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Women's leadership and gender equality in sport governance

FISU leaders' perceptions

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Abstract

Despite a significant increase in opportunities for women to actively participate in sport, females remain underrepresented in sport leadership positions. The issue of gender inequality is global, but very few researchers studied female leadership in the context of the international sport governing bodies. The aim of the present study was to explore the current stage of women's leadership and gender equality within the senior leadership positions at FISU - the International University Sports Federation.

Qualitative research was adopted for the study to serve its exploratory purpose. The primary data was collected by conducting five semi-structured in-depth interviews with three male and two female leaders at FISU. The research sample was chosen in accordance with purposive sampling method for selecting the interviewees to ensure that they can provide valuable insights on the topic based on their cultural and professional background. The collected primary data was then analyzed using content analysis method to narrow down the data and identify the most essential themes discussed by the respondents.

The primary data analysis indicated that current leaders recognise the issue of gender inequality in leadership positions at FISU as problematic. The findings revealed the reasons of gender inequality at FISU leadership, highlighted the need for both top-down and bottom-up changes in order to achieve the gender diversity on board, emphasized the importance of sharing the responsibility with all the members of the organisation and outlined the characteristics that make female leaders unique and valuable. Recommendations for further research included the expansion of a sample of research participants by approaching the leaders not only at FISU but also at the national university sports associations to understand the broader perspective on gender equality and women's leadership across countries.

| Keywords/tags (subjects)
Women's leadership, gender equality, sport leadership, sport governance |

| Miscellaneous (Confidential information) |

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1   Introduction

For many years women have been representing the minority in the leadership positions in sport industry. Despite the acknowledged importance and benefits of female leaders, nowadays sport remains to be a gendered space with a visible dominance of males in sport governance. (Kihl, Shaw, & Schull 2013, 148.) Governance is a crucial component of every sport-related organisation at any level from amateur to professional and all over the world, even though governing processes are not always visible (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald 2005, 195-196).

The underrepresentation of women in sport leadership context was first analysed on the example of Canada in 1984 and followed by similar research on English sport the next year. These studies became an important starting point towards exploring the relationships of gender and sport leadership as well as the reasons and institutionalised practices that provoke the gender inequality in sport leadership. Nevertheless, the topic of gender equality in sport leadership still did not get enough attention from the academic world. (Knoppers, Hovden, & Elling 2019.)

The majority of previous studies have been focused on researching the role of gender in sport governance either in the context of certain countries or in the context of national sport federations. However, there is a lack of persistent understanding of gender equality issues from a global perspective, for example, very few researchers have been studying gender equality and women's leadership within international sport organisations. From this perspective, the topic of the present study brings new insights to the field since it intended to study the current leaders' perceptions of gender equality and female leadership within FISU – the International University Sports Federation.

The aim of the following study was to explore the contemporary stage of women's leadership and gender equality within the senior leadership positions at FISU. The author tried to understand if people obtaining the leadership positions at the FISU Executive Committee and other committees recognise the issue of gender inequality in

their governance. Thus, the research question stated by the author is the following: Is the problem of gender inequality recognised by leaders at FISU?

Taking a closer look at the women's leadership at FISU served a broader objective of getting a deeper understanding of the sport governance issues related to gender and fulfilled the personal motivation of the author to study this topic.

The student who conducted this study is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Business Administration with a specialisation in Sport Marketing & Management. Therefore, the interest of the author lies in exploring business concepts through the lens of the sport industry. As a future female working in one of the sport organisations, it was the author's personal interest to get a better understanding of women's leadership in sports. Moreover, the conductor of the present study has been involved in the Winter Universiade 2019, which is one of the event organised by the International University Sports Federation. The existing network of individuals at leadership positions at FISU prompted the author to study female leadership and gender equality in sport leadership by taking a closer look at the current situation at FISU.

The study follows the recommendations by JAMK reporting instructions for conducting the bachelor's thesis and includes five different chapters that structure the study in a logical and easy-to-read manner.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the background information and explains the author's motivation for the study. This introduction chapter aims to familiarise the reader with the context and make him/her acknowledged about the general concept of the research. The second chapter covers the theoretical framework of the study by referring to the secondary data sources on the topics of gender equality in sport governance, women's leadership in sport and university sports. The third chapter presents the methodology of the study, including the purpose of the study, the research question stated, and the research design chosen to achieve the research purpose. The processes of data collection and data analysis, as well as the reliability and validity matters, are described in detail in the methodology chapter. The fourth chapter reveals the findings on the perceptions of women's leadership and gender

equality at FISU. The final fifth chapter discusses the findings, provides an answer to the research question, discusses the findings and limitations of the study, and states suggestions for further research.

2   Theoretical framework

2.1   Gender equality in sport governance

The notion of gender equality stands for equal treatment of males and females in legislation and policies that make them equally accessible to services and resources available (UNFPA 2017). Ensuring gender equality in sport is crucial because sport has been always a model example for the understanding of gender in society as a whole (Pfister 2011, 2).

The change towards achieving gender equality at all levels of sport started in 1981 when the "Resolution on the Greater Involvement of Women in Sport" was adopted. However, the proposed measures and recommendations did not lead to a predicted success since women still faced gender-based discrimination. In 2010 the "Code of Sport Ethics" introduced the revised guidelines and resolutions, demanding for creating the opportunities for equal participation in sport for all genders. (ibid., 3.) The 2012 London Olympics has been a historic moment for the development of gender equality in sport. For the first time ever almost even number of male and female athletes participated in the Olympic Games - 44% of women and 66% of men. Despite significant progress towards achieving the gender equality of athletes on the field, women remain underrepresented in sport governance positions off the field. (Adriaanse 2016, 149.)

Elite sport performance of both men and women receives a lot of attention from the state, whereas the gender issues in sport governance are usually ignored by governments all over the world. That is why the positive shifts towards achieving gender equality within sport governing bodies are coming slowly, comparing to the athletic

side of sport. For example, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) first recognized the issue of underrepresentation of women in 1996 during the conference on Women and Sport. (Knoppers, Hovden, & Elling 2019.) The gender quota of at least 20% of women in leadership and governance positions in the IOC was established and aimed to be achieved by 2005. This percentage is considerably lower than the target for the athletes that is close to a 50/50 share. More recently, in 2014 women held 26,7% of Executive Committee positions, which is still lower than the share of 30% needed for a critical mass. (Adriaanse 2016, 149.)

The critical mass theory implies that when an organisational minority exceeds a certain level or so-called critical mass, it is able to affect the organisation's culture. A group dominated by one gender where less than 20% represent another gender is also named as a skewed group. Such groups are controlled by the majority, whereas the minority is perceived as symbolic and is not able to influence the decisions. A tilted group is composed of 20% to 40% of the minority representatives, which are given an opportunity to change the organisational culture. The most appropriate case is a balanced group with 40% to 60% representatives of the other gender. In balanced groups, both genders are able to demonstrate their skills and express their opinion openly, because gendered distinctions lose their importance. (Joecks et al. 2013, 67-68.)

The study on the gender diversity of national sport governing bodies conducted by Adriaanse (2016) indicated that the underrepresentation of women on governing boards of sport organisations is a global issue. The representation of women is above 30% only in four out of 45 countries analysed. Getting to the positions of the board chair and the executive chair remains to be challenging for females, which leads to the fact that the global share of women at these positions is approximately 11% and 16% respectively. (158-159.)

Similarly, Women in Sport, which is a charity organisation that aims to transform sport for the benefit of every female in the UK, has been researching the National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of Sport in England and Wales for several years, focusing on both numerical data and personal experiences of women on board and in other

senior leadership roles. In 2016 their study showed that on average 30% of NGBs' board positions were held by females, and this percentage did not change since 2014. The percentage of women in senior leadership roles decreased from 42% to 36%, and only 24% of chief executives in NGBs were women. The same percentage of women were working as performance directors. Besides, high-funded NGBs had more women in non-executive director positions (33%) than low-funded NGBs (25%). ("Beyond 30%" report 2017, 3-4.)

However, women on boards are representatives of a big share of stakeholders and excluding women from leadership positions violates ethical and business principles. From the ethical perspective, the underrepresentation of women on board could negatively influence the values and practices within the sport governing body. Whereas from the business perspective, it was proved that organisations with at least 30% of the board represented by women show better results in performance compared to gender unequal organisations. (Adriaanse 2016, 159.)

Moreover, gender is a powerful aspect of organisational and social processes within sport organisations (Kihl, Shaw, & Schull 2013, 148; Burton 2015, 156). For many years an underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in sport is driven by the prevalence of organisational practices that are aimed to be gender-neutral, but in fact, reinforce the dominance of men in sport. Women are likely to be hired for marginalized positions, do not get the same return on human and social capital investments as their male counterparts, face additional challenges through the progression of their career and have a more significant conflict in terms of balancing work and family lives. As a result, gender inequality in sport organisations became an institutionalized practice that needs to be delegitimised. (Cunningham 2007, 138.)

Some may argue that there were already several laws, documents and regulations adopted to fight against discrimination of women in sport such as Title IX in 1972. Title IX is a federal civil rights law in the United States of America. It was passed as a part of the Education Amendments and was addressed to protect people from discrimination based on sex during the education process, including sports activities. (Title IX N.d.)

Despite the positive effect on the active participation of women in sports, Title IX affected the governance side of American athletics negatively. A new law encouraged the merge of university athletic departments that were previously separate for men's and women's sports. As a result, female directors were demoted, whereas their male colleges became directors of these unified departments (Cain 2001, 338). In other words, Title IX allowed girls to practice sports at the same level as boys but simultaneously discouraged females to build a career in leadership positions in the sport industry (Brake 2004, 461).

2.2   Women in sport leadership

The understanding of leadership is relatively broad and there are a lot of different definitions of leadership. According to Northouse (2015), "*leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal*" (6). Northouse classifies definitions of leadership to the ones that perceive leadership as a group process, as a personality perspective and as power relationship. As a group process, leadership is about locating one individual in the center of a group to embody its willpower. As a personality perspective, leadership is a combination of traits and qualities that certain individuals have. As a power relationship, leadership is a way to have power over the followers in order to encourage the change in them. (Northouse 2016, 5).

Moreover, leadership is a constantly changing concept that reflects the social environment and context. The changes around the understanding of good leadership constantly occur both in the people's perception of leadership and the academic exploration of it. In terms of sport, leadership is often viewed as a group concept rather than an authoritative one. Due to the increased professionalism and commercialisation of sport, the importance of having effective leadership became well understood. At the same time, the issue of underrepresentation of certain groups of people in sport leadership got greater consideration from researchers and practitioners who started to study the challenges that women face during the progression of their career in sport industry. (O'Boyle, Murray, & Cummins 2015, 1-2.)

Sport leadership can refer either to the leadership in coaching or management. In sport coaching, coaches take the role of leaders who influence the athletes' attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours, set the goals for them, create an environment to achieve these goals. (ibid., 3-4.) However, in the present study, the leadership is analysed from the sport management perspective. Before exploring the role of women in sport leadership, it is crucial to understand the differences between the notions of management and leadership.

Leadership is about setting the direction and developing the vision, demonstrating inspiring and motivational attitude, taking risks and promoting changes. In turn, management processes include implementing the vision, planning and organising routine processes, solving arising problems with low risk, achieving results expected from them. (Kotterman 2006, 15.) The success of a sport organisation often relies on the effectiveness of leadership and abilities of leaders to run the changes within the organisation, make strategic decisions and address the issues as a facilitator (O'Boyle, Murray, & Cummins 2015, 3).

Having a critical mass of women in leadership positions has proven its positive influence on the complex performance of various sport organisations. For example, previous studies demonstrated that financial performance improves, talent acquisition becomes better, more innovative ideas arise in group works and employees retain in organisations for longer. (ibid., 140.)

For instance, in 2007 research done by Catalyst, Inc. showed that companies with a higher number of female board members perform better financially (The Bottom Line: Corporate performance and women's representation on boards 2007). These companies also seemed to have better non-financial performance: their customers and employees were more satisfied, community relations became better, innovation and connection expanded to a more significant number of customers (Allen 2006).

A review of more than 400 publications on women directors on corporate boards supports the arguments mentioned above. When women are working on boards, corporate governance becomes more effective through both individual interactions

and a variety of board processes. Women add diversity of views and bring skills, knowledge and experiences different from men. As a result, debating and decision-making processes improve due to a broader perspective. (Terjesen, Sealy, & Singh 2009, 329.) Because women possess different perspectives, attitudes, norms and beliefs compared to men, a lack of women on a board of directors limits the diversity of opinions, reduces creativity and effectiveness (Allen 2006).

Women have already been recognized as highly valuable and beneficial in other areas of the sport industry. For example, female agents gain popularity in Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Football League (NFL) and the National Hockey League (NHL) for several reasons. Firstly, they are not shady, act transparently and keep promises. Secondly, female agents have a fundamental ability to nurture, which is not that peculiar to men. They reflect on a wider range of considerations that impact not only the athlete but also his/her family. Women agents take responsibility to negotiate additional deals concerning the ordinary athlete's life apart from traditional negotiations such as salary, benefits and working conditions. (Hong 2005.)

However, challenges for women in sport leadership positions continue to occur during the whole career, starting from the recruitment process. In some cases, women have to go through more demanding recruitment procedure based on the assumption of recruiters that women are less suitable for leadership roles in sports (Shaw & Hoeber 2003, 366). Furthermore, Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) noted that the job requirements are also driven by gender, for example, such requirements as no young children, ability to work extra hours, the experience of practising sport and a strong commitment to it, not being a feminist are set (504).

Some sport organisations remain to be male-dominated because of a lack of proactive recruitment policies and the prevalence of hiring practices that value similarity instead of diversity (O'Boyle, Murray, & Cummins 2015, 142-143). Even if an organisation understands the importance of having women on boards, male-dominated network excludes women from the recruitment process as a consequence of homologous reproduction (Burton 2015, 162). Homologous reproduction is a concept

typical for organisations, where those who have power maintain their influence by giving access to positions of power and influence on candidates with characteristics similar to their own (Kanter, 1977).

Even when a potential female employee has gone through a hiring process, the challenges are not over. The organisational and social practices start to influence women significantly, perceiving them as less powerful compared to men. Female employees are seen as compliant, they have less power and influence in the organisation. Therefore, men have higher job positions and salaries, whereas women face internal pressures on the workplace. (Ely & Padavic 2007, 1131.) In terms of the sport organisations, these pressures include job stress, work overload and extra working hours out of schedule, which is detrimental to the work-family balance of females. Without adequate organisational support, such employees are likely to leave their job positions because of the inability to manage work and family obligations. (Dixon & Bruening 2007, 383-384.)

For meeting the purpose of the present research, it is also essential to define more in-detail some of the reasons for women's underrepresentation in sport leadership. Glass ceiling is the first one. The term "glass ceiling" stands for the invisible obstacles that limit the career progression for women or other minorities. This invisible, but recognizable barrier reflects the unequal treatment and discrimination of women in the workplace. (Galloway 2012, 51-52.)

Stereotyping is another reason for gender inequality that restrain females from obtaining a leadership position because of a stereotypical belief that she cannot do the job as good as a "traditional" male counterpart (Burton 2015, 160-161). As Cunningham notes (2010), "*people who are not white, able-bodied, heterosexual, protestant males – are likely to face prejudice ad discrimination*" if they want to be leaders in sport industry (395). Consequently, women are perceived as an untypical, untraditional group for sport leadership which results in constant scrutinizing of females based on their gender characteristics (O'Boyle, Murray, & Cummins 2015, 141). On the one hand, female leaders are still considered to be too feminine, emotional and gentle. On the other hand, powerful and authoritarian female leaders are perceived

as too masculine or labelled as a homosexual (Rhode & Walker 2008, 35). Both perspectives have a negative context and make it challenging to overcome the obstacles and fit for a profile, which matches with the social norms (Cummings 2010, 261).

The challenges mentioned above are typical for many sport organisations. National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a prime example, and at the same time, a relevant parallel with FISU since both organisations are dealing with student sport. Negative perceptions of females and stereotypes regarding the lack of qualification are the main reasons for fewer employment opportunities in NCAA for women, compared to men. In addition, throughout the NCAA's governance history there is a clear continuous tendency to hire more males as a sign of homologous reproduction, even though the number of female athletes has increased significantly over the years. (Rhode & Walker 2008, 31.) A lack of female role models among student-athletes is another factor that discourages women from leading in NCAA (ibid., 14).

2.3 International University Sports Federation

The abbreviation FISU stands for the Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire or the English equivalent of International University Sports Federation. It was founded in 1949 and became one of the global bodies overseeing multiple sports along with the International Olympic Committee, the International Paralympic Committee, the Commonwealth Games Federation and the International World Games Association (Foster, O'Reilly, & Davila 2016, 152).

The International University Sports Federation governs and organises competitions for student-athletes, currently enrolled at the University and aged between 17 and 28. The range of sports events organised by FISU includes Summer and Winter World University Games, which are held every two years, as well as World University Championships taking place every even-numbered year (World University Championships N.d.). Starting from 2015, FISU hosts University World Cups that are played in university-versus-university format to create more opportunities to compete for athletes, who practice sports that are not included in the programme of World University

Games (University World Cups N.d.). Alongside organising sports events, various conferences, forums and educational programs are held to encourage the study and development of university sport globally (About FISU education N.d.).

FISU is the world governing body for national university sports federations from five continents. By the year 2019, it united 174 national member associations around the world. (FISU history N.d.) National university sports federations (NUSFs) compose the FISU General Assembly, which is responsible for establishing the general policy within the organisation and its major work directions. The General Assembly also elects the Executive Committee and agrees on the programme and finances that are proposed by the elected Executive Committee. The General Assembly meets every second year, whereas the Executive Committee meets at least every half a year to make the main decisions.

The Executive Committee is elected for a four-year period and comprised of President, First Vice-President, four Vice Presidents, Treasurer, Senior Executive Committee Member and 15 Executive Committee Members. The current FISU President for the term of 2019-2023 is Oleg Matytsin, who is also a Sports Minister in Russia since the beginning of 2020. (FISU Executive Committee N.d.) In 2019 Penninah Aligawesa Kabenge was elected as the first-ever female FISU Vice President, which became a historic development for the organisation. In total, during the last elections, four female members and 19 male members were appointed to the Executive Committee by the General Assembly. (Koos 2019.)

The Executive Committee works closely with 13 committees that specialise on particular areas of FISU activities. One of these committees is the Gender Equality Committee. (FISU Governance & Structure N.d.) Being an advisory body to the Executive Committee, the Gender Equality Committee is responsible for developing policies that encourage, support and improve the promotion of women in sports through all levels and structures, thus, ensuring the equality between men and women. There are five international members of the Gender Equality Committee, namely Chair, Vice-Chair and three members. Rosaura Mendez Gamboa from Costa Rica is the

current Chair of the Committee at the same time holding the position of an Executive Committee member. (FISU Gender Equality Committee N.d.)

FISU Gender Equality Committee (GEC) was established in 2011 with a mission to promote and achieve gender equality among active participants as well as leaders of university sport. To follow this mission, the GEC hosts events and programmes, for example, Gender Equality roundtable discussions that take place in parallel with the Winter and Summer Universiades (About FISU Committee for Gender Equality N.d.).

2.4   Multilevel examination of women's leadership and gender equality

The previous researches on women's leadership and gender equality within sport organisations often examined a phenomenon from a single perspective, whereas modern researchers changed the focus towards studying the complex situation in the field (Welty Peachy et al. 2015, 577). One of those pioneers was Cunningham (2010) who suggested using the multilevel framework for investigating women's leadership at three levels: macro level, meso level and micro level (396). Firstly, at the macro level, the aspects of sport as a structure with institutionalised masculinity and traditionally gendered leadership practices are explored. Secondly, at the meso level, the internal organisational policies and existing stereotypes, as well as their influence on gender inequity and imbalance within an organisation, are investigated. Thirdly, at the micro level, the meaning of individuals' experiences and expectations along with the individuals' perceptions of policies and procedures introduced at an organisational (meso) level are analysed. (Burton 2015, 156.)

The author decided to use the described above multilevel framework as a foundation for the interview questions in view of the fact that gender issues in sport are "*situated in multi-level, sometimes subtle, and usually taken-for-granted structures, policies, and behaviours embedded in sport organisations*" (Fink 2008, 147). Therefore, it was essential to ask interviewees questions related to each level of the framework to get to know their complex perceptions of gender equality issues and get a

broader understanding of the current condition of female leaders at FISU. Figure 1 provides a visualisation of the multilevel framework applied to design the interviews.
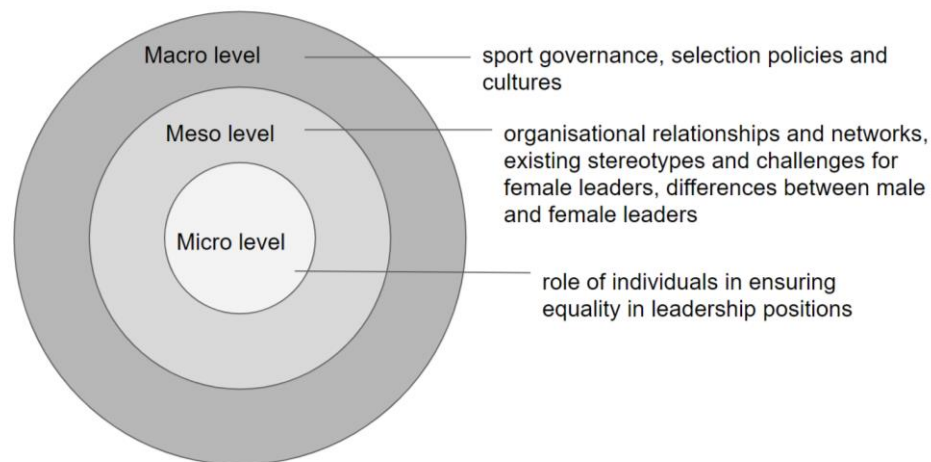
Figure 1 Multilevel examination of women's leadership in sport governance. Simplified version of the model by Sotiriadou and Haan (2019, 9)

3   Methodology

3.1   Research design

The process of choosing a design for research requires picking the most suitable research techniques and methods from a wide variety of them. It is one of the most essential steps of the thesis since it organises the research process in a logical and structured way and ensures that each stage of research is examined efficiently (Anderson & Poole 2001, 22; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, 16). However, before explaining the research design adopted in the following study, it is crucial to state the research purpose and method clearly.

There are three common types of research purposes which differ by the aim and nature of a study: exploratory, explanatory and descriptive. Descriptive research is applied to study and describe a phenomenon and its characteristic that were not explored before. It involves the analysis of the reasons and processes of a phenomenon

that happened in the past or happens in the present. (Nassaji 2015, 129.) This type of research aims to describe, clarify, explain features and relationships in order to create a profile of cases, events or people (Robson 2002, 47).

Explanatory research is used to identify cause-effect relationships and explore the range of factors that become a cause for consequent effect (Yin 1994, 101). As a rule, an analysis is conducted to understand how one variable impacts on changes in another variable; as well as to identify and analyse dependent and independent variables (Saunders et al. 2009, 140).

The objective of exploratory research is to study an unfamiliar problem when a limited amount of information or no information related to a research object is available (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad 2010, 12). In consonance with Stebbins (2011), it helps to underline the theory development process based on the gathered data and the research outcomes are predicted to deliver valuable knowledge (5).

The following study has an exploratory research purpose since it aims to explore the current stage of women's leadership and gender equality within the senior leadership positions at FISU. No prior research on this specific topic was done before, therefore, the outcomes are predicted to include some valuable and one-of-the-kind insights.

Taking into account the theoretical framework and research purpose defined above, the research attempted to study the perceptions of leaders who currently obtain leadership positions at FISU about women's leadership and gender equality. The stated research question is the following: Is the problem of gender inequality recognised by leaders at FISU? If yes, how significant is the problem, what are the reasons and how to improve the situation? If no, what are the good practices that allowed to achieve that? The answer to this research question is based on the interviewees' perceptions of the contemporary stage of women's leadership and gender equality on the FISU board.

Taking into account the purpose and research question of the present research, a research method can be chosen. According to Walliman (2011), a research method stands for the tools and techniques used to develop a well-elaborated and systematic plan, which is followed by a researcher who makes a study. Either qualitative or quantitative method can be adopted. (2-3.)

The quantitative method includes numerical data collection in order to expose it to statistical manipulations, analyse the data and display the results. The conclusions are justified based on measurable, in other words, numerical results. This method is widely used to explain a correlation between phenomena and prove or refute a hypothesis. The forms of quantitative analysis are, for example, questionnaires and surveys. (Creswell 2003, 153-154.)

Whereas the qualitative method is defined as an interpretive and naturalistic approach to a subject of research. Qualitative studies intend to understand a phenomenon in a broad perspective, obtain the results based on people's opinion and observe a phenomenon in a natural context. Qualitative data collection methods include focus groups, individual interviews and observations or participation. (Patton 2001, 39.)

Qualitative research is widely used in exploratory studies and, as a rule, involve active interactions with participants of the research in their usual environments. The researcher aims to immerge into the experiences of participants while not being subjective and avoiding the personal bias that can lead to a wrong interpretation of qualitative data collected from the participants. (Creswell 1998, 17-18.)

The following study aims to understand the current stage of the gender equality situation within the senior management and other leadership positions at FISU. Therefore, it was decided to adopt the qualitative research method and conduct five individual interviews with male and female representatives of FISU's governing structures.

Considering the exploratory purpose of the research and its qualitative nature, the author has made a decision to adopt the research onion model developed by Saunders et al. (2009) due to its comprehensive and consistent structure that allows to gradually follow the process of research design (108).

The research onion has six layers, which complement each other and exhort an effective progression for formulating a research methodology. The research design starts from choosing the philosophy of research, consequently, follows by making a selection on each layer of the onion and eventually finishes by deciding on techniques and procedures of data collection and analysis. Figure 2 demonstrates the sequence of the onion layers. (Saunders et al. 2009, 108.)
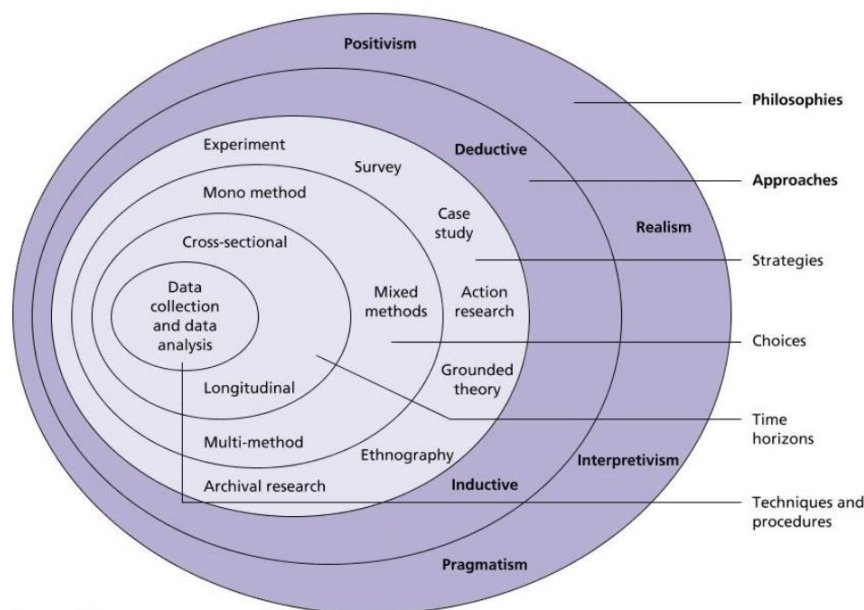
Figure 2 The research onion by Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2009, 108)

Research philosophy is the first layer of the research onion that is determined by the researcher's view of the reality and being, acceptance and credibility of knowledge, and the role of values. The author of this research has applied the philosophy of pragmatism due to the fact that it claims that multiple opinions about the world exist and there is no right or single answer to a research question. The researcher engages oneself into multiple points of view of people involved in the research and explores their experiences deeply. The study is focused on integrating these diverse opinions

to interpret the data better and provide acceptable knowledge. The researcher's own values affect the data interpretation significantly, whereas both objective and subjective perspectives are adopted. (Saunders et al. 2009, 119.)

To be more specific, the research purpose of this study is to explore the current stage of women's leadership and gender equality at FISU senior leadership positions, therefore, pragmatism philosophy allows to better analyse interview responses from the perspective of acceptance of various points of views and constructing the research results more accurately. The author's perception of women's leadership and gender equality might impact on the interpretation of qualitative research results, but this influence should not be significant enough to make the findings overly subjective and inaccurate.

The next layer of the research onion and, consequently, the next stage of the research design is a choice of the research approach. The research approach can be deductive or inductive, depending on the nature of the relationships between theory and research. The inductive method can be defined as a shift from specific to the general and is more widely used in qualitative research to generate a new theory as an outcome of the research. (Bryman & Bell 2011, 11-13.) In accordance with Saunders et al. (2009), the small sample research is recommended for an inductive study to gain a better understanding of the context, comparing to a deductive approach with a large number of samples analysed (126). The conventional method of data collection in an inductive approach is in-depth interviews concerning specific phenomena followed by finding patterns between respondents (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault 2015, 18-19).

The aspects of an inductive approach stated above confirms that it should be applied to the following research. Firstly, the research focuses on gathering qualitative data by conducting five interviews. Secondly, it aims to analyse the particular responses, find patterns and based on that information investigate an overall situation around the issues of women's leadership at FISU as an outcome of a research.

The research design process continues by deciding upon a research strategy – the third layer of the research onion. The right strategy helps to answer stated research questions and objectives effectively. Saunders et al. (2009) distinguish seven different strategies: experiment, survey, case study, action research, grounded theory, ethnography and archival research (141). The following research employs the grounded theory strategy. Grounded theory approach is widely used for conducting inductive studies especially for exploring business and management issues (ibid., 148-149). According to Silverman (2001), a grounded theory strategy involves three essential stages of data analysis. Firstly, the categories of data are developed. Secondly, categories are saturated with other researches in the field to ensure their credibility and relevance. Thirdly, developed categories are generalized. (235.) The same process was done during the data analysis stage of the following study and is described in detail in chapter 3.3.

However, for some researches only one strategy does not cover all aspects planned to be explored, thus, several research strategies can be combined. Subsequently, either the mono, the mixed-method or the multi-method can be applied in research. Picking an appropriate method or combination methods for the study is the fourth step in a research design process and the same-numbered layer of research onion. (Saunders et al. 2009, 152.) Mono-method research is the most applicable for this study given that the author primary uses qualitative data collection methods – semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The fifth layer of the research onion model informs on the time horizon of research. Time horizon emphasizes a time framework when a study intends to be completed. A cross-sectional time horizon refers to the collection of data at a certain point at a specific time, in other words, a "snapshot". (Saunders et al. 2009, 155.) In view of the fact that the following study involves the research of a phenomenon at a specific pe-riod, the author has chosen the cross-sectional method.

Research design finishes by choosing methods and techniques of data collection and analysis that would assist in capturing quality evidence, interpret collected data and draw convincing and valuable conclusions out of it (Kabir 2016, 202). The author

conducted five semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives on FISU's leadership positions. The more detailed description of the chosen data collection methods and data analysis process is provided in chapters 3.2 and 3.3 respectively.

Summing up, the author has employed the research onion model for designing the research in a complex and sequential manner. The decisions upon research design elements were made starting from the outside layer of the onion and are the following: pragmatism philosophy, inductive approach, grounded theory strategy, mono-method, cross-sectional time horizon and qualitative data collected by conducting semi-structured interviews.

3.2   Data collection

As it was mentioned previously, semi-structured in-depth interviews are the prior method of data collection in this research. According to Drever (2003), an interview is an effective way to gather qualitative data and collect information about interviewee's attitudes and experiences, gain an understanding of their motivations, reasons and meanings of the studied phenomenon through collecting their opinions and statements (1).

Semi-structured interviews are a common type of data collection for inductive studies that, in contrast with structured interviews, reflect the open-ended nature of the questions and encourage the emergence of new topics not initially planned for discussion (Bryman 2012, 12-13). Open-ended questions allow the researcher to get detailed answers in a less formal arrangement and make the discussion natural and on-going while still following the list of questions that have to be asked (Harrell & Bradley 2009, 27).

In accordance with Taylor et al. (2015), in-depth interviewing is a face-to-face interaction between the researcher and respondent initiated to understand interviewee's opinion on the questions about experiences and situations proposed by an interviewer (102). The interview responses are a source of primary data

collected first-hand by a researcher that is, therefore, considered to be a reliable source of information (Kothari 2004, 95-96).

The primary data collection process starts by identifying a population of the study and narrowing it with one of the sampling techniques. One-on-one interviews require finding participants who demonstrate a willingness to share their opinions and experiences with a researcher. (Creswell 1998, 124.) The author of this thesis used purposive sampling (also known as judgement sampling) for selecting the potential candidates to be interviewed. It is a non-probability sampling method, which is used to select the potential respondents by pre-determined criteria that meet the purpose of the study. The choice of criteria is based on the judgement of the researcher. (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad 2010, 77.)

Five current members of the FISU board were interviewed using the video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Skype. Three males and two females participated in the interview. All of them represented different countries and cultural backgrounds. The example of FISU as an international sport governing body was chosen because of the author's existing network of people in this sport organisation and access to their contact information at the official FISU's website. Moreover, FISU is the umbrella sport organisation which has a female Vice President, which is unique for such kind sport governing bodies, thus, it was valuable to explore the practices that led to this achievement in terms of women's leadership.

Two members of the FISU Executive Committee, two members of other committees and one member of both the Executive Committee and other committee were interviewed. The interview included 10-12 open-ended questions and corresponded with three levels of the contemporary situation of women's leadership analysis: macro, meso and micro levels. The number of questions varied from one interviewee to another because some answers were detailed enough to answer several questions in one. Furthermore, the general interview topics and sample questions are provided. The full version of the interview questions is attached in Appendix 1.

- One question about the academic and professional background to get to know the respondent better and possibly adjust further questions in accordance with received information;
- Two questions about the interviewee's perception of leadership in general;
- Two questions concerning the macro level of women's leadership at FISU;
- From four to five questions regarding the organisational culture and behaviours at the meso level;
- One to two questions about the individuals' responsibilities (micro level).

Five interviews were conducted in English while two respondents were native English speakers and others, including the author in a role of interviewer, speak English as a foreign language. Before the start of an interview, each respondent was informed about confidentiality in the following form:

"*First of all, I would like to say a few words about confidentiality. Your name and position wouldn't be disclosed. The interview is recorded, it will be transcribed and some of your citations might be added to the research paper without mentioning any personal information about you.*"

With the permission of the respondents, the interviews were recorded. The interview material was then transcribed using the online software for a manual transcription. The interview length varied from 20 up to 38 minutes. The responses were collected within a period of two weeks in order to get the most accurate 'snapshot' of a current situation and follow the principles of a cross-sectional study. The minutes of interviews are summarized in Table 1. For confidentiality reasons the exact positions at the FISU committees are not disclosed and are named by a common term 'member'. Moreover, the author does not reveal the country of origin, age as well as the name of the committees that the respondents are involved in and the period of holding these positions because that might lead to the disclosure of individuals who participated in the interview due to a relatively small number of people at FISU Executive Committee and other committees. Nevertheless, gender has a major significance in the interpretation of the collected data and has to be revealed. During the stage of data analysis, the respondents were contacted once again by e-mail to agree on the disclosure of their gender and the way they appear in the research.

Table 1 Interview minutes

	Type of position	Gender	Length of the interview
1.	Committee member	Male	38:34
2.	Executive Committee member	Male	20:49
3.	Committee member	Male	33:08
4.	Executive Committee member, Committee member	Female	24:35
5.	Executive Committee member	Female	36:34

3.3 Data analysis

The author followed the principles of an inductive research approach, in other words, shifting from specific observations to broader generalization (Silverman 2001, 81). To achieve that the author of this study analysed the collected qualitative data in three essential steps: data reduction, data display, and making conclusions and verifications (Lancaster 2004, 170).

Data reduction is the first step in the analysis of qualitative information. One of the most popular approaches to analyse qualitative data, including interview responses, is content analysis (Adams, Khan, & Raeside 2014, 159). Content analysis can be defined as "*any qualitative data reduction and sensemaking effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings*" (Patton 2002, 453). Content analysis involves a careful reading of interview transcripts and identification of repetitive themes and tensions within the collected data. This approach helps in reducing qualitative data, dividing it into chunks and refining the concepts. (O'Gorman & MacIntosh 2014, 141.)

The next stage of qualitative data analysis is data display which refers to the visualisation of data for easy access, interpretation and evaluation of the findings (Lancaster 2004, 171). The author of this study decided to present the data in a table format that helps the reader to acknowledge the themes identified at the first stage of data analysis and recognise the consistent and repetitive nature of statements by several interviewees. The screenshots of tables with the data are provided in Appendix 2. Nevertheless, this concise and structured technique of displaying the data should be complemented by direct citations from the interviews to give a broader understanding of each theme by completing the condensed data visualised in the table with full statements and guide a reader through the table.

The third step of data analysis involves making conclusions that are made after the data collection and data display are done. The data analysis finishes by the verification of findings through checking the data for meanings and interpretations and replication of findings, if needed (ibid., 172).

Considering the following research, after the interview transcriptions were finished, the responses were first analysed for significant statements and then determined for repetitive meanings and areas of convergence and divergence between the respondents. Furthermore, the core themes and sub-themes were formulated out of categorized meanings. Then the themes and repetitive meanings were tabulated for better data visualisation. Finally, the whole process of data analysis was revised in order to prove the relevance of the findings and draw the final conclusions.

3.4   Reliability and validity

In accordance with Ihantola and Kihn (2011), the research can be defined as reliable if another researcher can repeat the same research process under similar circumstances and get exactly the same or slightly different findings. In contrast, if the findings differ significantly, the research should not be classified as reliable. (47.) The reliability in a qualitative study is highly dependable on the honestly and objectiveness of the person, who conducts the research (Robson 2002, 176).

Validity in qualitative research refers to the accuracy and trustfulness of research findings. Validity can be both internal and external. Internal validity of research proves that findings represent the reality, while external validity defines if these findings about the reality are applicable to other groups. (Brink 1993, 35.) There are three typical threats to validity of qualitative study: respondents bias, researcher bias and reactivity. Respondent bias refers to a situation in which respondents do not provide truthful answers or are eager to help the researcher with answers that they feel are desirable. Researcher bias indicates any form of the negative impact of the researcher's academic experience or expectations, for example, the effect of his/her expectations on design, analysis and sampling techniques. Whereas reactivity refers to the researcher's personal potential to impact on the situation and people studied. (Robson 2002, 174.)

Reliability of the following study was ensured by the careful wording and open-ended nature of the questions asked during the interview to make sure that the respondents are not provoked to answer the questions in the desired manner. Keeping in mind that English is a foreign language for the majority of respondents, accurate language and formulations were used to ensure the full understandability of the questions. Moreover, the respondents were informed about the approximate length of the interview in advance to prevent any rush during the interview conduction and give enough time for thoughtful answers. Besides, the purposive sampling method of selecting the respondents provided the diversity of cultural, academic and professional backgrounds of interviewees and, thus, improved the reliability of repetitive meanings.

In order to increase the validity of research finding and avoid the negative influence of respondent bias as well as researcher bias and reactivity, several measures were taken by the author. Firstly, keeping the record of collected data through interviews and having unrestricted access to it allowed the author to check the data multiple times for any misunderstandings or wrong transcriptions, and make sure that no errors occur at the data collection and analysis stages. Secondly, the author agreed with respondents on non-disclosure of their personal data, except the gender of interviewees, to encourage them to share their honest opinion instead of giving the

'right' answers. Thirdly, the thesis supervisor gave feedback and suggestion for improving the validity of findings and prevent the influence of the author's expectations on the objectiveness of the study. Additionally, few individuals assisted the author in assessing the validity of research by reviewing the interview questions and findings from the data analysis and providing critical feedback on them.

4 Findings

Due to the relatively flexible nature of semi-structured in-depth interviews, the interviewees were encouraged to share their experiences, thoughts and ideas on the topics of women's leadership and gender equality in sport leadership with a closer look at FISU. This fact allowed the author to get detailed responses, analyse them using the content analysis approach and discover core themes and sub-themes that arise repeatedly among respondents.

First, the author has applied the content analysis approach of qualitative data to narrow down the primary data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and distinguish repetitive statements. Those themes are the following: invisible obstacles for female leaders, need for top-down change, cooperation with national members, shared responsibility and personal qualities typical for female leaders.

Table 2 Themes and sub-themes emerged from interviews' analysis

Theme	Sub-themes
Glass ceiling	• Stereotypes • Male-dominated network • Work-life balance
Need for top-down change	• Use of gender quota • Other policies and practices
Cooperation with national members	• Bottom-up changes at national level • Cultural background of members

Shared responsibility	• Men's advocacy • Women's support • Everyone's responsibility
Traits typical for female leaders	• Communication skills • Multitasking • Caring, listening, engaging • Greater awareness of the content

4.1 Glass ceiling

To meet the exploratory purpose of the research it was crucial to study the existing barriers and challenges (if any) that women in leadership positions face at FISU. It was found that these limits are artificial, and include several stereotypes about the role of women, the dominance of men that prevent women from being included in their informal male-network, and the challenge of balancing between work and family which is more significant for female leaders than male colleagues.

The questions that revealed interviewees' opinion on existing invisible obstacles were:

1. Are there any obstacles might women face in the workplace?
2. Do you feel that stereotypes related to gender exist at FISU?

The most significant invisible barriers are existing stereotypes that prevent women from obtaining leadership positions. Most of the stereotypes relate to inability of women to do their tasks as good as men due to the lack of experience and similar arguments. Because of this stereotypical view, women are given more feminine positions in the organisation. The stereotypical role of women as a principal caregiver remains true in certain countries where the FISU members – National University Sports Federations – come from.

Existing male-dominated network negatively influences the FISU organisational culture as well. Both male and female respondents emphasized that fact:

"I think ultimately in terms of getting to leadership positions, I think that currently people who are on privileged positions like on boards of committees or directors are

all men and a lot of them are particularly older men. And as a result of many factors like where they come from, a lot of them fundamentally still don't believe in gender equality or accept the barriers and need for equality but perhaps don't take the actions to achieve it." (Interviewee 3, male)

"I think women have lack of network. Because when you have a male-dominated environment, the men network by themselves and often the women are excluded. So that means that you are included in some discussions, but not in every discussion, and this is in FISU the same as in other organisations there." (Interviewee 4, female)

She then added: *"In the meetings, to be honest, it's obvious that men, well, take more often the floor to let everybody know their opinion about it. Also, when you heard these arguments two minutes before, the next man will stand up and say the same. This is not typically for FISU, this is typical for all, let me say, sport organisations, that men often take the floor to present themselves, and women I think they are more orientated to work on the content, not so much to present themselves*." (Interviewee 4, female)

Both female respondents also talked about balancing work and family life. For example, interviewee 4 assumed:

"And when we talk about special topics, and I think when we talk about priorities women always try to take care about staff or employees and also they have a special focus on the problem to combine the work life or the career with the family life. I think this is something, maybe it is not in the mind of men, because they have a different arrangement at home." (Interviewee 4, female)

This assumption should be viewed as truth, because none of male respondents raised that topic. However, two men (interviewee 2 and 3) focused their attention on high qualifications of women in leadership positions. On the contrary, this aspect was not discussed by female counterparts.

"I think that there is often women who have reached a certain position have to display outstanding characteristics to get over the gender bias." (Interviewee 2, male)

4.2 Need for top-down change

All respondents agreed on the need for top-down change leaded by FISU and directed to its members – National University Sports Federations. This finding was discovered after the analysis of responses for the following questions:

1. What do you think should be done to create and sustain gender equality in sport governance? Is this done at FISU? What else should be done to develop sustainable gender-equal culture?
2. The next question concerns the use of quotas. For example, there is a belief that gender diversity on a board is possible only if at least 40% of members represent another gender than the majority. What do you think about the use of quotas?

The respondents gave their view on the existing practices appointed from the top and were open in suggesting other governing methods to support female leaders. The interviewer's questions regarding respondents' opinions on the use of gender quota at FISU got a lot of attention. The use of quota is one of the government initiatives that could help to deal with gender inequality issues and ensure better representation women on board at least numerically. Therefore, it was decided to underline it as a separate sub-theme.

The majority of the respondents agreed that gender quota is an effective tool to achieve gender equality in a limited period of time. For instance, Interviewee 3 (male) stated:

"So, I personally feel that if we are going to achieve gender equality within a timeframe that is acceptable, my personal opinion is that the only way we can do that is to create quotas. To require a certain level, to guarantee a creation level of female membership. The exact number is really up for debate." (Interviewee 3, male)

However, the quota system has its advantages and disadvantages, especially visible for women aiming to get a certain leadership position. On the one hand, women could be appointed just to meet the gender diversity requirement. On the other hand, without the quota system, women are not even considered for a position, meaning that they do not even get a chance to show that they are capable enough to work on this position. Female interviewee 4 provided an argument:

"*Often women think when they come with quota in a position, they think it's only because of the quota in that position. But when you do not have the quota often you cannot show your qualities, your skills, and your knowledge. And this is something maybe it helps to show that women are able to lead organisations. So I think it is a strong tool that you can use when all other ambitions to change the situation are not successful*." (Interviewee 4, female)

Interviewee 2 (male) declared another negative point of the gender quota system:

"*People will always disrespect people's appointment based on a quota system.*" (Interviewee 2, male)

He added: "*So, we have worked on the principle where it is much better to have a collaborative approach and hopefully never have to pull in the gender scorecard, the quota card.*" (Interviewee 2, male)

Respondents also agreed that the use of quota should only a short-term requirement that boosts the consequent changes in the governing policies. Interviewee 3 (male) made an important note and expressed the importance of other governing practices and policies for ensuring adequate representation of women at FISU leadership positions:

"*And I think once you break that glass ceiling and you have more female members at the table, and guarantee equality through quotas for... Let's say...I don't know... I would like to think that by that point we have institutional cycles in place and programs in place and also we have challenged internal perceptions enough, so*

becomes much more of a natural thing that ultimately we see gender equality within elected positions and that women are just seen equally compared to men in terms of their candidacy if they have equal experience, etc." (Interviewee 3, male)

After sharing the opinion on the use of gender quota, respondents were encouraged to propose other governing policies and practices that, from their perspective, would help to improve the current situation. The range of suggested initiatives from the top varied among respondents. For instance, such initiatives as leadership mentoring programs, organised open discussions about gender equality and challenges of female leaders (Interviewee 3, male); educational programs for improving the appreciation of gender equality and its role (Interviewee 5, female) were suggested.

The mentioned above top-down initiatives were expected to boost positive changes towards creating and sustaining gender diversity on FISU board, but it also essential to enhance awareness and encourage NUSFs to solve this problem in cooperation. For example, interviewee 2 (male) expressed his opinion:

"*If we determine that members obligations are to have gender equality in all of the governance activities then we need to make sure that is well understood*". (Interviewee 2, male)

Two out of five respondents (interviewee 3 (male), 4 (female)) showed solidarity in the need of creating a written agreement or policy for gender equality at FISU and proposing it to the NUSFs. The fifth interviewee added why it is so important to have good practices in sport governance and direct them to all the FISU membership countries. She also opened up the following theme related to a close cooperation of FISU and NUSFs:

"*We need educational programs like seminars, conferences where this topic should be brought on board to let people understand and change their mentality. I think the other programs we can have is mentoring programs so that women like us who have been able to achieve at that level we mentor other women who might not be feeling comfortable to come up for set programs. But I think FISU has thrived because before*

there was no gender equality committee, there is one in place right now. And I believe that could be the reason that also changes what happening in FISU right now. But I still feel, the numbers are still low. Not only at leadership positions but also in other programs like… some countries when they are bringing teams, there are a few that have a balance in the number of women and men." (Interviewee 5, female)

4.3 Cooperation with national members

Interviewees highlighted that top-down initiatives encouraged by FISU board are not enough to solve the issue of gender inequality in leadership positions because the roots of the problem are at the bottom level - at National University Sports Federations.

Interviewee 3 had expressed the need to first understand the global picture before appointing any top-down changes:

"*If we don't really understand the current picture globally and we don't understand what people think and how they feel about it, it's very hard to transform the proposals or to create change if we don't actually know what's happening. You might have a feeling that in certain regions, it's more significant than in others, but we need to have a concrete idea of it to help us identify areas to improve, but also to help future leaders.*" (Interviewee 3, male)

Cultural background of FISU members is diverse and in some countries the gender inequality is more significant than in the others. The current barriers at NUSFs all over the world are transferred to FISU due to the fact that FISU is comprised of 174 NUSF member federations while being the members of the General Assembly that play an essential role in all areas of FISU activities.

"*I wouldn't say it's at the FISU level, most likely at the NUSF level. Because if more women in the different NUSFs are nominated more occasionally and more often than*

none, then there might be a very good opportunity that these ladies would be considered for different FISU positions." (Interviewee 1, male)

In addition, cultural background of member has a huge influence on the women's leadership at national level and creates additional barriers for female leaders that prevents them from being considered for leadership positions. Two respondents (interviewee 2 and 5, male and female respectively) mentioned that these obstacles are even more significant in certain cultures and countries, for example, in Muslim countries.

"*I think that sometimes it is very difficult for certain cultures and certain backgrounds to be able to be comfortable to talk to women on an equal basis. Some places women are not same as being equal from both the religious, cultural, ideological... which is again not something I was subscribed to, but this is something we have to balance, we have to realize that it is a barrier to women in certain countries, certain sports, certain cultures, actually being able to attain a position because of that ceiling that is artificially placed above them by things that are male dominated.*" (Interviewee 2, male)

Interviewee 5 explained how a cultural background of the NUSF members limits the participation of women in leadership in national, continental and international sports organisations:

"*For example, when you come to the General Assembly of FISU, not even half are women. People representing various national sports federations, you find the majority, probably more than 75% or 80% or even up to 90%... when you go to General Assembly, you find they are men. It's just because from their background, whichever countries, they always voting men. They know top leadership is for men. They know the women's role is back in the kitchen. And that's why even when you come to the continental university sports federation, very few have women in the top positions.*" (Interviewee 5, female)

4.4   Shared responsibility

Respondents were unanimous that everybody in the organisation is responsible for ensuring gender equality in sport leadership and supporting current and future female leaders.

All respondents were asked two questions on the topic to understand their opinion on the topic of responsibility for solving the gender inequality issue:

1. What is the role of individuals in ensuring gender equality?
2. Whose responsibility is to support female leaders?

Answering to these questions, some respondents were focused more frequently on the role of men's encouragement, others stated that women are responsible for supporting and mentoring other women to overcome the mental barriers. The role of gender equality committee was also discussed.

Three respondents (Interviewee 2 and 3, both males and Interviewee 5, female) expressed the importance of men's advocacy for creating and sustaining gender equal environment. They agreed that males should not only publicly support gender equality but take actions that proves their opinion. Male interviewee 3 stressed that:

"*I wanna see more men standing up and saying. Not only believe in the need for female equality and leadership, in gender equality, but also their actions back it up.*" (Interviewee 3, male)

On the other hand, according to the opinion of interviewee 5 (female), each individual in the organisation is responsible but the change should start from women themselves:

"*Otherwise, in the gender context, when you talk about gender, most people think these are women issues and if we want to change this conception, I think we should start with us women. Women with my experience... we are our own enemies, we always fight our fear.*" (Interviewee 5, female)

Other respondents also agreed that gender equality is not a problem of women only. However, despite the fact that male respondents seem to understand the importance of their public advocacy and support, female leaders at FISU do not feel that their support is enough to make a change. For example, Interviewees 2, 3 and 4 shared:

"I think that female leaders for a long time have been demanding more equality and more men to stand up and say 'I agree, I support you' and that's gonna take some action." (Interviewee 3, male)

"We just need to make sure that they [women] are not silenced, they are encouraged to support it and that the tone of the meeting is actually equitable." (Interviewee 2, male)

"When we talk about gender equality, why women should solve that problem? It is not the problem of the women, it is the problem of the organisation. This is a little bit funny when we talk about gender equality that always the women should be the person who are responsible for having gender equality in the organisation. Often, I do not feel that the men feel this responsibility. This is funny." (Interviewee 4, female)

Besides, other interview participants stated that just having a gender equality committee is not enough for helping female leaders and more things should be done from the governance perspective:

"I think that there are some principles that should be in the governance roles, government teams, committee roles. Then there are set behaviours that imply that everybody is treated equally, that everybody has an equal voice, and everybody is independent when they are appointed to the committee." (Interviewee 2, male)

In spite of the positive effects, having a gender equality committee has also its drawbacks. Interviewee 4 (female) clearly commented on them:

"Of course, it's good to have a gender equality committee who deals with question about gender equality but I think this is also risk in my opinion because when you have a gender equality committee everybody can say "okay, we have the committee". This committee is dealing with the questions and other committees are not responsible for that." (Interviewee 4, female)

4.5   Traits typical for female leaders

In order to understand a broader perspective of women's leadership at FISU, the interviewees were asked about the qualities of female leaders and if they are different to those of male leaders:

1. Do you believe that women in leadership positions have certain qualities that are not similar to that of men? If so, please name some of these qualities.
2. Do you feel that there is a difference between men and women in leadership positions?

During the data analysis process, certain qualities typical for women in leadership positions repeated several times in interviewees' responses. For instance, interpersonal and communication skills were declared by the two respondents (interviewee 3 (male), 4 (female)) as qualities that differentiate female leaders from their male counterparts. Multitasking (interviewee 2 (male), 5 (female)) as well as caring, listening and engaging aspects were repeatedly stated by various respondents (interviewee 1 (male), 3 (male), 4 (female)) as qualities that most of women in leadership positions have. Moreover, interviewees 2 (male) and 4 (female) stated that female leaders have the outstanding awareness and knowledge in their professional area. Other personal traits that were discussed by interviewees are summarized in a table attached in Appendix 2.

5   Discussion

The research aimed to explore the current stage of women's leadership and gender equality within the senior leadership positions at FISU. To achieve this exploratory

purpose, the author has stated a research question: Is the problem of gender inequality recognised by leaders at FISU? The answer to the research question can be either positive or negative. In case of negative answer ("*no, the issue of gender inequality is not applicable for leadership positions at FISU*"), the author would analyse the good practices that allowed to achieve that. In contrast, in case of a positive answer (*"yes, the problem of gender inequality exists in leadership positions at FISU"*), the conductor of this study would define to what extent the problem exists based on the perceptions of interviewees, what are the reasons and what should be done to solve this problem and increase the representation of women in leadership positions. The answer to the research question is based on the perceptions of five current leaders at FISU, who participated in the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The data collected during the interviews was analysed using content analysis.

The primary data analysis revealed that gender inequality is recognised as a problematic issue by people obtaining the leadership positions at FISU. According to the interviewees' perceptions, women are underrepresented in sport leadership because of the existing invisible obstacles, also named as the glass ceiling, stereotyping about women and cultural background of membership associations (NUSFs), which, in fact, nominate the candidates for leadership positions at FISU. Since women still face barriers because of a gender that exclude them from being considered as appropriate candidates at the national level of university sport, it is even more challenging for them to become leaders at the international level. Therefore, the representation of women can be increased through close cooperation with FISU members (NUSFs) along with top-down initiatives that should be leaded by FISU and directed to NUSFs. The examples of initiatives discussed by the respondents are the use of gender quota, leadership mentoring programs, written gender equality policies and educational programs. Respondents highlighted the importance of sharing the responsibility for creating and sustaining gender-equal environment on FISU board, because only through the collaboration of women, men, committees, countries and other parties the problem of gender inequality can be solved, the glass ceiling can be broken, and more highly-qualified, courageous, empathetic women from all over the world can get an opportunity to start obtaining leadership positions at FISU level.

Summing up, the content analysis of the responses allowed the author to narrow down the data, find repetitive themes and sub-themes that help to expose the interviewees' perceptions of female leadership and gender inequality on board. As a result, five core themes were derived: glass ceiling, need for top-down change, cooperation with national members, shared responsibility and traits typical for female leaders.

Saunders et al. (2009) remark that primary data becomes a more reliable source of information if it is complemented by secondary data (267). Following this advice, the author of the following research has investigated the available sources of secondary data on the topic of women' leadership and gender equality in sport leadership and has compared the findings with the findings from similar researches done previously.

Starting with the existing glass ceiling for female leaders described by respondents, the research has shown that stereotypes about women, male-dominated network and poor work-life balance are the most significant invisible obstacles that female leaders at FISU face. However, previous researches indicate that these obstacles are common not only at FISU but are also applicable to other sport organisations. For instance, Shaw and Hoeber (2003) found that male candidates for leadership positions in national sport organisations in England are preferred over female counterparts because women are stereotypically assumed to be less suitable for leadership positions (348). Besides, the typical for sport organisations "old boys" network that does not believe and/or take actions towards achieving a gender diversity on board and denies the access of women to their network have been studied as a discrimination factor by a number of researchers (Burton 2015, 163). In addition, finding the balance between work and life is a common challenge for female leaders in sport industry. Women spend more time on family obligations, whereas the work requirements remain the same as for men. In some sport organisations this impossibility to find the work-life and work-family balance forces women to leave their positions. (Dixon & Bruening 2005, 228-229.) According to interviewees, at FISU the issue related to work-life balance is not that significant so that women leave their leadership positions, but it should be taken into considerations anyway.

The second theme derived from the interviews is the need for top-down initiatives such as the use of gender quota and other policies and practices initiated by FISU and directed to all the FISU member associations – National University Sports Federations. The majority of respondents agreed that the use of gender quota is an efficient initiative that can help to improve the representation of women in FISU leadership in a relatively small period of time. However, gender quota should be used only as a short-term initiative and in a long-term should be replaced by modern policies and practices that are less strict and deliberate. Sotiriadou and Haan (2019) have found similar tendencies by researching women and leadership in sport. Their findings indicate that the use of quota was evaluated by research participants as problematic and tokenistic and does not reflect the principles of good governance. The use of skills matrix and nomination committees might be a sufficient replacement of gender quota that would ensure that candidates are appointed based on their skills and qualifications. (15.) In turn, current leaders at FISU suggested creating, for example, mentoring and educational programs and adapt a collaborative approach, which would ensure that appointments are supported and encouraged by everybody in an organisation.

The findings also revealed that cooperation with members is essential at all FISU activities. The shift towards a better gender diversity on board should be encouraged not only by top-down initiatives but also by bottom-up changes at the national level. The reason is that most of the challenges and barriers for female leaders arise at the level of NUSFs and are then transferred to FISU. The cultural background in membership countries, especially in Muslim countries, supports gender bias and creates a lack of women in sport leadership. Therefore, in order to solve gender inequality at FISU, the cultural prejudices concerning women's role and abilities to obtain leadership positions should be broken down first. The influence of cultural dimensions on women in sport leadership is not well-researched yet, but it is assumed that progression through career path in sport leadership is easier for women in developed countries (Adriaanse 2016, 159; Sotiriadou & Haan 2019, 15).

The importance of sharing the responsibility of creating and sustaining gender diversity in FISU leadership is the fourth theme derived from the content analysis of the

interview responses. All interviewees agreed that everybody in the organisation is responsible for ensuring that the principles of gender equality are followed, women get the same voice as men and nobody is discriminated because of gender. Men's advocacy lies in supporting female leaders by both publicly saying their willingness to increase gender diversity on board and taking actions in that direction. Whereas women are responsible for mentoring and supporting their female colleagues. Interviewee 4 and 5 (both female) mentioned the need of women to grow their self-confidence and overcome the fears of not being perfect, which is not that common for men as it is for women. Research on female leaders conducted by "Women in Sport" revealed that a lack of self-confidence is not only typical for women at all levels, but also negatively affect career development of females to senior level positions and should be solved by creating development opportunities, including mentoring and networking, aimed purposefully at women ("Beyond 30%" report 2017, 19).

Similarly, some of the present study interviewees highlighted the importance of having female role models for women who aim to take leadership positions in the future and mentoring programs where current leaders might consult future ones on the topics of career development. Respondents assumed that this kind of practices would help to increase the number of women on board. In fact, Cunningham (2007) argued that the more women hold management positions in sport organisations, the greater is the gender diversity of the whole department. He proved his argument by providing a finding from the past research on intercollegiate sport that hiring a female athletic director has led to an increase in the number of female coaches of women's teams. (139.) This means that the respondents are likely to be right in their assumption – role modelling and mentoring may result in an increased number of females on future FISU board.

Finally, respondents mentioned traits of female leaders that differentiate them from male counterparts and create a diversity of skills, leadership styles and personal qualities on FISU board. Female leaders are unique due to their interpersonal and communication skills, ability to handle multiple things at the same time, caring, listening and engaging way of leading a group of people. These personal characteristics make them as good leaders as men. It was also found that the perceptions of female

leadership do not differ significantly among various respondents and their sex. This finding is similar to the one from a previous study by Welty Peachy and Burton (2011), who found that the opinion on what is effectiveness in sport leadership did not differ based on the gender (421).

Summing up, the discussion chapter showed that most of the findings from the present study are similar to the findings from previous researches. Thus, these findings can be assessed as reliable and valid, however, some limitations should be still taken into consideration.

In order to adequately interpret, formulate and proceed the finding, the researcher have to recognise the limitations of the study (Anderson & Poole 2001, 25). Regarding the following study, the author has identified three major limitations: a small number of interviewees, researcher and respondents bias.

Firstly, the number of interviewee participants was narrowed to five, meaning that three male and two female leaders at FISU were interviewed. This sample is relatively small; therefore, the findings should not be over-generalised (Anderson & Poole 2001, 27). Moreover, it was initially planned to interview an equal number of men and women but because of a language barrier and a lack of time before finishing the data collection, only five FISU executive committee and committee members were interviewed.

Secondly, the data collection and analysis might be affected by the researcher bias that make the findings subjective to some extent. The reliability and validity of the findings are ensured by strict following of the procedure of content analysis and reviewing of the findings by the supervisor and other individuals. Nevertheless, it is difficult to clearly assess how significant is the impact of researcher bias on the findings' interpretations (Starks & Brown Trinidad 2007, 1374). Conducting a study in a pair would reduce this limitation, especially at the stage of conducting the interviews and interpreting the data, to avoid the influence of personal attitudes and preferences on the direction of the interview and misinterpretation of the data collected.

Thirdly, the respondents bias has an impact on the findings as well. Similar to the researcher bias, it is impossible to know exactly how subjective, honest and reliable are the interviewees' responses.

Finally, it is essential to suggest some ideas for further research that can contribute to deepening the study. The first suggestion concerns the importance of expanding the notion of gender in sport leadership, which was mentioned by two respondents (interviewee 2 and 3, both male). Women represent just of the groups that face discrimination based on their gender characteristic. However, nowadays the understating of gender is broader than just men and women. Future researchers should not limit the study by exploring only two genders, but also include transgender and non-binary gender in their research. For example, interviewee 2 (male) shared his opinion:

"*In this point, we are only talking about female and male gender. We are not talking about transgender or people who prefer to present in another way. This is the long way coming in FISU*". (Interviewee 2, male)

Moreover, the topic can be researched further using a quantitative approach to a research in order to enlarge the sample of participants. Designing a questionnaire and getting the responses not only from the leaders of FISU, but also the leaders of national university sport association would help to understand the broader picture concerning gender equality and female leaderships across the countries and continents.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions

CAREER PATH AND BACKGROUND

3. Can you tell a little bit about your background? What did you study? How did you start at FISU?

PERCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP

4. How would you define the term 'leadership'? What comes to your mind? Can you name some associations?
5. Can you describe a good leader at FISU? What personal qualities does he/she have?

MESO LEVEL:

6. Do you believe that women in leadership positions have certain qualities that are not similar to that of men? If so, please name some of these qualities.
7. Do you feel that there is a difference between men and women in leadership positions?
8. Do you believe that gender diversity is beneficial for an organisation? Why?
9. Are there any obstacles might women face in the workplace?
10. Do you feel that stereotypes related to gender exist at FISU?

MACRO LEVEL:

11. What do you think should be done to create and sustain gender equality in sport governance? Is this done at FISU? What else should be done to develop sustainable gender-equal culture?
12. The next question concerns the use of quotas. For example, there is a belief that gender diversity on a board is possible only if at least 40% of members represent another gender than the majority. What do you think about the use of quotas?

MICRO LEVEL:

13. What is the role of individuals in ensuring gender equality?
14. Whose responsibility is to support female leaders?

Appendix 2. Research findings

Theme	Interview 1 (male)	Interview 2 (male)	Interview 3 (male)	Interview 4 (female)	Interview 5 (female)
Glass ceiling • **Stereotypes** • **Male-dominated network** • **Work-life balance**	"Backwards mentality" because of stereotype that women cannot do a men's job.	Women stereotypically have to be a principal caregiver and obtain more feminine positions at the workplace. Gender bias -> women have to display outstanding characteristics to get over the gender bias.	The stereotypical argument that "women haven't got enough experience" that inhibit women to take leadership positions. "Older men" network who doesn't believe in gender equality or don't work on achieving it even if they publicly claim to support it. And the majority of decision-makers are men.	"You need qualities when you would like to be a leader and these qualities are the same." Work-life balance differs between men and women, because women take care of family and work.	Women stereotypically are not supposed to be on the top. At FISU stereotyping is still a big issue and the reason of underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.

Theme	Interview 1 (male)	Interview 2 (male)	Interview 3 (male)	Interview 4 (female)	Interview 5 (female)
Need for top-down change • **Use of gender quota/critical mass** • **Policies and practices**	Percentages are not the right way to find a person to hire. "For me it's the best person for the job. If it means 70% women, 30% men I personally don't have a problem with it".	"People will always disrespect people's appointment based on a quota system". Old-fashioned way of putting it in, but an opportunity to structure drive behaviour. Principles that ensure equality in treatment, freedom of speech and independence. A **collaborative** approach instead of quotas. Appointments should be supported and encouraged by all **parties**.	"We need to have quotas to break that barrier". Quotas are the only way to achieve gender equality within an acceptable timeframe, but it should be "relatively a short-term requirement for a longer-term aim". Leadership mentoring program for female leaders. Organization-wide agreement. Open discussions about gender equality and challenges should be organized. Work on identify what are the obstacles and break them down. While taking into consideration the members, FISU should take a lead to make the change.	A tool to achieve gender equality - **everybody** has to look for qualified men and women. It's better not to have a quota, but our societies are not developed enough. With the use of quota, women think they are chosen for the position only because of quota. But without the quota, they cannot show their qualities, skills and knowledge because they are not even considered for the position. Gender equality should be integrated in every area of strategy of FISU. Written gender equality policy within FISU and its members (**NUSFs**).	Quota at FISU level might be hard to work because candidates are proposed by the **countries (NUSFs)** -> change should start from there. A policy that impacts on the grassroots (**NUSFs**). A good policy addressed for NUSFs may put away a need for quota. Educational programs to improve the appreciation of gender equality and its role.

Theme	Interview 1 (male)	Interview 2 (male)	Interview 3 (male)	Interview 4 (female)	Interview 5 (female)
Cooperation with national members • **Bottom-up change** • **Cultural background of members**	Challenges start at the NUSF level because **NUSFs** don't make effort to encourage and nominate more women. The more women they have, the more consideration at FISU will be put it. "It's a mentality thing."	Certain cultures don't see women as equal to men, for example, in Muslim countries. In certain countries, cultures and sports women cannot obtain a position because of ceiling created in a male-dominated environment. Power is imbalanced -> roles are dictated from cultural and sociological perspectives. It's difficult to talk to women on an equal basis there.	General Assembly is comprised of members from different **countries** and many of members don't support gender equality. To link up with them and understand their position even if they don't support gender equality. To identify regions where the problem is more significant and work with them to help future leaders.	**NUSFs** should be inspired and guided by gender equality policies introduced at FISU level.	Cultural background, especially in Muslim countries, puts women somewhere they cannot even mingle with men. If the **countries** don't present women for leadership positions, there is no way to vote for women.

Theme	Interview 1 (male)	Interview 2 (male)	Interview 3 (male)	Interview 4 (female)	Interview 5 (female)
Shared responsibility • **Men's advocacy** • **Women's support** • **Everyone's responsibility**	Men: "Have to accept that a female can do as good job as male". **Every single person** whether it's male of female brings something special to the table and makes the difference.	**Everybody** is responsible to make sure that everyone is listened to. **Everyone** should not to diminish their principles and ensure that the right things are done in governance.	Men: Public support of female equality and leadership both by saying and doing. Female leaders for a long term have been demanding more equality supported by men's advocacy will lead to a positive change. We are **all** responsible.	Men: Women have a lack of network because they are excluded from some informal discussions by men. Women: Women need support by other women because they have a lack of self-confidence and no role models to follow. Having a gender equality committee has its drawbacks - people can say "Okay my committee is not responsible for that, we have a special committee". Must be the task of **everybody** in the organization.	Women: Are their own enemies because they want to be perfect. **Each individual** has a responsibility to change the mentality of people. But the change should start with women - to break the mentality as women.
Traits typical for female leaders	Courageous, hardworking, self-confident, brave, inspirational.	Greater emotional intelligence, greater awareness of what is going on.	More open, engaging with people, caring, opening, listening, transparent. Women are more apprehensive about applying for a position.	Flexible, multitasking, more caring. Involve people to find a common sense of a topic. Cooperation and communication. Diplomatic. Focused on the content they are dealing with rather them having power.	Women handle a lot of things. They are naturally leaders because they are mothers and leaders in the family -> easy to translate those skills to an organization and lead even better than men. Women don't put self ahead of others and first take of people they serve, giving more than 100%.