

Why we need structures to change: an analysis of the barriers for women in sports leadership in Europe



Imprint

This report is an output of the **Step Up Equality** project. It aims to tackle persistent gender inequalities in sport and address the underrepresentation of women among trainers, managers, and decision-makers in sport. For further information on the project, as well as downloadable research and support material, go to www.girlsinsport.se/stepupequality.

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- ASSIST (Italy)
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Summary

The study identifies key barriers to women's leadership within sport. It also provides insights and recommendations for future actions, training, reporting mechanisms for gender-based discrimination and research.

Key Findings

1. In contrast to widespread assumptions, women are highly interested in leadership positions
2. Women deem sports knowledge and soft skills as key prerequisites for success in leadership
3. Structural discrimination limits women's access to and success in positions of leadership
4. There is a high risk of women quitting leadership roles due to unsupportive environments
5. Gender-based discrimination is prevalent in sport and is appears in a variety of forms
6. Men in leadership roles frequently struggle to identify gender-based discrimination
7. Whilst women are fairly confident in their leadership abilities, men are more likely to perceive women as lacking in relevant skills
8. Strong interpersonal skills and resilience are needed to navigate an unsupportive environment
9. Existing support structures and career pathways for women are inadequate
10. Reporting mechanisms for gender-based discrimination rarely exist and are insufficient

Step Up Equality intends to stimulate debate and contribute ideas on how to achieve greater progress on the goal of gender equality in sports leadership and decision-making.

Visit page **41** for our call to action and recommendations.

The Glass Ceiling for Women in Sports Leadership Remains Intact

The United Nations 193 members agreed to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” by the year 2030 with its goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Agenda¹. This UN framework has since been increasingly adopted and incorporated into strategies across sectors, including sport. Yet in May 2018, Lydia Nsekera, the Chair of the IOC Women in Sport Commission, reflected on the state of gender equality in sport:

“There are still, everywhere in the world, too many highly accomplished women who are refused access to sport, or socially stigmatized when they decide to excel in a sport. Similarly, women face discrimination at all levels, and continue to endure violence and abuse.

Gender inequality persists among decision-making bodies, technical occupations, the media, and in the awarding of sponsorships and prizes.²”

— Lydia Nsekera, Chair of the IOC Women in Sport Commission)



In order to improve gender balance in sports across Europe, the European Union set itself in 2014 a number of objectives to achieve by 2020³. It aimed to achieve a minimum of:

- in executive boards and committees of national sports governing bodies
- in the management of professional sports administrations and governmental sports bodies
- in volunteer and employed sports coaching positions

However, despite the rapid growth of sports, such as football for women’s and girls’ in recent years, overall participation levels of women and girls remain low compared to boys and men (Special Eurobarometer 472, 2018)⁴. Further, they do not participate in the full range of sports and physical activities. This has been attributed in part to many sports being considered typically “masculine” and therefore deemed less appropriate for women and girls by their societies. In some countries in Europe, decision-makers have historically even banned women from participating in perceived “masculine” sports, such as football.

A follow-up data analysis and report published by the Council of Europe in 2019 went even further. It stated that in 2019, women are still strikingly absent when it comes to leadership, decision making or coaching positions in Europe:

- 38% of sports federations have developed projects to recruit or increase the number of women coaching, yet they remain underrepresented. At elite level only 22% of coaches in sports federations are women.
- Only 7% of the presidents, 18% of vice-presidents and 22% of all board members in sports federations are women⁵.

Despite implementing policy changes, it concluded that men still dominate in all aspects of European sports, except for membership in sports with a high proportion of women participating: Women are therefore side-lined from decision-making in sports and the glass ceiling remains intact⁵.

Even the most popular sports for women have relatively few women in coaching or management positions. Moreover, when women hold leadership positions, both at the professional and grassroots level, they earn significantly less than men whilst performing the same tasks and are often undervalued. The exclusion of women from positions of influence and leadership, including active discrimination, does not only affect the individual women themselves - it is detrimental for its culture and limits the potential and sustainability of sports as a whole.

About the Study

Purpose

As part of the Erasmus+ Step Up Equality project this research study was conducted to identify barriers to women's leadership within sports in Europe. One of the main purposes of this study is to tackle the lack of available data and independent analyses on inequalities and gender discrimination in grassroots sports. It additionally identifies specific training needs for men and women in sports, which enable more women to get into and hold leadership positions. It also investigates the use and perception of current reporting systems for gender-based discrimination. Based on the results, the study outlines practical recommendations for changes that need to take place in sports environments. Thereby it wants to contribute to increasing the number of women in leadership positions and assist the sports sector in profiting from a gender diverse leadership in the future.

Data Collection

Data was collected from participants across Europe, with the majority of it coming from the Step Up Equality project partner countries: Germany, Italy, Poland, Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The data analysis focused predominantly on data from Sweden, Poland, Italy, and Germany, as partners will conduct leadership trainings in these four countries in the next work phase of the project.

Project partners conducted desk-based research, distributed online surveys including quantitative and qualitative questions via their networks, and conducted in-depth interviews (IDI) with individuals. The data collection took place between May and September 2019.

A review of the situation at the time of the study found that all four countries still lack equality when it comes to women in sports leadership:

SWEDEN

While the country generally has a very good reputation for gender equality, this sometimes results in false assumptions regarding how much progress has been made in sport. Women's football for example is big in Sweden, yet the national football association is regularly criticized for its slow progress in supporting women's leadership at the highest levels.

ITALY

ITALY The situation is particularly poor: of the 45 national sport federations not a single one is led by a woman, and the same situation is seen in grassroots sports organisations nationally. Moreover, sportswomen in Italy are still by law excluded from recognition as professional athletes and from rights and protections that come with professional status (Law on Sport Professionalism No. 91 of 1981).

High-level athletes are still treated as semi-professional, despite a recent legislative provision in January 2020⁶. The provision gives individual clubs and federations the ability to extend these protections to athletes by providing an initial contribution in terms of tax relief, but as we wait to see the effects of this optional provision, to date elite athletes mainly receive mere daily reimbursements and allowances.

POLAND

The situation is characterised by men holding most of the positions of power in sports. A study covering 28 national sports associations in summer sports and seven in winter sports for the year 2016 showed that women held only 12% of positions on management boards of sport organisations. In almost one third of Polish sport associations, there is not a single woman on the management board.⁷

GERMANY

Several national and regional sports governing bodies have established mentoring programmes for women. However, women are still hugely underrepresented in sports leadership. For example in 2019, the German Football Federation (DFB) only counts one woman among 16 executive committee members and 22 presidents of regional and county football associations, despite having over 1.1 million women and girls as members.⁸

Participant Demographics

The study focuses on three main target groups, who volunteered to participate in the research and provided informed consent prior to taking part.

Women Athletes

These are women*, referred to hereafter simply as “athletes”, who are currently active as participants in a team or individual sport in Europe. The study explores their potential and barriers for future leadership. In total 129 participants took part in an online survey for women athletes, out of which 128 identified as female and one as non-binary. In addition, four athletes took part in in-depth interviews. The average age of athletes surveyed is 29 years, ranging from 16 to 65 years. Participating athletes have been active in their sport for 15 years on average.

Men and Women in Sports Leadership

These are men* and women*, who have proceeded to take on a leadership position in sports. They are able to provide insightful information and recommendations for supporting potential women in leadership positions. Examples are coaches, managers, referees, sports officials (e.g. people working in sports governing bodies) and board members. This list is not conclusive. In total 74 leaders, 52 women (70%) and 22 men (30%), participated in the online surveys. In addition, 14 women and 12 men in leadership positions took part in in-depth interviews. The lower proportion of responses from men reflects that project partners found it more challenging to engage this target group on the topic of gender equality and reach it through their networks. The average age of leaders is 41 years, ranging from 23 to 63 years. Leaders have been active in their sport for 18 years on average.

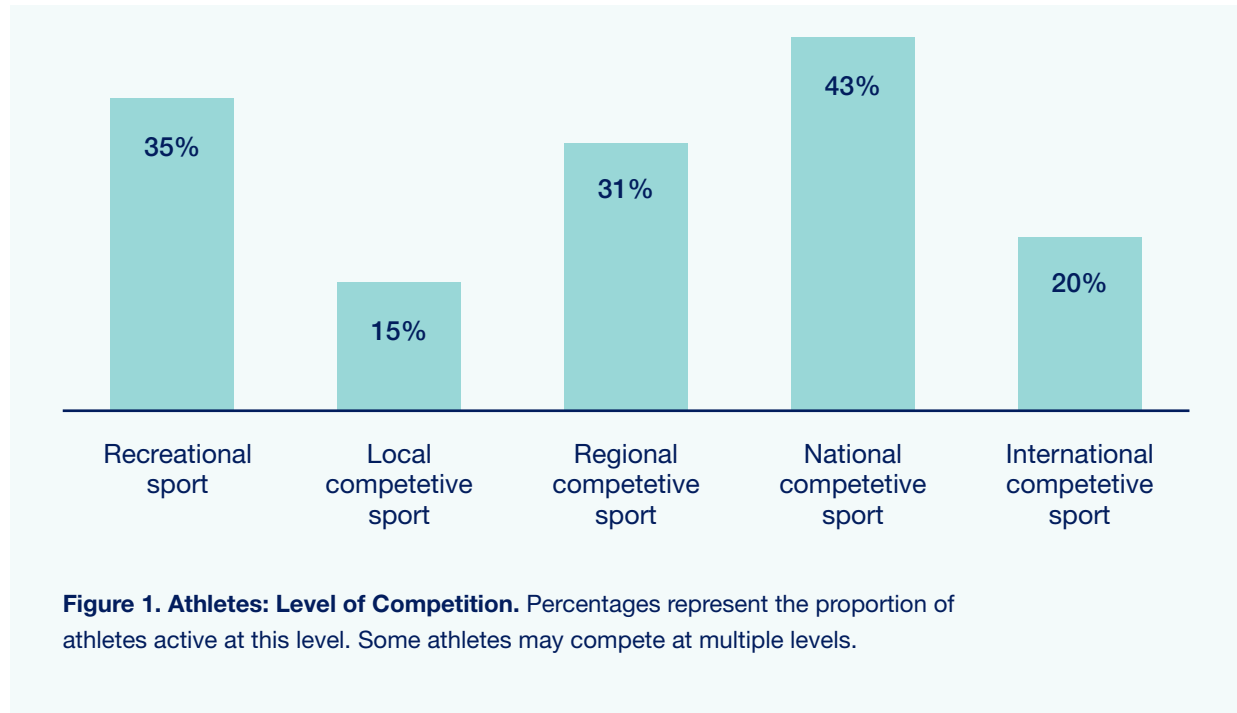
In addition to the target groups, five in-depth interviews were conducted with experts in the field of women in sports: professionals who, rather than being involved in the direct implementation of sports, have a high degree of knowledge in the field. They are able to provide an overall vision, based on diverse cases and from an outside point of view, e.g. as researchers, journalists or policy makers.

*Our understanding of masculinities and femininities is inclusive of everyone who identifies as a man or woman themselves. While we strive for the inclusivity of all genders in all activities in sport, our focus in the study are the specific challenges and opportunities for individuals who identify as women.

Sports Setting of Participants

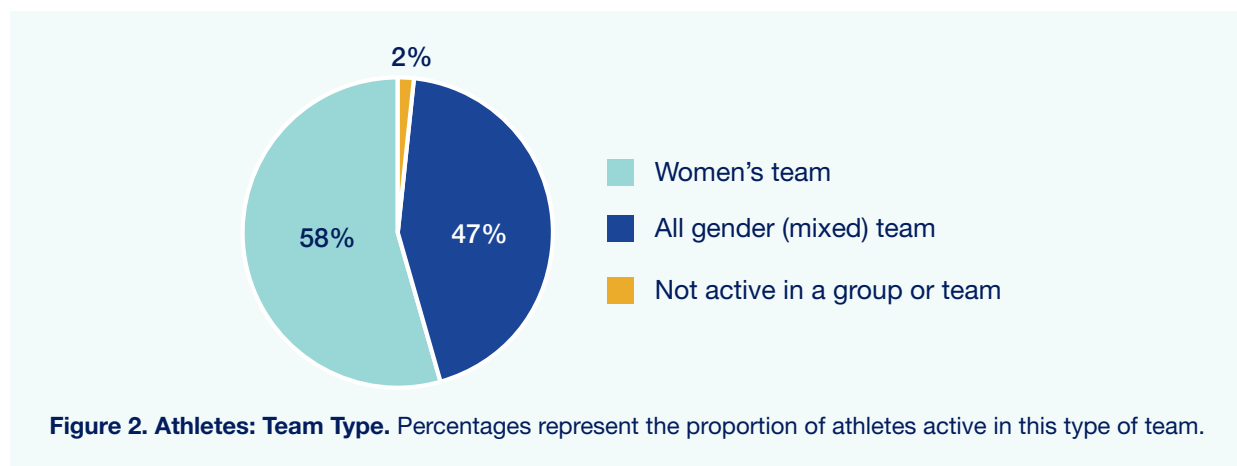
The participants in this study are active in 30 different sports. These range from more traditional individual and team sports, such as athletics, martial arts and football, to emerging and niche sports like roller derby or horseback archery. Football was the most commonly cited sport by athletes at 31%, as well as 36% of the participants in leadership positions.

Athletes: Level of Competition



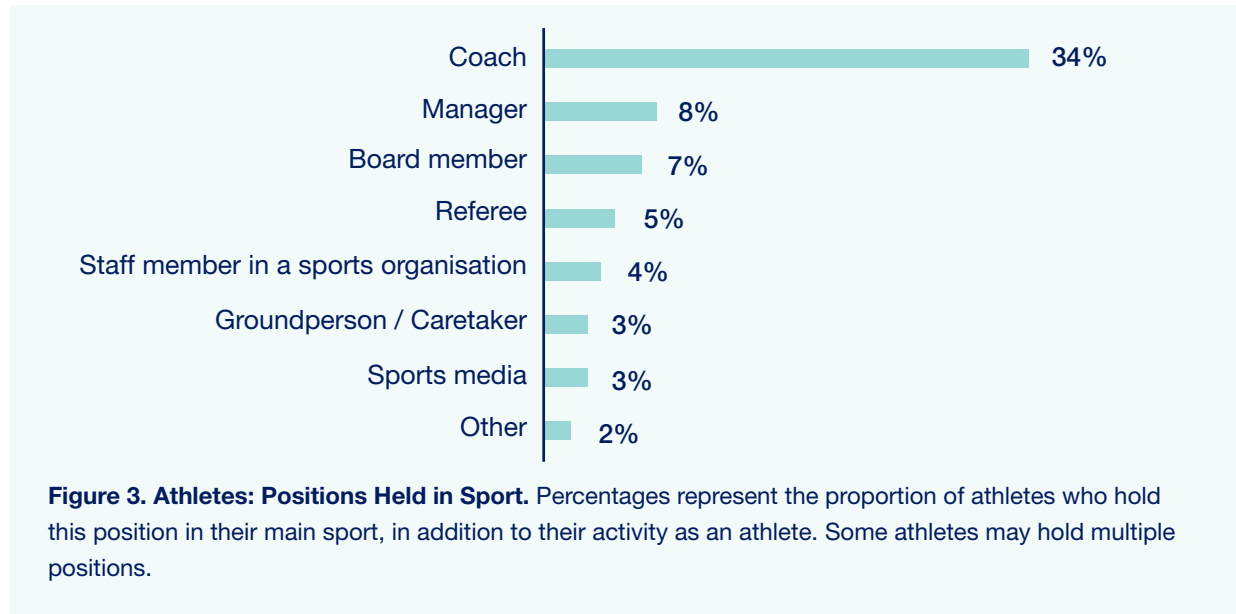
Athletes: Types of Teams

The vast majority of athletes surveyed carry out their sports activities in a group or team setting. Slightly more athletes take part in a women only group or team than in a mixed gender setting.



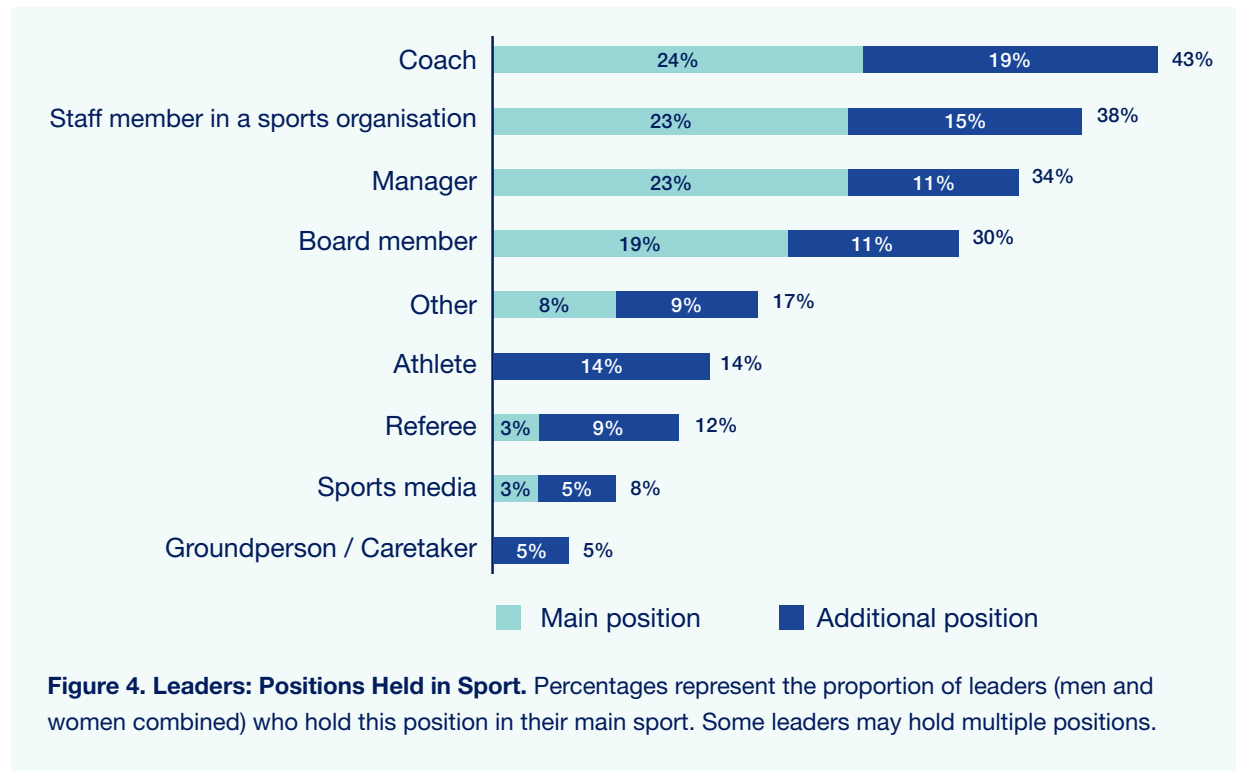
Athletes: Positions Held in Sport

Of the athletes surveyed, 43% reported also holding another position in their sport.



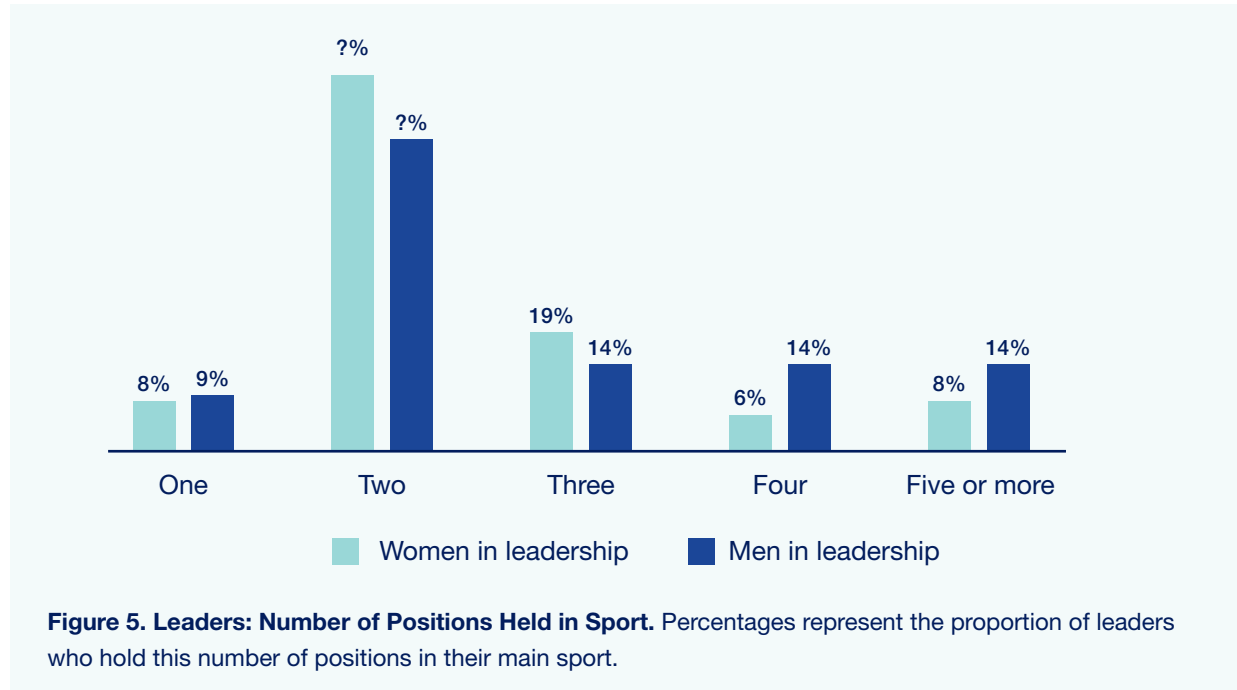
Leaders: Positions Held in Sport

On average, leaders have held their main leadership position for seven years. Additionally, 92% of both the men and women in leadership surveyed currently hold another position in their sport, which may include being an athlete.



Leaders: Number of Positions Held in Sport

Only 8% of women and 9% of men in leadership positions surveyed hold one position in their sport. The majority of leaders hold two positions and men hold a higher number of positions than women.



Leaders: Types of Organisations

The surveyed men and women in leadership are predominantly active in sports clubs, regional and national sports organisations.

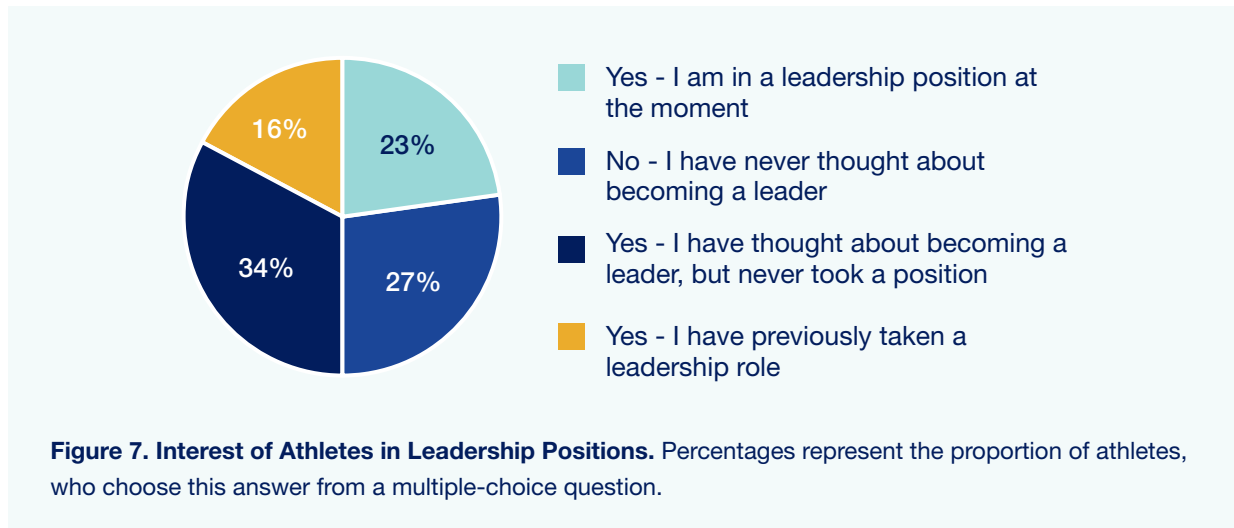


Results

1. Changing the Narrative: Women’s High Motivation and Confidence for Leadership

When it comes to underlying reasons for the low number of women in sports leadership positions, people often claim that there is a lack of women who want to take on the roles. In line with this common conception, a number of the men in leadership positions responded in a similar fashion: *“Everyone has equal opportunities [in my organisation], but far less women decide to be candidates for executive jobs”*. – **Man leader, tennis, Poland**

In contrast, the survey results show that women self-report high levels of interest for sports leadership roles: The majority of athletes (73%) either has thought about taking on a leadership position in the past, held a position in the past or was also active as a leader parallel to their athletic career.



Disproving common misconceptions and prejudices, the numbers from every participating country suggest that the attitude of athletes towards leadership tends to be positive, rather than negative or hesitant. In fact, it shows that not only women who have ended their careers, but also many women who are still actively pursuing their athletic careers are motivated for and engaged in leadership roles.

This tendency is also visible when we look at women’s confidence regarding their leadership skills, which is high. Most athletes considered themselves either “somewhat confident” or “very confident”, when it comes to taking on the tasks of sports leadership. They also show signs of striving towards leadership, which is encouraging for the recruitment of future women leaders.

How much do the following statements describe your situation in your sport?

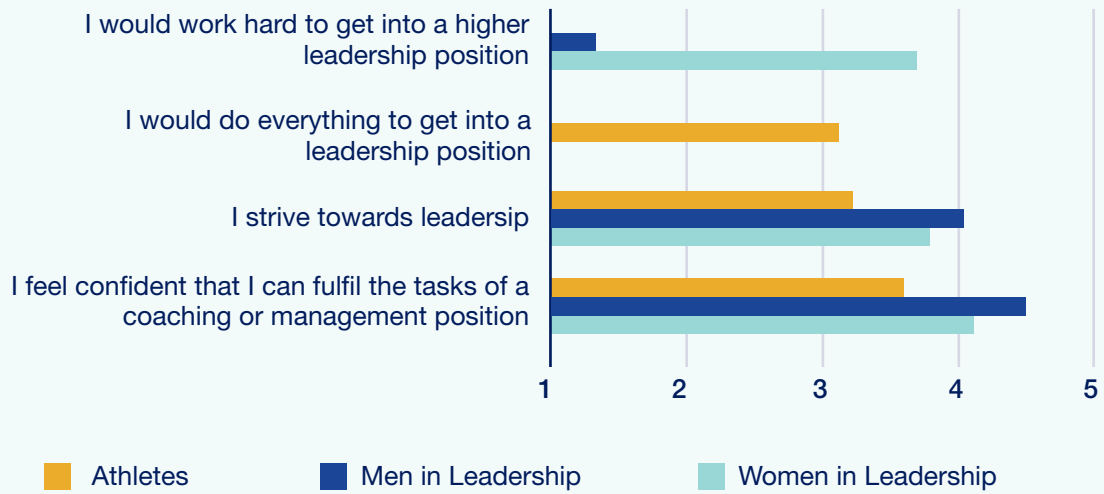


Figure 8. Leaders and Athletes: Confidence and Motivation for Leadership. Responses represent the average rating for each target group on a scale of 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“Completely”).

People who are already in leadership and have therefore tried and tested their abilities, naturally show even higher levels of confidence. Women leaders however expressed a much greater willingness to work hard to achieve a higher position than their male colleagues did.

“You just need courage and self-confidence [to be a leader]. I learned a lot when I got my C-license in coaching and I know a lot about football. Maybe more, than most men do.”

– **Woman leader, football, Germany**

This could also be a reflection of more women holding lower-level management positions than high-level positions. These are more likely to be held by men.

POLAND

The gap between women’s interest in and action for leadership is largest in this project partner country: The majority of athletes surveyed (61%) has already thought about taking on a leadership position, but not acted upon it. Only 19% of women athletes never thought about becoming a leader and 20% had a position in the past.

Taking into account how few women hold leadership positions sports associations, the survey responses force the question - Why are women still absent from leadership and decision-making positions and what needs to happen for motivated women to be able to fulfil their potential?

In the following sections, we want to find an answer to these questions, by exploring the environment women athletes and leaders find themselves in. We will proceed by looking at knowledge and skills that participants identified as a requirement for successful sports leadership. In a second step, we will present the challenges and barriers that women face in terms of leadership.

2. The Importance of Sports Knowledge and Soft Skills for Success in Leadership

The information in this section is important to support women as active and potential leaders in two main ways. Primarily, it explores the specific perspective of women in sports and helps us understand the underlying causes for a lack of women in leadership positions. Secondly, it can be used to develop better educational measures to improve the capacities of those who would like to receive further training.

Which knowledge, attitudes and skills are needed to be successful and satisfied in a leadership position? Name the top six.

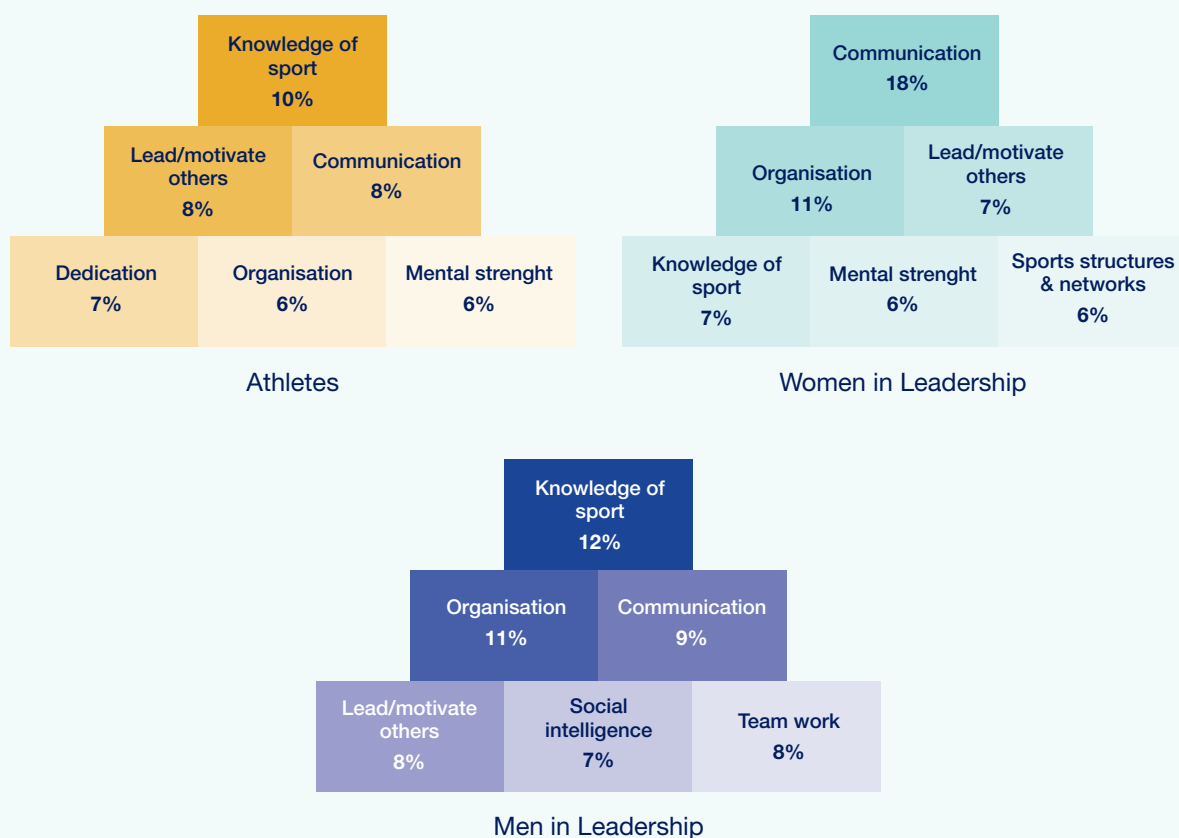


Figure 9. Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes (KSA) for Successful Leadership. Percentages on the cubes represent the proportion of answers for each target group, which fell into the respective thematic category.

“If you want to work in sports, a certain level of experience is important. You do not need to be a former top player. But I think that experience, of how a team works or which dynamics can occur, are for example important.”

– **Woman leader, football, Germany**

Women in leadership positions rated communication skills as the most important skill for leadership. Athletes and men in leadership positions on the other hand deem sports knowledge to be the most important attribute for leadership. In addition, female athletes reported dedication as an important factor for being a successful leader.

POLAND

Women leaders and athletes stressed the need to be mentally strong and resistant more frequently than men in leadership positions did. This is an indication of the unfriendly environment in which women find themselves in sport, which we will explore more later on.

“To be an effective leader you need to have a genuine interest in other people”.

– **Woman leader, Sweden**

In conclusion, the importance of social skills and soft skills in general, such as communication, confidence, mental strength or the ability to lead others can be found across all responses. Especially, when the perspectives of women leaders are taken into account. However, subject knowledge and expertise are also among the most frequently given answers. The variety of suggested abilities implies the wide range of tasks leaders must fulfil to be successful, e.g. delivering proper expertise to prove their professional qualification, as well as mastering soft skills to deal with their environment.

The findings have implications for educational measures: leadership trainings must consider the most frequently named skills and forms of knowledge, as well as the different roles leaders have to fulfil in their work and be structured accordingly.

We also learn about the environment that women leaders operate in, based on the responses: the importance of social skills indicates the relevance of the social environment in general. Secondly, the importance of mental strength for women athletes and leaders indicates that this environment can be rather challenging for women in sport. We will explore the challenges and barriers they face as leaders in the next section.



3. Sports Structures are the Main Barriers, not Women's Skills

The results regarding barriers and challenges for women in sport and its leadership positions in particular complete the assumptions we have drawn from section one and two: The most obvious explanation for the low percentage of women in leadership positions is not a low motivation of the women themselves, but their environment. Out of the 52 women in leadership positions surveyed, only 23 have not experienced challenges when obtaining their position. In fact, it is especially the environment they operate that tends to be challenging, as the barriers appear to be mostly structural and gender-based discriminatory treatment was reported as prevalent in sports structures.

3.1. An Unsupportive Environment is the Main Barrier to Leadership

In your opinion, what are the most common barriers that women face when entering a leadership position in sports? Name the top three.

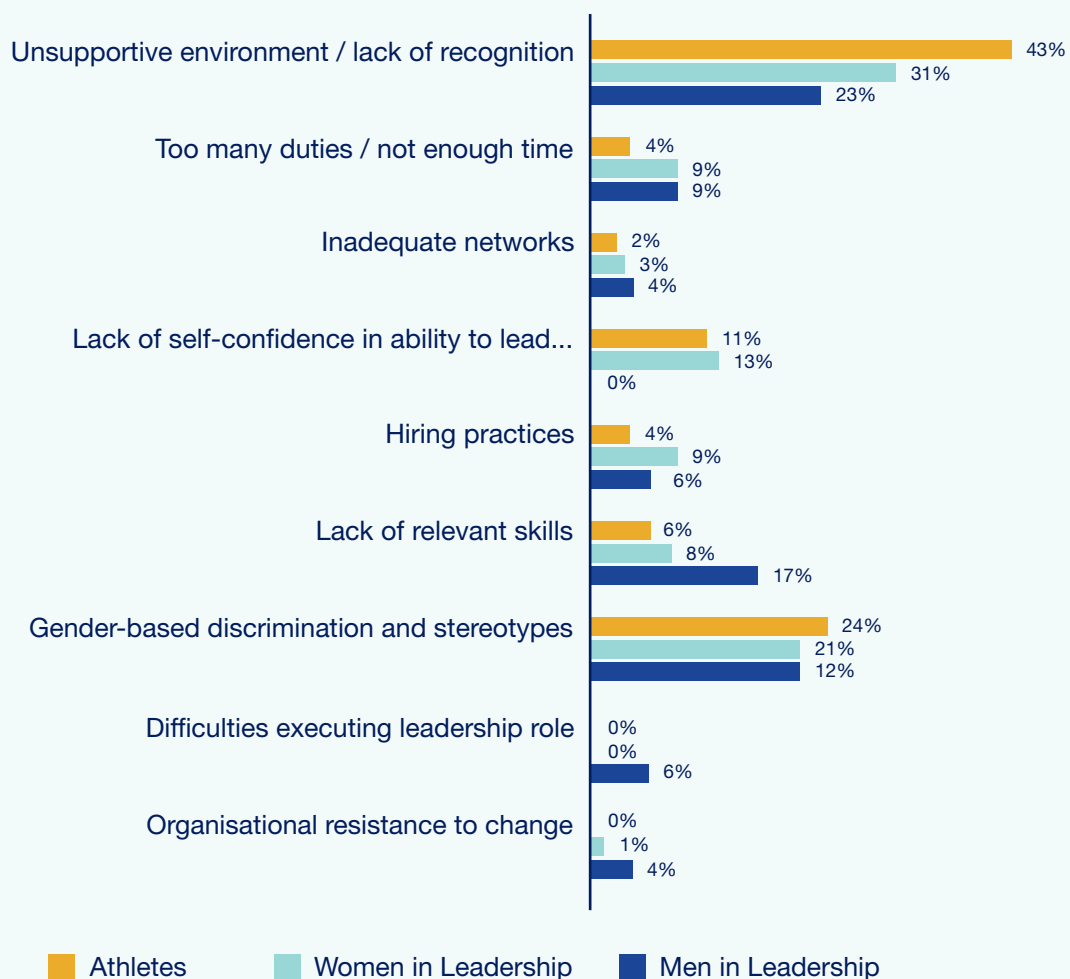


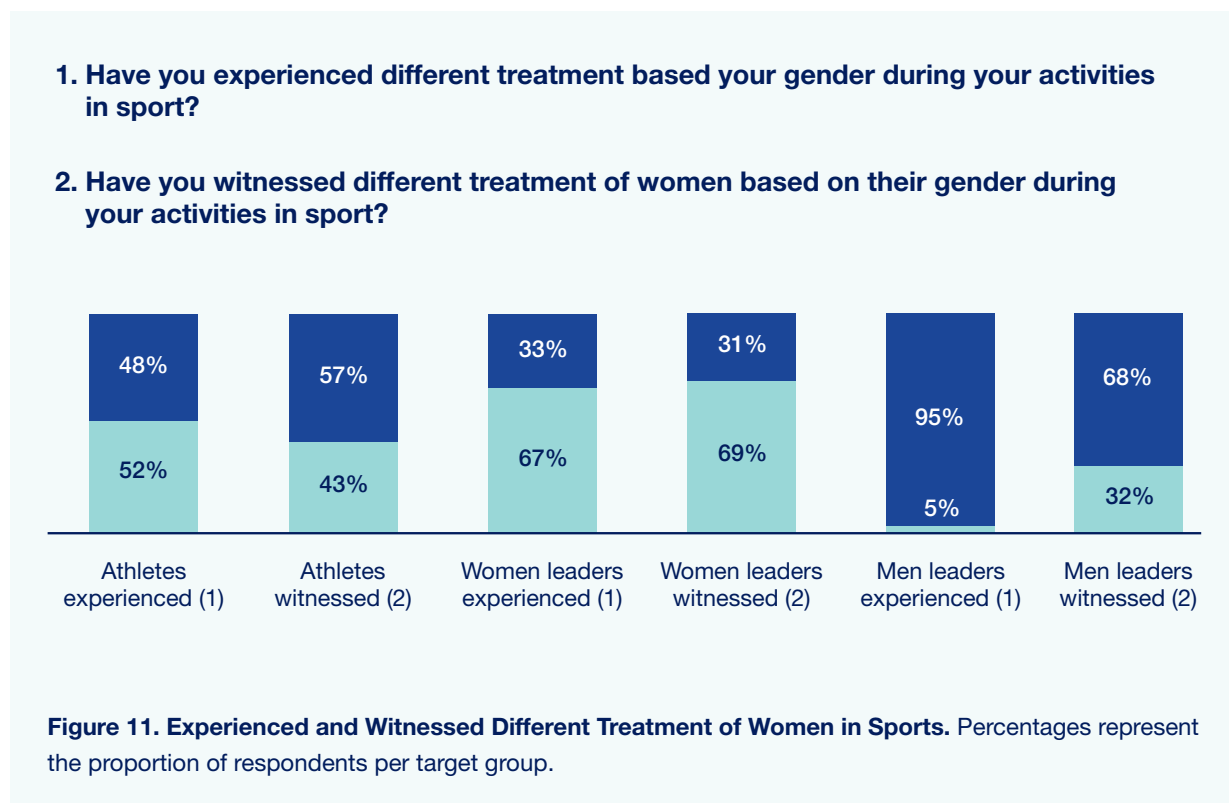
Figure 10. Perception of Barriers to Leadership Positions for Women. Percentages represent the proportion of answers for each target group, which fell into the respective thematic category.

“That’s just the classic situation that I have witnessed so often: You share the classroom with mostly men and the people who lead the sessions are men. They just presume you won’t be as good as a man and when you are, they are always really surprised.”

Woman leader, football, Germany

Both athletes and leaders thought most frequently that an unsupportive environment or lack of recognition are the main barriers for women to enter leadership. This was followed by gender-based discrimination and stereotypes. Out of the six most frequently given answers by both groups, only two barriers are on a personal level: Lack of self-confidence and relevant skills. Even though the results show that 25% of the leaders’ answers concern the lack of relevant skills, mostly men in leadership positions give this answer. Examples given by men were a lack of experience, assertiveness, lower resistance to stress, creativity and women being afraid of taking on responsibility. While 17% of men thought a lack of relevant skills is a major barrier for women, only 8% of women leaders and 6% of athletes agreed. Again, these numbers suggest that women are rather confident, while the perception that they lack relevant skills is an external perspective.

3.2. Women are Treated Differently Based on Their Gender



Whilst the majority of women leaders and athletes have personally experienced different treatment based on their gender during activities in sport, only 5% of the men in leadership positions did. Although men reported witnessing incidences, in which women were treated

differently, at 32% this was a significantly smaller proportion of respondents compared to women leaders and athletes (69% and 43% respectively). In addition, some of the interviews suggest that the number of women in sport, who experience different treatment because of their gender, is even higher.

There also seems to be a self-awareness issue: some women perceive certain social behaviours as normality in sports workplace culture and therefore are not categorizing it as discrimination. As one Swedish woman leader put it: *“You need to understand yourself and the context you are in”*. A Dutch woman leader in handball also commented on this normalisation: *“some behaviour of men is so common that it is accepted as normal”*.

POLAND

At 77%, the number of women who had challenges obtaining their leadership position is particularly high in Poland. Also, the gender differences when it comes to the perceived barriers are obvious: women referred more frequently to the unfriendly environment and also mentioned the lack of appropriate skills as well as self-confidence, which none of the men chose. Generally, none of the men experienced gender-based discrimination or observed it.

“I believe that [a glass ceiling in sports organisations] is made out of plastic rather than glass. If you keep banging at a glass ceiling, it will break at some point, whereas a plastic ceiling bends.”

– Woman leader, Poland

Around half of the people who answered the survey perceive different treatment of women taking place in their activities. A closer inspection of participants’ perceptions of equal opportunities within their own sports organisations revealed the following:

Do women and men have the same opportunities in your organisation/group to become leaders in sport?

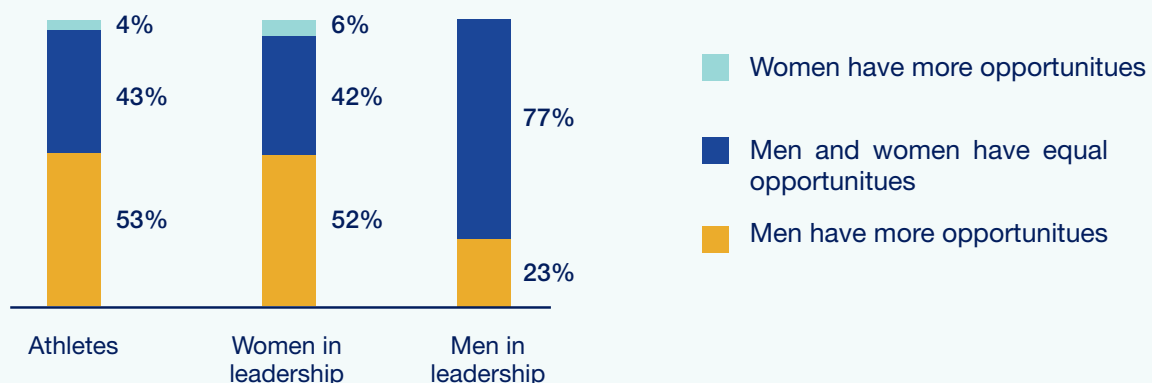


Figure 12. Perception of Equal Opportunities in Sports Organisations. Percentages represent the proportion of respondents per target group.



The majority of women athletes and leaders think that there are unequal opportunities in their organisations, with men having more opportunities. The majority of men, which thinks that men and women have equal opportunities, does however not share this perception. Women's perceptions of unequal opportunities are also reflected in the number of women in leadership positions within their sports organisations:

- 42% of the leaders, both men and women, state that more men than women currently hold leadership positions in their organisation. 28% of leaders describe their organisation's leadership as gender-balanced, a further 8% as unbalanced (non-gender specific) and the remaining 10% did not comment.
- Only 9% of respondents say that there are more women than men in their organisation's leadership positions. This figure is reduced to 2%, after taking into account leaders in sports organisations that are only open to women.

3.3. Examples of Gender-Based Discrimination in Sports

Participants elaborated in the survey on the different treatment of women they experienced or witnessed during their sporting activities in the last year. The answers show wide-ranging aspects of gender-based discrimination and clearly demonstrate the challenges women face as athletes and leaders in sport.

Prejudice and Gender Stereotypes

Expectations for women in sports are frequently based on gender-stereotypes. It may not be “normal” for women to play a certain sport. The perception of women being physically weaker and more emotional than men is reflected in different rules for competition, such as shorter distances or fewer bouts for women.

Men might play “softer” against women and women’s conduct and fair play is judged differently to men’s. Women are assumed to have little understanding of sports and expected to stand back and take a more passive role, instead of asserting influence in decision-making.

“The norm is a man. Women’s achievements get judged more harshly.”

– **Man leader, football, Sweden**

“Women are asked to make the tea.”

– **Woman leader, football, United Kingdom**

“In sports, associations are ruled by very old antiquated thinking patterns. For example, in 2002, I was asked in my job interview what I would do if my child is ill.”

– **Woman leader, active in multiple sports, Germany**

“Many people, who don’t practice any sport, often told me that women don’t know how to play basketball and that it is a sport for men.”

– **Woman athlete, basketball, Italy**

Jokes

Discriminatory or derogatory comments from men are often dressed up as jokes or “banter”. Women active in sports deemed “masculine” mentioned these more frequently. They reported adverse comments on a woman’s ability to play or ability to lead in the sport and that women playing sports are seen as comical or ridiculous and are laughed at.

It is the “machoism in small things” and the comments singling out the only women in a sports setting, or focusing on her physique, appearance and emotions over her sporting prowess.

“Many people make fun of my sex whilst playing and I am often the only woman on the pitch.”

– **Woman athlete, wheelchair rugby, Poland**

Lack of financial recognition

Financial inequalities persist: women athletes and leaders report earning less than their male counterparts do, with some high level athletes receiving little or no pay. Additionally, athletes often receive smaller prizes and less prize money for the same athletic achievements in competitions. Women's teams find it more difficult to obtain sponsorship and this leads to less equipment being available or purchased at a higher price.

"There are different awards in the Italian beach volleyball championship for men and women, whilst doing the same activity."

– **Woman leader, volleyball, Italy**

"I thought about leaving my job in a leadership position, since first of all it is not considered a real job: I receive reimbursements and not a salary. Moreover, I am not treated fairly compared to my male colleagues and sometimes I receive too much pressure."

– **Woman leader, rugby, Italy**

"For us there is nothing free like for men's football teams, and everything we pay is paid at a much higher price than the market."

– **Woman leader, football, Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Deliberate obstruction

The people in a woman's environment may forbid her from participating in (certain kinds) of sport. Decision-makers in sports might deliberately exclude women athletes from mixed games or competitions. Sports facilities turn women away on the basis that there are e.g. no changing rooms, free sports spaces or coaches available to them. Women coaches are side-lined from women's teams or even fired. There may be a bias towards hiring men, even if women leaders are the better candidates.

"Less good and prepared men were chosen, then me and other women."

– **Woman leader, volleyball, Italy**

"[They were] taking the female athletes away from the female coaches or even firing female coaches."

– **Woman athlete, handball, Poland**

"To a young lady it was told that she cannot enter the [sports] representation, because she is female. She entered, but only after much pressure."

– **Woman leader, fencing, Croatia**

"During the mixed championships (for players up to 14 years of age) coaches prefer to let a male athlete play, rather than the girls. Although technically the girl is better."

– **Woman athlete, football, Italy**



Harassment and abuse

Women experience direct insults, sometimes even from men on the same mixed team. They include sexist, discriminatory remarks, as well as bullying and mobbing; sexual comments during matches by male athletes spectating; coaches that are sexist to female athletes; strong discriminatory speech against women in sports in online comments.

“A young member of our section mobbed me, although I was the head of the section at the time. He is now a member of its board.”

– **Woman leader, sport shooting, Poland**

Lack of respect

Women are frequently not taken seriously and have to prove themselves. Athletes reported being belittled. There is a disregard for the competences of women, who are considered weaker and less physically able. Athletes are often reduced to appearance and called a “pretty girl” etc.

Therefore, many sports have lower achievement levels for women and girls, as well as smaller prizes. There is an indifference to women’s performance results, which is reflected in the access to facilities, training and human resources provided. Likewise, women in leadership positions said that they are often talked over or ignored by men in discussions and decision-making.

“[I experience] mainly comments or a latent denial of competencies. In group discussion, the remarks of a woman are frequently not discussed further by the group or ignored. Or the point made by a man previously is picked up again.”

– **Woman leader, football, Germany**

“The teachers said that ladies could not do a certain [martial arts] technique, because it was deemed “too physical”. The World championship fights for ladies are all on the same date, while the men have a day of rest between the individual and team events. Also the ladies fights last 4 minutes, while the men have 5 minutes per match.”

– **Woman athlete, kendo, Netherlands**

“I encounter gender-based discrimination every day. I hear very often that women cannot coach men.”

– **Woman leader, football, Poland**

“Even though I was the coach of the girls’ team, the referees always referred to the male manager.”

– **Woman athlete, football, Italy**

Intersectionality

Women, of course, are not a homogenous group but have many different and intersecting identities based on e.g. race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief.

This can lead to further discrimination or disadvantages in sporting structures, as well affect their access to support. Women all too frequently all grouped together as one group. An intersectional approach to justice and equality that looks at complex forms of discrimination is much needed and future research recommended.

“Women in football are automatically assumed to have little understanding of the game - especially women of colour.”

– **Woman leader, football, United Kingdom**

“[I have experienced different treatment] on my gender and race. White men are not used to seeing a black woman in leadership positions.”

– **Woman leader, football, United Kingdom**

“As a lesbian, I have also been treated contractually in a discriminatory way.”

– **Woman leader, volleyball, Italy**

“I joined a new women’s football club recently, but I was not allowed to play. I was only allowed to train. I think it was because of my hijab, so I left the club.”

– **Woman athlete, football, Germany**

“When I went to a coaching course, some participating men were commenting in Arabic on me being there: What is she doing here with a hijab?”

– **Woman leader, football, Germany**

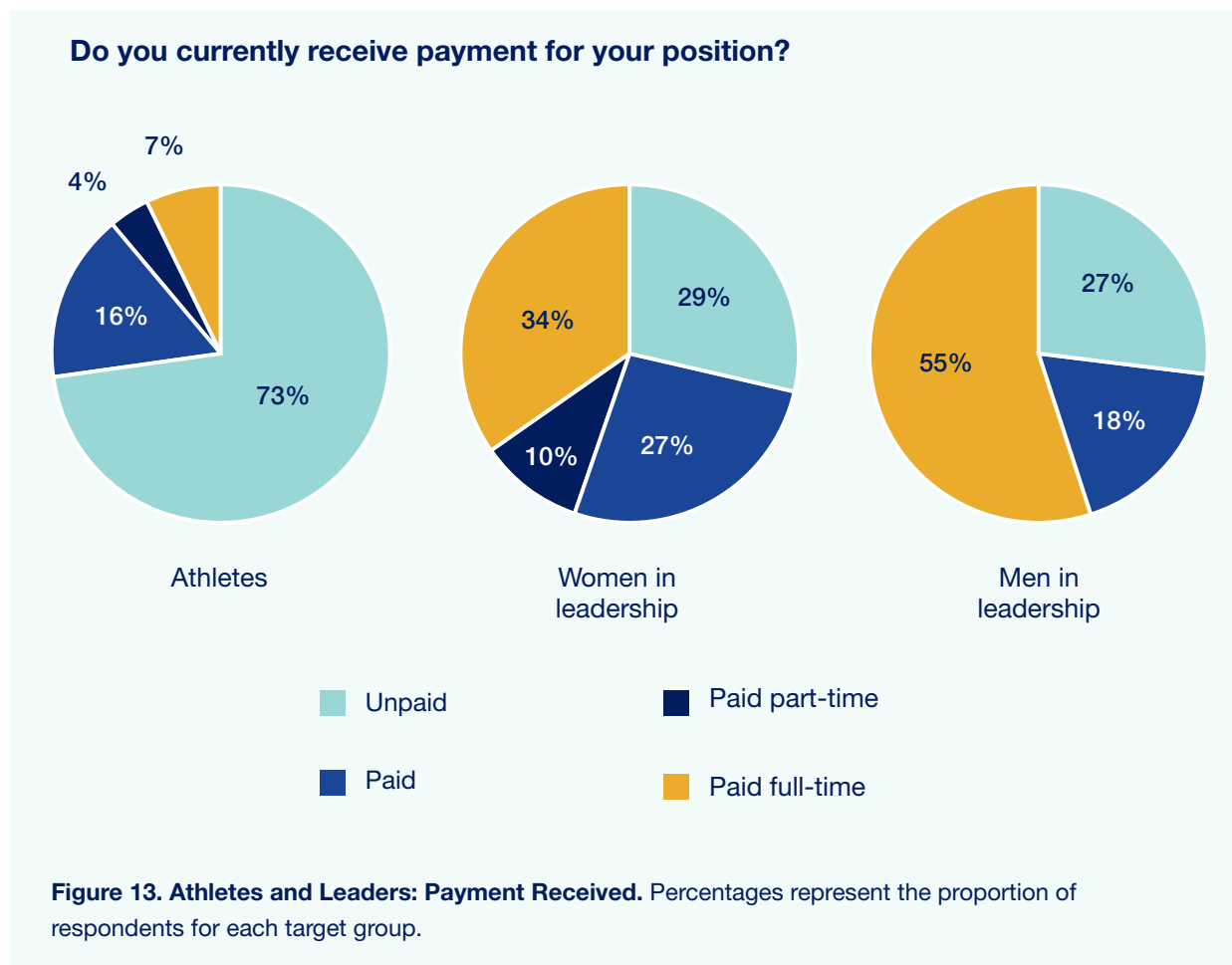
“Because of my trans-identity, I intensively experienced discrimination in sports. I was denied a playing license and got kicked out by sport clubs.”

– **Woman leader, football, Germany**

“I trained as a referee. After one year, I quit, because I did not receive enough support and was not recognised fully by the association. This was in contrast to men in similar situations or to younger women, who were more supported, because they wanted to referee competitively or because people saw “more potential” in them, especially because of their young age.”

– **Woman leader, football, Germany**

3.4 Pay Inequalities Contribute to Women Ending their Careers Early in Sport



“The discrimination of us women in football is something you realise every day. Just think about some of my teammates: In order to come and play the World Cup qualifiers, they had to ask their employer for permission. Some others have part-time jobs, because when you train five or six times a week, like me, you cannot afford a full-time job. Even if you need it, because the reimbursements we receive are not enough to live...”

– **Woman athlete, football, Italy**

“[To be in my leadership position] you need time and you do not get a lot of money. [You receive a] maximum of 200 Euro per month, which you cannot live off. You set priorities and in the end, you do need money.”

– **Woman leader, football, Germany**

In every project country, the remuneration of surveyed athletes is poor and prevents many of them competing to a higher standard. In Germany, it is striking that one athlete only receives expenses and another is paid part-time, although four German athletes compete at national and two at international level. Women leaders surveyed are in a better payment position compared to athletes across Europe, yet higher paid and full-time leadership positions are

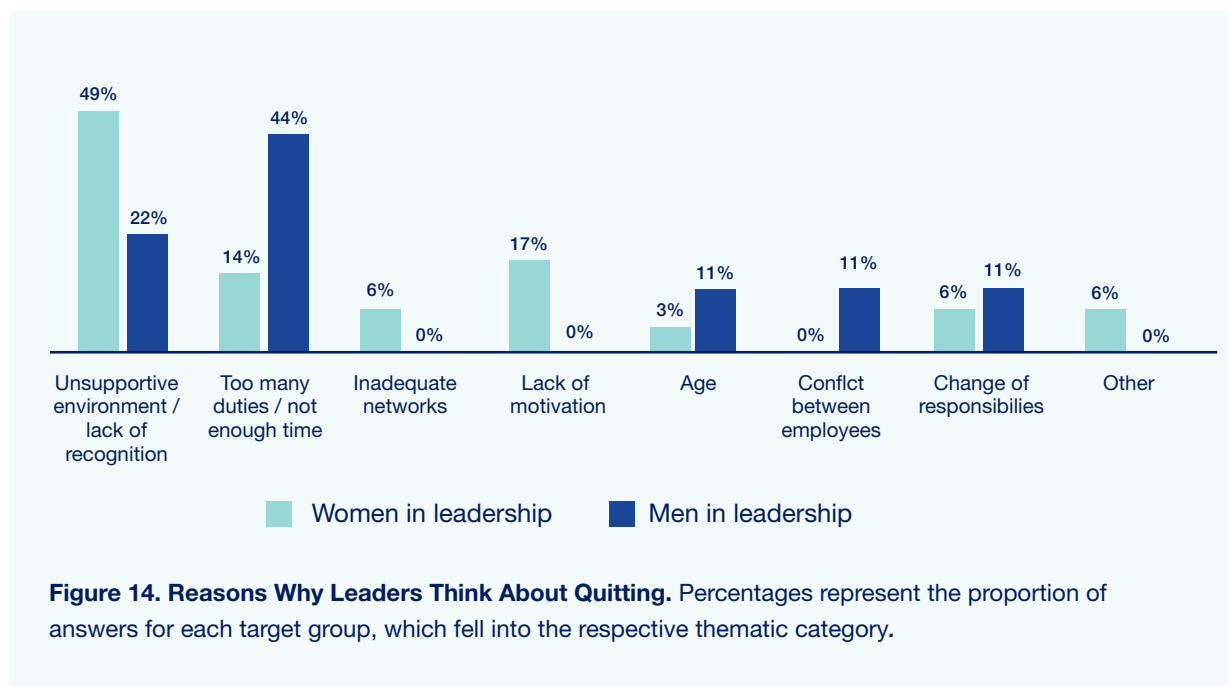
still mostly occupied by men. These results are in line with existing research, such as FIFPro's Global Employment Report (2017)⁹ for football. It found that amongst active women footballers worldwide, 90% consider ending their careers in sport early in order to find a better-paid job or start a family. The survey findings further demonstrate the necessity to recognise women as professional athletes, protect the labour rights of women in sport and grant their right to equal pay for equal work. Sports governing bodies have an opportunity to act proactively on this subject, highlighting the contribution sport can play to gender and pay equality in wider society. For women in sports collective action and labour unions are valuable tools to have a visible and collective voice, which can no longer be ignored.

3.5 One in Two Women in Leadership Positions Thinks About Quitting

Even when women have made it into the respective positions, there is a high risk of them quitting. Half (50%) of women sports leaders stated that they sometimes think about quitting their current activities and 31% of them have previously quit or paused their activities.

“Yes, I sometimes think about quitting due to...

- *...the ignorant alpha culture and racism.”*
– **Woman leader, football, United Kingdom**
- *...demotivation because of the lack of support.”*
– **Woman leader, rugby, Poland**
- *...sometimes [being] tired of fighting.”*
– **Woman leader, football, Germany**





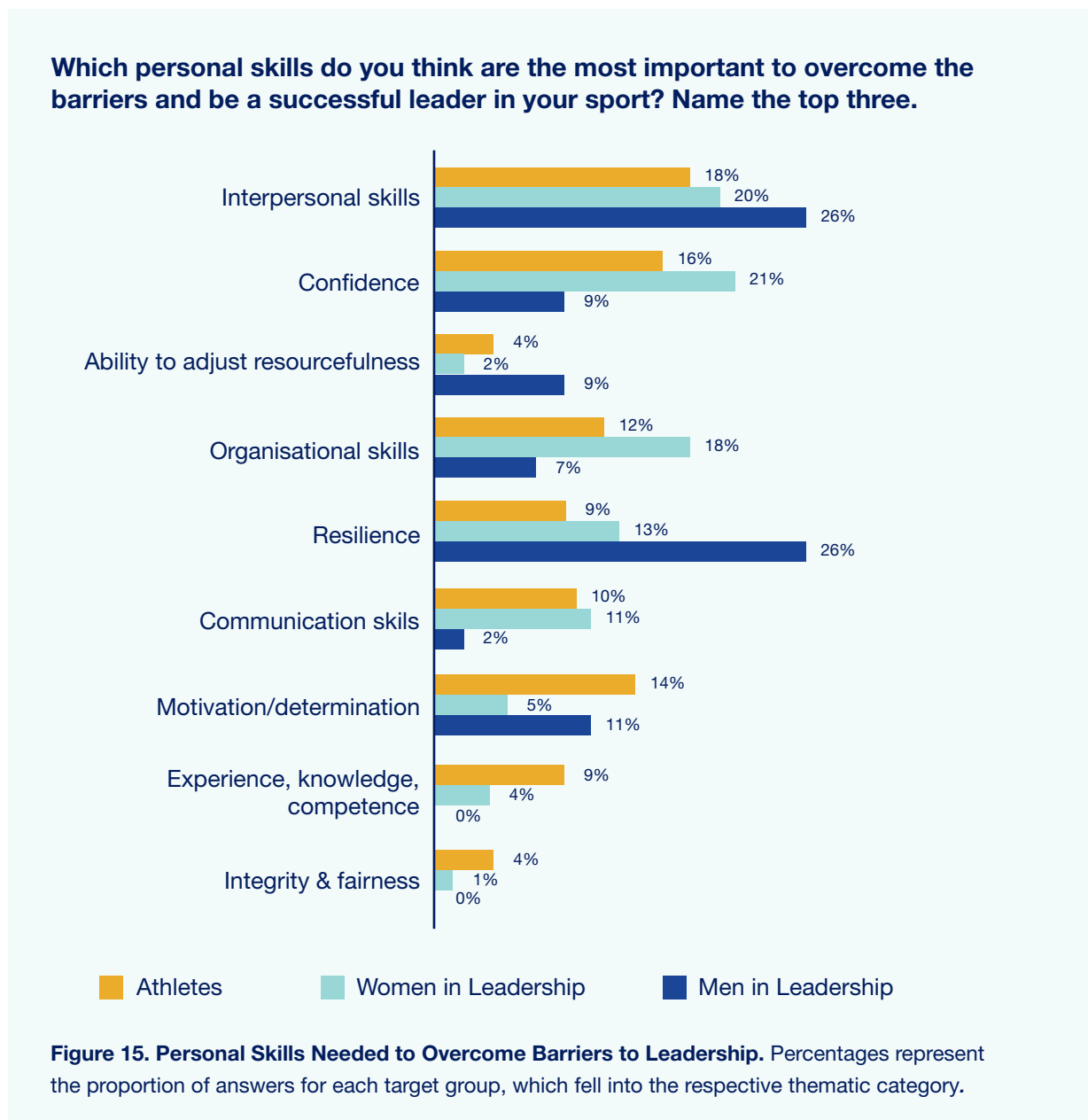
Women in leadership once again indicated the unfavourable professional environment and the lack of respect as reasons, leading to demotivation. Men on the other hand, are most likely to quit their job because of the high workload and time constraints. Some women leaders stated that having more women to rely on as support, would help them in the unsupportive environment.

Our findings suggest that measures aiming to increase the number of women in leadership must first and foremost be targeted at sports institutions. There is a clear lack of structures and skills in place in the workforces to create an appropriate and gender diverse working environment. Thus, it is not surprising that the leadership potential of highly motivated women is not unlocked and that they remain underrepresented. This is amplified by the risk of women quitting their leadership roles, due to an unsupportive environment.

Furthermore, there is an urgent need to support women as athletes and leaders to succeed despite such unsupportive environments, e.g. through trainings, which openly address these issues and strengthen a variety of social skills mentioned in section two. Another strategy could be the promotion of networks for women athletes and leaders in which they could offer and get peer-support to compensate for the unsupportive environment in their organisations. Still, institutionalised support structures in organisations and associations are key to fight these problems, which will become more implicit in section four.

4. Deadline with Gender-Based Discrimination in Sports Leadership

4.1 Strong Interpersonal Skills are Needed to Navigate an Unsupportive Environment



Athletes and leaders perceive interpersonal skills, which include negotiating, influencing as well as dealing with conflicts and criticism, as the most important skills to combat barriers to leadership. For athletes, confidence and motivation/determination are the second and third most useful skills to deal with them, followed by organisational and communication skills. While strengthening these skills will not overcome structural barriers, it will help women to endure unsupportive and discriminatory environments.

In which areas would you like to receive further training to deal with any barriers to leadership in your specific sports situations? Name a top three.

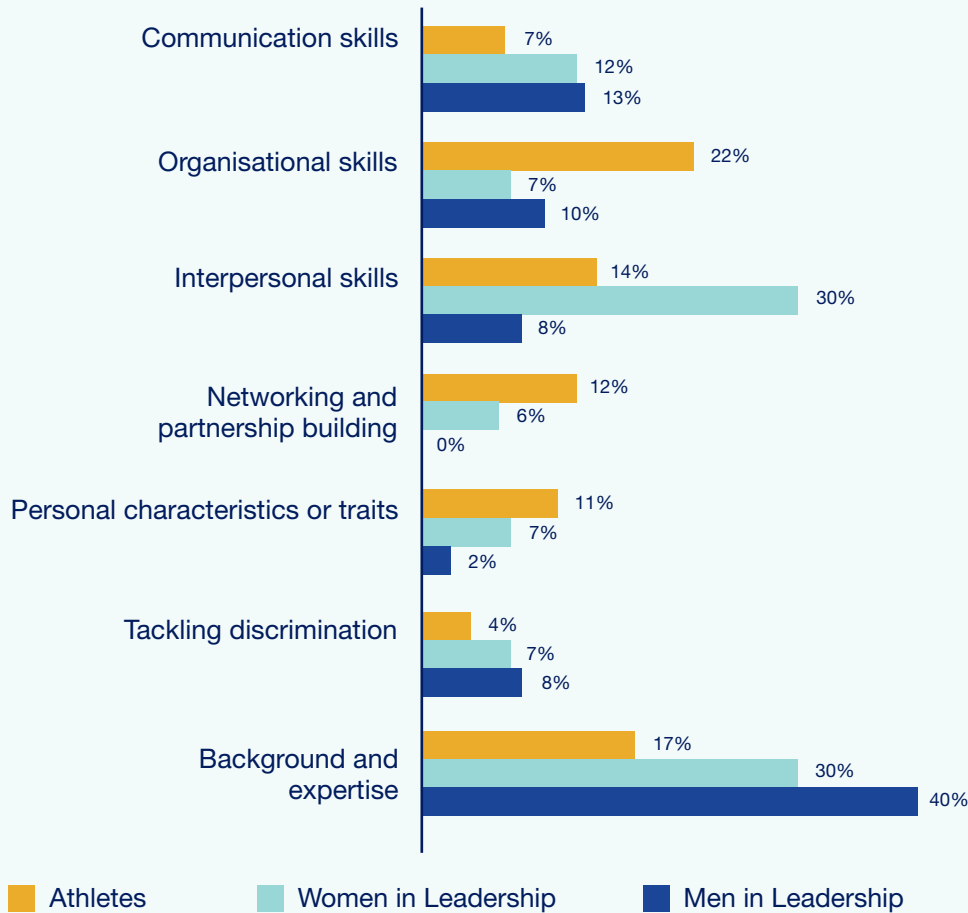


Figure 16. General Training Needs to Overcome Barriers to Leadership. Percentages represent the proportion of answers for each target group, which fell into the respective thematic category.

The majority of survey respondents stated that they would like to receive further training in subject knowledge. Women leaders also clearly indicated a strong desire to improve their interpersonal skills, which are seen as key to overcome the barriers in their positions.

Women in leadership named most frequently management, strategy and organisational development topics as knowledge areas they would like to receive training in. This was followed by fundraising & finance, sports policy and politics, coaching skills, legal and human-rights based information, marketing & PR, information about opportunities, research, physiology, case studies, pedagogy and psychology (in order of prevalence).



POLAND

Although all groups indicate the significance of organisational skills, women indicate more frequently self-confidence and communication skills as important factors. Men stress more frequently the importance of professional qualifications, organisational skills and endurance, signaling at different experiences in their personal careers and paths, in which professional qualifications are the main promise of success.

GERMANY

Participants perceive communication as the most important skill someone in a sports leadership position has to master. A certain degree of assertiveness and resilience is needed by people who want to be successful and stay in their leadership position.

ITALY

There is a strong wish to learn more about content and tools. This is reflection of how few training offers reach women who are interested in leadership positions. In addition, the need to strengthen self-esteem and determination is ranked high. This can help women establish themselves in an environment that is often exclusively male or male-dominated.

SWEDEN

Both athletes and leaders rate the ability to lead and motivate others as essential. Further, interpersonal skills and self-confidence are perceived as the most important skills to overcome barriers, as well as resilience in the face of adversity.



4.2 Create More Support Structures and Make them Known

Only 33.5% of the participants' organisations or groups offer support for women who are athletes and want to become leaders. Mixed gender training is the most common type of support, followed by support groups or networks, and mentoring. Women leaders are also far more likely (20%) to say that their organisation offers training aimed specifically at women, compared to athletes (only 3%). This indicates that sports organisations need to do more to ensure that their athletes know about existing training opportunities for women, which would help them access leadership positions.

SWEDEN

Support available is in line with the European average. Athletes however are more likely to know about support offers aimed at women, suggesting that there is greater awareness. Also among the offers provided, the number of trainings for women and mentoring combined makes up 50% and is comparatively high.

ITALY

Women reported having inadequate access to training and no support to reconcile work, private life and sports.

POLAND

Sports organisations organise mainly training aimed at improving the qualifications of their employees, but they do not offer special leadership training dedicated to women.

GERMANY

More than half of the athletes said that their group or organisation has support available, yet only a small proportion is aimed specifically at women.

4.3 Gender-Based Discrimination (GBD) Commonly Goes Unreported

The lack of support for women in sport becomes even more evident, when we study participants' experiences of gender-based discrimination and reporting it.

Have you ever reported discrimination based on gender during your activities in sport (personal or witnessed experience)?

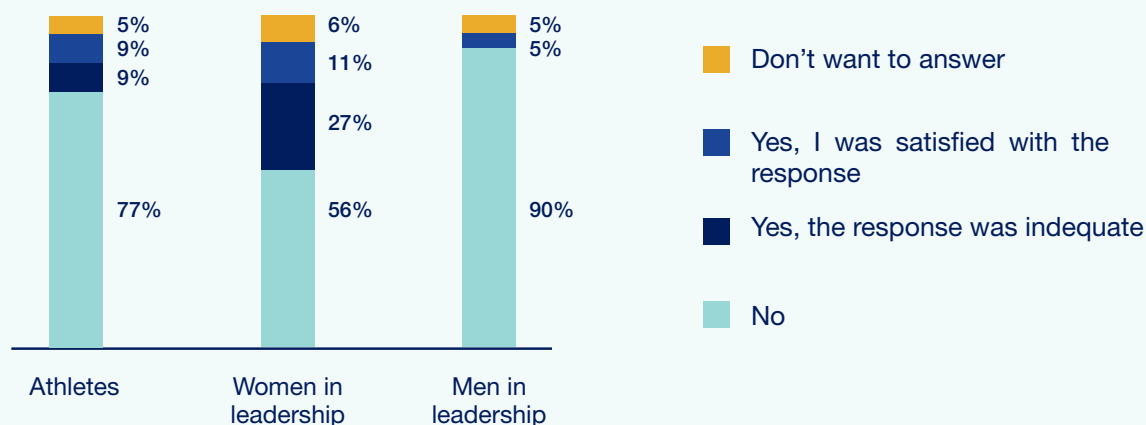


Figure 17. Reporting of Gender-Based Discrimination. Percentages represent the proportion of respondents for each target group.

Even though between 43% and 58% of surveyed athletes and leaders have experienced or witnessed acts of gender based discrimination towards women in the last year alone, only 28% of leaders and 18% of athletes have ever reported it.

SWEDEN

Although 75% of the Swedish athletes experienced differential treatment based on their gender and 88% have witnessed different treatment of women, not a single person has experience of reporting it. Similarly, 50% of the leaders experienced and 75% witnessed different treatment and only 8% reported cases.

This indicates that there are significant barriers to reporting. But the numbers could also be connected to a bigger picture. The majority of Swedish athletes and leaders say that men have more opportunities than women.

However, there is also a large proportion who believes that opportunities are the same, despite experiencing gender-based discrimination themselves. This is reflected by the following statement: "Just as often men are also treated differently" (woman leader, ice hockey, Sweden). This suggests that women can also be hesitant to see and/or acknowledge structural discrimination.

ITALY

Even though 35% of athletes witnessed and 43% experienced gender based discrimination in the last year, 76% have never reported it. Athletes are in a power-imbalance and might fear repercussions for reporting incidents of discrimination, e.g. being excluded from sports activities or further discrimination.

The experiences of athletes differs from leaders, who are not only more likely to have been subjected to or experience discrimination, but also more likely to report it. Only 17% have never reported discrimination, whilst 83% have witnessed and 67% have experienced different treatment because of their gender.

4.4 Existing GBD Mechanisms Lack Visibility

Only 47% of the leaders and 36% of the athletes surveyed could name a national or local institution that safeguards equal opportunities in sport. Thus, one reason why acts of gender-based discrimination go unreported is the lack of knowledge about where to submit a complaint. Among the leaders, there is a large gender difference: 77% of men could name an organisation compared to only 35% of women.

POLAND

Knowledge of reporting mechanisms is very poor: 81% of athletes, 62% of women and 58% of men in leadership positions could not name institutions that safeguards gender equality in sports.

The most frequently cited institutions that safeguard gender equality were national sports governing bodies and non-governmental organisations. However, many examples cited by respondents indicate that they only have superficial knowledge in this respect, since many of the institutions named are not significantly engaged in the equalisation of opportunities in sport.

4.5 More Research on Effective Reporting Mechanisms for Discrimination

“My coach said, let it be. I think she could have done more. She only said, let it be, the tournament is over now anyway. Someone should have spoken to the person and he should have apologised. I would wish that the [opponent’s] coach has to think about his actions after the incident, about how he was discriminating. It doesn’t change much for the person who experienced the discrimination, but he should know that he discriminated someone.”

— **Woman athlete, football, Germany**

Out of those participants that reported gender-based discrimination, the majority was unsatisfied with the response. One reason for this could be that the people they trusted want to avoid escalating a conflict or do not take the complaint seriously.

GERMANY

The number of women in leadership positions who reported discrimination, but were unsatisfied with the response is high at 38%, compared to the European average of 27%

“[The organisations] all say that they have these plans [to safeguard equal opportunities in sport], but actually taking action...”

— **Non-binary athlete, swimming/fitness, Netherlands**

Our data suggests that expectation of no meaningful action following a complaint might be another reason for the lack of reporting. There is a need for more accessible knowledge about reporting mechanisms, more options for reporting, as well as an improvement of the existing options, since satisfaction with the process and outcomes is so low. We therefore recommend further research into what constitutes an effective, trusted and meaningful reporting mechanism and response for gender-based discrimination in sport.

5. How to Structure Effective Training Programmes for Women in Leadership

“It would be great to have a mentoring programme for different women in sport leadership positions to get the chance to just experience another women’s leadership style, how they approach their duties, how they communicate. It would just be a really good thing!”

— **Woman leader, football, Germany**

Training Content

About which topics / contents would you like to have more knowledge to become a successful and satisfied leader in your sport?

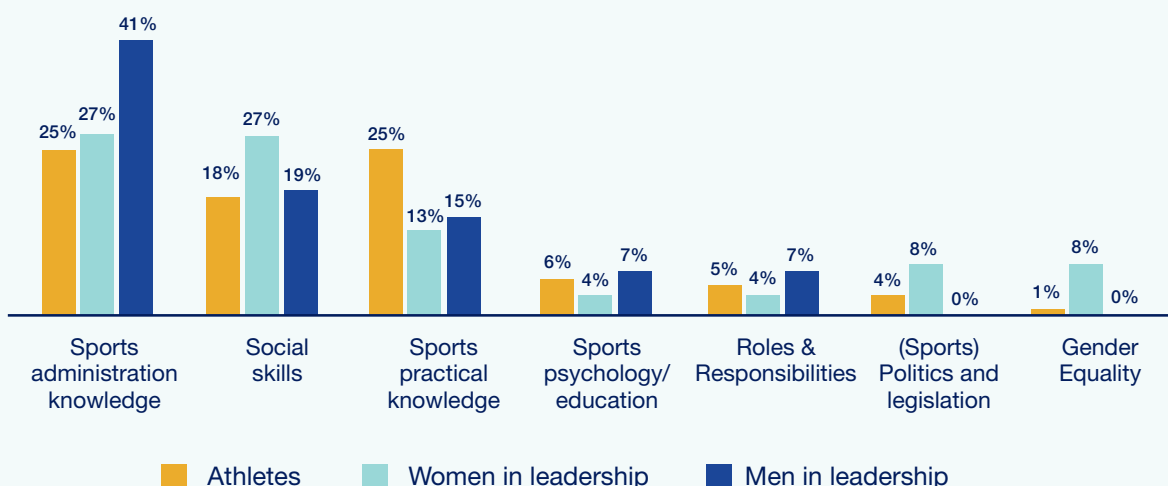
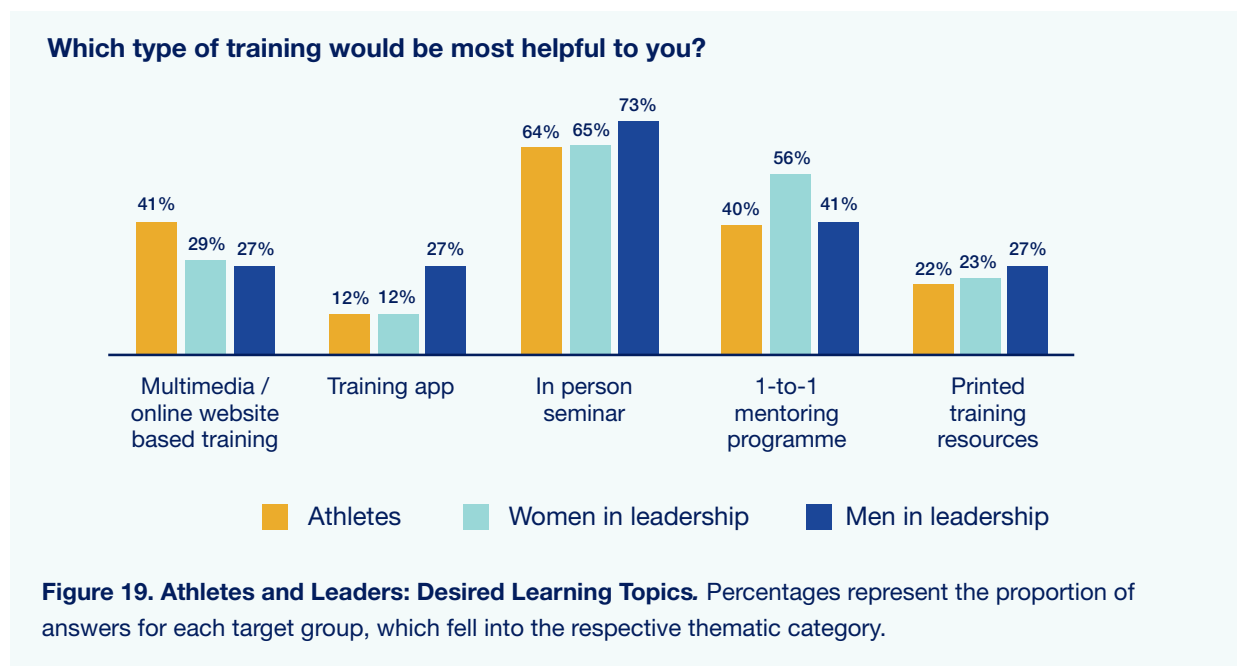


Figure 18. Athletes and Leaders: Desired Learning Topics. Percentages represent the proportion of answers for each target group, which fell into the respective thematic category.



- Trainings must consider the different roles leaders have to fulfil in their work
- Trainings should focus on social skills and subject knowledge since they are considered most important to succeed in a leadership position
- Trainings must address the problem of unsupportive environments openly and support women athletes and leaders to succeed in such an environment without carrying on the myth that the women themselves are the problem
- Trainings must not only be targeted at women athletes and leaders, but also at their environment, in particular at people in decision-making positions with a potential to change structures and influence environments

Suitable Training Formats



If you were to attend a seminar in person, which of these would help you attend?

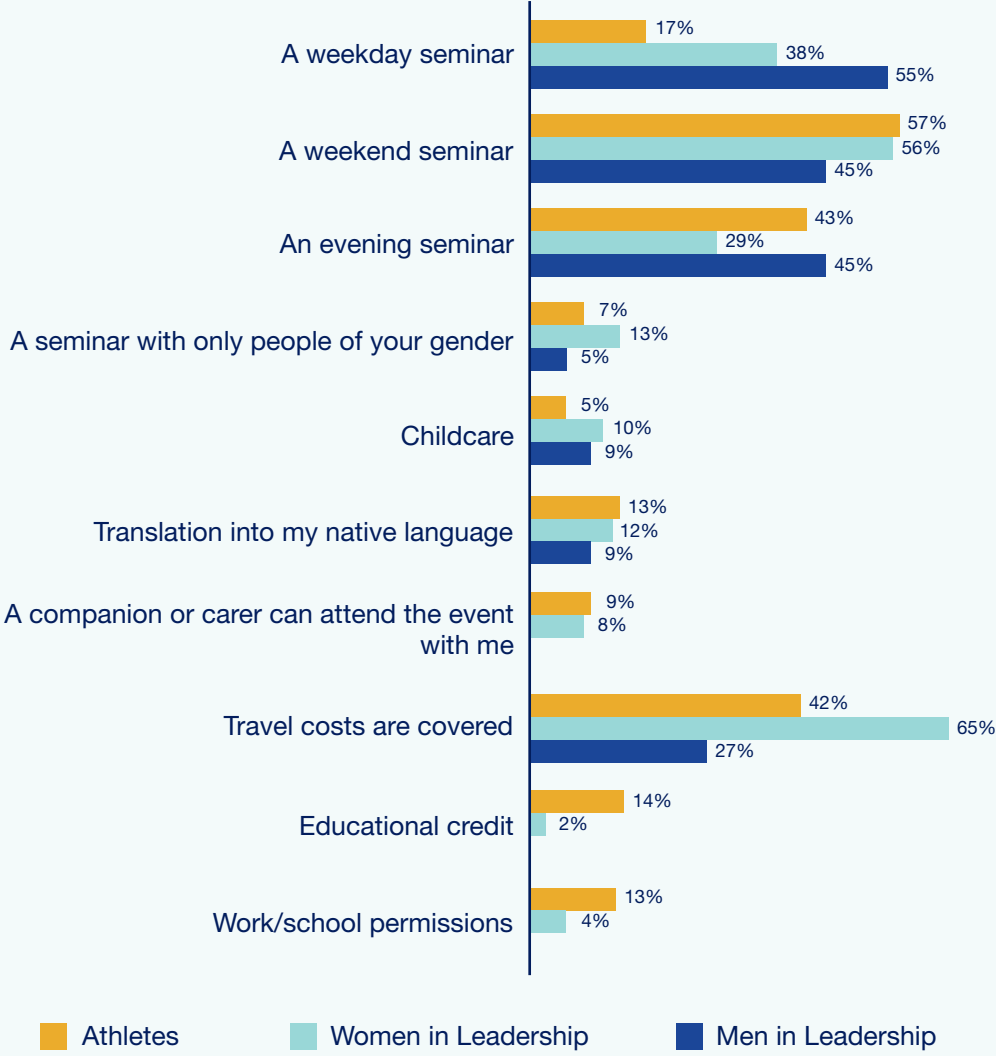


Figure 20. Athletes and Leaders: Suitable Training Formats 1. Percentages represent the proportion of respondents for each target group. Educational Credit and Work/School Permission were only options in the Italian survey.

Changes Needed in the Sports Environment

What would have to change in your club / association for women to fulfil their potential as leaders?

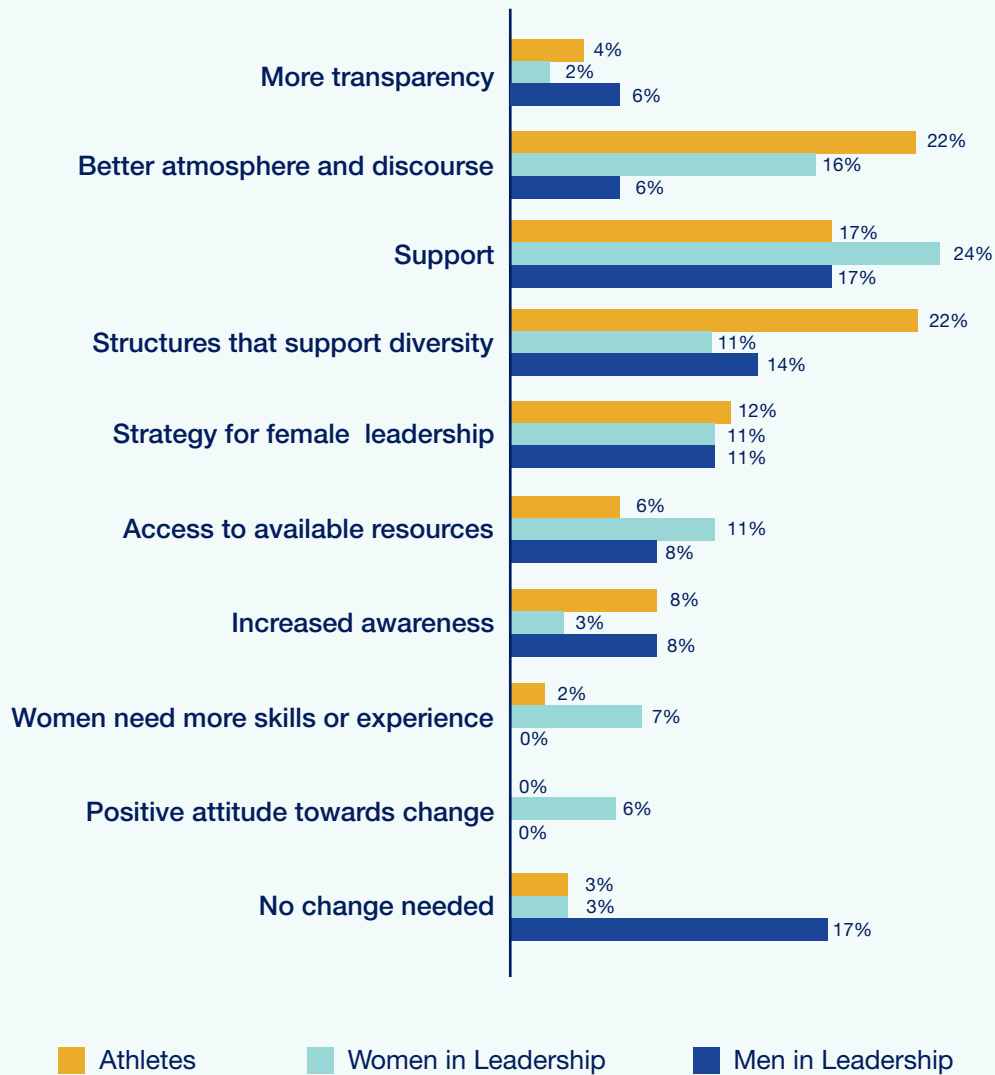


Figure 21. Changes needed in sports environments for women to be successful leaders. Percentages represent the proportion of respondents for each target group.

Conclusion

The myth that women - not their environment - are the problem seems to live on, manifested in a sports landscape that seems incapable of not being obstructive, and even further from actively promoting and supporting women for leadership. These rather catastrophic findings relating to support structures indicate that either there is little or no awareness at present of the structural barriers that women athletes and leaders face in sport, or that the people in positions of responsibility lack the will to change systems and structures.

To demand a proactively supportive environment for women leaders is not only a moral issue, based on the rights of women themselves - though this should be reason enough. The implications for women being excluded from sports and its decision-making processes are far reaching. As role models, they play a huge role in inspiring other women and girls in taking up sport. They can ensure that women's voices and perspectives are heard and rights protected, as well as becoming confidantes for younger women athletes.

Sport is also a highly visible and powerful social institution that can influence the wider drive for gender equality in society. Women in sports leadership learn transferable skills that equip them to become leaders in all areas of community life. Sports organisations and institutions, which take gender equality serious and commit to progressive actions, have the opportunity to demonstrate their added value for society, become better performing organisations, increase human resources and profit from economic growth.



Recommended Actions

Stop wasting the potential of highly confident and motivated women for leadership in sport by:

Policies and Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supporting policies for gender equality in sport clubs and organisations• Holding sports organisations more responsible for supporting women athletes and leaders in order to have more women in leadership positions• Incentivize the presence of women on management boards
Training and Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introducing (more) training courses for women only• Conducting diversity trainings for people in charge of sports clubs and organisations• Implementing training courses to provide people in charge with knowledge about possible strategies for reducing barriers for women leaders and athletes• Developing joint training courses for women already in leadership roles and women athletes, in order to foster empowerment, strengthen personal skills and provide them with knowledge about networks and peer solidarity
Gender-Based Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Installing more efficient mechanisms to report gender-based discrimination• Spreading knowledge on how to report gender-based discrimination and how to get support
Networks and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating more exchange and network opportunities between women in sports leadership positions, in order to encourage solidarity amongst women through peer support
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conducting more research on structural and gender-based discrimination from an intersectional perspective• More research on what constitutes an effective, trusted and meaningful reporting mechanism and response for gender-based discrimination in sport.

Find out more

You can find out more information on the report, references and tools used here:
www.girlsinsport.se/step-up-equality.

 @step up equality

 @stepupequality #stepupequality

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