



## Quotas in regional federations' executive boards: a gender perspective analysis

*Cuotas en las juntas directivas de las federaciones deportivas autonómicas: un análisis desde la perspectiva de género*

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** the increasing presence of women in sport leadership in recent years is gradually rebalancing a historically unequal field.

**Objective:** framed by Kanter's theory of occupational sex segregation, this study investigates the gender composition of regional sports federations' governing boards. Specifically, it aims to describe the profile of their members following the implementation of a quota measure, analyzing the current landscape from a gender perspective.

**Method:** The study surveyed 194 board members (62.37% men, 37.63% women). The 26-item instrument collected data on sociodemographic, professional, and leadership experience characteristics. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and independent t-tests.

**Results:** Significant gender disparities were found. Women board members were significantly younger and held higher educational levels than men. However, men possessed more coaching certifications, held higher-presidency roles, and had more years of leadership experience. Women were overrepresented in lower-influence vocal positions and dedicated fewer weekly work hours. No significant difference in gender representation was found between individual and team sports boards.

**Discussion:** While the mandatory quota achieved a balanced numerical proportion, gender disparities persist in opportunity and power. Women board members occupy less influential roles and have less leadership experience than men. This suggests quotas alone are insufficient.

**Conclusion:** To transform tokenistic representation, complementary measures -such as mandatory zipper systems or extending quota requirements to specific leadership positions- are important. Future research should employ qualitative and longitudinal designs to analyze power dynamics within boards. Gender equality in sports governance requires actively restructuring power relations, not merely meeting compositional targets.

### Keywords

Gender quotas; regional sports federations; sports governance; sports leadership.

### Resumen

**Introducción:** La creciente presencia de mujeres en puestos de liderazgo deportivo en los últimos años está reequilibrando gradualmente un ámbito históricamente desigual.

**Objetivo:** Enmarcado en la teoría de Kanter sobre la segregación ocupacional por sexos, este estudio investiga la composición de género de las juntas directivas de federaciones deportivas autonómicas. Nos proponemos describir, desde una perspectiva de género, el perfil de sus miembros tras la aplicación de una medida de cuotas.

**Método:** Se encuestó a 194 miembros de juntas directivas (62,37 % hombres, 37,63 % mujeres) mediante un cuestionario de 26 ítems sobre características sociodemográficas, profesionales y de experiencia en liderazgo. Los datos se analizaron con estadística descriptiva, pruebas chi-cuadrado y t-test.

**Resultados:** Las mujeres eran significativamente más jóvenes y con mayor nivel educativo, pero los hombres poseían más titulaciones de entrenador, ocupaban más presidencias y tenían más años de experiencia directiva. Las mujeres estaban sobrerrepresentadas en puestos de vocalía y dedicaban menos horas semanales. No hubo diferencias significativas entre deportes individuales y colectivos.

**Discusión:** Aunque la cuota logra una proporción numérica equilibrada, persisten disparidades en oportunidad y poder. Las mujeres ocupan roles menos influyentes, lo que sugiere que las cuotas por sí solas son insuficientes.

**Conclusión:** Para transformar la representación simbólica, son importantes medidas complementarias, como sistemas de listas cremallera o extender las cuotas a puestos directivos clave. Futuras investigaciones podrían emplear diseños cualitativos y longitudinales para analizar las dinámicas de poder. La igualdad de género requiere reestructurar activamente las relaciones de poder, no solo cumplir objetivos numéricos.

### Palabras clave

Cuotas de género; federaciones deportivas autonómicas; gobernanza deportiva; liderazgo deportivo.



## Introduction

In terms of sporting participation, the presence of women is becoming progressively more balanced compared to that of men. For instance, 42% of women in the European Union (EU) practice sport, keep fit or participate in recreational physical activity at least once a week compared to 47% of men (Eurostat, 2019). During the Tokyo 2021 Olympic Games, 47.8% of athletes were women (International Olympic Committee, 2024). Moreover, the Paris 2024 Olympic Games represent a historic milestone as the first Olympic edition to achieve full gender parity in athlete quota places, reflecting the International Olympic Committee's commitment to promoting equality in sport (International Olympic Committee, 2023). While these data appear positive at first glance, they may create a 'mirage of equality' that hides or distorts the reality that the social field of sport is still, as Dunning (2008) argued, a male preserve. The presence of women in sport roles outside the field of play has not progressed in the same way. Over the last decade, various studies have confirmed the persistent under-representation of women in areas such as sports coaching (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2018; LaVoi, 2016), sports science studies (Serra et al., 2019; 2022), or sport management and governance positions (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014; Barcia et al., 2024; Galarza et al., 2025; Mikkonen, 2022).

Regarding leadership positions in sports federations, considering the ten most popular Olympic sports in each EU country, in 2023 women represented 22.7% of the members of the highest decision-making bodies; 19.7% of the deputy/vice-presidents; 12.9% of the presidents or chairs; and 24.9% of the executive heads (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024). Knoppers et al. (2021) point out that the lack of, and resistance to, parity in leadership positions in sports organisations is justified through four discursive axes. First, there is a meritocracy discourse that assumes women who join a board through a quota are unqualified or less qualified than men. Second, there is a neoliberal discourse that views gender quotas and other affirmative action practices as limiting the freedom of individuals and sports organisations to act. Third, there is a deterministic discourse of silence or passivity that assumes patriarchal structures at a macro-social level are solely responsible for women's underrepresentation. Lastly, there is a discourse of diversity that values greater participation of women in sports, but not in board membership.

In order to tackle the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, including in sports federations, a frequent measure has been the implementation of gender quotas (Knoppers et al., 2021; Valiente, 2020; 2023). Drawing on Conell's gender-regimes theory (2009), Adriaanse & Schofield's work (2014) showed that implementing a gender quota effectively promotes gender equality in sport leadership positions only when combined with additional measures. These measures include directors embracing gender equality as an organisational value, regarding symbolic relations; appointing women directors to significant board roles, addressing production and power relations; and fostering a cohesive team environment on the board, in terms of emotional relations.

However, while quotas can positively affect gender relations, it is a measure that continues to be debated as the implementation of this measure faces resistance and unexpected challenges, and quotas' success appear to be influenced by regional, national and organisational acceptance (Adriaanse, 2017; Evans & Pfister, 2020). For instance, quotas are often seen as coercive, with the presence of women in leadership roles being attributed to compliance with a legal mandate rather than their abilities (Knoppers, 2021; Pike et al., 2018). Additionally, while quotas can swiftly increase the number of women in governance positions, they may lead to practices such as expanding the size of boards, allowing men to retain their positions and power (Caprais & Delorme, 2019).

This study aims to describe the profile of individuals who comprise regional sports federations' governing boards from a gender perspective after the implementation of the quota measure. By examining the demographic, professional, and experiential characteristics of board members, the research seeks to highlight gender disparities and understand the factors influencing gender representation in these leadership positions. In doing so, it also contributes to the broader debate on gender quotas by providing empirical evidence from a regional context with a specific regulation regarding quota compliance.

## ***Understanding the context: Gender policies and leadership positions in Spain's sports organisations***

Throughout the 21st century, Spain has made significant progress in terms of social, political and legislative recognition of women. The protection of women against gender-based violence (Organic Law 1/2004 and Organic Law 10/2022) or the guarantee of sexual and reproductive rights (Organic Law 2/2010) are examples of efforts in this direction. After two legislatures with a conservative majority in parliament, the progressive political cycle that began in 2019 has been introducing new regulations aimed at gender equity. One of the most remarkable governmental efforts has had to do with equal representation between women and men on the boards of public and private organisations. In this regard, Law 39/2022 on sports mandates that sports organisations achieve gender balance in their governing bodies. Accordingly, men or women cannot exceed sixty percent nor be less than forty percent of a board's total composition. However, the implementation of this gender quota as well as other gender equality measures (e.g. equality plans, protocols of action against sexual and gender-based harassment) in entities such as national sports federations is not going so smoothly, and sanctions are already being considered by the public administration (del Toro, 2023; EFE, 2024).

In strict terms, it could be said that the gender quota in Spanish sports federations is not a new measure, although it is the most demanding one. Resolutions from the Consejo Superior de Deportes (the highest sports governance body in Spain) in 2014 and 2019 encouraged greater female participation and leadership through an economic incentives program. Resolutions issued by the Consejo Superior de Deportes (CSD) in 2014 and 2019 introduced a set of economic incentives to promote female participation and leadership in sport. The 2014 resolution allocated €1 million to the *Mujer y Deporte* program, supporting initiatives such as media promotion of women's sport, travel grants for female coaches and referees, the hiring of retired female athletes, and social support for maternity, academic training, and work-life balance. Many federations that voluntarily adapted to these resolutions benefited financially, and those organisations also implemented more measures aimed at promoting gender equality within the organisation (Valiente, 2023). However, the growth of female participation in Spanish sport was only 4 percentage points in between 2009 and 2023 (Vilanova et al., 2024). This raises doubts about equality measures reliant solely on economic incentives and the goodwill of sports leaders.

In the previous paragraphs, we discussed national regulations. However, Spain is divided into different regions, each with its own regional sports federations. The regulations mentioned earlier only affected the national federations. Thus, it is not surprising that a recent study shows that the executive boards of Spanish sports federations are composed of 65% men, while the percentage of men in these bodies within regional sports federations is 72% (Asociación del Deporte Español, 2022). The same study reveals other striking data: only 3% of Spanish federations and 7% of regional federations have a female president.

The gender balance on the boards of regional sports federations varies greatly among Spanish regions (the mean is 28% of women). However, one region, the Valencian Country, stands out for its high presence of women on its regional sports federations' boards, reaching 43% (Asociación del Deporte Español, 2022). This is due to a 2018 mandate requiring regional sports federations in the Valencian Country to form their boards such that the least represented gender comprises at least 40%. This measure was solidified with the publication of Order 7/2022, which regulates the electoral processes of these organisations. In this work, we focus exclusively on the sports federations of the Valencian Country, which elected their new boards in 2022. This case presents a unique opportunity to explore how the most demanding gender quota at regional level in Spain is shaping leadership structures in sport, a topic still scarcely addressed in academic literature.

### ***Theoretical framework***

Kanter's (1977) theory of occupational sex segregation was used to address the aim of the current study. This theory is particularly relevant as it delves into the intricate dynamics of opportunity, power, and proportion –factors directly applicable to understanding the representation of women on regional federation boards. The theory has been applied in the sport context (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2018; Knoppers, 1987; Reade et al., 2009) and in the business sector (Nguyen et al., 2020), further supporting its suitability for analyzing gendered structures within organizational settings like sports federations.



Knoppers (1987) defined opportunity as “the shape of one's career ladder, perceived obstacles and satisfaction, access to training, and availability and type of feedback” (p. 13). According to her perspective, opportunity is intrinsically linked to one's position in the occupational hierarchy and the ability to access resources and advantages associated with certain job roles. Previous research has shown that the career ladders of male and female in sport leadership positions differ based on gender (Hovden 2010). Opportunities for women in their career growth are sometimes influenced by their gender. These impediments include work-family conflicts and leadership positions often entail travel, long hours, and overtime (Burton & Leberman 2017). The association of sport leadership with men and masculine traits persists, leading to reduced consideration of women for managerial and leadership roles (Burton & Leberman 2017; Grappendorf & Burton 2017; Hovden 2010). Additionally, compared to women's sports, men's sports frequently provide greater financial options (such as budgets, sponsors, and professionalisation). The lack of opportunities for women in sport leadership positions may affect their ability to enter, progress within, and remain in sports organisations.

For Knoppers (1987), power relates to “one's capacity to mobilise resources” (p. 16). This concept encompasses the ability to make decisions, influence organisational policies and determine the course of events within a work environment. The sport industry has long been controlled by men, which has resulted in the growth of the “old boys” network (Dunning, 2008). This has an effect on gender-biased hiring policies and patterns, which in turn encourages homologous reproduction (Stangle & Kane, 1991). Women are consequently underrepresented in positions of power, which affects both their ability to direct their own careers and their ability to influence others in positions of decision-making. Furthermore, according to Adriaanse and Schofield (2014), quotas can impact gender relations in terms of power (e.g., who holds the most important responsibilities) as well as production (e.g., distribution of tasks and opportunity to join the board).

According to Knoppers (1987), proportion refers to the ratio of women to men in the workplace and is linked to concepts of opportunity and power. Kanter classified workplace groups into four categories based on their gender proportions: uniform, asymmetric, biased, and balanced. Uniform groups consist entirely of one gender, while asymmetric groups have a dominant gender influencing decision. Biased groups have a more balanced ratio, allowing the minority gender to influence organizational culture. In balanced groups, both genders hold influence, focusing on individual skills rather than gender. Kanter (1977) and Joecks et al. (2013) suggest that in biased groups, women represent between 20% and 40%, while in balanced groups, women account for 40-60%. Kanter highlights how these proportions affect opportunities for women and perpetuate traditional gender roles within occupations.

In summary, Kanter's theory of occupational sex segregation highlights the importance of opportunity, power and proportion in understanding work dynamics and gender inequalities in the workplace. These concepts provide an analytical framework for examining how organisational structures and social norms influence the work experiences of men and women. Kanter's theory provides a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges and opportunities in fostering gender-inclusive governance within regional federations.

## Method

### *Participants*

All 596 individuals forming the total population of governing board members of sports federations in the Valencian Country were invited to participate in the study. The final sample consisted of 194 individuals who voluntarily agreed to take part, corresponding to a non-probability response sampling method (Wolf et al., 2016). The response rate was 32.55%. The sample size was determined for a confidence level of 90% and a margin of error of 5% based on a population of 596 individuals. Thus, the sample for our study was  $n=194$  (62.37% identified as men and 37.63% as women) who were part of the governing boards in sports federations in the Valencian Community. The sample covered 51 sports disciplines belonging to 42 federations (see Table 1 for further details).



Table 1. Distribution of the sample by sports federation

Federation	Participants	% of board members	% of total responses	% licenses held by women
Aeronautics	2	20%	1,03%	5%
Athletics	10	50%	5,15%	42%
Badminton	2	28,57%	1,03%	36%
Baseball, softball and American football	2	18,18%	1,03%	29%
Basketball	3	42,86%	1,55%	26%
Bowling	2	28,57%	1,03%	24%
Canoeing	5	27,78%	2,58%	37%
Caving	4	57,14%	2,06%	33%
Chess	1	8,33%	0,52%	9%
Cycling	2	14,29%	1,03%	9%
Dance Sport	1	14,29%	0,52%	88%
Equestrian	2	40%	1,03%	78%
Fencing	1	16,67%	0,52%	39%
Fishing and casting	3	25%	1,55%	6%
Football	5	25%	2,58%	9%
Golf	10	50%	5,15%	27%
Gymnastics	4	30,77%	2,06%	95%
Horse pulling	15	75,00%	7,73%	no data
Judo	7	35%	3,61%	28%
Karate	15	93,75%	7,73%	32%
Kickboxing and Muay Thai	1	20%	0,52%	23%
Lifesaving	1	20%	0,52%	32%
Motor racing	2	25%	1,03%	14%
Mountaineering and climbing	12	50%	6,19%	33%
Olympic shooting	4	30,77%	2,06%	10%
Olympic wrestling	3	60%	1,55%	27%
Orienteering	5	55,56%	2,58%	42%
Padel	8	72,73%	4,12%	32%
Pelota	19	95%	9,79%	13%
Pigeon fancying	1	4,76%	0,52%	12%
Rugby	2	40%	1,03%	17%
Sailing	6	31,58%	3,09%	24%
Skating	1	14,29%	0,52%	62%
Sports for the intellectually disabled	2	15,38%	1,03%	22%
Swimming	2	15,38%	1,03%	46%
Taekwondo	1	10%	0,52%	36%
Traditional games	4	36,36%	2,06%	no data
Triathlon	7	46,67%	3,61%	28%
Underwater activities	1	5,88%	0,52%	13%
Volleyball	12	85,71%	6,19%	68%
Weightlifting	3	30%	1,55%	41%
Winter sports	1	25%	0,52%	24%

Note: the data in the column "% licenses held by women" has been extracted from the 2024 report on licenses and clubs published by the Consejo Superior de Deportes (2025)

Regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample (see Table 2), the male participants were notably older, with a mean age of 55.46 years ( $SD=10.88$ ), compared to 45.53 years ( $SD=10.91$ ) for female participants. The sample was predominantly married or cohabiting and highly educated, with the majority holding a vocational training certificate or a university degree.

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

Variable	Sub-categories	Men		Women	
		(% within columns)		(% within columns)	
Age in years, M (SD)	-	55.46	(10.88)	45.53	(10.91)
Marital status	Single	10	(8.3%)	11	(15.1%)
	Married	88	(72.7%)	36	(49.3%)
	Living with a partner	9	(7.4%)	15	(20.5%)
	Widow	1	(0.8%)	1	(1.4%)
	Divorced	13	(10.7%)	10	(13.7%)
Children	0	19	(15.7%)	24	(32.9%)
	1	26	(21.5%)	20	(27.4%)
	2	57	(47.1%)	24	(32.9%)
	3	15	(12.4%)	4	(5.5%)
	4 or more	4	(3.3%)	1	(1.4%)
Education	No studies	1	(1.2%)	0	(0.0%)
	Primary school diploma	12	(9.9%)	4	(5.5%)
	High school diploma	19	(15.7%)	5	(6.8%)
	Vocational training	20	(16.5%)	18	(24.7%)
	University degree	49	(40.5%)	23	(31.5%)



Master's degree	15	(12.4%)	21	(28.8%)
Doctoral degree	5	(4.1%)	2	(2.7%)

## Measures

After receiving ethical approval from the Sport Administration of Catalonia's Research Ethics Committee (011/CEICGC/2023), participants were required to fill out a 26-item questionnaire. To ensure the quality and relevance of the questionnaire, a thorough development and review process was carried out, including the collaboration of a committee of experts in the relevant field. This committee, composed of professionals with experience and expertise in the topic addressed by the questionnaire, reviewed every aspect of the questionnaire to ensure its univocality (i.e. questions had only one meaning) and relevance. Iterations of the questionnaire were made based on the suggestions and comments provided by the experts, thus ensuring its consistency and appropriateness to the research objectives.

Building on Kanter's (1977) theory and relevant categories identified in the literature on female representation in leadership positions in Spain (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2018; Valiente, 2020, 2023), the questionnaire comprised four sections designed to gather descriptive participant information. Firstly, sports federation characteristics: this section aimed to gather information about the types of sports and the number of licences within the federation. Secondly, socio-demographic characteristics: participants were asked to provide information about their sex, age, academic qualifications, coaching education, and family situation. Thirdly, socio-economic characteristics: information regarding employment status, and experience was collected in this section. And finally, experience in leadership positions: participants were asked about their current position, years of experience, and experience in clubs.

## Procedure

A link to the online version of the questionnaire was emailed to potential participants. The dissemination of the questionnaire was carried out by Confedecom, an association that is formed by a group of sports federations of the Valencian Country with the aim of promoting, defending and representing federated sports. Valencian Sports Federations also helped with the recruitment of participants by sending active board members an email with a link to the online questionnaire.

Participant confidentiality and data protection were ensured through the use of a secure online platform facilitating fully anonymous responses. No personally identifiable information (e.g., names, email addresses, IP addresses) was gathered. Informed consent was obtained digitally; the introductory page clearly outlined the study's purpose, emphasized voluntary participation, and stated participants' right to withdraw at any point before completing the questionnaire. Collected data were securely stored on an external hard drive with access restricted to the research team. Information was gathered between February and May 2023.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarise responses for each of the four sections of the questionnaire. To assess gender differences in responses, chi-square tests were used for categorical variables, while independent-samples t-tests were used for continuous variables. Prior to conducting t-tests, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test and Levene's test, respectively. A minimum significance level of  $p < .05$  was applied for all statistical tests.

## Results

In this section, the results will be organised according to the three key concepts of the theoretical framework: opportunity, power, and proportion.

### Opportunity

The women in this sample were significantly younger than the men ( $t(151.54) = 6.15, p < .001$ ). As shown in Table 3, Chi-square tests were performed to investigate differences in several variables between men



and women. For the education variable, a significant association was found between gender and educational level ( $\chi^2(7) = 15.60, p < .05$ ), indicating that women had higher educational levels, especially in the master's degree level. However, for the marital status variable, no significant association was found between gender and marital status ( $\chi^2NS$ ), suggesting that men and women have similar marital statuses. For the variable of children, a significant association was found between gender and presence of children ( $\chi^2(4) = 15.23, p < .01$ ), indicating that fewer women have children compared to men.

Table 3. Chi-square analysis of the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

Variable	Chi-Square Test	Interpretation
Education	$\chi^2(7) = 15.60, p < .05$	More women with higher educational levels
Marital status	$\chi^2NS$	Men and women have similar marital status
Children	$\chi^2(4) = 15.23, p < .01$	Less women with children

The previous experiences in sport and leadership positions of the sample are presented in Table 4. Comparative analyses were performed to investigate differences between men and women in several sport-related subcategories. In relation to the highest level of competition as an athlete, no significant differences were found between men and women ( $\chi^2NS$ ), suggesting that they have similar levels of performance in their sport experience. In terms of coaching certification, a significant association was found between gender and possession of certification ( $\chi^2(2) = 10.82, p < .001$ ), indicating that more men than women possess coaching certification. In terms of experience in leadership positions, significant differences were observed between men and women, with a higher percentage of men having held leadership positions compared to women. Moreover, when years of experience in leadership positions were examined, women were found to have fewer years of experience than men ( $t(63.09) = 2.46, p < .01$ ). These results suggest that while men and women may have similar levels of performance in sport, there are disparities in coaching certification and in experience and time spent in sport leadership positions, with a higher presence of men in these areas.

Table 4. Previous experience in sport and management positions

Variable	Sub-categories	Men		Women		Interpretation
			(% within columns)		(% within columns)	
Highest level competed as an athlete	I have not been an athlete	5	(4.1%)	7	(9.6%)	$\chi^2NS$ Men and women have similar levels of performance in their sports background
	Recreational level	14	(11.6%)	13	(17.8%)	
	Provincial level	13	(10.7%)	7	(9.6%)	
	Regional level	18	(14.9%)	7	(9.6%)	
	National level	43	(35.5%)	24	(32.9%)	
	International level	28	(23.1%)	15	(20.5%)	
Coach certification	Yes	53	(43.8%)	15	(20.5%)	$\chi^2(2) = 10.82, p < .001$ More men hold coaching education certificates
	No	68	(56.2%)	58	(79.5%)	
Experience in leadership positions	Yes	83	(68.6%)	35	(47.9%)	$\chi^2(2) = 9.23, p < .01$ More men with previous experience in leadership positions
	No	38	(31.4%)	38	(52.1%)	
Years of experience in leadership positions, M (SD)	-	11.94	(9.21)	8.05	(5.05)	Women had less years of experience in direction than men ( $t(63.09) = 2.46, p < .01$ ).

## Power

Comparative analyses were performed to investigate the differences between men and women in different roles within an organization (see Table 5). In relation to the current role held, significant differences were found between men and women ( $\chi^2(5) = 22.74, p < .0001$ ). It was observed that there were more men holding the position of president, while more women held the position of vocal compared to men.

In terms of the number of weekly hours spent working, a significant difference was found between men and women ( $t(148.43) = 2.91, p < .001$ ), with women spending fewer hours per week compared to men.

These results suggest that, although there is an unequal distribution of roles within the organisation, with more men occupying leadership roles such as the presidency, women tend to occupy vocal roles. In addition, women also tend to dedicate fewer hours per week to work compared to men.

Table 5. Current position in the sport regional board

Variable	Sub-categories	Men		Women		Interpretation
		(%within columns)	(% within columns)	(% within columns)	(% within columns)	
Current role	Presidency	29	(24.0%)	2	(2.7%)	x2(5)= 22.74, p<.0001 More male as presidents. More women as vocals.
	Vice-Presidency	15	(12.4%)	10	(13.7%)	
	General Secretary	21	(17.4%)	10	(13.7%)	
	Spokesperson	1	(0.8%)	1	(1.4%)	
	Treasurer	0	(0.0%)	4	(5.5%)	
	Vocal	55	(45.5%)	46	(63.0%)	
Weekly hours, M (SD)	-	13.05	(14.01)	7.47	(9.72)	(t <sub>(148.43)</sub> = 2.91, p<.001) Women spend low weekly hours than men

## Proportion

Regarding proportion as the third key construct of organisational context as Kanter proposed, in the present study, it was found that for every 1.66 men, there was 1 woman. This corresponds to a ratio of approximately 0.604, indicating that 37.67% of the population in the present study were women.

Moreover, to provide a deeper and more novel insight, a comparative analysis by sport type was conducted (see Table 6). The representation of women on boards was very similar in individual sports (38.0%) and team sports (36.9%). A Pearson's chi-square test confirmed that no significant difference was found in the gender representation on boards between individual and team sports ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.021$ ,  $*p* = .885$ ). Therefore, within this sample, the typology of the sport (individual vs. team) does not appear to be a differentiating factor in the gender composition of sports federation boards.

Table 6. Comparative analysis by sport type

Variable	Sub-categories	Men		Women		Interpretation
		(%within columns)	(% within columns)	(% within columns)	(% within columns)	
Type of Sport	Individual	80	(62.0%)	49	(38.0%)	x2 (1) = 0.021, *p* = .885 No significant difference was found in the gender representation on boards between individual and team sports
	Team	41	(63.1%)	58	(36.9%)	

## Discussion

This study aimed to describe the profile of individuals who comprise regional sports federations' governing boards from a gender perspective after the implementation of the quota measure in Valencian sports federations (Order 7/2022). According to Kanter's (1977) theory, the regional federations in the current study are considered balanced, as there exists a mandatory norm requiring that 40% of the board comprise women. Nevertheless, this study highlights significant gender differences regarding the demographic, professional, and experiential characteristics of board members in regional sports federations.

Despite the criteria for accessing the boards of regional sports federations being considered meritocratic and gender-neutral, they remain detrimental to women and minorities (Caprais et al., 2020). Achieving top positions involves not only having a strong network and good rapport with those in power but also holding multiple roles within the organisational structure (Soler et al., 2019), working long and unorthodox hours (Piggott and Pike, 2019), and being available on many occasions to represent the federation nationwide. This study shows that although both men and women attain leadership roles, their personal and professional profile differ significantly. Women often have to navigate more complex social dynamics, balance additional responsibilities, and overcome entrenched biases, resulting in significantly different personal and professional profiles compared to their male counterparts.

Regarding opportunity, the demographic analysis shows that women on these boards are, on average, 10 years younger than their male counterparts. This age difference could indicate a higher rate of premature dropout among women, potentially due to work-family conflict (WFC), as supported by studies on women in sport leadership positions (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2023; Pfister & Radtke, 2006). Additionally, there are fewer women with children, which further suggests WFC as a significant factor. In the Spanish sociocultural context, the distribution of reproductive labor such as daily household and family-



related activities is highly gendered, with men devoting an average of 1 hour and 50 minutes per day to such tasks, compared to women's 4 hours and 4 minutes (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2010). Addressing this issue could involve increasing the number of women with children in these positions and implementing measures to support work-life balance, such as scheduling meetings at family-friendly times and providing universal childcare support. Such measures align with the suggestions by Anderson et al. (2023), who emphasise the need for structural changes to support women's participation in sport. Having been an athlete, especially at a national or international level, appears to be an important factor in becoming a regional board member. A greater presence of women athletes in leadership positions within sports federations, as highlighted by Valiente (2020), leads to the development of more gender equity-focused initiatives, particularly concerning sports participation. In recent years, licences for women in various disciplines have significantly increased (Consejo Superior de Deportes, 2024). In examining the educational levels, the data revealed that a significantly larger proportion of women have completed graduate studies, earning master's degrees, compared to their male counterparts. This data challenges the meritocratic discourse of those who oppose quotas and, as described by Knoppers et al. (2021) or Pike et al. (2018), assume that women appointed to executive boards through such measures are not sufficiently qualified or are less qualified than men. Moreover, a significant number of men own specific sports coach certification, which suggests that being a sports coach is an element of symbolic recognition which facilitates advancing to become a regional board member due to the established relationships with sports federations developed through coaching. In the Spanish context and around the globe there is an underrepresentation of women coaches (Hinojosa-Alcalde et al., 2018; LaVoi, 2016) and this results also remarks the prevalence of the "old boys" network, (Dunning, 2008; Grappendorf & Burton, 2017; Knoppers et al., 2021), that perpetuate the status quo and hinder the access to leadership position for women. To address this imbalance, it may be necessary to change hiring and networking mechanisms or increase the number of women in coaching positions. Enhancing the presence of women in coaching roles within sports federations is essential for achieving gender balance, as discussed by Burton and Leberman (2017), who evaluate current scholarship in sport leadership from a multilevel perspective.

The issue of power within these organisations is critical. Previous research has discussed the impact of gender bias in sport leadership, underscoring the challenges women face in attaining positions of real power and influence (Galarza et al., 2025; Grappendorf & Burton, 2017). In our study, women often occupied positions that lack decision-making authority or the ability to drive change. Most women held positions as vocal with fewer hours compared to their male counterparts. In the boards of Spanish national and regional sports federations, members holding positions as vocal have both voice and vote in meetings but lack executive authority to formulate proposals or set policies decisively. Moreover, unlike presidencies or other executive roles, vocal members typically do not have as prominent a public profile, focusing primarily on contributing to debates and making collective decisions within the governing body. This highlights that, despite women being present in the regional federation boards, there is still a distinction between formal and effective equality, as well as in the division between public and private spheres that favour men (Hovden et al., 2010; Piggott & Matthews, 2021). Authors such as Caprais and Delorme (2019) argued that an unintended effect of implementing gender quotas in sports organisations can be the enlargement of boards so that men continue to maintain their influence on the most relevant decisions. This could be interpreted as a sign of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), a pattern of practice deeply rooted in sport that legitimizes male dominance and specific leadership norms. Even when women gain leadership positions (e.g., through quotas), they are often integrated into roles that conform to -rather than challenge- these established masculine standards, limiting their real influence. Thus, while quotas address numerical underrepresentation, they frequently fail to disrupt the underlying power dynamics and cultural barriers perpetuated by hegemonic masculinity, which continue to define legitimacy and authority within these federations. In this sense, the allocation of a majority of women to positions with high constraints on the exercise of power could also be an example of such practices.

In terms of proportion, the implementation of gender quotas has led to achieving the 40% threshold for women's representation, a positive step towards gender equality. According to Kanter's (1977) theory, reaching 40% representation is a significant milestone. However, as seen in the previous paragraph, there remains a disparity between representation and actual participation. While gender quotas may



increase the number of women on boards, they do little to change the occupation of top leadership positions (Hovden, 2010; Hovden et al., 2018; Piggott & Pike, 2020). This highlights the problem of viewing quotas as a quick fix for achieving gender equality. True progress requires systemic changes that allow women to participate fully and equally in decision-making processes (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014). Caprais et al. (2020) emphasised that although gender quotas help to reduce men's homosocial reproduction, the fundamental recruitment practices remain largely unchanged.

The results of this research show the persistence of some challenges in achieving effective gender equity on the boards of regional sports federations. The implementation of quotas as a fast-track measure is positive in addressing the balanced gender proportion (Caprais et al., 2020). However, addressing opportunity and power is more related to changes that need to occur within organisational cultures, where discourses and behaviours that tend to ensure male hegemony in this social space still prevail (Barcia et al., 2024; Dunning, 2008; Evans & Pfister, 2021; Mikkonen, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020).

This study has some limitations that should be considered. First, the analysis did not adopt an intersectional perspective (considering factors such as sexual orientation, race, social class, disability, etc.). Secondly, the study's descriptive design limits the ability to capture deeper insights into power relations and participants' lived experiences. Additionally, the relatively low response rate (32.55%) may introduce nonresponse bias. Although the sample size was adequate for the planned analyses, individuals who chose to participate might have differed systematically from non-participants, potentially affecting the generalisability of the findings.

## Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that while gender quotas have successfully increased women's numerical representation on Spanish regional sports federation boards, the gender order and the roles and status of men in regional sports' federations board still are reproduced. The persistence of gendered role allocation - with men disproportionately occupying high-status positions like presidencies and vice-presidencies - reveals how superficial compliance with quota laws masks deeper patterns of inequality. These findings align with Valcárcel's (2008) concept of the "gender equality mirage," where proportional representation creates an illusion of progress while traditional power structures remain intact.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, they challenge the assumption that compositional parity automatically translates to substantive equality in organizational governance. Second, they expose the limitations of quota systems that focus solely on numerical targets without addressing the distribution of actual decision-making authority. Our analysis of role allocation patterns suggests that without deliberate intervention, gender quotas risk becoming symbolic gestures that maintain rather than disrupt existing hierarchies.

To move beyond tokenistic representation, we propose two specific policy interventions. First, electoral mechanisms could be reformed through mandatory zipper systems (Bonilla, 2023), requiring candidate lists to alternate between women and men in all positions. This structural change would prevent the common practice of concentrating women in less influential board positions. Second, quota requirements should extend beyond board composition to focus specifically on roles with power or decision-making authority. We recommend mandating at least 40% representation of the underrepresented gender in all leadership roles (presidencies, vice-presidencies, etc.), as these positions typically hold the greatest organizational influence.

Future research should build on our findings by focusing on several key areas. First, it is essential to analyse the composition of the different bodies that form the assemblies and representative organs of sports federations. This analysis could shed light on whether gender quotas effectively translate into meaningful participation and influence in decision-making processes. Additionally, there is a need to conduct more qualitative research to examine the power dynamics established within the boards of regional sports federations, as well as the role of social capital when designing election lists and determining who occupies which position on the board. Understanding the intricate relationships of power and influence among board members can provide valuable insights into the barriers and opportunities for women and minorities in attaining leadership roles. Longitudinal analysis of the specific positions occupied by women and men in the boards of regional sports federations also could be valuable information



regarding how power is distributed over the terms since the implementation of quotas, and it would be useful to assess the extent to which the distribution of this power has consequences for the federations' policies. Additional avenues of research include examining sports with a significant gender imbalance in licenses, as well as conducting a multi-level analysis of regional, national, and international federations.

While gender quotas have undeniably transformed the demographic landscape of Spanish regional federations, our findings caution against complacency. True equality requires to actively restructure power relationships. Our policy proposals offer a viable pathway, but sustained progress will require ongoing monitoring and a shift in organizational cultures that still equate leadership with masculine norms. As the present study shows, achieving meaningful equality demands to look beyond the numbers to question who really holds power in supposedly gender-balanced organisations.

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