

Breaking Barriers: Gender Equality in European Sports Leadership

A comparative case study of Ireland and Germany

by

Pauline Jost

2607840

p.jost@student.utwente.nl

503312

pjost@uni-muenster.de

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Supervisors:

Harry de Boer, Dr.

Oliver Treib, Dr.

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Abstract

Despite increasing gender equality between men and women in sports participation, women still face obstacles in most areas of the sports sector. Such a lack of gender equality can be found in sports leadership. In the EU only two of the member states have achieved gender equal sports leadership in 2024 and the degree of gender equality in national sports leadership varies greatly among the countries. Sports leadership scholars identify multiple causes for the persisting inequalities in sports board rooms, one of which is examined in this thesis. Guided by the general research question “how can the varying levels of female representation in sports leadership among EU member states be explained, and how can countries with less gender balance in this area learn from those that are leading the way?” the following paper seeks to determine whether the differences in gender equality in EU-27 member states can be explained by varying policy programs using the cases of Ireland and Germany. A mixed method research design is employed to answer these questions. The results show that the variations in implemented policy programs are not sufficient to explaining why Ireland has gender balanced boards, while Germany does not.

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1 Introduction

Despite increasing gender equality between men and women in sports participation, women still face obstacles in most areas of the sports sector (Moawad, 2019). These areas include for instance resource allocation such as salary or equipment, visibility of women's sport, or training of female match officials and coaches (European Commission, 2022; International Olympic Committee, 2021). Another example is the lack of gender equality in leadership positions of sports organizations, especially considering that women are increasingly participating in all kinds of sports but are not adequately represented at decision-making level (Adriaanse, 2017; Mikkonen, 2023). In fact, the sports sector significantly lags behind most other areas of society when it comes to gender balance in decision-making bodies (Adriaanse, 2017; Knoppers, Spaaij, & Claringbould, 2021).

In 2016, less than 20% of sports leadership positions worldwide were occupied by women. Only a little over 10% occupy board chairs and a little more than 15% are placed as chief executive, the most influential position in an organization (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016). Furthermore, in 2017 several international federations that represent sports with high levels of female participation had no women on any executive committee whatsoever. This included for instance the International Association of Athletics Federation, the International Handball Federation, and the International Swimming Federation (Leberman & Burton, 2017). The gender composition of decision-making bodies of the National Olympic Committees (NOC) paints a similar picture. Only 27 out of 135 NOCs had a share of 20% or higher of female representatives in leadership positions in 2016. Moreover, 33 out of 35 international sports federations associated with the Olympic movement were run by men with the number of female presidents lying at less than 6% and only 12.2% female vice presidents (Leberman & Burton, 2017). Additionally, on the executive board of the International Paralympic Committee only 3 seats are occupied by women, compared to 11 men (Yellow Window, 2016)(Adriaanse, 2017). Europe has the lowest number of women on its NOC executive boards compared to other continents, and within its National Sports Federations (NSF) women make up only 14% of decision-making positions (Yellow Window, 2016). In general, women make up less than 25% of influential positions such as board members for executive bodies or General Director, and less than 10% of presidents or vice-presidents of continental confederations of Olympic sports (Yellow Window, 2016). A report published in 2017 by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) shows that in 2015, only one of the EU member states, Sweden with 43% , was able to meet the 40% target outlined in the Proposal for Strategic Action 2014-2020 issued by the European Commission. The EU average of female representation in sport decision making positions was 14%, the lowest share of women in leadership positions was found in Poland with 3% (European Institute for gender Equality, 2017).

There are several arguments as to why sports organizations and federations should ensure gender equality in their leadership positions. Most of them are based on ethical and democratic principles. These arguments essentially entail the logic that the number of female participants in a sport, regardless of the level, should have percental representation in decision-making positions. These arguments assume that women understand the needs of female athletes better because they have been in similar positions and are therefore able to better represent their needs as stakeholders (Adriaanse, 2017; Mikkonen, 2023). This means that the existing gender imbalance in sports leadership impacts multiple stakeholders, first and foremost female athletes, club members, coaches and officials, and fans. Since in sports governance important decisions are made regarding policies, strategies, and rules of the respective sport, the underrepresentation of female participants leads to their unique experiences and needs being overlooked (Knoppers et al., 2021). This can have severe consequences for women and girls in the sports industry as they are less likely to be protected from gender-based violence or suffer from economic disadvantages (European Commission, 2022). Apart from gender inequality in

leadership positions being an ethical and democratic issue, the benefits of gender diverse leadership can furthermore be argued from a business perspective. More gender diversity leads to an increased pool of talent which means there is a larger variety of perspectives, skills, and experiences to choose from. This is most likely to increase the organizations efficiency and therefore its performance overall (Adriaanse, 2017; Leberman & Burton, 2017; Mikkonen, 2023). Additionally, a greater variety of perspectives and backgrounds leads to increased problem solving ability and adaptability, which is beneficial for organizational performance, especially in the 21st century (Leberman & Burton, 2017). Furthermore, studies have shown that women tend to use a more critical approach by questioning many decisions which leads to more independent boards. Moreover, they have shown to go beyond financial performance concerns and focus on things like stakeholder satisfaction and social responsibility which enhances the entire organizational performance (Adriaanse, 2017; Burton & Leberman, 2017).

Based on this outline of the issue of gender inequality in sports leadership, this thesis is guided by a two-part research question. The first part focusses on possible explanations for differences in the representation of women in the composition of sports associations at the national level. The second part focusses on possible solutions to improve the balance in leadership positions in sports associations. In other words, it is about what can be learned from countries that “perform well”. The central research question is therefore:

RQ1: How can the varying levels of female representation in sports leadership among EU member states be explained?

RQ2: And what can countries with less gender balance in this area learn from those that are leading the way?

This research question is both politically and scientifically relevant. On the one hand it addresses the broader issue of gender equality and women’s empowerment, which also constitutes the fifth sustainable development goal as formulated by the United Nations. Understanding the factors that contribute to the disparity between men and women in leadership can help inform actions aimed at promoting gender diversity and equality. On the other hand, this research provides an opportunity to analyze socio-cultural structures that facilitate unequal representation of men and women in leadership, shedding light on the barriers and challenges to be overcome. Therefore, by answering this question this research contributes to the scientific literature on gender and leadership in sports and provides practical knowledge for future initiatives and policies in this matter. Thus, contributing to the advancement of gender equality and diversity in sports on a global scale. Furthermore, this thesis adds to the scientific literature on comparative public policy, gender policies, and policy transfer.

Multiple sub questions have been formulated to answer the research question guiding this thesis. For the first part, the first sub question to be answered concerns the dependent variable that is whether there is a gender imbalance. Therefore, the following question was formulated:

SQ1: What does the gender balance in the decision-making bodies of national sports federations in the EU-27 countries look like?

As the results from this first sub question show, the gender balance of sports leadership positions varies substantially between Member States of the EU. The second sub question explore what factors account for this variety in gender balance across the EU. It is formulated as follows:

SQ2: What possible explanations for the variety of female representation in sport leadership positions in the EU-27 countries can be found?

The interest of this research is mainly in one such possible explanatory factor, namely policies. The assumption is that national policies may differ with regard to ensuring gender balance in sports leadership and the effect should be visible in the composition the executive committees of national sports federations. Hence the third sub question reads:

SQ3: Do countries with more gender equality in their sports federations have different policies implemented compared to countries with less gender balanced boards?

As for the structure of this thesis, the following section describes the current state of literature on possible explanations as to why gender imbalances may occur in sports leadership. A special focus will be put on existing gender policies as an explanatory factor. It will furthermore give insights into the field of sport policy making and comparative public policy which will serve as a framework for comparing different European countries. The methodology section will outline the methods applied to answer the above-mentioned research and sub questions as well as argue the case selection and concepts applied. After presenting the results of this mixed methods analysis the main findings will be discussed and contextualized against the existing body of literature. The thesis will be concluded by stating remarks on limitations of this thesis as well as possible directions for further research.

2 Literature Review

Over the past decade, extensive research has been conducted on the underlying causes of this gender imbalance in decision-making positions of sports organizations (Burton, 2014; Evan & Pfister, 2021; Mikkonen, 2023). For the most part scholars agree that these causes can be found on multiple levels, that is macro-, meso-, and micro-level. Additionally, these factors are all interconnected and reinforced by one another which makes the issue particularly wicked (Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019).

2.1 Macro-Level Factors

A macro-level approach to exploring possible causes for the existing underrepresentation of women in sports leadership positions focusses on the sport sector level as a whole (Adriaanse, 2017; Burton, 2014; Evan & Pfister, 2021; Mikkonen, 2023). From this perspective, sport is considered to be reflecting norms and values existing in wider society which connect gender imbalance in sports leadership to socio-cultural forces and practices that exist in the majority of society (Burton, 2014; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Mikkonen, 2023; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019).

2.1.1 Societal Norms and Values

Scholars who focus on macro-level factors found sport in general to be a gendered institution (Adriaanse, 2017; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). This means that the sport sector as a whole is considered to be masculine, and leadership traits in particular are connected to “traditional” masculine characteristics (Burton, 2014; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Evan & Pfister, 2021; Mikkonen, 2023). This resulted in the institutionalization of a masculine culture within sports with favored treatment of male activity that can be found in the majority of sports organizations (Adriaanse, 2017; Burton & Leberman, 2017). Pape (2019) and Mikkonen (2023) argue that sport is even an extreme case of such a gendered institution due to the differentiation between men and women on the sporting field. While such a differentiation makes sense when it comes to the physical aspect of sports, due to apparent biological differences, it was conferred to other areas of the sport sector including leadership and decision-making (Mikkonen, 2023; Pape, 2019). This led to the establishment of a so-called “hegemonic masculinity” as the norm and a desirable trait in the sports sector overall. Women and other people who do not fit into this ideal type are automatically met with resistance and generally considered as “other” (Mikkonen, 2023).

These institutionalized gendered norms pose severe consequences for everyone who does not conform to the ideal (masculine) type, especially women. With regards to sports leadership their abilities to perform as a leader is often called into question and further influences who is perceived to be an appropriate candidate for particular tasks (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). The resulting skewed gender ratio reinforces masculinity as the norm in sports leadership positions. Additionally, Burton and Leberman (2017) found a shared assumption within the sports sector that there is no need for change as it is generally assumed to be gender neutral. Naturally, this enhances male dominance in leadership positions further.

2.1.2 Policies

Another factor that influences gender equity in sports leadership are implemented policies in the sports sector. According to Sotiriadou and de Haan (2019) policies, which also include rules and/or instruments and strategies, are on the one hand channels through which the existing inequalities are institutionalized. On the other hand, they can be designed to challenge these inequalities for instance via allocating funding, implementing gender quotas, or offering leadership coaching. Furthermore, policies regarding leadership in sports implicitly reflect whether the issue of gender inequality has been recognized and is taken seriously by the actors involved (Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). In other words, if there are no policies in place designed to ensure an equal representation of women and men in leadership because policy makers do not recognize the severity of the problem, the existing

gendered culture of the sports sector is less likely to be changed. Equally, gender equity policies have the potential to ensure a critical mass of both male and female leaders in board rooms which challenges the organizational culture and can influence individual behavior which can ultimately change the gendered subculture of the sport sector (Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). This also shows the interconnectedness of macro- (policies), meso- (organizational culture), and micro-level (individual behavior) factors. The latter two will be further outlined in the following sections.

2.2 Meso-Level Factors

Other scholars have used a meso-level perspective to explore causes for gender imbalance in sports leadership positions, which means they focus on organizational level. They examine processes, structures, policies, and governance within the organization to understand how underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions is created and maintained (Adriaanse, 2017; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019).

2.2.1 Stereotyping

Through stereotyping for instance, the type of person who is deemed most suitable for a leadership position is associated with male or masculine characteristics. While this stereotype is created outside of the organization (see macro-level perspective), it is nevertheless passed on for generations within, creating certain belief systems and role allocations that are hard to disrupt (Burton, 2014; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Evan & Pfister, 2021; Mikkonen, 2023). Such institutionalized role allocations, meaning what is considered to be typical male or typical female, leads to for instance assumptions about family responsibilities. According to such a stereotype, women are not as suitable for leadership positions as these often come with major commitments such as traveling. Since women are sooner or later going to start a family and need to stay home with the kids they will eventually not be able to fulfil such duties. These two stereotypes, that a) women will eventually start a family and b) they will be the ones who are staying home is exclusively considered a women's problem giving them a disadvantage compared to their male contestants (Evan & Pfister, 2021; Mikkonen, 2023). Similarly, these stereotypes inherent in the organizational belief system influence how women are expected to behave, that is according to "typical feminine traits". Since the stereotypical leader however is assumed to assert certain "masculine" characteristics, women are expected to possess such characteristics for them to be considered a suitable candidate for a leadership position. This is of course a big stretch for most women and even if they are able to perform it, they are very likely to be unfavorably evaluated because they are no longer conforming to their assumed gender role of being feminine (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Mikkonen, 2023).

2.2.2 Organizational Culture

As mentioned before these stereotypes are supported and recreated through an organizational culture, that is a "pattern of shared assumptions" (Mikkonen, 2023, p. 1008) which leads to the institutionalization of such gendered norms and values (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Evan & Pfister, 2021). Additionally, an organizational culture that is based on the notion of hegemonic masculinity, as is the case in most sports organizations, can have a significant impact on the perception of policies that seek to establish gender equity within the organization. Furthermore, it can lead to certain views and opinions to be reproduced over generations which often results in the employment of distancing practices by leaders who refuse to consider that institutionalized practices could be the reason for gender imbalance in leadership positions (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Evan & Pfister, 2021; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019).

2.2.3 Access and Treatment Discrimination

Gender imbalance in sports leadership positions can also be rooted in procedures at organizational level. One such procedure would be for instance the selection process of successors. In that regard most sports organizations function based on a snowball principle, where current decision-makers, who are predominantly men, choose their successor themselves and the selection process being not more than a formality. Here, they tend to choose people who are similar to them in appearance, character, or background (Evan & Pfister, 2021). Some scholars call this phenomenon access discrimination as certain groups of people, here women, are prevented from gaining access to certain positions within the organization as well as the ability to exercise influence (Burton & Leberman, 2017). Additionally, within sports organizations informal networks have major impacts on individual careers which benefits those who are part of the “the old boys network” (Burton & Leberman, 2017).

Another factor that has an impact on gender imbalance in decision-making positions at organizational level is that of treatment discrimination. Certain groups, here again women, are prevented from accessing the same amount of resources or rewards provided by the organization or less than they would deserve (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Mikkonen, 2023).

2.3 Micro-Level Factors

From a micro-level perspective, scholars focus on factors that influence individual’s behaviors within the sports context with regards to how they react to certain experiences and expectations, and how they understand operational procedures and policies at organizational level (Adriaanse, 2017; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019).

The afore mentioned institutionalized role allocations and associations of leadership with masculinity and subordinate role with femininity at macro- and meso-level impacts individuals’ behavior as they might identify with such gendered practices. In other words, women might refrain from or not even consider gaining managerial experience or other skills (human capital) that would qualify them for leadership positions because they think they are not suited to be a leader anyways (Adriaanse, 2017; Mikkonen, 2023). Burton (2014) calls this “self-limiting behavior”. Additionally, some women might also refrain from trying out for managerial positions because they are aware of these obstacles they are going to face and would rather not waste their time and resources (Evan & Pfister, 2021).

Furthermore, scholars who focus on factors that could cause gender imbalance in sports leadership positions have found that women generally profit less from networks and relationships (social capital) or have a harder time building enough social capital in the first place (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Evan & Pfister, 2021; Mikkonen, 2023). This difference in returns of social relations is decisive especially in the sport context as in this sector a well-connected social network has a big impact on the individual’s career. The fact that women generally profit less from such connections than men can again reduce the individuals motivation to even try and to advance within the organization (Burton & Leberman, 2017).

2.4 Sport Policy-Making

As already indicated, this study will focus on the difference in implemented policies as a possible explanation for the differences in gender balance between the EU-27 countries. Therefore, this following section will give an overview of the sport policy-making process in the EU, describing who is involved and what strategies and instruments are commonly used.

Firstly, it must be mentioned however that defining the scope of sport policy is rather difficult. Since sport in itself is frequently used as a solution to wicked problems in other policy areas, such as health or social integration, it is difficult to define where sport policy related issues begin (Hoekman & Scheerder, 2021). Secondly, according to Hoekmann and Scheerder (2021), there is still relatively

little scientific knowledge about sport policy making and its impact which renders the question of how successful sport policies are in addressing certain issues. Another issue that is raised by the authors with regard to sport policy making is the general assumption of an inherent “goodness” of sport, precisely because it was applied as a solution to so many other issues. This, however, deflects from uncovering precisely these sport related issues that sport policies should address (Hoekman & Scheerder, 2021).

2.4.1 Sport Policy-Making in the EU

Previous to the Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in 2009, the EU had no policy-making competencies in the policy area of sport. However, it indirectly influenced the field via policies and funding programs in related policy areas, such as health, education, or social inclusion (Halleux, 2015). The Lisbon Treaty provided a legal basis for the EU to become involved in sport policy-making, transferring a mandate to develop and implement an EU sport policy, allocating a specific budget, and work on cooperations with international bodies. EU action in sport policy-making is broadly divided into three categories: the societal role of sport, its economic dimension, and the organization of sport (Halleux, 2015). The competencies transferred with the Lisbon Treaty were supporting ones, meaning that the EU has no legislative power in sport policy making and is only allowed to take incentive measures and provide recommendations. In other words, it is allowed to support, coordinate, or complement policy measures implemented by the Member States in the area of sport. It furthermore needs to take the “specific nature” of sport into account, that is recognize that traditionally the sport governing bodies are in charge of the organization of their respective sports (Halleux, 2015).

For this reason, the EU can only use “soft” policy making tools such as structured dialogue, cooperation, funding, and information provision via studies, consultations, and events. For instance, to incentivize a cooperation at EU-level, meaning cooperation with and between the Member States, the EU provides three-year Working Plans on Sport for its Member States, the Council, and the Commission. These plans serve as a framework for coordination and are supposed to foster EU-wide convergence and unity between sport policy-related actions implemented in the Member States (Halleux, 2015). Issues related to gender equality are worked out by an expert group for good governance in sport. Furthermore, the EU financially supports projects and networks via the Erasmus+ program to help reach its policy goals. Overall, funding is one of the most important policy tools the EU can make use of in the sport policy field (Halleux, 2015).

2.4.2 Sport Policy-Making in the Member States

Not only was there increased involvement of the EU in sport policy-making, the national governments of its Member States have increasingly become involved in this field with the beginning of the 21st century. Reasons why governments have become involved in sport policy-making are manifold and include increased national pride, identity, and a certain feel-good factor as well as increased health, unburdened health care systems, and integration and social inclusion (Hallmann & Petry, 2013; Ouyang, Lee, & Ko, 2023). This shows that governments are not only interested in the development of elite sport but also in sport for all. In their comparative study of 23 European and non-European countries Hallmann and Petry (2013) found that there are multiple similarities but also differences in the sports systems and hence sport policy-making processes across Europe. Similarities include the fact that sport policymaking is usually divided and/or coordinated by a government body on the one side and a non-governmental body on the other. Here, the type of governmental body responsible differs from country to country depending on the existing political system. The non-governmental body responsible is usually an umbrella organization representing multiple national sports federations. These sports federations in turn represent the sports clubs of their respective sports at the national level. In Europe, these sports clubs are traditionally main local providers for sport. In some cases, the

non-governmental body involved in sport policy-making is joint with the National Olympic Committee (Hallmann & Petry, 2013).

As for the topics of sport policy-making in the Member States Hallmann and Petry (2013) found that it is generally differed between “sport for all” which includes issue areas such as development, infrastructure provision, and inclusion of persons with disabilities and “high performance sport” dealing with topics such as talent planning, and provision of high performance centers. Issues that have increasingly become important are gender policies, school sport, and decreasing barriers for children’s sport participation (Hallmann & Petry, 2013).

2.5 Comparing and Transferring Policies

As the second part of this thesis focusses on comparing existing policies in countries with more gender balanced boards to countries with less gender balanced boards, and whether the latter can learn from better-performing countries this following section provides brief insights into the concepts of comparative public policy and policy transfer.

According to Radin and Weimer (2017) the aim of comparative public policy is to improve current policies via the method of comparison in other contexts. These other contexts may be found across other domains, in other countries, or other organizations. Therefore, policy transfer can be understood as one research avenue of comparative public policy (Radin & Weimer, 2017). A widely adopted definition of policy transfer is that it is the process of translating “knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system” (Dolowitz, 2000, p. 3).

Policy transfers can be motivated by a dissatisfaction with the status quo. This implicates that such transfers are practical driven rather than a knowledge driven (Green, 2007; Marsden & Stead, 2011; Tan, Zheng, & Dickson, 2019). Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) argue that this voluntary engagement in policy transfer should be understood as lesson drawing. Here, actors assume that if a policy was successful for instance in one country it should be successful in another (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). To illustrate another extreme, policy transfer can be coerced for instance because the membership in an international regime come with obligations that force the adoption of certain programs or policies. In reality, most policy transfers lie between these two extreme cases, for instance decisions about the extent of transfer is voluntary but the motivation to engage in the process in the first place comes form a fear of falling behind and is therefore coerced (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

The process of policy transfer can be pushed for and implemented by different actors (Marsden & Stead, 2011). These can range from elected officials and political parties, over civil servants and various supra-national institutions and organization, to think tanks, policy experts, and consultants (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). According to Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) the type of actor involved in the policy transfer can influence what exactly is transferred.

As already mentioned, a policy transfer is rarely a straight-forward copy of a whole program that was implemented elsewhere. There are different parts of a program or policy that are adopted during the transfer process. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) have identified eight categories that can be transferred. First, a transfer can merely include the adoption of one or several policy goals, which means the same outcome is intended (Benson & Jordan, 2011; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; STone, 2012). Second, policy content can be transferred, that is which direction the policymaker wishes to take to reach the intended outcome. Together with policy instruments, these three categories refer the aspects that can be transferred from policies. As explained before, a distinction needs to be made between a policy and a program, the former referring to a broader formulation of intention and the latter being a specific set of actions to implement a policy (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). According to the authors it is possible to transfer such a policy program as well. Other scholars refer to this category of transferable aspects as regulatory, administrative, and judicial tools (Benson & Jordan, 2011;

Stone, 2012). The last four categories include institutions, ideologies, ideas and attitudes, and negative lessons. Stone (2012) has emphasized that it is also possible to transfer personnel, such as members of staff. Benson and Jordan (2011) have made a distinction between hard transfers, which usually includes instruments, tools, and structures, and soft transfers, including goals, ideas, and ideologies.

Additionally, there are varying degrees of transfer. According to Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) there is a direct and complete transfer, also known as copying. Stone (2012) argued that a straight-forward copying of a whole program can rarely be observed however certain tools or institutions could be adopted from one context to another. Furthermore, there is emulation which refers to the transfer of ideas (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). A policy that is based on a mixture of multiple policies transferred from a different context is also possible and what Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) call a combination. Lastly, policy transfers can merely be inspirations, meaning that a policy or program serves to inspire policy change but with a different final outcome (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

Of course, there are factors that can restrict the possibility of a policy transfer. Which is for one the complexity, since the more complex a policy or program is, the harder it would be to transfer it to another context (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). This could also be connected possible to structural and institutional restrictions, as it must be considered that policy interventions are designed to fit the structural and institutional conditions in which they are created. Since these conditions vary from context to context one must consider if the transferred policy or program fit the structural conditions of the new context (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). Lastly, there can be language restrictions, which refers to international transfers not being possible in some cases because the specific programs or policies are not understood correctly or at all (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

Lastly, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) emphasize that not all policy transfers are successful. For a transfer from one context to another to lead to a successful outcome the “borrower” must have enough information about the policy or program to be transferred and how it functions. Furthermore, it is that the elements crucial to the success of the policy or program in its original context are transferred otherwise the policy transfer would be incomplete. Additionally, actors must pay attention to the existing differences between lender and borrower with regards to economic, political, and ideological structures for the transfer to be appropriate (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

Another aspect that needs to be considered before comparing policies, is the special characteristics of the policy domain to be studied. Raub et al. (2020) argue that for constructing comparable variables, one needs to consider which measures are important for reaching the intended outcome of policies. As for gender equality, Krizsan and Lombardo (2013) have argued that policies designed to tackle this issue must fulfill gendering and structural content criteria, as well as empowerment and incrementality process criteria. The gendering content criterion refers to the underlying visions of gender equality of the policy. That is whether the policy adopts an equal treatment vision, viewing men and women as equal beings, neglecting however the structural disadvantages that women are facing. Or whether the policy adopts a transformative vision of gender equality, recognizing the issue as a structural rather than individual one and seeking to change the social structures (Krizsan & Lombardo, 2013). The structural content criterion then refers to how the policy intends to change the structural gender hierarchies. Empowerment in the process sphere of gender policies refers to whether or not the policy process has been inclusive, that is who was involved. According to the authors the quality of gender equality policies depends on whether women were involved and heard in the process. Lastly, the incrementality criterion sets the policy making process into context, that is it urges to examine the policy against the previous status quo (Krizsan & Lombardo, 2013).

3 Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology employed in this thesis. It outlines what research design was used to answer the guiding research and sub questions. Furthermore, it describes how the data was collected, conceptualized, and operationalized and how it was analyzed.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to address the research question and sub-questions as outlined in the first chapter. A quantitative analysis was conducted to assess the gender composition of executive boards across five national sports federations within all EU member states. This quantitative approach identifies which of the EU-27 countries have successfully achieved gender balance and highlights those that lag behind, offering a broad overview of the current state of gender representation in sports leadership across the European Union.

Building on this foundation, the study then adopts qualitative methods to explore the factors that might explain the divergent outcomes in gender composition of executive committees among the Member States. By selecting Ireland and Germany as comparative case studies, the research explores the specific national policies and cultural contexts that contribute to these differences. The qualitative analysis focuses particularly on the variations in national gender policies, investigating how these policies are implemented and their impact on achieving gender balance in sports leadership. The insights gained from this comparative analysis allow for drawing conclusions about what lessons can be learned by countries with less gender-balanced sports leadership from those that are leading the way, such as Ireland.

Overall, this mixed-methods research design offers a holistic exploration of the research question and sub-questions. By combining the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study not only provides statistical evidence of gender disparities but also contextualizes these findings within broader socio-political frameworks. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, the research is able to provide a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the topic. Specifically, the insights drawn from the case studies of Ireland and Germany should promise to be valuable for informing strategies that German sports organizations—and potentially others—can adopt to enhance the representation of women in leadership positions. The research design and methodology for each question and sub-question are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Questions and Methodology Overview

Question	Method
How can the varying levels of female representation in sports leadership among EU member states be explained?	Mixed Method Research Design
<i>SQ1: What does the gender balance in the decision-making bodies of national sports federations in the EU-27 countries look like?</i>	Descriptive Statistics
<i>SQ2: What possible explanations for the variety of female representation in sport leadership positions in the EU-27 countries can be found?</i>	Explorative Literature Review & Content Analysis
<i>SQ3: Do countries with more gender equality in their sports federations have</i>	Comparative Case Study

different policies implemented compared to countries with less gender balanced boards?

And what can countries with less gender balance in this area learn from those that are leading the way?

Qualitative Research Design, Content Analysis

3.2 Data Collection

For the quantitative analysis, publicly available data was collected from the official websites of the national sports federations of all EU-27 countries. This resulted in the creation of a comprehensive database on the gender composition of executive boards across various national sports organizations throughout Europe. The choice of those five specific types of sport was based on a ranking that was initially developed to identify the top five most popular sports in Europe using membership numbers in sports clubs. The data used to create this ranking was derived from a both, primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained from reports published by the national governing bodies of sports within the EU-27 countries, where available. In cases where no primary data was available, secondary sources such as published studies, books, and academic articles that analyze the organized sport landscape in Europe were utilized. This comprehensive approach ensured that the ranking was as representative as possible, reflecting the most popular sports across Europe.

For answering the second sub-question, which explores the underlying factors that could explain the differences in gender composition across the executive boards of sports federations in different EU Member States, this research relied heavily on secondary literature. This literature included data derived from surveys, government reports, and academic studies that investigate conditions and structures relevant for explaining varying gender balance in sports leadership across the EU. By synthesizing findings from multiple sources, the study was able to identify patterns and potential explanations for the observed disparities in gender representation.

For the comparative case study, which focused on two specific countries, the research utilized publicly available policy documents and reports to analyze the national approaches to gender equality in sports leadership. These documents were derived from the websites of the responsible governmental and/or non-governmental agencies in the countries that were examined.

3.3 Conceptualization

Before going into detail of the steps taken to analyze the collected data, this following section will provide a definition of several key concepts. This is to ensure that this research is comprehensible and can be recreated in the future.

3.3.1 Organized Sport

Article 2 of the European Sports Charter (ESC) defines sport as “all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, are aimed at maintaining or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels” (European Sports Charter, 2021). Articles 10 of the ESC further emphasizes the need to provide access to sport for all as it is considered an integral part of the European identity and serves as a place of employment for millions of citizens (European Sports Charter, 2021; European Commission, 2024). In general, sport can be exercised as organized or unorganized physical activity. The main difference here is that in organized sport there is some form of structure present, exercised by adults to coordinate

the physical activity (Wiumn & Säfvenbom, 2019). In other words, in organized sport the physical activity is locally provided within some form of institution, usually sports clubs which are coordinated by national, non-governmental sports associations with decision-making and administrative bodies. The sport clubs themselves often have similar structures to coordinate local activities, these positions are usually carried out as voluntary work (Nagel, Elmose-Osterlund, Ibsen, & Scheerder, 2020). This shows that sports clubs serve as a key instrument for sport policy-making and participation in organized sport could be measured by looking at the active memberships of sports clubs (Nagel et al., 2020). To sum up, organized sport as it is understood in this paper is *the exercise of physical activity provided by a sport club that is governed by a national, non-governmental sports association*.

3.3.2 Sports Leadership

Grasping the concept of leadership in sport is arguably quite difficult as there are multiple definitions for leadership as such but especially regarding sport since the participants in this sectors are so vastly different (Barnhill, Smith, & Oja, 2021; Scott, 2022). For instance, Scott (2022) emphasizes the difference between formal and informal leadership within sports organizations where the former is means positions and bodies of formal organizations such as federations or committees, whilst the latter refers to the type of leadership any individual can exercise on and off the sporting ground depending on for instance experience or skill. In other words, formal leadership in sports organizations refers to official positions that are governed by rules and informal leadership is a character-related ability to lead others that can change depending on the situation.

However, one component of leadership that can be found in multiple conceptualizations is the ability to persuade, encourage, or motivate members of an organization to act in a way that contributes to the success and effectiveness of that organization (Barnhill et al., 2021; Scott, 2022). This means that those in leadership positions have the power to influence others to act in a way that is beneficial for the organization or the sport. This power could be rooted in the official duties and responsibilities of an elected positions of the executive board of a sport organizations as well as the respect by others because of experience or skill as in the informal type of leadership proposed by Scott (2022).

Another approach to conceptualizing leadership in (sports) organizations is to define leadership as the governing body of said organizations. Their job is to establish rules, develop, promote, and represent the organizations itself as well as the sport in general (Lam, 2014). These duties affect multiple stakeholders such as sports clubs, members, or owners which means that leadership means having the power to make decisions that directly influence the field itself but also being the first entity that is held accountable (Lam, 2014). This understanding of leadership being the governing body of the sport organization is similar to Scott's notion of formal leadership, which will be adopted in this paper as well.

3.3.3 Executive Committee

Two of the most important bodies in leadership structures of sports organizations are the General Assembly or Congress, and the Executive Committee. The latter is also known as an executive or management board, or management council (Huijsmans, 2017; Hums & MacLean, 2018). These two bodies are comparable to the legislative and executive of a government (Boudreaux, Karahan, & Coats, 2016). The executive committee generates an agenda, proposes policies and rules, and discusses important issues that affect the organization itself as well as the sport as whole. The general assembly votes on these proposed rules and policies and whether or not they should be implemented. It functions, so to speak, as the parliament of that organization (Hums & MacLean, 2018). Hums & MacLean (2018) further argue that the executive committee could be considered the more powerful body as without it proposing an idea, it won't be brought to the attention of the general assembly nor will be up for a vote.

The executive committee consists of members of the general assembly that are elected by the assembly itself (Hums & MacLean, 2018). The president of the whole organization, who is elected by the general assembly as well, also serves as the head of the executive committee. Members serve for one or multiple terms, the length of which depends on the organization. The executive committee typically has 5 to 20 members, this number too varies from organization to organization (Hums & MacLean, 2018). The international football association (FIFA) for instance has an executive committee consisting of 24 members, including the president and eight vice-presidents. All members are elected or re-elected every four years after a World Cup (Boudreaux et al., 2016).

The names of the members of executive committee and general assembly can usually be found on the organization's website or in reports of the annual general assembly meetings (Huijismans, 2017).

3.3.4 Gender Balance

Since this paper seeks to compare which EU-27 countries have been successful in achieving gender balance in sports leadership, a benchmark for achieved gender balance is needed to facilitate such a comparison. As was stated in Chapter two, sport is a policy field in which the member states retain sovereignty to take action or not. The EU institutions' role is restricted to supporting and supplementing any activities and promote European sporting issues. To do this, they have a few instruments at their disposal, for instance providing funding or issuing guidelines entailing targets which the member states are not legally obliged to adhere to. Nevertheless, as was described in Chapter 2, such guidelines can serve as an external push factor for national governments to take action out of a fear of falling behind their fellow member states. For this reason, this paper considers the European Commission's Proposal for Strategic Actions 2014-2020 as a benchmark for gender balance in sports leadership.

In the proposal the Commission emphasized the need for "full gender-balance in the representation in decision-making positions in sport governing bodies" (European Commission, 2014). Additionally, the Commission provided objectives for sports organizations in the EU that should be reached by 2020 to ensure this gender balance in decision-making positions. Primarily, executive boards of national sport governing bodies should consist of a minimum of 40% women and men. The same target should be reached in professional sports administrations and governmental sports bodies. Furthermore, all sport governing bodies should possess a gender equality policy and action plan (European Commission, 2014).

As this paper adopts a formal understanding of leadership, specifically related to leadership positions in governing bodies and seeks to determine whether the EU-27 countries were successful in meeting the objectives set by the Commission for their executive sports boards, gender balance is understood as a minimum of 40% women and men in executive boards.

3.4 Operationalization

To answer the first sub question on which countries were successful in meeting the guidelines of the European Commission with regards to gender balance in executive committees of sports organizations, this paper has focused on five specific types of organized sport. Therefore, a ranking for each country was conducted of the five most participated in sports based on membership numbers of sports clubs. This was to ensure that the focus would lie on organized sports with clear leadership structures. In a first step, the top five most participated in sports based on club membership were collected individually for each country. The participation numbers were derived from publicly available data by the national sports governing bodies of each country as well as peer reviewed articles and studies. The sources can be found in *Table A1*. In a second step, points were allocated to the respective sports. Five points were given to the number one sport in a country, four to the second most participated in, and so on. After that the points for each represented sport from all countries were

added up, to establish a ranking from type of sport represented in most countries to type of sport represented in the least countries. This ranking included only sports that were in the top five of at least three countries. *Table A2* provides an overview of the top five most participated in sports per country.

From this ranking the top five sports were chosen, as presented in *Table 2*, for further examination of gender equality in leadership positions. Here, gender balance in executive committees was measured as the ratio of men and women on executive boards of the national federation for each of those top five most participated in sports. The gender composition of executive boards was derived from the websites of each national sports federation. As per the Commission’s proposal the benchmark for gender balance was considered to be met if a minimum of 40% women and men were members of the executive board of the national sports federation.

Table 2. Most popular sports in EU countries based on membership in sports clubs.

Sports	Points	Number of Countries
1. Football	87	18
2. Gymnastics	25	9
3. Basketball	25	7
4. Swimming	24	9
5. Tennis	16	7
6. Volleyball	12	6
7. Athletics	11	5
8. Skiing	11	5
9. Cycling	10	3
10. Handball	8	3
11. Golf	8	3

As the literature on gender imbalance in sports leadership has shown, the possible causes are often intertwined and more often than not multiple occur at once. Therefore in SQ5, this thesis adds two possible causes for explaining the differing level on gender equality in EU sports leadership. The first is an overarching macro-level cause, meaning societal norms and values on gender and gender roles. Second, another meso-level cause will be added, that is the organizational procedures when it comes to successor selection. This will be measured by looking at the electoral procedures codified in the constitutions of the national sports federations.

3.5 Cases

For the other factors focused on in this thesis, especially national gender equality policies, a country selection is made comparing two countries. The choice of countries is partly pragmatic in nature as time is limited and language is a barrier.

With these preconditions in mind, the choice of countries to study was determined by answering the first research question. Here it will be seen that Germany is an interesting case study. It performs mediocre in the comparison of EU Member States, ranking in 12th place. This indicates that Germany could learn from better-performing countries. One such country will turn-out to be Ireland. Furthermore, it will turn out that not all German associations are underperforming. Hence the question what poorly performing associations can learn from well-performing associations will be examined also. The focus lies primarily on policy as Chapter 2 indicated that policy matters and is a possible explanatory factor that (umbrella) unions themselves control.

3.5.1 Case selection: Germany

Based on the results of SQ1, this study explores which policies Germany has implemented to address the issue of gender imbalance in sport leadership positions, as in European comparison Germany only ranks at place 12, just above the EU-27 average of share of women represented in leadership positions

but well under the set target of a minimum of 40%. The policy that will be analyzed was created and adopted by the German Olympic Committee (DOSB), the main sport policy maker in Germany regarding sport development and sport for all. The specific structure of German sport policymaking is outlined below.

German sport policymaking is structured as a highly complex co-governance system, this means that the responsibility is shared between various governmental and non-governmental actors and no specific ministry of sport (Breuer, Feiler, & Wicker, 2015; Breuer & Nowy, 2017; Petry & Hallmann, 2013). The main governmental actor involved in sport policy making at national level is the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI). It mainly assumes a coordinating role of predominantly the elite sport sector and is supported by a committee for sports in the German Parliament. Their main task is the fight against top-level sport issues such as doping or match fixing (Breuer & Nowy, 2017; Petry & Hallmann, 2013). This focus on high-performance sport is due to the fact that as per the German constitution the German government does not have explicit competence in the field of sport, which restrains its involvement to areas of national interests (e.g. national representation via athletes at major sporting events). Furthermore, governmental involvement in sport policy making is based on the principle of subsidiarity and especially the opinions and control of experts in the domain (Breuer & Nowy, 2017).

The main non-governmental actor involved in sport policy making in Germany is the German Olympic Committee (DOSB). The committee represents several national Olympic and non-Olympic federations, serving as the sole umbrella organization of 68 German sport federations, 16 federal state confederations, 87.000 sport clubs, and 17 federations with special tasks from elite sport to grassroots level (Breuer et al., 2015; Breuer & Nowy, 2017; DOSB, 2024b; Hartmann-Tews, 2019; Petry & Hallmann, 2013). Thus the DOSB differentiates its tasks into realizing general, performance-oriented and sport-for-all goals (Petry & Hallmann, 2013). The national sport federations function as the governing bodies of their respective sports and represent it national, federal, and municipal level. They make up the largest portion of the General Assembly of the DOSB, the ultimate decision-making body. Therefore these national federations are significantly involved in the German sport policy making (Hartmann-Tews, 2019).

In its role as a linking partner between the national sport federations and governmental authorities in sports related matter, the DOSB cooperates with the BMI in matters regarding national representation and elite sport (Breuer & Nowy, 2017). This interaction between governmental bodies responsible for sport and the nationally federations with regard to sport policy making is governed by rules set out between the BMI and DOSB. As mentioned before, the BMI is primarily involved in elite sport and national representation which leaves the DOSB with the tasks of developing targets regarding various aspects of sport, roughly structured into high-performance, sport for all, and youth sport, to be achieved by its member organizations within an Olympic cycle (Breuer & Nowy, 2017). Furthermore, the DOSB is to formalize these targets with its national federations, assess if these targets have been achieved and evaluate whether these steering instruments have been effective (Breuer & Nowy, 2017). Nevertheless, the scope of DOSB sport policy making is limited by the legal framework of the voluntary sport sector. Thus, while DOSB member organizations should follow its policies, however they are not legally binding and their implementation is voluntary (Hartmann-Tews, 2019). This leaves the DOSB with a limited number of tools to ensure that its policies are implemented. With regard to gender policy for instance, it can only try and convince its member organizations of the importance of gender equity and hope to evoke their cooperation and commitment to solve the issue (Hartmann-Tews, 2019).

The DOSB's commitment to address the issue of gender inequality in sport in general began in the 1970s, when it created a resolution according to which all member organizations should establish committees tasked with increasing the number of women in sport clubs and leadership positions

(Hartmann-Tews, 2019). An assessment of this resolution, conducted in 1990 showed what little impact it had on the number of women in leadership positions. However, only in the early 2000s the DOSB launched strategic action to recruit women for leadership positions, by setting up an innovation fund to support member organizations in achieving this target. In 2012 and 2014 the targets were formulated more concretely, requiring the proportion of women in leadership positions of all DOSB committees to be at least 30% (Hartmann-Tews, 2019). The most recent policies adopted by the DOSB regarding gender balance in leadership positions are the “Strategic key points on the topic of gender equality in sports by DOSB until 2020” and “Strategic key points on the topic of gender equality in sports by the DOSB from 2021 to 2025” (DOSB, 2024a, 2024c).

Since this study focusses on evaluating the success of policies implemented in the same time frame as the Strategic Proposal by the Commission and the most recent DOSB policy on gender equality is yet to be completed, the analysis will focus on the “Strategic key points on the topic of gender equality in sports by the DOSB by 2020”. The policy was adopted in 2016 by the General Assembly of Women in Sport to address the growing gender equality discourse in Sport at national and European level. The policy was based on the recommendations by EU expert group (2013/2014) and the European Commission (2014-2017) (DOSB, 2016).

3.5.2 Case selection: Ireland

The results from SQ1 have furthermore shown that Ireland is one of four countries in the EU that has achieved a total representation of at least 40% female board members. However, it will be the only case which will be compared to Germany. Finland and Romania, two other countries that achieved a total gender representation of 40% have not achieved gender balance in all five federations, as is outlined in Chapter 4. Sweden would be an ideal case for comparison as it has achieved gender balance in all five national federations, however there is no policy program available in English at the point of this research. Therefore, the focus will remain on Ireland.

The Irish sports structure and policy making is comparable to the one in Germany to a certain extent. The governmental body responsible for sport policy making in Ireland is the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS). But it fulfills its policy making role mainly through the agency Sport Ireland, formerly known as the Irish Sport Council (Bourke, 2013; Stapleton, 2021). Sport Ireland is the authority responsible for the development of Irish sport and it supports over 100 organizations mainly via financial means. In its function as main sport policy maker the actor relies heavily on the National Governing Bodies, such as national sports federations, in implementing its strategic priorities (Bourke, 2013; Stapleton, 2021). Sport Ireland’s first involvement in addressing gender inequality in sport was by launching the Women in Sport Programme in 2005. The fund supported initiatives developed by the member organizations that were aimed at increasing active participation of women and girls in sports (Bourke, 2013). According to the Irish sport policy making structure, policies developed to address gender inequality in sport leadership by Sport Ireland will be analyzed.

3.6 Analysis

To analyze the gender composition of executive boards in the national sports federations of the EU-27 member states, descriptive statistics were employed. The frequencies and proportions of male and female executives in every country were calculated for the five selected types of sport. Additionally, to summarize the gender composition of executive boards in the EU overall, in the member states, and in each sport measures of central tendency such as mean and median were used. Finally, these results were summarized in tables. This descriptive statistics approach allowed for a thorough examination and comparison of gender diversity in sport leadership across the EU. The results are furthermore used for the case selection.

For the remaining part of this thesis a qualitative content analysis approach was chosen to examine the sources used for exploring what factors could possibly account for the varying gender balances in the selected cases. Additionally, their existing policy documents and reports aimed at increasing gender equality in sports leadership can be analyzed and compared by identifying the content of these policies. Qualitative content analysis allows for systematic review of the policies, by working out key components and deriving meaning to gain insight into their implementation and effectiveness. Due to the comparably small number of documents no external analyzing software such as Atlas.ti were used to derive the key components of the existing policies. The categories that will be focused on in this comparative analysis are informed by the literature review in Chapter 2. The key components can be divided into two categories, content and process. These key components which will be compared are informed by the literature review in Chapter 2 and are summarized in *Table 3*.

Table 3. Component Matrix

Ideas/Ideology	Content	Process
<i>Gendering</i> Equal Treatment or Transformative vision of Gender	<i>Targets</i> Specific benchmarks to be achieved by the policy	<i>Empowerment</i> Actors involved in policy design
<i>Goals</i> Intended outcome of the policy	<i>Instruments</i> Measures taken to achieve the targets	

4 Results

This following section presents the results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data as described in Chapter 3.

4.1 Gender balance in sports leadership in the EU-27

The executive boards of the five examined national sports federations across the EU are composed of a total of 1438 members, 332 of which are women. This means that on average in 2024, only 23.1% of all leadership positions in national sports federations of member states were occupied by women. The total number of board members examined across the countries ranges from 32 in Malta to 102 in Greece. Most member states had a total of 40 and 60 board members. These results are summarized in *Table 4*. Each country is assigned to one out of six groups. Group 1 incorporates countries with a gender balance of less than 10%, Group 2 consists of countries with 10% to 20% share of women, Group 3 20%-30%, Group 4 30%-40%, Group 5 40-60%, and Group 6 >60%. This means that Group 5 incorporates all countries that have achieved gender balance.

Table 4. Gender composition of executive boards in national sports federations in the EU-27, 2024

Country	Total Men	Total Women	Total	Share Women (%)	Group
Austria	55	10	65	15,40%	2
Belgium	32	9	41	22,00%	3
Bulgaria	47	6	53	11,30%	2
Croatia	44	6	50	12,00%	2
Cyprus	47	7	54	13,00%	2
Czechia	49	8	57	14,00%	2
Denmark	26	11	37	29,70%	3
Estonia	40	10	50	20,00%	2
Finland	27	22	49	44,90%	5
France	42	12	54	22,20%	3
Germany	31	11	42	26,20%	3
Greece	86	16	102	15,70%	2
Hungary	50	5	55	9,10%	1
Ireland	31	25	56	44,60%	5
Italy	62	17	79	21,50%	3
Latvia	39	14	53	26,40%	3
Lithuania	41	4	45	8,90%	1
Luxemburg	38	17	55	30,90%	4
Malta	27	5	32	15,60%	2
Netherland	23	12	35	34,30%	4
Poland	51	10	61	16,40%	2
Portugal	30	13	43	30,20%	4
Romania	28	19	47	40,40%	5
Slovakia	37	14	51	27,50%	3
Slovenia	52	6	58	10,30%	2
Spain	47	19	66	28,80%	3
Sweden	24	24	48	50,00%	5
<i>Total</i>	1106	332	1438	23,10%	

The table furthermore shows that the lowest share of women was found in Lithuania with 8.9%, while the highest share was found in Sweden with 50%. Only four out of the 27 EU member states have achieved gender balance in executive boards of national sports federations in 2024. In total, four countries could be assigned to Group 5, having achieved a gender balance in the executive boards of the examined national sports federations in 2024. These countries include apart from Sweden, Finland, Ireland, and Romania. Three countries, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, form Group 4 and make up the smallest group. Eight out of the 27 examined countries could be allocated to Group 3, having a share of women between 20%-30%. These countries include Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Slovakia, and Spain. Group 2 is the largest group and includes 10 countries in total that show a share of women between 10%-20%. The remaining two countries, Hungary and Lithuania, are allocated to Group 1 as they have a share of women below 10% on the executive boards of their national sports federations.

4.1.1 Type of sport matters

While the total share of women on executive boards of national sports federation varies greatly across Europe, ranging from 8.9% to 50% it was discovered that these number also depend on the type of sport that is examined.

4.1.1.1 Football.

In Football, the most participated-in sport in Europe, on average in 2024 only 12.4% of all leadership positions were occupied by women. This is well below the total average of 23.1%. The size of executive boards in the national football federations ranges from seven members in Denmark to 21 members in Italy. The total number of members was 346, with 43 women in total. These findings are summarized in *Table 5* below.

Table 5. Gender composition of executive boards in national football federations in the EU-27, 2024

Country	Total Men	Total Women	Share Women (%)	Group
Austria	17	1	5,60%	1
Belgium	10	0	0,00%	1
Bulgaria	15	1	6,30%	1
Croatia	17	0	0,00%	1
Cyprus	8	1	11,10%	2
Czechia	12	0	0,00%	1
Denmark	7	0	0,00%	1
Estonia	13	1	7,10%	1
Finland	6	2	25,00%	3
France	11	3	21,40%	3
Germany	11	4	26,70%	3
Greece	18	0	0,00%	1
Hungary	8	1	11,10%	2
Ireland	9	6	40,00%	5
Italy	17	4	19,00%	2
Latvia	8	1	11,10%	2
Lithuania	15	1	6,25%	1
Luxemburg	11	1	8,30%	1
Malta	7	1	12,50%	2
Netherlands	5	2	28,60%	3

Poland	17	0	0,00%	1
Portugal	11	1	8,30%	1
Romania	15	0	0,00%	1
Slovakia	13	0	0,00%	1
Slovenia	6	0	0,00%	1
Spain	12	8	40,00%	5
Sweden	4	4	50,00%	5
<i>Total</i>	303	43	12,40%	

When examining the gender composition of only the national football federations more than half of the EU-27 countries must be allocated into Group 1. This means that 15 national football federations have less than 10% women in their executive committees, 9 of which do not include any women at all. In football, Group 2 is much smaller, including only 5 countries, Cyprus, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, and Malta. Group 3 is similarly small, including only Finland, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. The remaining three countries, Spain and again Ireland and Sweden have achieved gender balance on the executive committees of their national football federations.

4.1.1.2 Gymnastics.

An entirely different distribution of women occupying leadership positions can be observed in gymnastics. On average in 2024, 47.6% of all leadership positions in national gymnastic federations in the EU-27 were occupied by women. In total there were 254 members on the executive boards of national gymnastics federations across Europe, 121 of which were women. Nationally, the size of the boards ranged between 5 members in the Netherlands to 17 members in Greece. *Table 6* summarizes these findings below.

Table 6. Gender composition of executive boards in national gymnastics federations in the EU-27, 2024

Country	Total Men	Total Women	Share Women (%)	Group
Austria	13	3	18,75%	2
Belgium	6	4	40,00%	5
Bulgaria				
Croatia	5	3	37,50%	4
Cyprus				
Czechia	6	5	45,50%	5
Denmark	2	5	71,40%	6
Estonia	2	6	75,00%	6
Finland	2	7	77,80%	6
France	5	5	50,00%	5
Germany	4	7	63,60%	6
Greece	10	7	41,20%	5
Hungary	7	1	12,50%	2
Ireland	5	4	44,40%	5
Italy	6	3	33,30%	4
Latvia	3	7	70,00%	6
Lithuania				
Luxemburg	7	6	46,20%	5
Malta	8	4	33,30%	4
Netherlands	2	3	60,00%	5

Poland	5	6	54,50%	5
Portugal	8	7	46,60%	5
Romania	5	8	61,50%	6
Slovakia	4	5	55,60%	5
Slovenia	8	4	33,30%	4
Spain	5	4	44,40%	5
Sweden	5	7	58,30%	5
<i>Total</i>	133	121	47,60%	

In the national gymnastics federations, there is no executive committee allocated to Group 1 and only two countries, Austria and Hungary, in Group 2. For gymnastics Group 5 makes up the largest group, including 12 countries that show gender balanced executive committees. Here, there are also 6 countries that exceeded a share of 60% women in leadership positions, allocating them to Group 6. The remaining four countries, Croatia, Italy, Malta, and Slovenia are included in Group 4.

4.1.1.3 Basketball.

In basketball the distribution of men and women in leadership positions is again similar to that of football. Though not as low as 12,4%, on average basketball has the second lowest share of women occupying leadership positions with 15,6%. In 2024 there were 302 seats on executive boards in national basketball federations across the EU, ranging from boards with six members in Portugal and Romania to 23 members in Italy. *Table 7* summarize these findings below.

Table 7. Gender composition of executive boards in national basketball federations in the EU-27, 2024

Country	Total Men	Total Women	Share Women (%)	Group
Austria	9	3	25,00%	3
Belgium	8	1	11,10%	2
Bulgaria	11	1	9,10%	1
Croatia	13	0	0,00%	1
Cyprus	16	2	11,10%	2
Czechia	9	0	0,00%	1
Denmark	6	2	25,00%	3
Estonia	11	0	0,00%	1
Finland	8	6	42,90%	5
France	8	0	0,00%	1
Germany	6	0	0,00%	1
Greece	21	1	4,50%	1
Hungary	11	0	0,00%	1
Ireland	5	4	44,40%	5
Italy	18	5	21,70%	3
Latvia	17	3	15,00%	2
Lithuania	12	0	0,00%	1
Luxemburg	7	4	36,40%	4
Malta				
Netherlands	6	3	33,30%	4
Poland	11	0	0,00%	1
Portugal	5	1	16,70%	2
Romania	2	4	66,70%	6

Slovakia	7	0	0,00%	1
Slovenia	14	0	0,00%	1
Spain	8	2	20,00%	3
Sweden	6	5	45,50%	5
Total	255	47	15,60%	

For basketball the majority of the countries can be allocated to Group 1. 12 out of 26 examined executive committees have a share of less than 10% women, 10 of which do not have women represented in their board at all. Group 2 and 3 consist of four countries each and the smallest group for this sport, Group 4, includes two countries, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The only countries that have achieved gender balance in the executive committees of their national basketball federations are Sweden, Finland, and Ireland. One country, Romania is included in Group 6, having a share of over 60% women in its executive committee.

4.1.1.4 Swimming.

On average in 2024, women made up 25.3% of leadership positions in national swimming federations in the EU-27 member states. There were 257 executive board members in this sport in total, 65 of those were women. The smallest board, with four members, was found in Portugal while the Greek swimming federation has the largest board with 23 members. These findings on the swimming federations are summarized in *Table 8*.

Table 8. Gender composition of executive boards in national swimming federations in the EU-27, 2024

Country	Total Men	Total Women	Share Women (%)	Group
Austria	13	2	13,30%	2
Belgium	4	4	50,00%	5
Bulgaria	11	2	7,70%	1
Croatia				
Cyprus	14	3	17,60%	2
Czechia	9	2	18,20%	2
Denmark	3	3	50,00%	5
Estonia	8	0	0,00%	1
Finland	5	4	44,40%	5
France	10	0	0,00%	1
Germany	4	0	0,00%	1
Greece	17	6	26,10%	3
Hungary	13	2	13,30%	2
Ireland	6	6	50,00%	5
Italy	9	2	18,20%	2
Latvia	4	1	20,00%	3
Lithuania	6	2	25,00%	3
Luxemburg	4	1	20,00%	3
Malta	6	0	0,00%	1
Netherlands	5	2	28,60%	3
Poland	10	4	28,60%	3
Portugal	4	0	0,00%	1
Romania	2	6	75,00%	6
Slovakia	2	6	75,00%	6
Slovenia	10	2	16,70%	2

Spain	8	0	0,00%	1
Sweden	5	5	50,00%	5
Total	192	65	25,30%	

While swimming is the sport that comes closest to being gender balanced, after gymnastics, there are still seven out of 26 examined executive committees that are included in group 1. However, Groups 2 and 3 include six countries each, and again no countries allocated to Group 4. The third biggest group is Group 5, incorporating five countries total. Again, Sweden, Finland, and Ireland as well as Belgium and Denmark have achieved gender balanced executive committees in their national swimming federations. Two countries, Romania and Slovakia, have gender imbalanced boards with a smaller representation of men, sorting the into Group 6.

4.1.1.5 Tennis.

In tennis women made up 20.1% of all leadership positions in the national federations in 2024. In total there were 279 executive board members in the EU, more specifically 56 female and 223 male board members. The size of the executive boards ranged between the countries from four members in Austria and Belgium to 22 in Greece. These findings can be seen in *Table 9*.

Table 9. Gender composition of executive boards in national tennis federations of the EU-27, 2024

Country	Total Men	Total Women	Share Women (%)	Group
Austria	3	1	25,00%	3
Belgium	4	0	0,00%	1
Bulgaria	10	2	16,70%	2
Croatia	9	3	25,00%	3
Cyprus	9	1	10,00%	2
Czechia	13	1	7,10%	1
Denmark	8	1	11,10%	2
Estonia	6	3	33,30%	4
Finland	6	3	33,30%	4
France	8	4	33,30%	4
Germany	6	0	0,00%	1
Greece	20	2	9,10%	1
Hungary	11	1	8,30%	1
Ireland	6	5	45,50%	5
Italy	12	3	20,00%	3
Latvia	7	2	22,20%	3
Lithuania	8	1	11,10%	2
Luxemburg	9	5	35,70%	4
Malta	6	0	0,00%	1
Netherlands	5	2	28,60%	3
Poland	8	0	0,00%	1
Portugal	2	4	66,70%	6
Romania	4	1	20,00%	3
Slovakia	11	3	21,40%	3
Slovenia	14	0	0,00%	1
Spain	14	5	26,30%	3
Sweden	4	3	42,90%	5
Total	223	56	20,10%	

In tennis eight countries are included in Group 1, five of which do not have any female members in their executive committees. For countries are included in Group 2 and 4 respectively, and Group 3 also consists of eight countries. Only Sweden and Ireland have achieved gender balanced executive boards in their national tennis federations, while Portugal's executive committee is the only one that is included in Group 6.

To summarize, the findings show that football is the sport with the smallest share of women in leadership positions, while gymnastics has a share of almost 50% women in leadership positions. Swimming, tennis, and basketball range between having a share of 15% to 25% women on the executive boards of their national federations.

4.1.2 Positions matter

The findings of the quantitative analysis furthermore show that there is also a vertical gender gap in sport leadership. It was found that the gender composition depends also depends on the position within the executive board. While the overall share of women in decision making positions was 23.1%, they only represented 14.5% of the total number of presidents. The findings are summarized in *Table 10*.

Table 10. Proportion of men and women in presidential positions in national sport federations of the EU-27 by sport, 2024

Type of Sport	Male Presidents	Female Presidents	Share Female President (%)
Football	26	1	3,70%
Gymnastics	18	6	25,00%
Basketball	23	3	11,50%
Swimming	22	5	18,50%
Tennis	23	4	14,80%
<i>Total</i>	112	19	14,50%

Table 10 also shows that there are significant differences in the gender composition of the total number of presidents depending on the type of sport. While in gymnastics women represent at least 25% of the total number of presidents within the EU-27 national federations, there is only one female president of a national football federation in the EU. After gymnastics, swimming has also here the highest share of female representation with 18.5%, followed by tennis and with 14.8% and basketball with 11.5%.

Table 11 shows that Sweden has the highest share of female presidents with a total number of four out of five. Romania is the only country that has three of the five examined national sports federation led by women, and the Netherlands and Ireland have two respectively. In the remaining 23 countries, only eight have one federation led by a woman, that is in Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain. This means that in 15 out of the EU-27 member states all of the examined national sports federations have a male president.

Table 11. Proportion of men and women in presidential positions in national sports federations of the EU-27 by country, 2024

Country	Male Presidents	Female Presidents
Austria	5	0
Belgium	4	1
Bulgaria	4	0
Croatia	4	1
Cyprus	4	0

Czechia	5	0
Denmark	4	1
Estonia	5	0
Finland	4	1
France	5	0
Germany	5	0
Greece	5	0
Hungary	5	0
Ireland	3	2
Italy	5	0
Latvia	4	1
Lithuania	4	0
Luxemburg	5	0
Malta	4	0
Netherland	3	2
Poland	4	1
Portugal	5	0
Romania	2	3
Slovakia	4	1
Slovenia	5	0
Spain	4	1
Sweden	1	4
<i>Total</i>	112	19

4.2 Explaining the Differences in Composition of Leadership across the EU

The results from sub question one show that there are not only differences between countries but also between the type of sport examined when it comes to gender balance in sport leadership. This raises the question what factors can explain these differences across countries and across sports. To answer this question two cases were selected for a more detailed examination. The first case is Germany, a country that performs mediocre when it comes to gender balance in sports leadership. In overall gender balance in 2024, Germany is included in Group 3, ranking 12th place in the national comparison of EU Member States. With regard to type of sports Germany shows a share of female leaders of over 60% in gymnastics. However, in three of the other sports it is included in Group 1, having no female members in the executive committees of its national basketball, swimming, and tennis federations. The executive committee of Germany's national football federation consists of a share of 26.7% women, which comes closer to a gender balance but still falls short of the minimum of 40%. Ireland on the other hand is one of the only two countries that has achieved gender balance in the executive committees of all of the examined national sports federations. It outperforms Germany in four out of five sports when it comes to the equal representation between women and men in leadership positions. Therefore, Ireland and Germany seem to be interesting cases to compare to determine what might explain the differences between these two countries in gender equality in sports leadership.

A first possible explanation that was explored focused on macro-level factors. Therefore, the existing societal norms and values with regard to gender and leadership were considered and whether they differ in the selected cases. The content analysis of existing studies and surveys of citizens views in Ireland and Germany has rendered the following results: the attitudes towards gender in German society is rather traditional. A survey conducted by the German Federal Institute for population

research showed that traditional gendered roles are still prevalent in German society, specifically with regard to family life. This has also been found by a survey conducted by the GIZ who asked people outside of Germany on their experiences in the country. With regards to social values and norms, the answers showed that while many perceive Germany as a modern state in most respects, when it comes to gender equality issues it is deemed to be lagging behind. Especially with regard to leadership positions the general opinion was that while men and women have equal rights and enjoy similar qualifications and skills, women are surprisingly absent in top positions. The main issue seemed to be that Germans find the reconciliation of family and work life very hard due to traditional role allocations. In a European context, results for the attitudes and values of German society were mixed. On the one hand, there is a large portion of society that represent egalitarian views on gender, that is they think both women and men are equally able to take care of a family or be successful in professional life. There is however, a substantial part of German society that defends traditional views and gender a role allocation. In Ireland on the other hand an egalitarian view on gender is the most prevalent. The European Social Survey conducted research on gender in contemporary Europe in 2023 and found that respondents in Ireland tended to assess gender equality in leadership to be more positive for the country's politics more positive than German respondents. A same trend was discovered for attitudes towards gender equality in higher management positions. Here, more Irish respondents agreed that equal representation of men and women is good or very good for business than in Germany.

4.3 Policies as the Explanatory Factor

The results from sub question two show that German and Irish societal norms and views regarding gender and leadership are different. Based on the findings in Chapter 2, that societal norms and values influence policy design, these results lead to the assumption that policies implemented in German and Irish sports sector also differ. This following section shows the results of the content analysis of German and Irish national and organizational policies on women in leadership used to test this assumption.

4.3.1 Comparison of National Policies

The data for the German case is comprised of one resolution by the DOSB women's plenum and two reports by the vice president of the DOSB women's plenum. All documents were published in 2016. This data is compared to the Irish Women in Sports policy, using the policy outline from 2019 and an update report from 2021. The results of the analysis are summarized in *Table 12*.

Table 12. Component Matrix for National Gender Policies in Germany and Ireland.

Country	Ideas/Ideology	Content	Process
Germany	<p><i>Gendering</i></p> <p>-transformative visions of gender</p> <p>-gender inequality = structural issue</p> <p><i>Goals</i></p> <p>-men and women are equal</p> <p>-reduce gender inequality in sports</p>	<p><i>Targets</i></p> <p>-30% women in DOSB leadership</p> <p>-share of female participant reflected in leadership of member organizations</p> <p><i>Instruments</i></p> <p>-Mentoring Program</p> <p>-Knowledge provision</p> <p>-Leadership Camp</p>	<p><i>Empowerment</i></p> <p>-DOSB women's plenum</p>

Ireland	<i>Gendering</i>	<i>Targets</i>	<i>Empowerment</i>
	-gender inequality = structural issue	-a share of at least 30% women in leadership of member organizations	-Sport Ireland -male and female stakeholders from all over Ireland
	<i>Goals</i>	<i>Instruments</i>	
	-inclusive and fair sports culture for everyone -equal opportunities for men and women	-funding program -knowledge provision -mentoring program	

The general analysis for the German policy reveals an overarching theme of the developed strategy being connected to the ongoing societal debates on gender equality at European and national level. 5 citations were identified that relate to this connection. Especially the recommendations by the European Commission on establishing gender equality in sports have been named in two of the documents to be a model for selecting the fields of actions to be targeted by the policy. This shows that the DOSB values equal opportunities for men and women alike, and recognizes gender inequality as an issue that demands attention. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the vision of gender adopted in the policy is a transformative one. The documents clearly state that the DOSB recognizes gender inequality as a structural issue demanding top-down actions. For this reason, the policy is aimed at decreasing discrimination based on gender.

The general analysis for the Irish case reveals that the policy is connected to national efforts to address gender equality in general and sport in particular. The documents show that Sport Ireland is working in line with national policies such as the National Sports Policy 2018-2027 and the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020. Furthermore, the policy is implemented under the overarching objective of Sport Ireland to create an inclusive and fair sports culture for everyone. Similarly, to the German case the Irish Women in Sports policy envisions women having equal opportunities as men, suggesting that they are aware that this vision has yet to be realized. Furthermore, the policy is designed to eliminate the gender gradient, recognizing that the issue of gender inequality as a structural component.

As for policy targets the documents showed gender equality in sport leadership to be one of four main areas in which the DOSB seeks to take action through its strategy. The other three areas are the promotion of female coaches, fight against sexual violence in sport, and gender equality in media portrayal. With regard to taking action in the field of sport leadership the documents emphasize a commitment to increase female representation in leadership positions within the DOSB itself as well as its member organizations. In two of the analyzed documents it is further specified that the target of the policy is to ensure the implementation of a gender quota of a minimum of 30% women in the voluntary and full-time leadership positions of the DOSB. For the member organizations the target is to increase the share of women in voluntary leadership positions to mirror that of their female participants, and come closer to equal participation of men and women in their full-time leadership positions.

As for the Irish policy the data showed that gender equality in sport leadership is one of four target areas of the Women in Sport Policy also. The other three areas are coaching and officiating, active participation, and visibility. To address gender inequality in leadership positions the documents reveal general targets of seeking to make progress towards more gender balanced boards of funded

bodies. Here the policy is oriented at a benchmark of 30% female representation as outlined in the National Sports Policy. Moreover, the policy is set out to support women who seek to occupy leadership positions in funded bodies.

Three main instruments set out to achieve the targets of the policy were identified in the documents in the German case. The first is a mentoring program targeting former female athletes who would like to continue to work in the sport sector as a coach or leader. Participants receive support and guidance by an experienced mentor over the course of one year to develop personal competencies, understand administrative structures within the sport sector, and built up a personal network. Within this program the DOSB further offers workshops to the participants. Another instrument the DOSB intends to rely on to achieve its objectives is the provision of knowledge and expertise in designing gender balance leadership structures. This organizational advice is at the disposal of all interested member organizations. A third instrument that is frequently mentioned in the analyzed documents is the expansion of the DOSB's leadership camp. This means that with the adoption of the "Strategic key points on the topic of gender equality in sports by the DOSB by 2020", interested member organizations are able to offer inhouse seminars on leadership, the exact topic of which is for them to choose. These seminars are financially supported by the DOSB, which also offers its expertise in planning them. One additional theme that stood out in the analysis of the documents is that all of the above-described instruments have already been implemented before the adoption of the "Strategic key points on the topic of gender equality in sports by the DOSB by 2020". Lastly, the policy arranges for the creation of a committee (*Arbeitsgruppe*) who is tasked with observing the development of the situation after the implementation and make recommendations for further action. These instruments however do not seem to tackle the structural inequalities and gender hierarchies that are recognized by the DOSB to be an issue. The Mentoring program is aimed at individual rather than structural level, and the remaining two instruments are provided only to organizations who are interested in improving their leadership structures, presuming that these organizations also recognize gender inequalities in leadership to be a serious issue.

For the Irish case the analysis revealed that the instruments employed by Sport Ireland can be sorted into three different categories. First, there a monetary instrument which include funding of initiatives and rewarding organizations that have achieved gender balance on their boards. This takes place mainly through relaunching the Women in Sport Programme established in 2005. Second, there are training and expertise instruments at organizational and individual level. This includes a gender diversity boards toolkit for funded bodies to use, to develop more gender equal boards by providing them with sufficient support, expertise, webinars, and experiences from other sectors. At individual level the Women in Sport policy developed gender and diversity training for current managers on the importance of inclusive leadership, as well as a mentoring program for women who seek a career in sports leadership. Additionally, with the implementation of the policy a committee tasked with overseeing the activation and progress of the policy was created. As the instruments implemented in the Irish policy are similar to those in the German policy the same issues arise when it comes to tackling the structural barriers of gender inequality in leadership. The mentoring program is aimed at individuals, and the leadership toolkits and webinars presume organizations too have already understood the importance of gender balance in their leadership structures.

With regards to who has been involved in the development process of the policy in both cases it was ensured that women's voices were heard. The DOSB's policy on women in leadership position was designed and implemented by the organization's women's plenum tasked with ensuring gender equality and diversity within the organization. The representatives of this plenum were all female at the time of implementation. As for the Women in Sports Programme by Sport Ireland, the policy document reveals that previous to designing the policy, Sport Ireland has conducted interviews and

survey all over the country to ensure that as many stakeholders could be heard. The document furthermore states, that it was the intention to include both men and women in this research.

4.3.2 Comparison of Organizational Policies

As the analysis from sub question one showed not only a difference in gender balance in sports leadership between countries but also between types of sports the policies of the individual federations were also analyzed with regard to selection procedures of board members.

The analysis showed that the nomination procedure of board members, also referred to as directors, were quite similar in all federations to a certain extend. In all cases another member, a nominations committee, or the Board could nominate any member of the organization itself. These nominees were then to be elected and ratified by the members of the General Assembly. However, three of the five Irish sports federations had explicit procedural measures in place to ensure gender diversity on their Boards. The Irish football federation's constitution specifically states that no less than 40% of the directorial positions should be occupied by women. To ensure this the Additional Football Director and at least one other Ordinary Football Director should always be female. The Irish Swimming and Basketball federations determined similar terms in their constitutions. The Irish swimming federation is bound to ensure a gender balance of 60/40 on their board, while the Irish basketball federation's nomination committee is to make sure that the Board reflects a balance of skills, knowledge, equality, and diversity. The process to achieve this is similar in both federations. The board consists of a fixed number of directors nominated by the regional federations and the remaining positions are filled by directors appointed by nomination committees. These co-opted directors are to be selected in such a manner that complies with a gender balance of 60/40 or rather equality and diversity. Such procedural measures cannot be found in any of the constitutions of the five German federations analyzed. Therefore, one could draw the conclusion that there is more gender balance in sports leadership in Ireland because of certain procedural measures regarding the election process determined in their constitutions. However, this conclusion can only be drawn for football, basketball, and swimming as no such procedural measures could be found in the constitutions of the Irish gymnastics and tennis federations.

4.4 What Lessons can be Drawn

The second part of the research question guiding this thesis seeks to explore what a country with less gender balance in sports leadership – such as Germany – can learn from a better-performing country – such as Ireland. As the previous analysis of the policy documents of both cases has revealed some mixed results. Both policies are very similar to one another, especially with regards to the underlying ideologies overarching goals. Even the process of designing the policy was similar in that in both cases it was ensured the program was designed from women for women. Both agencies have employed similar instruments as well to achieve their set targets as both employ mentoring programs for women interested in leadership as well as knowledge provision on leadership structures for their member organizations. The policies did differ in one aspect, which was the provision of monetary incentives for member organizations to ensure gender diverse leadership. While Sport Ireland has ensured that projects which aim at achieving more gender balance in sports leadership are adequately funded through the Women in Sport Programme, while no such funding opportunities are available to German organizations, at least not through the DOSB policy. Therefore, funding could be a promising avenue through which the DOSB could improve gender balance in the executive committees of its member organizations with a top-down approach. However, the first Irish Women in Sport policy was implemented for 2019-2023, meaning that the policy cycle has only been concluded for maximum one year. Hence, it is questionable whether this policy has been decisive in the gender composition of Irish sport federations in 2024.

However, the previous analysis showed that policies guiding the selection procedures for leadership positions of the national sports federations seem to have a bigger impact on the gender diversity of the former. Since the analysis showed that in three out of five Irish sports federations, having gender equal boards is a specific requirement for these organizations, while German federations have no such measures in place, some lessons can be drawn for the latter. In other words, perhaps it is not national-level policies that impact gender equality in sports leadership, it is organizational-level policies. Therefore, German sports federations could see to adjust their policies on board selection processes to improve gender equality.

5 Discussion

The findings presented in this thesis provide an in-depth understanding of gender and sports leadership and specifically the lack of female representation in sports leadership in the EU. This discussion chapter aims to interpret the main findings within the broader context of existing literature, examining how they align with or diverge from other scholarly perspectives and findings. Additionally, this chapter explores the significance of the results for scientific debates and potential impact on policy-making and practice.

Gender equality in sports leadership has long been a topic of concern, with studies consistently showing a lack of female representation in key decision-making roles. The results of the first part of this thesis support these findings and show that in 2024 there is still a long way to go before reaching gender equality in sports leadership in the EU as only five out of 27 countries have achieved a gender balanced executive committees. Only two of those, Sweden and Ireland have achieved gender balance in the leadership of all five examined national sports federations. This leads to the second interesting finding of this thesis. It was discovered that there are significant differences in the gender composition of executive committees of national sports federations depending on the type of sport. While in football the share of women in leadership positions was 15%, in gymnastics it was more than 47%. This finding could be explained with the argument that the number of women in decision-making positions of national sports federations is directly linked to the number of women participating in the sport Eilling et al. (2019). This means that the higher the female participation in a sport the higher the likelihood of gender-balance or almost gender-balanced boards. According to Eilling et al. (2019) male-dominated sports tend to be coupled with a more conservative organizational culture that fail to recognize the need for gender-balance in sports leadership and resist any type of structural change. Therefore, these findings support the assumption of an interconnectedness of macro-, meso- and micro-level factors contributing to a lack of female representation in sports leadership. Additionally, the share of female participants is only decisive for the gender composition of executive boards if it exceeds a critical mass of at least 60% (Eilling et al., 2019). This implicates that even in gender balanced sports, such as swimming and tennis, where there is a share of female and male participants of at least 40% each, leadership is still male-dominated. Only if the sport is female-dominated in terms of participation, such as gymnastics, leadership structures tend to be gender-balanced. The findings of this thesis support these assumptions. It furthermore shows there are structural discriminations women face based on their gender when it comes to the leadership positions, the as share of participation is clearly not reflected in leadership structures. Hence contributing to feminist literature arguing for a need to consider gender inequality as a structural rather than individual problem. Additionally, these findings have practical implications for interpreting published statistics on the general representation of women in sports leadership. Based on the results of this thesis, such statistics must be understood with caution as it must be considered which sports were examined.

This study has furthermore revealed a notable gender gap within the executive boards themselves, highlighting a significant disparity not only in overall representation but also in the distribution of leadership roles between men and women. While the total share of women on executive boards is (number), there is a strikingly lower proportion of female presidents within these federations. This discrepancy points to a persistent vertical gender segregation, especially evident in the highest position of decision-making. Vertical segregation, in this context, refers to the differential opportunities available to men and women as they progress up the organizational hierarchy. Despite a gradual increase in female representation at lower and mid-level positions, the proportion of women advancing to the topmost levels, particularly to positions such as president, remains disproportionately low (Takacs, 2018). This phenomenon can not only be found in the sports sector but is a widespread issue observed across various domains, including the broader labor market, where similar patterns of gender inequality exist (Takacs, 2018). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) reported

similar findings in 2017, emphasizing the pervasive nature of this issue (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017b). The role of president is arguably the most visible and influential position within any organization, and the pronounced lack of female representation in these roles may have far-reaching implications. It not only perpetuates the existing gender gap but also limits the visibility of female role models in the sports industry. This lack of representation can make it more challenging for aspiring women leaders to envision themselves in similar positions of power and influence, potentially discouraging them from pursuing leadership roles within the sports sector or other fields. This result highlights the potential of micro-level explanations by demonstrating how the absence of visible female leaders can restrict individuals' expectations, possibly discouraging them from pursuing leadership roles themselves (Adriaanse, 2017; Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019).

Another significant finding of this thesis was that the German and Irish national policies on gender equality in sport were remarkably similar in both their goals and the methods they employed to achieve them. This parallelism could be attributed, in part, to the common background in which these policies were developed. Both policies were established by government agencies in EU member states, which meant that they were subject to similar external pressures such as the ongoing gender discourse at the EU level and recommendations by the European Commission such as the Proposal for Strategic Action 2014-2020. Furthermore, both Germany and Ireland have comparable structures within their sport sectors, where sport policy is predominantly implemented on a voluntary basis. This limited array of tools available to both countries' agencies has inevitably led them to adopt comparable strategies in striving towards their common objectives of promoting gender equality in sports leadership. This then raises the question of the effectiveness of such policies since without mandatory enforcement mechanisms, the implementation of recommended actions may not be carried out consistently or thoroughly, resulting in limited impact on the desired outcomes of the policy. Martinsen et al. (2022) have examined this fundamental implementation dilemma at European level. Sport is not the only policy field in which the EU has merely a supporting role, limiting its enforcement possibilities. Nevertheless, the authors found that an institutional architecture has emerged to deal with this issue. The construction of a European Administrative Space is specifically aimed at facilitating the cooperation between national administrations and has led to the creation of European Enforcement Agencies that oversee the implementation of policies in the Member States. A possible avenue for future research would be to explore whether such an institutional set up to oversee national sports policies would be applicable to national sports structures.

This thesis also examined the policies governing the selection process for leadership positions within individual sports federations. The findings revealed that Ireland's football, swimming, and basketball federations have implemented specific measures to ensure gender diversity on their executive committees. This proactive approach may explain Ireland's strong performance in traditionally male-dominated sports like football and basketball. The adoption of these measures by some federations, but not others, raises important questions for future research, particularly regarding the factors that motivate certain national federations to prioritize gender diversity while others do not.

In summary, the discussion in this chapter has highlighted the persistent and multifaceted nature of gender inequality in sports leadership across the EU. The findings not only confirm the existence of significant disparities in female representation but also illuminate the structural barriers that continue to hinder women's advancement to top leadership positions. However, it has also shown that policy offers a limited explanation of these differences in gender balance. Policies at organizational level seem to have a larger impact on the gender composition of its executive committees than do national-level policies.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has sought to address the question of how the varying levels of female representation in sports leadership among EU member states can be explained, and what lessons can be drawn by countries with lower gender balance from those that are leading the way. Through a quantitative analysis of the gender composition of the executive committees of national sports federations in all EU-27 countries, the thesis has shown that gender inequalities still persist in European sports leadership despite significant improvements towards gender equality in other domains of sport. By examining both successful and lagging cases, the research sought to explore the underlying causes for these differences by focusing on implemented gender policies. The results have shown that the national gender policies for sport in the analyzed cases, Germany and Ireland, are strikingly similar with regard to content and process categories. Thus, challenging the assumption that national policies account for differing gender balance across EU Member States. The analysis further revealed the challenges inherent in voluntary approaches to promoting gender equality, suggesting that without stronger enforcement mechanisms, progress may remain limited. The implications of these findings extend beyond the sports sector, contributing to broader debates on gender inequality and offering valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to foster more inclusive leadership structures. Future research should build on these insights to explore potential institutional frameworks that could enhance the implementation and impact of gender equality policies in sports at both national and EU levels.

This research has been conducted under a number of limitations that should be acknowledged. First and foremost, the study relies heavily on secondary literature sources. While this approach allows for the inclusion of a broad geographical scope and enables the researcher to draw upon a wide array of existing knowledge and perspectives, it also presents certain challenges. The reliance on secondary data can result in limited specificity, as the information available may not directly address the specific aspects of the research question. Furthermore, secondary sources are prone to the inherent biases of the original researchers, which could influence the findings and interpretations presented in this study. In addition to the limitations related to data sources, the research was also constrained by time limits and language barriers. These constraints led to a focus on a smaller number of comparative case studies, reducing the analysis to just two cases. Although the selected cases provide valuable insights, the exclusion of other potentially relevant cases, such as Sweden, represents a significant limitation. The inability to cover these additional cases limits the generalizability of the findings and suggests that future research should consider a more expansive and inclusive approach to case selection. Ultimately, these limitations highlight the need for cautious interpretation of the results and suggest avenues for further investigation that could address these gaps.

All in all, this thesis has contributed to the existing research on gender equality in sports and sports leadership and policymaking in the EU, and advancing the discourse on gender equity and inclusivity in the sports sector. Its findings show that we are still a long way from realizing equal opportunities for women and girls in the sports sector in general and sports leadership in particular.

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Appendix A

Tables

Table A1. Sources for the Ranking of top five most participated in sports in the EU-27 countries. No data was found for Czechia, Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, and Slovenia.

Country	Sources
Austria	Sport Austria (2023, December 31). <i>Mitgliederstatistik</i> . Retrieved from https://www.sportaustria.at/fileadmin/Inhalte/Dokumente/Mitgliedsstatistik/Sport_Austria-Mitgliederstatistik2024.pdf
Germany	Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund e.V. (2023). <i>Bestandserhebung 2023</i> . Retrieved from https://cdn.dosb.de/user_upload/www.dosb.de/uber_uns/Bestandserhebung/Bestandserhebung_2023.pdf
Ireland	Sport Ireland (2021). <i>Irish Sports Monitor: Annual Report 2021</i> . Retrieved from https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2022-07/2021
Poland	Statistics Poland (2022, May 16). <i>Participation in sport and recreational activities in 2021</i> . Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/jost5/Downloads/participation_in_sport_and_recreational_activities_in_2021_2.pdf
Bulgaria	Council of Europe Portal (2021). Sport: Country Profile - Bulgaria. Retrieved from coe.int/en/web/sport/country-profile-bulgaria
Croatia Lithuania Romania	Rojo-Labaien, E., Rodríguez Díaz, Á., & Rookwood, J. (Eds.) (2020). <i>Sport, Statehood and Transition in Europe: Comparative Perspectives from Post-Soviet and Post-Socialist Societies</i> . Routledge
Cyprus	Hallman, K., & Petry, K. (Eds.) (2013). <i>Comparative Sport Development: Systems, Participation and Public Policy</i> . Springer
Italy	Istat (2015). Sports Practice in Italy. Retrieved from https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/204687
Portugal	Coelho e Silva, M., Figueiredo, A., & Goncalves, C. E. (2007). <i>Sports in a Changing Society - The Case of Portugal: origins, current statistics and new directions</i> . Retrieved from Coimbra University Press website: https://estudogeral.uc.pt/bitstream/10316/97582/1/Sports_in_a_changing_society.pdf
Belgium Denmark Estonia Finland France Hungary Netherlands Slovenia Spain Sweden	Breuer, C., Hoekman, R., Nagel, S., & Harold, v. d. W. (Eds.) (2015). <i>Sports Economics, Management and Policy: Vol. 12. Sport Clubs in Europe: A Cross-National Comparative Perspective</i> . Springer

Table A2. Top five most participated in sports in the EU-27 countries.

Country	Top five most popular sports based on membership in sports clubs
Austria	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Tennis 3. Skiing 4. Golf 5. Gymnastics
Belgium	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Tennis 3. Dancing 4. Volleyball 5. Gymnastics
Bulgaria	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Martial Arts 3. Volleyball 4. Basketball 5. Handball
Croatia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Badminton 2. Chess 3. Skiing 4. Bowling 5. Gymnastics
Cyprus	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Football 2 Swimming 3 Basketball 4 Volleyball 5 Tennis
Denmark	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Gymnastics 3. Badminton 4. Swimming 5. Jogging
Estonia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gymnastics 2. Football 3. Swimming 4. Body building 5. Basketball
Finland	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Skiing 3. Floorball 4. Ice hockey 5. Swimming
France	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Rugby 3. Swimming 4. Tennis 5. Judo

Germany	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Gymnastics 3. Tennis 4. Shooting and Archery 5. Athletics
Hungary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Basketball 3. Handball 4. Volleyball
Ireland	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Gaelic football 3. Golf 4. Running 5. Swimming
Italy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Gymnastics 3. Swimming
Lithuania	Basketball
Netherlands	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. speed skating 3. Swimming 4. Cycling 5. Athletics
Poland	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cycling 2. Swimming 3. Football 4. Volleyball 5. Tennis
Portugal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Handball 3. Basketball 4. Athletics 5. Volleyball
Romania	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gymnastics 2. Rowing 3. Athletics 4. Wrestling 5. Boxing
Slovenia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Skiing 3. Basketball 4. Bowling 5. Shooting
Spain	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Football 2. Basketball 3. Cycling

Sweden

- 4. Climbing
- 5. Tennis

- 1. Football
- 2. Athletics
- 3. Golf
- 4. Gymnastics
- 5. Floorball

No data was found for Czechia, Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, and Slovenia.

Appendix B

Analyzed Documents

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