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## Article

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## Article

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

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**Abstract:** Diversity have become a desired value in sport organizations. However, regardless of the aspiration towards more gender diverse leadership, women leaders remain a minority. Diversity and its impact on group performance has also increased interest among scholars. Building on information/decision-making theory and the concept of the right fit, this paper introduces a new theoretical model that sheds light on the contradiction of gender-biased recruitment/selection processes in sports organization boards and the impact of diversity on organizational outcomes. The model is partly tested with survey data from the Finnish National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs). This paper shows that, because of the gender-biased recruitment/selection process, the benefits of gender-diverse organization boards may not be fully actualized, which not only affects the functioning of sports organizations, but may also limit women's inclusion on sports organization boards.

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



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## 1. Introduction

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

The aim of this study is to (1) shed light on this paradox and its impact on board governance and (2) test whether gender impacts board member's perspectives regarding board

governance (whether the men and the women board members bring different perspectives into the board). This research problem is approached through theoretical development and empirical analysis. This study answers Crosby and Bryson's (2018) call for more attention on gender within public leadership research, and extends the current literature by introducing a new theoretical model of the contradicting intersection of (gender-biased) recruitment processes and diversity, as well as the impact that this contradiction has on the diversity of perspectives regarding board governance in sports organization boards. Furthermore, this paper broadens the literature and transformative policymaking using quantitative methods, which are minimal in research on gender equality and sports leadership (Elling 2015; Elling et al. 2019, pp. 188–89; Greene 2012; Hughes and Cohen 2012). Survey data collected from Finnish National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) board members are used partly to test the model and its assumptions, namely the variance of perspectives on board governance between male and female board members. The research builds on information/decision-making theory and the concept of the right fit, which are discussed in the following section and of which two hypotheses are formed. In the following chapters, we present the empirical study and results, and discuss the results based on previous literature. Further research avenues and limitations regarding the theoretical model and the survey are discussed in this paper's conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

### 2.1. Board Diversity

Two competing theoretical perspectives, social categorization perspective and the information/decision-making perspective, have guided most of the studies on gender and organizational outcomes (Lee and Cunningham 2019; Nowy and Breuer 2019; Wicker et al. 2020).

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

The other theoretical perspective, information/decision-making perspective, claims that diversity has a positive impact on organizational outcomes. The information/decision-making perspective (Williams and O'Reilly 1998) suggests that diverse groups consist of people with different backgrounds and life experiences. These differences are likely to affect how people approach problems and what kind of information and expertise they have, thus influencing which decisions are made and how (Nowy and Breuer 2019). To the extent these varied perspectives are considered and valued in decision-making processes, the group outcomes should improve even if diversity negatively influences the group's functioning (Williams and O'Reilly 1998). The information/decision-making perspective is consistent with other theoretical frameworks such as the categorization-elaboration model (CEM) by van Knippenberg et al. (2004) and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). CEM, basing on the integration of information/decision-making and

social categorization perspectives, defends that the number of perspectives and ideas may increase with diversity. Social categorization may disrupt the elaboration of these perspectives. However, upon elaborating the number of ideas and perspectives in a group, group performance should improve. The vast amount of information available forces the board to process that information more thoroughly and consider wider perspectives in its decision-making (Williams and O'Reilly 1998). Resource dependence theory is based on the idea that diverse individuals provide different resources such as varied skills, experiences, values, networks, and access, which is beneficial for the board and thus organization's performance (Hafsi and Turgut 2013; Hillman et al. 2007; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).

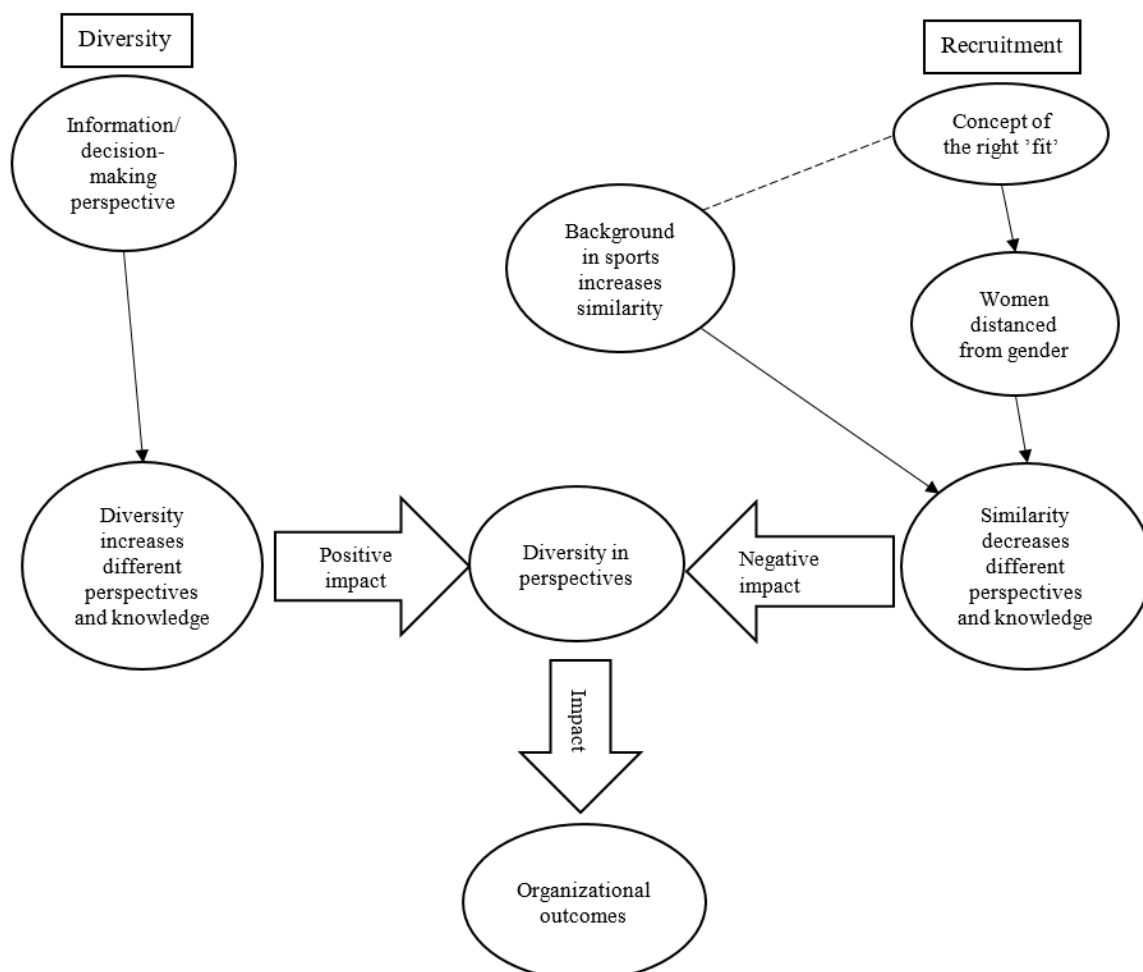
Previous studies have cited contradicting results on whether diversity has a positive or negative result on organizational results in (sport) organizations (Dula et al. 2020; Lee and Cunningham 2019; Milliken and Martins 1996; Wicker et al. 2020). For instance, studies have found gender diversity to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

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

## 2.2. Recruitment and the Right Fit

NGB boards across the globe are homogenous, with the majority of board members and especially chairs older (white) men. This also applies to Finland (Särkivuori et al. 2020). Previous research has shown that, when recruiting new members to sports boards, only certain types of people possessing certain traits are seen as what Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) conceptualize a proper 'fit'. The perceived proper fit consists of gendered and socially constructed ideas of qualifications, skills, traits, knowledge, characteristics, and needs, which are often not based on systematic identification of the board's needs, but rather on the ways the present board members (i.e., men) have qualified themselves for board membership (Adriaanse and Schofield 2014; Claringbould and Knoppers 2007; Hovden 2000, 2010; Knoppers et al. 2021). However, sports boards' selection and recruitment processes are assumed to be gender neutral and of good quality, which removes a gender balance as an objective in these processes (Claringbould and Knoppers 2007; Sotiriadou and De Haan 2019). Even if increasing the number of women on the board is seen as improving the board's functions, the present board members may doubt the quality of

women candidates and sustain the current recruitment/selection procedures and policies to control the entrance of women into decision-making positions (Claringbould and van Liere 2019; Sotiriadou et al. 2017). Hovden (2000) characterized this fit as a ‘male heavyweight’ profile. Because only individuals (women and men) who fit this profile are included in male networks and selected as candidates for leadership positions, the board’s existing values are guaranteed and reproduced, which leads to the board staying homogenous (Hovden 2000, 2010; Sotiriadou et al. 2017). Men as the majority can frame the recruitment and selection processes of the board members, and thus maintain the male-dominated culture, into which their own habitus better fits (Knoppers et al. 2021; Piggott et al. 2019). Women aiming for board membership then tend to distance themselves from their gender and prove their ‘fit’ in order to be seen as possible candidates (Claringbould and Knoppers 2007; cf. Hovden et al. 2019). Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) suggested that, because only women who are considered to be the right fit (good education, high-level jobs, no young children, flexible time schedule, behave ‘properly’, not openly feminist, substantial knowledge of and commitment to their sport) are selected as board members, homologous reproduction (preference to select a member of the dominant group because they are seen as the best fit; Kanter 1977) can occur regardless of if members of a subordinate group (in this research women) are involved. Following the logic of the right fit, this research proposes that, if only individuals who are seen as the right fit are selected to boards (i.e., homologous reproduction occurs regardless of selecting members of a subordinate group), the variance in perspectives that the information/decision-making perspective emphasizes may not reach its full potential (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model of the contradiction of diversity and gender-biased recruitment/selection processes of sport organization boards.



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

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

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

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

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

### 4. Materials and Methods

This study's data consists of an online survey targeted at all Finnish NGBs' ( $n = 74$ ) board members ( $n = 590$ ). The survey data were collected from 29 October to 15 November 2020 as part of a broader research project focusing on the NGBs and their board governance

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

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

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Background Factors

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

The survey provides indicators that men hold the highest leadership positions. From the results, 21.3% of the men and 11.4% of the women respondents were chairs. Additionally, 16% of the men and 13.6% of the women respondents were vice-chairs. These differences between men and women are not statistically significant ( $p = 0.520$ ). However, the findings support those of previous research, in which men tend to hold the highest lead-

ership positions in sports governance in Europe and Finland (Adriaanse 2019; Särkivuori et al. 2020).

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

### 5.2. Transparency and Openness

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

**Table 1.** Transparency and openness.

	The board's work atmosphere is open.		I think the recruitment process for board members is open and transparent.		I have the opportunity to test my thoughts regarding the operations of our National Governing Body of Sport (NGB) on the board.	
<b>t-test</b>	0.180		0.244		0.100	
<b>SD</b>	0.91	1.12	0.99	1.29	0.75	1.03
<b>M</b>	4.29	4.06	4.19	3.91	4.53	4.24
<b>n</b>	139	36	119	35	135	42
<b>Fisher test</b>	0.131		0.223		0.057	
<b>Fully agree</b>	44.70%	34.10%	35.30%	36.40%	56.70%	45.50%
<b>Agree</b>	40.00%	34.10%	34.70%	22.70%	28.70%	40.90%
<b>Disagree</b>	6.70%	11.40%	8.00%	18.20%	4.70%	4.50%
<b>Fully disagree</b>	1.30%	2.30%	1.30%	2.30%	0.00%	4.50%
<b>I do not know</b>	7.30%	18.20%	20.70%	20.50%	10.0%	4.50%
<b>n</b>	150	44	150	44	150	44
<b>Gender</b>	Man	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	Woman
<b>Question</b>	The board's work atmosphere is open.		I think the recruitment process for board members is open and transparent.		I have the opportunity to test my thoughts regarding the operations of our National Governing Body of Sport (NGB) on the board.	

### 5.3. Skills and Capabilities Needed in Future

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



**Table 2.** Skills and capabilities needed in future in NGBs.

<b>t-test</b>	0.656		0.444		0.774		0.890		0.620		0.382	
<b>SD</b>	0.94	1.11	0.99	1.08	1.10	1.13	1.31	1.27	1.40	1.34	1.36	1.30
<b>M</b>	3.49	3.57	3.13	3.00	3.60	3.55	3.06	3.09	3.20	3.32	3.21	3.41
<b>n</b>	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44
<b>Fisher test</b>	0.360		0.816		0.969		0.983		0.824		0.659	
<b>Fully agree</b>	9.30%	18.20%	6.70%	6.80%	22.00%	22.70%	16.00%	15.90%	24.70%	25.00%	22.70%	22.70%
<b>Agree</b>	50.00%	45.50%	33.30%	29.50%	37.30%	31.80%	25.30%	25.00%	20.70%	25.00%	23.30%	34.10%
<b>Neutral</b>	24.00%	15.90%	30.00%	27.30%	24.00%	27.30%	22.00%	22.70%	19.30%	15.90%	19.30%	13.60%
<b>Disagree</b>	14.00%	15.90%	26.70%	29.50%	12.00%	13.60%	22.00%	25.00%	20.70%	25.00%	21.30%	20.50%
<b>Fully disagree</b>	2.70%	4.50%	3.30%	6.80%	4.70%	4.50%	14.70%	11.40%	14.70%	9.10%	13.30%	9.10%
<b>n</b>	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44
<b>Gender</b>	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
<b>Question</b>	Understanding of national sports policy		Understanding of international sports policy		Development of interaction and negotiation skills		Increasing trust between board members		Openness and transparency between operative management and the board		Openness and transparency between board members	

M = man, W = woman.

#### 5.4. Board Composition

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

**Table 3.** Board composition.

<b>t-test</b>	0.658		0.592		0.394	
<b>SD</b>	0.834	0.632	0.871	1.013	0.674	0.740
<b>M</b>	4.46	4.40	4.04	3.94	4.58	4.48
<b>n</b>	136	40	109	34	145	42
<b>Fisher test</b>	0.357		0.704		0.728	
<b>Fully agree</b>	54.00%	40.90%	20.00%	22.70%	62.70%	54.50%
<b>Agree</b>	31.30%	47.70%	44.00%	40.90%	30.70%	36.40%
<b>Disagree</b>	4.00%	2.30%	8.70%	13.60%	3.30%	4.50%
<b>Fully disagree</b>	1.30%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
<b>I do not know</b>	9.30%	9.10%	27.30%	22.70%	3.30%	4.50%
<b>n</b>	150	44	150	44	150	44
<b>Gender</b>	M	W	M	W	M	W
<b>Question</b>	Our NGB's board must principally represent our members.		Our NGB's board must represent general knowledge of exercise and sports.		The board must have substantial knowledge of the NGB's specific sport (e.g., understanding of the competition system, special features of the sport). *	

\* non-normal distribution; M = man; W = woman.

#### 5.5. Board Work

Opinions regarding board work itself were measured with six variables. The variables considered knowledge-based operations and a shared vision of equality, non-discrimination, and disciplinary actions (Table 4). The results are rather similar, though the women tend to be more critical of board operations. A slight statistical difference emerged for the variable 'The board has shared views on how information should be interpreted'. The mean for women is 3.41 and for men is 3.64. For the item 'In the board's decision-making, choices are made between different solutions based on knowledge', 55.30% of the men agreed and 26.7% fully agreed with the statement, whereas 29.5% of the women agreed and 25% fully

agreed with it. Regarding other items, no statistical difference emerged between the men and women.

**Table 4.** Board work.

<b>t-test</b>	0.054		0.943		0.041		0.218		0.284		0.423		0.989	
<b>SD</b>	0.833	1.149	0.814	1.027	0.842	1.095	0.761	0.845	0.849	0.821	0.837	0.987	1.406	1.564
<b>M</b>	4.19	3.85	4.14	4.15	3.64	3.41	3.95	3.84	4.38	4.22	4.40	4.25	2.44	2.44
<b>n</b>	124	33	133	27	102	35	118	36	138	37	132	40	111	32
<b>Fisher test</b>	0.168		0.001		0.070		0.510		0.087		0.202		0.508	
<b>Fully agree</b>	30.00%	20.50%	26.70%	25.00%	12.70%	9.10%	26.70%	18.20%	47.30%	31.80%	46.70%	47.70%	7.3%	13.6%
<b>Agree</b>	46.00%	40.90%	55.30%	29.50%	47.30%	47.70%	47.30%	56.80%	40.00%	45.50%	36.70%	31.80%	17.3%	9.1%
<b>Disagree</b>	6.00%	9.10%	5.30%	4.50%	7.30%	20.50%	4.00%	4.50%	2.00%	6.80%	2.70%	11.40%	25.3%	22.7%
<b>Fully disagree</b>	0.70%	4.50%	1.30%	2.30%	0.70%	2.30%	0.70%	2.30%	2.70%	0.00%	2.00%	0.00%	24.0%	27.3%
<b>I don't know</b>	17.30%	25.00%	11.30%	38.60%	32.00%	20.50%	21.30%	18.20%	8.00%	15.90%	12.00%	9.10%	26.0%	27.3%
<b>n</b>	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44	150	44
<b>Gender</b>	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
<b>Question</b>	The board's operations are knowledge-based. **		In the board's decision-making, choices are made between different solutions based on knowledge. *, **		The board has shared views on how information should be interpreted. ***		The board has interaction that enables the interpretation of information. **		The board has a clear, shared vision of the NGB's measures to promote gender equality and non-discrimination.		The board has a clear, shared view on disciplinary actions in the sport, including measures to prevent misconduct.		The board members have opportunities to educate themselves regarding board work (e.g., good governance).	

\* statistical difference  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* non-normal distribution; \*\*\* statistical difference (comparing means)  $p < 0.05$ ; M = man; W = woman.

### 5.6. Impact on Future Strategic Decisions

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

**Table 5.** Impact on future strategic decisions.

<b>t-test</b>		0.972		0.964		0.312
<b>SD</b>		1.03	1.09	0.65	0.83	1.12
<b>Mean</b>		4.13	4.12	4.56	4.56	3.94
<b>n</b>		128	34	140	43	119
<b>Fisher test</b>		0.706		0.420		0.056
<b>Very high impact</b>		34.70%	34.10%	57.30%	65.9%	28.7%
<b>Some impact</b>		40.00%	31.8%	34.0%	27.30%	34.70%
<b>Little impact</b>		8.00%	9.10%	1.30%	2.30%	14.70%
<b>No impact at all</b>		2.70%	2.30%	0.70%	2.30%	1.3%
<b>I do not know</b>		14.70%	22.70%	6.7%	2.3%	20.7%
<b>n</b>		150	44	150	44	150
<b>Gender</b>		M	W	M	W	M
<b>Question</b>	State sports policy guidelines	Amount of public funding for sports and grant policies *		Sustainability issues in sports (equality, non-discrimination, sustainable development, and so on)		

\* non-normal distribution; M = man; W = woman.

## 6. Discussion

The theoretical model built in this paper suggests that the gender-biased selection processes of members (based on the concept of the right fit) on sports organization boards may limit the variance of perspectives on board governance between men and women board members, and ultimately the organizational outcomes of Finnish NGBs. This study's analysed survey data support this model and hypothesis 2: the perspectives of men and women board members on key constructs of board governance tend to be rather similar. Therefore hypothesis 1 proposing the perspectives of men and women board members being rather different is disproven. For most of the items measured, there was no statistical

difference between men and women, and in items in which there was a statistical difference between genders, it was rather small. This section discusses the differences between the male and female board members' backgrounds in relation to previous research to provide further understanding. Additionally, it presents biased selection processes and their impact on gender equality and perspective diversity.

### 6.1. Background Factors

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

Men also tend to have more experience with voluntary leadership positions. In Finland, term limits vary between different NGBs (and other organizations). Some have a fixed limit of, for instance, two terms, while others have no limit at all. The lack of term limits may well be one factor influencing the absence of women on boards, especially in smaller NGBs, where governance practices may not have been given that much attention. The lack of term limits benefits men, because men are the majority on sports boards and can hold their seats for long periods of time ([Pfister and Radtke 2009](#)). This prevents younger women and men from achieving board positions, as positions do not become available until the older members decide to step down, which hinders the formation of gender-balanced boards and cultures. Another factor that may partly explain the gap in the years of experience between men and women is age. The majority of the women respondents in this study were less than 45 years old, whereas the men tended to be older. To note, first, the younger age of women does not allow them as many years to gather experience as does the

older age of men. Second, the younger age of female board members can indicate a slow, positive change in the culture of sports and sports leadership towards gender inclusivity. Even if the change has been slow, especially within decision-making positions (Fasting et al. 2014; Turpeinen and Hakamäki 2018), there have been some improvements regarding gender inclusivity in sports. Therefore, younger women may be more willing to reach for sports leadership positions. They may also see leadership positions as more 'normal' and achievable for women because of the changing culture in sports and sports organizations, and because of previous role models (i.e., women who have already achieved leadership positions in sports).

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

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

NGB boards do acknowledge the importance of diversity (Lehtonen and Stenvall 2021). However, they view diversity more from a business angle instead of one of, for instance, gender or multiculturalism. Having a background in the board's sport is important for a board member, but if the candidate possesses a certain business background (e.g., law, finance), the necessity of the sporting background may decrease. Board members see, for instance, a marketing, financing, or corporation background as a chance to bring new knowledge and perspectives, and thus new resources, onto the board, whereas gender

is not considered a quality that brings new value into the board (Lehtonen and Stenvall 2021). Knoppers et al. (2021) echoed this idea; adding women to the board of a sports organization is not seen as adding symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

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

## 7. Conclusions

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

The study's empirical part extends the current literature to the novel, hitherto nearly unexplored context of Finnish NGBs. Survey data from NGB board members were used to partly test the model's assumptions, namely the assumption that the perspectives of the male and the female board members are in fact rather similar. The assumption was tested analysing women and men board members views on key constructs of board governance. The data supported hypothesis 2: *Women and men board members' perspectives regarding key constructs of board governance are similar*, thus supporting the model's assumption and disproving hypothesis 1: *Women and men board members' perspectives regarding key constructs of board governance are different*. The model presented in this paper creates a new angle and point of departure for understanding the interplay of sports board governance, selection of board members, and gender. In this paper, the focus has been on gender diversity. However, the model may also be applicable to other diversity discussions (e.g., race, sexual orientation) in sports organizations as different, oppressed minority groups face many similar barriers regarding inclusion within leadership positions in sport.



It must be noted here that the data presented consist of a rather small sample of Finnish NGB board members. Especially, the number of women respondents was rather low ( $n = 44$ ), which may have caused the results to indicate no statistical difference between genders. Furthermore, the results reported in this paper measure only the items included in the survey. Other items may have given different results. Therefore, more research with larger samples is needed to further test the model. For anonymity reasons, the survey included no questions regarding the share of men and women in the respondent's board or their breakdown between different positions. Therefore, comparison, for instance, between boards with low and high level of gender diversity was not possible. This offers an avenue for further research. Additionally, more qualitative research delivering a deeper, more nuanced understanding is required to explore even further why perspectives on board governance are similar in the NGB context. Further studies should also look into the concept of the right fit, and recruitment/selection processes to further test the proposed theoretical model in Finnish NGBs: (1) How new board members are selected/recruited. (2) Why the board member's perspectives are this similar. Is it because of the right fit and recruitment as proposed in this paper, and are there other factors playing a role, such as organizational procedures and decision-making practices (e.g., lack of learning orientation towards diversity (Ely and Thomas 2020), cultural contexts, women not fitting the profile, or women unwilling/unable to become a board member because of individual level factors (e.g., time/money, self-limiting behaviour, not wanting to join)). (3) Whether the recruitment of homogenic board members has been intentional or unconscious. The model presented in this paper builds on information/decision-making theory. However, the social categorization perspective suggests that group variance may have a negative impact on organizational outcomes. Additional research can also test to what extent the variance in group members (e.g., board members) and perspectives positively influences organizational outcomes in relation to the possible negative impact suggested by the social categorization perspective.

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