A study conducted by the *European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE 2015)* with reference to 28 European NSFs in Olympic sports has shown that women hold only 14% of decision-making positions in NSFs. On the other hand, the results of the *Sydney Scoreboard: A Global Index for Women in Sport Leadership*, an online tool for monitoring women’s representation on NSF boards worldwide, have shown that in 2013–2014 in 21 European countries the percentage of female board members ranged from 9%—the lowest result among all European countries included—in Poland to 37% in Norway (*Adriaanse 2018*). There were even fewer women chairs on national federation boards. In 14 out of 21 countries studied, less than 10% of federations were governed by women (average for

European countries is 8%, and 10% on a global scale). In Poland, 3% of NSFs were managed by women in the analyzed period (Adriaanse 2018: 16–18). The results obtained show that women remain significantly under-represented in the position of sport leadership.

In Poland, gender distributions on boards of 35 Olympic sports NSFs were studied it was found that women accounted for only 12% of leadership positions of those in 2016 (Jakubowska 2018). In almost one third of Polish NSFs, there are no females holding board positions. In addition, only 11% of women are secretaries general (Jakubowska 2018). Secretaries general are responsible for day-to-day operations and implement policies and orders of the management board. Before Jakubowska's (2018) work, research on women in positions of leadership in sports organizations and NSFs in Poland was scarce except for seminal work by Pawlak (1998). The obtained data also pointed to significant under-representation of women in the studied organizations. Only 6.5% of women were board members in sports organizations, and 6.9% of women held corresponding positions in NSFs. Comparing the results of Jakubowska's and Pawlak's research it should be stated that since 1998 the situation of women holding leadership positions in Polish NSFs has not significantly improved.

Analysis of the composition of governance bodies in sports federations is compelling because those who lead determine functioning and structuring of a given sports discipline. Hence, they decide who is involved in work in sports and whose vision of development is to be implemented (Claringbould & Knoppers 2012). As Jakubowska (2014: 331) comments: "Over-representation of men contributes to consolidation of male dominance in sports and introduction of practices which (re)produce gender boundaries. Sports organizations in many cases seem to be the last bastion of masculinity, but at the same time a guarantee of men's control over women's participation in sports." Consequently, over the past twenty years, the number of Polish female representatives for the Olympic Games has increased by approx. 20% (Jakubowska 2018). The number of adult Polish women participating in sport or physical activities is also increasing (Lenartowicz et al. 2017). However, as statistics cited earlier demonstrated the gender distribution on Polish NSF boards has not changed significantly despite these increases in the number of girls and women in sports.

Numerous studies point to the advantages of increased presence of women in leadership structures. A review of research from the last 30 years on corporate boards has shown that appointing women to hold leadership positions improved governance in organizations (Terjesen et al. 2009; Nielsen & Huse 2010). Higher representation of women on the board contributes to the development of a more creative and democratic management team, presentation of a new and distinct perspective resulting from different experiences, and can improve financial results (Leberman & Burton 2017; Piggott & Pike 2019). In addition, female leaders are role models for other women (Piggott & Pike 2019). However, nowadays, even if women decide to hold leadership position in sports organizations, after several years they often give up their job disappointed by the male-dominated and hostile environment in the organization (Pfister & Radtke 2006). Therefore, greater visibility of women in sports organizations could improve employee retention (Piggott & Pike 2019: 2).

Gendering of Sports Organizations—Theoretical Assumptions and Research Results

For years, research has been conducted in the Anglo-Saxon countries and Western Europe on the processes of gendering of sports organizations. Gendering of a profession or specific practices is the process of identifying work or traits required to perform it with a specific gender (Bradley 1989; Acker 1990: 146). This process contributes to sustaining occupational segregation and maintaining uniformity in a given occupational group.

For the purpose of describing any potential gendering of Polish NSFs, Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations (1990, 1992) were employed. Acker (1990, 1992) states that the requirements of the labor market seem to be gender-neutral, and yet remain adapted to men and by that gendered. She distinguished four interrelated and mutually influential gendering processes in organizations. These processes are embedded in the labor market and contribute to maintaining gender inequality. The first one is the gendered division of labor. This process is infused in organizational practices and makes specific positions identified with a specific group of people. In relation to leadership positions in organizations, most often white males constitute such a target group (Acker 1990: 146). The second process refers to symbols, images or discourses reproduced at work. This process is related to the gendered division of labor. Any division of work strengthens (or weakens) stereotypes related to performing specific work or tasks. For example, if sport is associated mainly with men, they will be considered to be ideal employees of sports organizations. Women, on the other hand, can be perceived as lacking key skills to lead sports organization and therefore can be treated with a great deal of distrust (Acker 1990: 146). The third process refers to interactions in the workplace. These interactions are constructed with the use of dominant cultural meanings ascribed to performing professional duties. Due to the fact that sports organizations operated for a long time mainly as 'male' spaces, the meanings assigned to specific tasks or experience of men are considered to be dominant. The meanings that seem to match best the interactions within the organization start to be regarded as obvious and reasonable, and with time they become embedded within the organizational structure (Acker 1990: 146–147). The last process refers to creating and sustaining social identities. Each social identity requires a specific job in order to adapt to the organizational norm. Trying to fit into the idea of an ideal employee, women often negate or hide their gender identity knowing that it might have a negative effect on their chances in the profession (Acker 1990: 147). Acker also described the logic of organizational functioning which ensures that the four processes described above are rationalized and legitimized and gender hierarchies sustained. The rules, performance assessment, payroll as well as practices and routines defining organizational culture and relations between employees in the organization are perceived as obvious and unquestionable despite the fact that they contribute to sustaining the gender difference and hierarchy in professional work. Due to this, the “myth of work neutrality” with regard to gender (Acker 1990: 147–150, cf. Pfister 2010) is working and the entire process of gendering organizations remains invisible.

Research on under-representation of women in the position of sports leadership using the multi-level approach (Burton & Leberman 2017) has shown that there are many factors that shape organizations. A multilevel perspective provides a comprehensive view of the determinants of women's under-representation in management positions in the NSFs.

Clearly, the perception of sport itself as a male space influences functioning of sports organizations. Sport sociologists claim that sport is a gendered institution (Messner 2002). Currently, both models of femininity and models of masculinity are becoming more and more complex and are subject to change, but gender inequalities remain visible at the level of sport management, such as over-representation of male coaches or significantly lower salaries of female athletes in numerous sports disciplines.

Research concerning social-cultural level perspective (macro) on women's leadership in sports organizations have indicated that sport remains a gendered institution and masculinities are a certain standard having impact on all activities in sports organizations (Adriaanse & Schofield 2013). Shaw and Frisby (2006) and Cunningham (2008) described institutionalized masculinities as a principle of operation of sports organizations that significantly limits women's access to leadership positions. Not only are women under-represented but also marginalized in sports organizations (Sibson 2010; Shaw 2006; Shaw & Hoerber 2003). Such sanctioned practices last for years (Cunningham 2008). Perceiving masculinities in sports organizations as a certain norm means that under-representation of women remains an unsolved problem. Claringbould and Knoppers (2012) indicated that the normality, passivity and neutrality practices adopted by the respondents maintain and strengthen the unequal division of leadership positions with regard to gender. The conviction about equal access to the profession, naturalization of unequal participation of women in sports organizations and lack of action taken to change this situation strengthen the status quo. In addition, the practice of liminal awareness (cf. Martin 2006) with regard to gender operating in organizations makes it difficult to introduce strategies and policies aimed at aligning gender imbalance on leadership positions in sports organizations.

Further, qualities generally expected from men like assertiveness or striving for power are seen as a key feature to perform managerial duties. In a study of three British NSFs, Shaw and Hoerber (2003) showed that leadership discourses were containing various gendered subtexts. Senior management jobs were identified with discourses of masculinity, while duties associated with discourses of femininity were not highly valued. In turn, Knoppers and Anthonissen (2008) showed that associating the discourse of masculinity with rationality, instrumentality and passion contributes to excluding women from occupying position of power in sports organizations.

Research on sports organizations from the organizational (meso) level perspective highlighted the role of practices, principles and rules functioning in organizations that contributed to under-representing women in leadership positions. Numerous studies have confirmed the existence of an old-boys network (Shaw 2006; Sibson 2010; Pfister & Radtke 2006, 2009), use of a specific sense of humour, paternalistic language (Shaw 2006), and even a distinctive dress code to maintain 'male' work practices in organizations (Pike & Piggott 2019; Shaw 2006; Claringbould & Knoppers 2007). Much attention was paid to analyses of the recruitment process for management boards. Research results have shown that men were considered to be better candidates and women had to adapt to "male" ideas about an "ideal leader." For example, in British sports organizations women had more difficult job interviews because they were assumed to be less capable of holding positions on boards than men (Shaw & Hoerber 2003), while Hovden's (2000) analyses regarding recruitment in Norwegian NSFs and sports organizations have shown that candidates representing

“male traits” were sought, where at the same time these traits were perceived as gender-neutral. Searching for such candidates contributes to reproducing gender hierarchies. Numerous researchers have indicated that these practices correspond to the homologous reproduction described by Kanter (1977). The criteria set by those in power ensure that they maintain influence on the organizational operation by employing people with similar characteristics. Occurrence of homologous reproduction was confirmed by Claringbould and Knoppers (2007). The researchers described how twelve studied women holding top positions in Dutch sports organizations distanced themselves from their gender, trying to meet the expectations of a board member. Knowing the expectations of recruiters, the women respondents accepted the assumed criteria or adapted their behaviour to the criteria. Referring to these situations, Cunningham (2008: 137) wrote about the culture of similarity that marginalizes women in the organization.

Analyses related to the micro level were focused on the meaning that individuals give to their work in sports organizations and how the internalisation of beliefs about work affects women’s professional opportunities. Studies on discourses on masculinity and femininity confirmed that men are perceived as leaders performing more responsible tasks and women are assigned to administrative work having no strategic importance for the functioning of an organization (Shaw & Hoeber 2003; Sibson 2010; Claringbould & Knoppers 2007, 2012). In turn, Grappendorf and Burton (2017: 53) described gender role stereotyping as a barrier preventing women from being promoted. In addition, gender role stereotyping lowers motivation to occupy key positions in the organization, leading to self-limiting behaviors (Burton & Leberman 2017: 26).

The study of discourses on masculinity and femininity also revealed that women experienced difficulty in combining work and family duties (Pfister & Radtke 2006, 2009; Dixon & Bruening 2005). As the study by Pfister and Radtke (2006) showed, women who quit their jobs in sports organizations did not want to participate in the battle for power and prestige. Moreover, they lacked motivation because they could not implement significant changes in the organization. At the same time, being aware of the existing expectations to be ‘ideal mothers’ they hesitated whether it was worth devoting to work for the organization. The studied women having a family declared that their participation in professional work depends on their partner’s support in performing family duties. Men had no such dilemmas (Pfister & Radtke 2006, 2009). In addition, the studies showed that among women holding managing positions in German sports organizations there was a higher percentage of unmarried women than in the entire population. The surveyed men lived with their partners as often as the rest of the male population (Pfister & Radtke 2006: 236). This result may indicate that unmarried or childless women have more time and energy to devote themselves to their professional career and the unequal division of home and parental duties makes it difficult for them to engage in work in sports organizations.

Methodology

Considering the literature review presented above concerning gendering of sports organizations, and the existing research void in this field in Poland, a decision was taken to

interview women ($n = 12$) and men ($n = 12$) holding leadership positions in Polish NSFs. The main purpose of the research was to explore the professional experience of women and men occupying leadership positions in Polish sports federations. It was decided that conducting interviews also with men is of key importance to understanding the gendering of sports organizations in Poland, as they dominate in Polish NSFs in terms of numbers and a vast majority of men manage these organizations. Their views concerning importance of gender in the NSFs are crucial to analyzing the current situation and drawing applicative conclusions. Answers to the following research questions were sought:

RQ1: What meaning do respondents assign to gender with regard to work in NSFs, their professional careers and performed duties?

RQ2: What are the reasons for the under-representation of women in leadership positions in Polish NSFs, according to the respondents?

RQ3: Do the respondents experience gendered barriers in their professional life?

Twenty-four individual in-depth interviews with women and men working in Polish sports federations representing Olympic sports disciplines were conducted. As claimed by Kvale (2007: 9), qualitative interviews provide “a unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own worlds describe their activities, experiences and options.” Therefore, instead of providing generalizations, the paper is to contribute to a better understanding of gendered professional experiences of senior managers working for Polish sports federations and does not aspire to present the ‘objective truth’ about the situation of all NSF employees in Poland.

Individuals working in federations representing Olympic individual and team sports disciplines were interviewed. The respondents were sought by sending invitations to specific people from the largest Polish sports associations. Then, due to numerous refusals to participate or lack of contact, sports organizations were asked to select a person meeting the inclusion criteria, who would agree to participate. This method of recruiting participants was complemented by snowball sampling, as still only few people agreed to participate.

Only persons occupying key leadership positions were studied, that is presidents, vice-presidents of boards in Polish NSFs and secretaries general. The exception were two female respondents: one was the chairwomen of a commission and the other one occupied a senior managerial position other than indicated above. For the sake of keeping confidentiality towards the respondents, the NSFs for which the subjects work will not be listed. Considering how few women work in NSFs in Poland, indicating the organizations for which the respondents work, in many cases would mean (e.g. in the case of secretaries general) immediate identification. In particular, the interviewed women asked for a guarantee that their identity would not be disclosed. There were situations when they contacted the interviewer afterwards to ask again for confidentiality and again informed about the negative consequences they would suffer if their personal details were disclosed. Knowing that the interview would concern functioning of women in NSFs, several potential respondents categorically refused to participate in the study. The interviewed women worked in sports federations for twelve years on average and men for twenty-three years, and the current leadership position was held by women for four years and two months on average, and by men for three years and seven months.

The respondents were asked to describe their responsibilities, functions and tasks assigned in the NSF, and to describe the federation as such, also in terms of gender division.

The respondents were asked if gender is an essential feature having impact on work in the organization, and if yes, what benefits the respondents see from women's work in the NSF. Then, they were asked to express their opinions about under-representation of women in sports organizations, to identify barriers they see for women's leadership in organizations and to propose possible changes that should be implemented to increase the number of female leaders working in NSFs. Next, they were asked about interpersonal relations at work, they were asked to assess their impact on the operation of their organization and the sense of acceptance in their environment. Another round of questions concerned any possible experiences of unequal treatment related to gender in their workplace and any potential conflict of roles between work and private life. Interviews lasted from 24 minutes to 1 hour and 22 minutes, they were conducted in person and were recorded and then transcribed word for word in Polish. The content of the interviews was analyzed in its Polish version and only the quotes used in this paper have been translated into English. The interviews were conducted by the female researcher (author of the study). The author is aware that as researchers we co-create the “truth” because our identities are important in the process of analyzing social reality (Smith & Sparkes 2016). However, both during the interviewing process and analyzing the data, author tried to adopt a reflexive stance to research in question.

Qualitative content structuring was used to analyze the interviews. This method can be employed as a combination of the deductive and inductive approach (Mayring 2014: 106). As Mayring stresses, the topics analyzed based on interview transcripts result from the scenario of interviews, so they are pre-determined (although generally). Thus, the first step of the analysis is deductive, because it resulted from the adopted constructivist approach to understanding gender, the J. Acker theory and the results of research on sports organizations adopting the theoretical assumptions listed above. However, the material itself, i.e. the main emerging patterns of statements or recurring topics, were analyzed using the inductive approach (Mayring 2014: 79–83). Initially, entire interviews were read line by line in order to understand the general meaning of the respondent's statement. Next, the focus was on topics relevant from the perspective of the research questions and categories were assigned with the emerging meanings given by the respondents. Then, individual categories were reduced to more general ones and summarized while ensuring that the final categories of the analysis are an accurate reproduction of the content of interviews. Then, for the purposes of external validation of the study, a researcher not participating in data collection and specializing in gender-related social studies was asked to review the conducted analysis and suggest any possible changes. The analysis of the interviews was discussed and minor adjustments were made.

The respondents demonstrated a significant degree of consensus in their answers to the questions included in the interview scenario. However, the research results part also includes inconsistencies that were noticed during the analysis. Two male respondents identified specific gendered barriers regarding women's entry into the NSFs. Similarly, three female respondents claimed that the sports organization environment is a meritocratic environment and that women themselves create barriers for their operation in sports federations. However, other female respondents indicated that gender stereotypes and a hostile environment remain the biggest problem for women working in sports organizations. The

part describing research results has been divided into three subsections corresponding to three research questions.

Results

Importance of Gender when Working in a Sports Organization

The respondents were asked if, in their opinion, gender is a significant feature influencing work in a sports organization. Answers of respondents were different according to their gender. Women stated that “male environment” is a big barrier. They also confirmed that gender is an important feature conditioning job opportunities in Polish NSFs, as well as career path or tasks assigned. In compliance with Acker’s (1990, 1992) assumptions regarding gender as an integral part of each level of organizational operation, the studied women indicated how gender “works” in their organizations.

I even thought for a moment, I never thought of myself in terms of gender ... Never before, actually ... And certainly in the recent period ... One guy, an official, told me recently, that was very symptomatic, and then I think I felt this for the first time, when I applied for the position of the CEO in 2014, one guy said to me ” a woman as a president over my dead body,” that’s what he said. And that was the first time I felt strange. It had nothing to do with my skills, and what I represent. And I think that it was aimed at closing ranks against a woman being the president. They couldn’t mentally digest it and I felt it ... Although I thought it was different, when I sum up the last two years I also have to say that I am convinced that a few things would have gone differently if I wasn’t a woman. That my voice, though strong, would be stronger. It is painful, yes ... This is a very sad reflection for me. (female leader, interview 5)

It was noticeable that the female respondents found it difficult to admit that gender matters in how their work in NFS is perceived. Day-to-day work in sports organizations changed the perception of one’s professional environment. The narrative about working in a meritocratic environment was replaced with descriptions of gendered power relations. They often stressed that meritocratic approach is an ideal to be pursued. Work in sports federations confronted beliefs about existence of equal opportunities with the premise of feminism, which proves the existence of gender inequalities in social life. Considering that the feminist paradigm is marginalized in Poland and sport is considered to be the space where the principle of equal opportunities applies (Jakubowska 2014: 13) confirming existence of gender discrimination was difficult for the female respondents. However, unequal treatment experienced by the respondents was substantiated with explicit statements.

If I were to name it, it’s simply discrimination. This is gender discrimination. And it’s not that I do something wrong. I can’t do anything. There are people who take strategic decisions. They take such decisions on behalf of the entire board. I can’t agree with this [the gender discrimination]. I coped with it for almost four years and I think it is too long anyway. Let me get this straight, this is gender discrimination. Full stop. And this is what we need to work on. (female leader, interview 2)

For the interviewed men, work had no gender and the gendered nature of organizations was invisible for them. The organizational logic (Acker 1990) and hierarchy is based on the concepts considered common-sense such as worker or competence but functions only thanks to individual. As Acker (1990: 150) claimed the gender neutral status of “a job” is

sustained by assumptions of abstract, universal and disembodied worker. In fact, the worker is very often a man. The gendered organizational logic is masked and at the same time becomes embedded in organizational structures. The prevailing narration that was presented by studied men was the conviction of the meritocratic nature of sports organizations. The studied men claimed that it would be difficult for them to find any barriers faced by women working in sports federations. Male senior managers in Polish NSFs stressed that women have equal opportunities with men to hold leadership positions. They also claimed that gender does not determine how an employee's work and capabilities are perceived. Taking into account the quantitative advantage of men in Polish sports associations, the meritocracy narrative seems to be the leading one. This way of seeing sports associations remained unchanged for the male leaders, and was replaced with the perspective of gender inequalities among the studied women. The different perspectives on how gender relations work in an organization may influence different involvement of both group in work. Conducting narrative revisions described by Shaw, Frisby (2006) would be useful for noticing the situation of women. Presenting unequal treatment of women and assuming a different model of how the organization or gender relations work could result in greater respect and diversity within the organization.

I don't think the reason is that men block women's access to organizational structures in sport. I think this is not the reason. This is because there are no such enterprising women, dynamic ones who would like to work in it. (male leader, interview 1)

Two male leaders indicated that they see difficulties specific to women at the beginning of their work in sports organizations. However, even they did not think that gendering is a feature inherent in organizations and is important at each level of functioning. Moreover, they were convinced that the proportions of men and women performing leadership functions in sport would “naturally” become equal over time.

Statements of the male respondents about equal opportunities in sports associations, women reluctant to hold leadership positions or the conviction of a “natural” change that will take place were combined with the respondents' objection to the policies aimed at promoting female leaders in NSFs. The subjects were not willing to act in favor of women's leadership in sport. They described their role in ensuring diversity in NSFs in terms of “not disturbing” and being “for” when women apply to work in the organization. Respondents expressed surprise when asked about their role in creating a diverse workplace. The statements indicated that the lack of gender balance in leadership positions is a “women's issue” that should be addressed by women, and not an issue essential for effective management of the organization. Being convinced that work will remain gender-neutral, the respondents did not see the need to support equal representation of women and men in senior managing positions.

The male respondents pointed to quotas¹ as a tool for aligning the gender imbalance of leadership positions in NSFs. The subjects clearly questioned the legitimacy of their

¹ The respondents talked about parities, which they most often understood as reserving exactly half of the positions on management boards to women. In Polish, we have two words referring to tools that guarantee representation for a minority group: parities and quotas. Most often, the respondents used the term ‘parities,’ which in Poland are not applicable to any area of social life, meaning quotas. Confusing these two terms was common and deepened the impression that the knowledge of the respondents regarding quotas and purposes for which they are used was very superficial.

use. They expressed their concern that by nominating women as board members in sports organizations, to which they would be obliged due to quotas, there would be no place in senior management bodies for men doing their work well. Such an opinion points to doubts about women's competences. However, none of the respondents noticed that lack of policy for maintaining the balance between women and men in leadership positions may be a factor depriving NSF's of capital and or "value-adding" talents brought by female leaders to the organization. Potential introduction of tools gaining the gender distribution in boards was treated as contrary to meritocratic principles.

I am against creating any parities, and, for example, blocking these 50% or 30% of places because they are supposed to be for women. It may turn out that among these 30%, I don't want to offend women here, we will be forced to take someone to complement these 30% and it may turn out that one of these 30% of women will not have these appropriate competences, she will not be willing to do it and will be, to say the least, a filler so that these parities are met. (...) I will not act... I mean, I will not disturb first of all!. (male leader, interview 4)

The reluctance to support practices that can advance women in NSF's may result from the lack of understanding of the benefits of diversity for the organization's operation. When asked if they see any advantages of women holding leadership positions in NSF's, the male respondents stressed that women are valuable employees and are needed in organizations. However they claim that that the main merit of women in organizations is their ability to 'soothe the savage breast' at work or improve the atmosphere.

Opinions of Respondents Concerning Under-representation of Women in Managing Roles in NSF's

The interviewed men and women differed in their opinions on the reasons for the minor presence of women in leadership positions in Polish NSF's. Respondent's statements were consistent with the gendering processes in organizations proposed by Acker (1990, 1992). The construction of discourses and images about who fits best to specific tasks in organization explained and reinforced the gendered division of labor. Women stated that they were treated with a high degree of distrust, they had to work harder than men and prove their utility for work. They emphasized that sport is perceived as a male occupation, which is why they are treated as "other." They believed that because of perceiving sport as more belonging to men, men immediately gain trust, which does not apply to women.

I have gone through a lot in a number of management boards and my recent reflection was that it always looks the same, at first they treat you as a woman, as the one that "knows nothing," then they start a discussion with you and at the end of the term they slowly begin to value your opinion and nod their heads. But, in fact, I absolutely have the feeling that more often attention is given to my appearance than to what I have to say. (female leader, interview 8)

Female respondents confirmed the existence of the so-called old boys network. Men often meet outside official business hours and make friends. With time, they develop relationships that allow them to work effectively and help each other. Most often, women are absent from these meetings that make work easier for men and good for their careers.

The practices listed by women that exist in NSF's discouraged women from acting for the benefit of their organizations and systematically undermined their professionalism. When

asked about the reasons for under-representation of women in leadership positions in the organization, most often men mentioned unwillingness or lack of ambitions in women.

It's probably women's choice that they don't jostle for such positions. I think so, this is how I see it. I can't find the reason for it. In other words: it just seems to me that women, not all of them, because I would not like to say that all women, do not want to take part in such things. They are not interested in such a social ... such social functions. (male leader, interview 7)

This statement, just like quotes from interviews presented in the first part of the research results, shows that men are inclined to blame women themselves for their low representation in the senior management bodies in organizations. In addition, the respondents emphasized that women are mothers in the first place and this is the role to which they devote themselves most willingly.

My wife also works at the university. To put it bluntly, she doesn't have inclinations towards such social or managing functions. We have three children. We take care of them together, quote unquote. Quote unquote, because my wife takes the majority of the duties. But yes, we have a division of roles. My wife doesn't have such aspirations. Perhaps because my aspirations are excessive. (...) Not every woman has such aspirations. (male leader, interview 8)

Women's mentality would have to change more. I think so, generally when you look at it, even such purely biological issues that women give birth to children, take care of these children, are more likely to give up some career and devote themselves to raising children. (male leader, interview 9)

Female respondents did not think that motherhood prevented them from working in NSFs. They claimed that combining parental and professional responsibilities is a matter of proper organization and involvement of the partner. As the statement below shows, the situation at work is however important.

I have never thought of a child as a barrier to anything. For me, both can go hand in hand. Good intentions of the family also help. But support is important. If it wasn't for my husband, I would have to change to part-time work, and then certainly they would dismiss me and wouldn't like to work with me. The child is not a problem. If there were normal conditions here at work and there was no such aversion to me, then there would be no such a problem. Here, it certainly coincides with the fact that I'm a board member, I'm some kind of a splinter in the fingers of these guys. Now I speak openly about it. I used to think that they just treat me like that, a bit on the side, because I'm a woman, I'm young, I know nothing. But no. It's simply discrimination. (female leader, interview 2)

Considering that the majority of family or parental responsibilities lie with women in Poland (Budrowska 2015), the respondents were asked whether organizations' care about providing employees with the work-life balance. None of the NSFs had any regulations that would facilitate combining work and private life. The declarations that everyone “tries to be human” and makes it easier for employees to perform their duties are not, however, supported with any clear recommendations. This may mean that the challenges arising from combining work and private life are not seen as essential for working life. The interviewed men themselves emphasised how important is their partners' support in being able to work in a sports organization. These reflections, however, did not lead to the conclusion that the division of duties in a family may prevent women from fulfilling their career ambitions equally to “biological issues.”

In the case of my family, it would not be possible for both of us to work at a level I am now, because children would certainly be neglected or social care would take them away due to our negligence. So it has to be like it ... This balance must be maintained. (male leader, interview 6)

When seeking the answer to the question about under-representation of women in managing positions, men often referred to the “natural” differences between women and men, and this was not just about reproductive functions. Thus, contrary to women who pointed to the situation of the professional environment as marginalizing women, men referred to differences related to “the body,” biological or physiological. Perceiving working women from the perspective of biological essentialism referring to specific and unchanging traits or dispositions of each gender diverts attention away from the social and structural factors determining the professional standing of women. The following quotes show that, using only the biological perspective, men saw women as *worse than men and by that unable to perform managerial functions*.

“There is perhaps such a biochemical justification for it, it is a well-established fact that life is a bit about go-getting energy and charisma. It is somewhat related to the level of male sex hormones, testosterone. It’s like with women with low testosterone, who will never be athletes. However, the character traits, in my opinion, linked to this hormone level, managing staff, which has also been checked, has an increased testosterone level. It may also be that it is linked. However, this is associated with a lot of stress. Coping with this stress. Go-getting energy. Perhaps that is why [women—author’s note] do not feel such pressure to manage or be in the structures.” (male leader, interview 4)

Generally, women are able to focus on several things at a time, men can focus very well on one thing, which has been proved. So when it comes to managing an organization, they are, of course, more chimeric than men, but we know that. As ... once said, there should be an allowance for working with women in sports, as for working with asbestos. Because, let’s say, we are preparing a female athlete for the world championships, and suddenly she gets a call from her fiancé that something is wrong, and fuck it, it’s over. The World or European Championships are a failure, we lose the first fight because she had an argument with her boyfriend. (male leader, interview 10)

Assuming that biological differences are considered to be permanent, then paying attention mostly to them the interviewed men could strengthen their belief that gender proportions in leadership positions in Polish NSFs are natural, because they result from “natural” differences between women and men. In addition, focusing on “natural” gender differences constructs men and women as fundamentally different or, for example, capable of performing different tasks.

Gendered Barriers

Distinct professional experiences of the respondents became apparent when the respondents talked about interactions at work. Men were surprised when asked if they had ever felt discriminated due to their gender. The following quote reflects the beliefs of the interviewed men.

“Me personally? ... I’m a man, so I haven’t experienced this kind of situation.” (male leader)

The respondent’s statement indicates that men see the issue of gender discrimination as applicable only to women. They were surprised that they could experience unequal treatment as men. They were unable to identify any gendered barriers that they would encounter in their work. It is possible, therefore, that being a man is perceived as a certain norm, and femininity as a kind of deviation from it and hence problems with unequal treatment. Moreover, such a “narrow” perception of gender issues makes it difficult to see, the issue

of gendering of certain professions or tasks. In addition, an in-depth reflection about the meaning of gender could also protect men against unequal treatment. The studied respondents unanimously replied that they did not witness discrimination of women in NSFs. Men stated that they feel accepted and are able to put their ideas in practice or start a discussion about new issues without any problems. None of the male respondents was of the opinion that their competences are questioned at work. Lack of reflection regarding gender relations was also evident from the sexist statements quoted throughout the whole Results part. The respondents openly made sexist and unjust statements without seeing them in this way. In Polish NSFs, such statements may pass unnoticed because they are often reproduced and taken for granted, and gender is not seen as a significant variable relevant to the functioning of the organization.

Statements of female respondents had definitely different implications. They indicated that there is no equality in sports associations:

There is no gender balance at all. Whether in this position or another. Women are usually seen to serve coffee, open the door and answer the phone. And be an accountant! (female leader, interview 7)

Above all, however, female respondents emphasized that they face distrust or disregard, which often forces them to adopt specific tactics or attitudes in order to be able to push across their opinions. The interactions in the work environment are constructed on the basis of dominant cultural meanings ascribed to professional duties according to the third process of gendering of organizations (Acker 1990). If discourses of managerial work are connected with masculinity and auxiliary tasks with femininity the interactions in workplace may include patterns of domination of one group and submission of the other. Some of the female respondents claimed that despite their formally high position in the organization they have no influence on its operation. Because of distrust, the respondents described strategies they use to break through with their ideas and have influence on the organization's operation.

You have to be a good strategist. I try to find out who will be my partner in discussion, who will be my opponent, and prepare my strategy in such a way, flatter the male ego, to talk them into my ideas. However, I have never tried to assume the attitude of a poor woman who needs help. And I am very far from crying or using some emotional blackmail. I prefer to be specific and have arguments on my side, be more of a player and play the game in a considered and intelligent way.” (...) Researcher: Find appropriate tactics? Female respondent: That's exactly it. Would a male board member have to use such tactics or would he be accepted? He would be accepted faster. However, after eight years of working with certain people, I know that my opinion matters. However, nonetheless, sometimes I have to be a poker player and practice my games. (female leader, interview 1)

The respondents also pointed to the existence of barriers that they could not overcome. Some respondents believed that the position of the president or being a member of the board presidium in some NSFs are beyond women's reach.

But there is probably something like that and you can talk about whether there is such a thing as a glass ceiling in sports organizations. And I think that the ceiling is not made of glass but plastic. If you hit a glass one, it will break at some point, the plastic one will bend (female leader, interview 11)

In addition to the lack of trust, which is the cause of women's scarce influence on the organization, women pointed to the division of tasks by gender as a practice diminishing importance of women in the organization.

Head coach or head of training, no one ever thought whether to give such a role to a woman. A woman to be a national team coach? What are we talking about ... It doesn't come to anyone's mind to give such a role to a woman. A role which is a bit more serious. (female leader, interview 5)

As it can be seen from the above quotations, both the interviewed men and women stated that women are more often assigned to “soft” tasks (education, children and youth’s sport, women’s sport) and office work. In turn, men’s tasks are related to strategic management and tasks which are most prestigious for the organization (professional sport, Olympic teams, secretary general). What was different for the respondents was understanding of the importance of allocation of tasks at work. Female respondents themselves reported this issue to the researcher as an example of gendered barriers. Men, on the other hand, when asked about division of tasks by gender in the organization, confirmed that it was the case, but they did not perceive it as a practice marginalising women in the NSFs.

Discussion and Conclusions

The presented research results indicate that Polish NSFs remain gendered organizations. Thus, the presented analyses confirm the studies regarding this issue (Claringbould & Knoppers 2007, 2012; Shaw 2006; Shaw & Hoeber 2003; Knoppers & Anthonissen 2008; Sibson 2010; Pfister 2010; Pfister & Radtke 2006, 2009). The practices and norms evoked by respondents, are strengthened by perceiving women and men as fundamentally different. As a result, masculinities still remain a certain standard co-creating hierarchies and relations between genders in NSFs.

At the same time, the distinctive characteristics of Polish NSFs were frequent references to biological essentialism and explicitly sexist statements made by interviewed men pointing to the reasons for the scarce presence of women in sports governance. The studied leaders were making sexist statements easily, without fear of any consequences for their professional work. Viewing male and female leaders from the perspective of biological essentialism ignores the social factors contributing to unequal position of women and men in NSFs. The specificity of the sports environment, perceived from the very beginning as male environment (and inseparably linked to corporality and physicality), additionally makes it difficult to understand the social and cultural factors contributing to the small number of women working in sports organizations and the few women who have made their way to the top management levels in these organizations. Using the biological essentialism perspective seems to be characteristic of this study and has not been widely discussed in other works dealing with the gendered nature of sports organizations. This might mean that the level of understanding of meaning of gender in the society and cultural factors responsible for under-representation of women in managing positions is scarce and lower than in the countries of Western Europe or North America, where studies have been conducted so far. It seems even more important to implement gender equality as an important issue in organizational operation. Introducing alternative gender narratives in NSFs, as proposed by Shaw and Frisby (2006), would reveal the taken for granted and tacit gendered norms and practices which sustain sexist behavior in sports organizations and sport in general (cf. Fink 2016).

The conducted study has shown that the processes described by Acker (1990, 1992) take place in Polish NSFs. The respondents pointed to gendered division of tasks. This division was characterized by the belief that women are better suited for office work and work requiring a significant amount of patience. Women were also considered to be predisposed to work in children's and youth's sport, whereas men were associated with tasks related to strategic management. In the NSFs concerned, the image of a man as destined to occupy leadership positions, brave and willing to take risk was reproduced. The discourses regarding femininity and masculinity influenced interactions in the workplace. The female respondents claimed that it is often taken for granted that they would do the day-to-day and low-valued secretarial and administrative work. In turn, performing management tasks by women was associated with considerable distrust towards their competences. Professional experiences of the interviewed women and men remain fundamentally different, despite the fact that both genders perform similar functions. Women pointed to examples of gender discrimination and often little influence on the operation of the association. Men did not report existence of specific gendered barriers in organizations. On the contrary, they stressed that they felt appreciated in their workplace. The respondents were characterized by their belief in the meritocratic nature of NSFs, and they rationalized gender hierarchies and regarded them as obvious. What is more, the statements of the respondents were characterized by sexism. They legitimized the existing divisions by references to biological differences between men and women and by lack of women's aspirations to hold leadership positions. It can be concluded that the studied men reproduced the principles of the organization's operation according to the organizational logic of gender operation as proposed by Acker (1992).

The patterns of behavior of the respondents can be interpreted by means of liminal awareness practices regarding the functioning of genders in the organizations concerned. Liminality practices to a large extent prevented them from looking at the Polish NSFs as gendered institutions. Martin (2006) referred to lack of reflection on reproducing gender practices, i.e. adopting certain attitudes, behavior and gender norms without being aware of this process, as liminal awareness. The result of this process is to maintain a specific, gender-related status quo in the practices implemented in sports federations. In this study, liminality practices were evident in the respondents' description of gendered division of duties, without understanding the importance of this process for the dominant role of men in the organization and the subordinate role of women. Another example could be making statements about equal opportunities and lack of gender barriers with regard to occupying leadership positions in NSFs without understanding that employee appraisal, although appears to be gender-neutral, remains gendered.

Female respondents emphasized that the barrier for their functioning in the organization was “male-dominated environment,” perceiving women as “other,” to which they have to adapt by adopting specific strategies. They spoke of struggling for respect and recognition, which was not the case with men. The female respondents noticed that due to their gender they were unwelcome in positions related to senior management. Thus, they experienced gender role stereotyping (Grappendorf & Burton 2017: 51). Traits stereotypically identified with femininity were not associated with the ability to manage effectively. Gender role stereotyping, at least in relation to Polish NSFs, remains an essential barrier for women working in sports organizations.

Respondents' statements about different competences of women and men and often stereotypical beliefs about division of roles in private life cause that the situation of women in NSF is seen as normal, because it reflects the beliefs of the respondents about gender. The view that men are better at leading organizations and women at managing family (or family budgets) allows the respondents to maintain the belief that the principles and practices of NSF are gender-neutral, although they actually tend to favor what is masculine. Liminality means that individuals constantly engage in reproducing gender practices without understanding their meaning. It seems that in order to change the current state of affairs, it is necessary to question the assumptions concerning gendering of specific practices in sports organizations. Without deconstructing the meanings given to sport as a male space, a man as an expert in sports and a person dedicated to senior management, it may not be possible to change NSF to more inclusive organizations. The practices of liminal awareness also support homologous reproduction (Kanter 1977) or culture of similarity (Cunningham 2008). It seems necessary to understand that the way of thinking about men as best suited to leadership position in NSF allows for the reproduction of gender divisions. Otherwise, this work will still be considered gender-neutral.

Beliefs expressed by men are of key importance for the functioning of organizations because, due to their quantitative advantage, men are holding power in Polish sport governance. Not seeing gendering practices in sports federations and perceiving them as gender-neutral meant that they accused women themselves for their absence in leadership positions in organizations. Blame the victim narrative is a common strategy in sport. Male respondents blame marginalized for their own failures. Similar difficulties are faced by female coaches (cf. LaVoi 2016: 20–25). The interviewed men suggesting that women are responsible for their situation make it more difficult, first of all, to see complex and structural barriers preventing women from leading in sports organizations and, second of all, to introduce counteracting policies and strategies. Moreover, this narrative can be effective in weakening career aspirations of women themselves. Women aware of this type of accusations may look for their professional career path outside sports organizations or accept their lower position within NSF. Conviction of the need to “fix women” (Grappendorf & Leberman 2017: 57) shows that dominant discourse of managerial work is allied with masculinity seen as a certain norm and women should be changed to be able to occupy a key position in NSF. Further, this assumption ignores diversity-related issues, assuming that all women function at work in a very similar way. What is more, it may hinder the operations of men whose behavior diverge from the norm adopted for men (Shaw & Frisby 2006). Ultimately, the conviction of the need to fix women may lead to situations where they are punished “no matter who they are or what they do” (Grappendorf & Leberman 2017: 57). As LaVoi points out (2016: 22), the narrative of blaming victims for their failures is linked to functioning in a society based on the principles of equal opportunities, individualism and neoliberal ideology. The belief that everyone has the same opportunities for developing their professional career normalizes hierarchies and makes it significantly difficult to draw attention to the dominance of one group and subordination of the other. In addition, the discourse of competition and victory is strongly rooted in sport. This may consolidate the conviction that prestigious positions are obtained only because of competences, and auxiliary one results from the errors and lack of achievements of those occupying such positions.

Considering the conviction expressed by the majority of male leaders about irrelevance of gender at work and the widespread conviction about sport as a “bastion of masculinity,” it seems significant that the majority of the interviewed women made a definite statement that they were treated unequally at work because of their gender. Having in mind that few women in Poland declare expressly feminist views (Kantar 2018) and the specific backlash regarding gender equality currently observed in Poland (Szelewa 2014), this confirmation of existence gender discrimination in Polish NSF's may be the proof of explicit and persistent nature of this type of practices. For example, Polish sports female journalists, who are a minority group in newsrooms, despite numerous descriptions meeting the condition of unequal treatment at work at the same time claimed that they were not discriminated and rejected feminist postulates (Organista & Mazur 2019). Unlike sports female journalists, the studied female leaders associated their experiences with gender discrimination. In this case, the discourse of the irrelevance of gender at work and meritocracy turned out to be insufficient for the female respondents to attribute the barriers and practices in Polish NSF's to factors other than gender power relations.

No doubt, changing the situation would require wider awareness of people working in Polish NSF's of the importance of gender in their professional work and perceiving sport as a male practice. Training male leaders in this respect seems to be the key. However, in order to make changes in an organization, one should act on many levels of its functioning (Adriaanse & Schofield 2013). As multi-level approach (Burton & Leberman 2017) to researching under-representation of women in the position of sport leadership has shown there are many factors that shape organizations. Therefore, one should not limit their activities to educating only the leaders, but also all employees of the NSF's or those responsible for the operation of Polish sports associations in the Ministry of Sport and Tourism. Further studies could analyze both the course of such training and its possible impact on the professional environment of Polish sports organizations. There is no doubt that ethnographic studies should complement and be the next step in examining gender in sports organizations. Also, the processes of gendering of sport organizations may vary in different NSF's, e.g. federations represented both individual and team disciplines, categorized as feminine, masculine or gender-neutral. No doubt, further research needs to be conducted regarding the impact of organizations representing specific disciplines on the women's leadership. As pointed out by Acker (1990), the interrelations between organizational structure of work and gender may look different depending on the work performed and tasks assigned. Jakubowska (2018) stated that it might be easier for women to work in small NSF's not ensuring much prestige to its employees or in organizations representing disciplines perceived as feminine (as less valued than the federations representing sports disciplines considered as masculine). This study, conducted with the representatives of different NSF's does not allow the author to draw conclusions as to the relationship between the sport discipline represented by a given federation and the processes of gendering of organizations.

Nevertheless, three of the female respondents stated that they did not observe unequal treatment of women and that frequently women themselves are responsible for their inferior position in the organization. Therefore, for some women the widespread conviction of equal opportunities in work life and inequalities embedded in the world of sport also make it difficult to see double standards. It is also possible that women expressing an al-

ternative opinion to the majority of respondents understood that their gender identity often undermines their work opportunities, so they were able not to identify themselves with other women. The female interviewees emphasized the importance of equal opportunities and a meritocratic approach for the good functioning of sports organizations. However, in the circumstances of gendered practices and principles operating in Polish NSFs, such an approach may disfavor women. Changing the situation would have to involve revealing and highlighting persistence of gender inequality as a structural feature of Polish sports federations.

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