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From Individual Agency to Structural Empowerment: A Grounded Theory Model of Women's Leadership Transformation in Sport Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Women remain underrepresented in senior leadership across many sport organizations despite sustained attention to gender equity. Research has often treated this problem either as a deficit in women's preparation for leadership or as a consequence of organizational barriers. The present study develops a process-oriented explanation that connects individual agency with the organizational and institutional conditions required for structural empowerment. This article presents a focused secondary analysis and theoretical synthesis of the qualitative phase of a larger doctoral study on women's leadership transformation in Iranian sport organizations. Twenty-four semi-structured interviews with women holding managerial or executive experience in sport and experts in sport management were analyzed in the original study using a Glaserian grounded theory approach based on constant comparison, open coding, selective coding, and theoretical coding. The full study produced 133 refined initial codes, 43 subcategories, 15 main categories, and five overarching dimensions. The present paper does not claim a new dataset or a new coding system; its distinct contribution is to isolate and integrate the transition-oriented categories that explain how individual capability may become substantive and potentially durable organizational influence: individual agency, competence development, support and networking, inclusive climate, structural empowerment, institutional accountability, transformation strategies, and transformation outcomes. The findings suggest that agency and competence are important but insufficient on their own. Their practical significance is shaped by access to professional networks, senior support, psychological safety, information, resources, decision authority, transparent rules, and monitoring. Structural empowerment was interpreted as a key bridge between holding a managerial title and being able to exercise organizational influence. Sustainable transformation was associated by participants with coordinated structural redesign, cultural change, and coalition building. Because the study is qualitative, these relationships should be read as an interpretive process model rather than as experimentally tested causal effects. The model shifts attention from "fixing women" to aligning individual capability with organizational power structures and accountability mechanisms.

Keywords: Women's leadership; sport organizations; structural empowerment; individual agency; gender equity; grounded theory; organizational change

Introduction

Women's participation in sport has expanded substantially, yet leadership structures in sport organizations continue to be strongly gendered. The issue is not simply the number of women occupying formal positions. Leadership involves access to decision arenas, information, resources, influential networks, and legitimate authority. A woman may therefore hold a managerial title while remaining peripheral to the processes through which priorities, budgets, appointments, and institutional rules are shaped. This distinction between numerical presence and substantive influence is central to understanding why improvements in representation do not automatically eliminate gendered inequality in sport leadership.

Sport-management research has repeatedly shown that women's underrepresentation in leadership is produced across multiple levels. Burton's (2015) review identified macro-level institutional practices, meso-level organizational cultures and stereotyping, and micro-level career expectations and experiences as interconnected sources of inequality (Burton, 2015). Gendered-organization theory similarly argues that apparently neutral organizational structures may embed assumptions about the "ideal" worker and leader, thereby reproducing gendered distributions of opportunity and authority (Acker, 1990). In sport governance specifically, gender operates through formal rules as well as informal relations of production, power, emotion, and symbolism (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013). These perspectives suggest that women's leadership cannot be explained adequately through individual skill or motivation alone.

The Iranian sport context illustrates the importance of a multilevel approach. Recent qualitative evidence from Iranian sport organizations has identified challenges at macro, meso, and micro levels, including cultural constraints, structural discrimination in selection, symbolic appointments, weaknesses in leadership-development processes, political communication demands, and personal-life pressures (Rahbar et al., 2025). Such findings are consistent with a broader international literature demonstrating that women's leadership pathways are shaped by organizational selection systems, sponsorship and networks, leadership stereotypes, work-family expectations, and the distribution of decision-making power (Burton, 2015; Burton & Leberman, 2017; Cunningham, 2023). However, the identification of barriers does not by itself explain how transformation occurs. A stronger model must show how women and organizations move from constraint to empowerment.

One common response to underrepresentation is to invest in women's leadership development. Training, mentoring, networking, confidence-building, and exposure to challenging assignments can strengthen leadership capability. In sport settings, transformational learning and leadership-development experiences can help women reinterpret their roles, develop strategic skills, and broaden professional networks (Megheirkouni & Roomi, 2017). Mentorship is also consistently described as an important resource for women in sport coaching and leadership because it can provide guidance, access, recognition, and career support (Mbatha et al., 2025). Yet leadership programs can become limited when they place primary responsibility for change on women themselves. A systematic review of women's leadership programs found that evidence of individual development is more common than evidence of organizational transformation (Gardiner et al., 2023). Ryan (2023) similarly cautions against approaches that attempt to "fix women" while leaving the systems that generate unequal opportunities substantially unchanged (Ryan, 2023).

Structural empowerment provides a useful theoretical bridge between these perspectives. Kanter (1977) conceptualized organizational power not simply as a personal attribute but as access to structures that enable people to accomplish work (Kanter, 1977): information, resources, support, opportunities, and networks of formal and informal influence. This idea is

particularly relevant to women's sport leadership. If a manager is assigned responsibility without budget authority, strategic information, adequate staff, or discretion over decisions, the position is formally managerial but substantively weak. Conversely, when women have access to the resources and authority required to act, their competence can be translated into organizational influence. Structural empowerment therefore shifts analysis from the question "Are women ready to lead?" toward the question "Does the organization provide the conditions under which leadership can actually be exercised?"

The present study addresses this transition by drawing on the qualitative findings of a doctoral grounded theory study of women's leadership transformation in sport organizations. The full study identified 15 main categories organized into five overarching dimensions and a core category of institutional transition from the glass ceiling to structural empowerment. The present article does not generate a new dataset or claim a new coding system. Its distinct analytic contribution is a focused theoretical synthesis of the categories that describe the transition from individual capability to organizational authority and institutionalization: individual agency, competence development, support and networking, inclusive climate, structural empowerment, institutional accountability, transformation strategies, and transformation outcomes. In the broader dissertation model, these categories were embedded within a larger account that also included barriers reproducing the glass ceiling. Here they are examined together to clarify the transition process itself rather than to reproduce the full barrier-centered model. This narrower question, analytic focus, and theoretical integration constitute the specific contribution of the article and should be distinguished from any publication that reports the broader dissertation model.

Accordingly, the study asks: How do individual agency, competence, relational support, organizational climate, and institutional arrangements interact in the transition toward structural empowerment of women leaders in sport organizations? A second question concerns sustainability: Which conditions may reduce dependence on exceptional individuals, temporary managerial support, or symbolic appointments? The resulting model is intended as an interpretive grounded process account. It proposes relationships among categories derived through theoretical coding, but it does not assume that all cases follow a single linear sequence or that the proposed relationships have been causally tested.

Methodology

Study design and analytic scope

This article reports a focused secondary analysis and theoretical synthesis of the qualitative phase of a larger exploratory sequential mixed-method doctoral study. The qualitative phase used classical grounded theory with a Glaserian orientation to generate an explanatory model from participants' accounts rather than to test a predetermined causal framework (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The wider dissertation subsequently included a quantitative phase, but no quantitative results are introduced into the present article. The current paper therefore remains within the empirical boundaries of the original qualitative dataset and coding hierarchy. Its purpose is not to recode the data as a new study, but to examine a theoretically coherent subset of the original categories in order to explain the transition from individual capability to structural empowerment and institutionalization.

Participants and sampling

The qualitative sample comprised 24 participants selected progressively from women with managerial and executive experience in sport organizations and academics or experts with relevant sport-management knowledge. Initial purposive

sampling was followed by snowball and theoretical sampling, with sampling and analysis proceeding iteratively. Later recruitment was guided by the need to elaborate emerging categories and relationships, and data collection stopped when subsequent interviews were judged not to add substantively new concepts or relationships to the developing model. Saturation was therefore treated as an analytic stopping principle rather than as a predetermined numerical target. Detailed participant-by-participant demographic or professional characteristics were not available in the records used for this focused secondary analysis and are therefore not reported.

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was designed to elicit experiences and interpretations concerning women's movement into leadership, barriers to advancement, access to organizational opportunities and resources, support systems, leadership development, and the conditions required for meaningful empowerment. The dissertation reports that interview audio was transcribed and checked against the recordings before coding, and that field notes were used during the research process. The present article introduces no additional interviews and no reconstructed or simulated participant statements. Interview duration, interview setting, interviewer characteristics, and the use of qualitative data-management software were not available in the records used for this secondary analysis and are therefore not reported.

Grounded theory analysis

Analysis in the original qualitative phase was conducted concurrently with data collection through constant comparison. During open coding, meaningful segments were coded without forcing them into an a priori framework. Similar codes were compared, refined, merged where conceptually appropriate, and progressively abstracted. The dissertation reports 133 refined initial codes, grouped into 43 subcategories and then into 15 main categories. Selective coding concentrated analysis around categories with the strongest explanatory relationship to the emerging core process, while theoretical coding specified relationships among categories. The 15 categories were ultimately organized into five overarching dimensions: mechanisms reproducing the glass ceiling, transition-enabling capacities, enabling institutional infrastructures, mechanisms for institutionalizing transformation, and sustainable outcomes of women's leadership. The core category was defined as the institutional transition of women's leadership from the glass ceiling to structural empowerment. In this paper, these procedures are reported as the analytic basis of the source study rather than as a newly repeated coding exercise.

Focused analysis for the present article

To preserve the empirical boundaries of the dissertation while creating a conceptually distinct paper, categories were retained for the present analysis when they directly addressed at least one of four transition functions: (1) individual capacity or intentional career action; (2) relational or organizational conditions that enable participation to become consequential; (3) access to information, resources, and decision authority; or (4) institutional mechanisms that embed and sustain change. On this basis, the paper focuses on individual agency, competence development, support and networking, inclusive climate, structural empowerment, institutional accountability, transformation strategies, and transformation outcomes. No new category is introduced and the substantive meaning of the original categories is retained. Barrier categories such as institutional blockage, gender culture, power networks, informal relations, and family requirements remain part of the full

dissertation model but are not re-reported in detail because they address reproduction of the glass ceiling rather than the transition mechanism that is the focus of this article. This procedure should therefore be understood as theoretically focused secondary analysis and selective reporting of an existing grounded theory model, not as an independent new grounded theory study.

Trustworthiness

Several procedures documented in the dissertation were used to support trustworthiness. The study drew on interviews and field notes, the analytic process was documented to support an audit trail, and research colleagues or experienced qualitative researchers participated in checking coding and category development. Selected interview material, codes, and categories were also reviewed by colleagues and faculty familiar with qualitative analysis. The dissertation additionally reports an inter-coder agreement of 76.6% for selected material. In the present article, this percentage is treated only as an auxiliary consistency check and not as a statistical index of qualitative validity. The available records did not specify the amount of material double-coded, the identities or number of additional coders, or the exact agreement formula; these details are therefore not reported. Credibility is based primarily on constant comparison, conceptual fit between data and categories, an auditable coding hierarchy, and representative participant excerpts. Reporting was informed by relevant COREQ principles for interview studies (Tong et al., 2007), but the manuscript does not claim complete COREQ compliance where source details are unavailable.

Ethical considerations

The study reports that field data were collected after the necessary permissions for interviews had been obtained. Participants are identified only by alphanumeric codes, and the present article retains that de-identified form. Quotations reproduced here are English translations of excerpts explicitly reported in the dissertation, with wording translated for readability without changing substantive meaning. The dissertation materials available for this secondary analysis did not provide a formal research-ethics committee approval number or a documented consent modality; accordingly, no approval code or specific consent procedure is reported.

Table 1. Methodological profile of the qualitative phase used in this article

Element	Study specification
Design	Classical/Glaserian grounded theory within the qualitative phase of a larger exploratory sequential mixed-method doctoral study; present paper is a focused secondary analysis/theoretical synthesis of the original qualitative model
Qualitative sample	24 participants selected progressively from women with managerial/executive experience in sport organizations and sport-management experts; detailed participant characteristics were not available in the records used for this secondary analysis
Sampling	Purposive sampling followed by snowball and theoretical sampling; later recruitment was used to elaborate emerging categories until subsequent interviews were judged not to add substantively new concepts or relationships
Data collection	In-depth semi-structured interviews; interview transcripts and field notes formed the qualitative evidence base. Interview duration, setting, and interviewer characteristics were not available in the records used for this secondary analysis
Analytic procedures	Constant comparison; open coding; selective coding; theoretical coding in the original qualitative phase
Full-study coding structure	133 refined initial codes, 43 subcategories, 15 main categories, five overarching dimensions, and one core category
Focus of this article	Focused secondary analysis of transition-oriented categories from individual agency through structural empowerment and institutionalization; no new dataset or coding system claimed
Additional consistency check	Inter-coder agreement of 76.6% was reported in the dissertation as an auxiliary consistency check; calculation details were not available in the records used for this secondary analysis

Research Findings

The transition-oriented findings form an interpretive process pattern rather than a list of independent factors or a fixed causal sequence. At the individual level, agency and competence were described as shaping how women approach leadership

opportunities. At the relational and organizational levels, mentoring, networks, senior support, psychological safety, and participative culture were described as conditions that may enable individual capacity to become consequential participation. Structural empowerment marks the analytically distinct point at which participation is accompanied by access to information, resources, and decision authority. Institutional accountability and transformation strategies were associated with the durability of these gains beyond particular leaders or temporary initiatives. Finally, the model identifies perceived or theoretically anticipated outcomes at individual, organizational, and institutional levels. The arrows in Figure 1 therefore represent relationships identified through theoretical coding; they should not be interpreted as experimentally established causal pathways or as a sequence that must occur identically in every case.

Table 2. Transition-oriented grounded theory categories and subcategories

Main category	Subcategories retained from the original coding structure	Role in the transition process
Individual agency	Professional self-limitation (interpreted here as anticipatory self-restriction under organizational constraints); individual resilience; career agency	May support intentional career action and negotiation of leadership conditions
Competence development	Leadership training; experiential learning; strategic learning	May build strategic capability and readiness for senior responsibility
Support and networking	Professional mentoring; professional networking; women's solidarity	May connect capability to information, sponsorship, opportunity, and collective support
Inclusive climate	Senior support; psychological safety; participative culture	May enable participation to become consequential rather than symbolic
Structural empowerment	Information access; supportive resources; decision power	Represents access to information, resources, and usable organizational authority
Institutional accountability	Anti-discrimination rules; gender transparency; organizational monitoring	May make equity reviewable and less dependent on individual goodwill
Transformation strategies	Structural redesign; cultural change; coalition building	Coordinates proposed change across rules, norms, and collective action
Transformation outcomes	Individual outcomes; organizational outcomes; institutional outcomes	Represents participant-reported or theoretically inferred individual, organizational, and institutional outcomes

Individual agency: moving from constrained participation to career action

Individual agency was identified as a transition-enabling category with three original subcategories: professional self-limitation, individual resilience, and career agency. In this article, 'professional self-limitation' is interpreted more precisely as anticipatory self-restriction under organizational constraints. Participants described how women may sometimes withdraw from managerial competition before formal exclusion occurs, particularly when repeated scrutiny, fear of judgment, or perfectionistic expectations make leadership appear personally risky. This interpretation is not intended to suggest that women create their own disadvantage. Rather, the pattern is treated as a possible adaptive response to organizational environments in which unequal evaluation or weak support is anticipated. Retaining the original category label preserves fidelity to the dissertation coding structure, while the revised interpretation makes its structural context explicit.

The counter-process was resilience and active career agency. Participants associated resilience with persistence after exclusion, maintaining confidence in one's capacity to influence outcomes, and constructing meaning from difficult experiences. Career agency was more explicitly strategic: accepting challenging responsibilities, negotiating the conditions required to succeed, setting deliberate goals for senior leadership, and refusing roles in which accountability was detached from authority. This distinction matters. Agency was not simply "confidence"; it involved the capacity to act on the organization and to negotiate the terms under which responsibility would be assumed.

A participant captured this connection between agency and power: "When I accepted the responsibility, I said explicitly that without authority over the budget and team selection, I could not be held accountable for the result" (P4). The statement

illustrates the transition logic of the model. Individual agency becomes meaningful when it is used to secure structural conditions for action. It also anticipates the later structural-empowerment category, where decision authority and access to resources become central.

Competence development: converting experience into strategic capability

The second transition-enabling category was competence development, comprising leadership training, experiential learning, and strategic learning. Participants emphasized that technical expertise alone did not guarantee advancement or effectiveness in senior management. Women also needed knowledge of strategic management, financial and legal processes, negotiation, influence, and organizational decision-making. In this sense, competence development was broader than formal education. It involved learning how organizations work and how leadership decisions are advanced, defended, and implemented.

Experiential learning was described through challenging assignments, job rotation, responsibility for important projects, and learning from error. Such experience creates visible evidence of readiness for senior leadership and helps women develop judgment in ambiguous situations. Yet experience becomes developmental only when organizations allow meaningful responsibility. If women are kept in low-discretion roles or excluded from high-visibility projects, they can later be judged as lacking the very experience they were never allowed to acquire. Competence development therefore depends partly on the distribution of organizational opportunity.

Strategic learning added a reflective element. Participants highlighted the importance of critically examining past experiences, sharing leadership narratives, and continuously updating knowledge in areas such as governance, finance, technology, and law. One participant stated: “Many women have technical knowledge, but they need to learn how to advance their views in meetings and gain others’ support” (P3). The finding does not reduce leadership to political performance; it indicates that expertise must be translated into influence within collective decision processes. The category is consistent with sport leadership-development research showing that women’s learning is strengthened when programs combine skill development with reflective and relational processes rather than relying on decontextualized training alone (Megheirkouni & Roomi, 2017).

Support and networking: building relational access to opportunity and influence

Support and networking formed the third transition-enabling category and included professional mentoring, professional networking, and women’s solidarity. Participants repeatedly described leadership careers as relational rather than purely individual. Mentoring by experienced managers could help women interpret formal and informal rules, receive targeted feedback, and plan a coherent career path. In the absence of such guidance, women may acquire qualifications but remain disconnected from the assignments, sponsorship, and visibility through which leadership pipelines are built.

Professional networking was defined functionally rather than socially. The relevant issue was access to information, decision-makers, cross-organizational relationships, and timely knowledge of leadership opportunities. Networks could connect women across federations, sport administrations, clubs, and other institutions, expanding the circulation of experience and making career opportunities less dependent on closed internal circles. As one participant explained, “A woman needs to be present in the networks where policies and appointments are decided, not simply learn about the outcome afterwards” (P5). This quotation distinguishes meaningful network participation from ceremonial inclusion.

Women's solidarity added a collective dimension. Participants described the importance of women supporting other women, visible role models demonstrating that senior leadership is attainable, and coalitions that can convert individually experienced problems into shared institutional claims. This is particularly important when unequal practices are normalized as isolated personal difficulties. Collective articulation can reveal structural patterns and increase bargaining power. The result aligns with evidence that mentoring and relational support can advance women in sport leadership, while also showing why mentoring alone is insufficient if influential networks and organizational opportunities remain closed (Mbatha et al., 2025).

Inclusive climate: making participation consequential

An inclusive climate connected relational support to organizational practice. Three subcategories were identified: senior-level support, psychological safety, and participative culture. Participants distinguished clearly between public endorsement of gender equality and operational support. Senior commitment was considered credible when it was reflected in nominations for leadership, assignment of strategic responsibilities, protection from discriminatory resistance, and allocation of budget, personnel, and time to equality initiatives. Symbolic statements without resource commitment were viewed as insufficient.

Psychological safety concerned the ability to express disagreement, report discrimination, and contribute expertise without fear of exclusion, reputational damage, or career retaliation. In a climate where speaking about unequal treatment is risky, problems remain hidden and organizations lose the information required to correct them. Participants therefore treated safe reporting and openness to dissent as leadership conditions, not merely employee-wellbeing issues.

Participative culture referred to whether women's contributions affected actual decisions. This was expressed succinctly by P6: "A woman's presence in a meeting matters when her view affects the decision, not when her name only appears in the minutes." The finding is crucial because it separates descriptive representation from influence. An inclusive climate does not exist merely because women are invited to meetings; it exists when information arrives in time, voices are treated as legitimate, differences in leadership style are accepted, and women participate before decisions are effectively closed. This transition from presence to consequential participation is a prerequisite for structural empowerment.

Structural empowerment: from managerial title to usable power

Structural empowerment emerged as the pivotal category in the transition process. It comprised information access, supportive resources, and decision power. Participants consistently distinguished formal appointment from actual ability to lead. Access to strategic information included timely knowledge of plans, budgets, criteria for advancement, organizational rules, and accumulated institutional knowledge. Information was not treated as a passive resource. It determined whether managers could intervene before decisions were finalized and whether they could navigate organizational procedures without dependence on intermediaries.

Supportive resources included budget authority, qualified personnel, operational tools, and access to legal, financial, administrative, and technical support. Participants stressed the unfairness of evaluating women's managerial performance when responsibility was not matched by resources. P1 summarized this problem directly: "You cannot demand results from a woman manager while preventing her from deciding on her own unit's budget." The quote captures the central mechanism of structural empowerment: accountability becomes legitimate only when a manager has the means to act.

Decision power involved discretion within one's area of responsibility, access to developmental assignments, and the capacity to influence across organizational units. Empowerment therefore exceeded autonomy over routine tasks. It included participation in strategic projects, opportunities that increase visibility and credibility, and sufficient authority to align other actors around organizational decisions. The three subcategories functioned interdependently. Information without authority produces awareness without action; authority without resources produces responsibility without implementation capacity; and resources without information may be poorly directed. Their conjunction converts a managerial position into a position of effective leadership.

This finding resonates with Kanter's (1977) structural theory of organizational power, which locates empowerment in access to information, resources, support, opportunities, and formal and informal power (Kanter, 1977). The grounded data add a gendered sport-management interpretation: structural empowerment refers to the organizational capacity to act, rather than merely to formal presence or a subjective feeling of confidence.

Inclusive climate and structural empowerment are therefore related but analytically distinct in this model. Inclusive climate concerns whether women can speak, participate, disagree, and be treated as legitimate contributors without disproportionate interpersonal or reputational risk. Structural empowerment concerns whether they possess the material and formal capacity to act on that participation through information, resources, and decision authority. A supportive climate may exist without sufficient authority, and formal authority may exist in a climate that constrains voice; the model therefore treats the two constructs as interacting conditions rather than interchangeable stages.

Institutional accountability: making gender equity independent of individual goodwill

Structural empowerment was not viewed as sustainable unless organizations became accountable for the rules through which opportunity and power are distributed. Institutional accountability included anti-discrimination rules, gender transparency, and organizational monitoring. Participants emphasized that gender equity should not depend on whether a particular senior manager is personally supportive. Formal rules must prohibit discrimination, provide independent mechanisms for complaints, and protect people who report unequal treatment from retaliation.

Gender transparency involved publishing or clearly communicating appointment criteria, setting observable objectives for women's representation and advancement, and monitoring career pathways from recruitment through senior leadership. Transparency changes the status of decisions: appointments can be evaluated against stated criteria rather than justified retrospectively through vague claims of "fit." Monitoring also helps identify where women are lost from the leadership pipeline—during recruitment, developmental assignments, evaluation, succession planning, or final appointment.

Organizational monitoring extended accountability to managerial performance. Participants proposed periodic reporting of gender-equity indicators and evaluation of managers according to the inclusiveness of their practices. The principle was articulated by P3: "There should be an independent route through which women can report discrimination without going to the same manager who is causing the problem." Institutional accountability thus moves equality from an ethical aspiration into the organization's administrative architecture. It makes practices observable, contestable, and reviewable.

Transformation strategies: coordinating structural redesign, cultural change, and coalition building

The grounded model did not imply that empowerment would emerge automatically once its components were recognized. A distinct category of transformation strategies specified how organizations could move from diagnosis to institutional change. Three subcategories were identified: structural redesign, cultural change, and coalition building.

Structural redesign concerned transparent and competitive appointment processes, documented selection criteria, review of how authority is distributed, and formal succession pathways. A key participant statement was: “The appointment process should be competitive, documented, and traceable so that personal relationships do not replace merit” (P1). The aim is not to eliminate discretion from leadership selection but to make discretion accountable and less vulnerable to opaque networks or gendered assumptions.

Cultural change included education about gender bias, explicit discussion of power relations and informal decision networks, and systematic visibility for successful women leaders. Participants viewed cultural work as necessary because formal policy can be neutralized by resistant norms or symbolic compliance. However, culture change was also understood as insufficient when it remained detached from resources and authority. Training without structural redesign risks producing awareness without redistribution of opportunity.

Coalition building referred to collaboration among women and men who support change, connections with universities, professional associations, media, and policy institutions, and sustained evidence-based advocacy. Coalitions provide continuity beyond individual leaders and can increase the legitimacy of reform. Their role in the model is to maintain pressure for implementation, supply knowledge, and prevent gender-equity initiatives from disappearing when leadership changes. Transformation therefore requires synchronized change in rules, meanings, and collective action.

Transformation outcomes and the feedback process

The final category concerned transformation outcomes described or anticipated within the qualitative accounts at individual, organizational, and institutional levels. Participants associated the transition process with stronger leadership self-efficacy, career advancement and retention, and reduced exhaustion associated with repeated discriminatory barriers. At the organizational level, they linked more substantive inclusion with diversity of perspectives, innovation and adaptability, and perceptions of justice and trust. At the institutional level, the model included normalization of women in leadership, development of a future leadership pipeline, and embedding gender equality in rules and procedures. These should be interpreted as participant-reported or theoretically inferred outcomes within the grounded model, not as independently measured effects of the proposed transition process.

The institutional level is what makes the model transformational rather than developmental. P3 stated: “Equality should not depend on one particular manager; it should be embedded in rules and procedures so it does not disappear when people change.” Sustainable change is therefore defined by durability across personnel transitions. The model also has a feedback character. When women exercise real authority successfully, their visible leadership can challenge stereotypes, expand networks, provide role models, and increase institutional confidence in inclusive succession. Conversely, if women are appointed symbolically without resources or support, poor outcomes can be misattributed to women’s leadership capacity and reproduce the original glass ceiling. Figure 1 therefore includes feedback from outcomes to the organizational conditions that shape future opportunity.

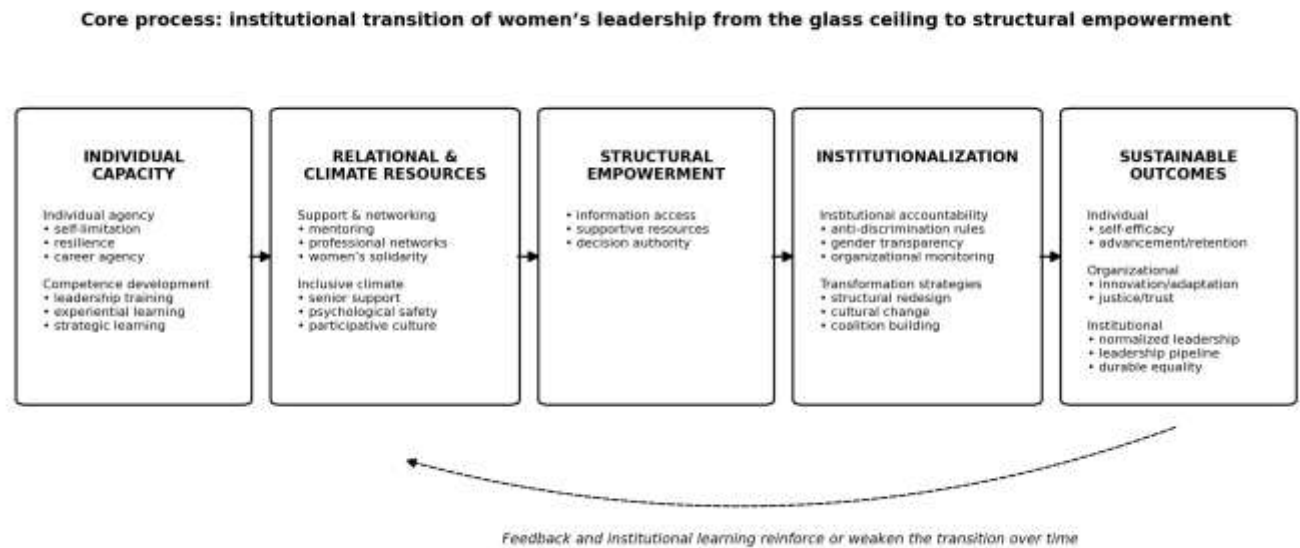


Figure 1. Grounded transition model from individual agency to structural empowerment in sport organizations.

Table 3. Representative participant excerpts supporting the transition pathway

Category	Participant	Translated excerpt
Individual agency	P4	"When I accepted the responsibility, I said explicitly that without authority over the budget and team selection, I could not be held accountable for the result."
Competence development	P3	"Many women have technical knowledge, but they need to learn how to advance their views in meetings and gain others' support."
Support and networking	P5	"A woman needs to be present in the networks where policies and appointments are decided, not simply learn about the outcome afterwards."
Inclusive climate	P6	"A woman's presence in a meeting matters when her view affects the decision, not when her name only appears in the minutes."
Structural empowerment	P1	"You cannot demand results from a woman manager while preventing her from deciding on her own unit's budget."
Institutional accountability	P3	"There should be an independent route through which women can report discrimination without going to the same manager who is causing the problem."
Transformation strategies	P1	"The appointment process should be competitive, documented, and traceable so that personal relationships do not replace merit."
Transformation outcomes	P3	"Equality should not depend on one particular manager; it should be embedded in rules and procedures so it does not disappear when people change."

Discussion

This study develops an interpretive process explanation of women's leadership transformation in sport organizations by connecting individual agency to structural empowerment and institutionalization. Its central proposition is that agency, competence, and leadership development may be necessary but are unlikely to be sufficient when organizational access and authority remain constrained. The model therefore brings into conversation two strands of literature that are often treated separately: women's leadership development and gendered organizational structure. Because the relationships are grounded

in qualitative accounts, the model should be read as an explanatory framework for interpretation and future testing rather than as a causal sequence already demonstrated across organizations.

At the individual level, the findings affirm the importance of resilience, strategic career action, leadership learning, and reflective development. This is consistent with sport-specific work showing that women's leadership development is shaped by transformational learning and by opportunities to reinterpret professional experience (Megheirkouni & Roomi, 2017). Yet the present model places a clear boundary around individual-development explanations. The data show that competence cannot compensate indefinitely for exclusion from high-value assignments, influential networks, timely information, or decision rights. This supports Ryan's (2023) argument that gender-equity interventions fail when they concentrate on "fixing women" while leaving organizational systems unchanged (Ryan, 2023), and it parallels Gardiner et al.'s (2023) conclusion that evidence for individual-level gains from women's leadership programs is stronger than evidence for organizational transformation (Gardiner et al., 2023).

Support and networking represent one important route through which individual capacity can become organizationally connected. Mentors may provide feedback and career guidance, but the grounded category extends beyond mentoring toward sponsorship, network access, information exchange, and collective solidarity. This distinction matters because not all networks confer the same resources. Social connection becomes strategically relevant when it provides access to decision arenas and opportunities that matter for advancement. The finding is consistent with the growing sport literature on mentoring women leaders and coaches (Mbatha et al., 2025), while emphasizing that mentoring should be linked to real organizational opportunity rather than treated as an isolated developmental service.

The inclusive-climate category helps explain why access alone may be insufficient. A woman may enter a meeting, committee, or management role and still have little influence if decisions are effectively made elsewhere, dissent is unsafe, or participation is ceremonial. This reflects the broader distinction between descriptive representation and substantive power. Adriaanse and Schofield's (2013) analysis of sport governance demonstrates how gendered power relations are reproduced within organizational regimes (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013), and Burton's (2015) multilevel review similarly shows that organizational cultures and leadership stereotypes shape women's advancement (Burton, 2015). In the present model, inclusive climate is interpreted as a condition that may allow network access and competence to become consequential participation; it is not treated as a deterministic prerequisite in every organizational setting.

Structural empowerment is the theoretical center of the model. The three grounded subcategories—information, resources, and decision power—closely correspond to the organizational conditions emphasized in Kanter's theory (Kanter, 1977). Importantly, participants did not describe empowerment primarily as a feeling of confidence or personal control. They described it as a distribution problem: who receives strategic information, who controls budgets, who has qualified staff, who is trusted to make decisions, and who gains access to career-building projects. This structural reading is especially important in sport organizations, where leadership positions may be highly visible and symbolically important even when formal authority is constrained. The model therefore defines empowerment operationally as the ability to mobilize organizational resources and influence decisions, not simply the possession of a title.

Institutional accountability addresses the sustainability problem within the proposed model. Without transparent appointment criteria, independent complaint mechanisms, monitoring, and reviewable indicators, empowerment may remain vulnerable to managerial turnover and informal power. Acker's (1990) theory is useful here because it directs

attention to the way inequality can be reproduced through ordinary organizational arrangements rather than through explicit exclusion alone (Acker, 1990). The grounded accounts similarly suggest that routine processes such as succession, information sharing, budgeting, evaluation, and project allocation can shape whether women's authority becomes substantive. Accountability, in this interpretation, makes such processes more visible and contestable.

The transformation-strategy category also clarifies why single interventions are unlikely to succeed. Structural redesign without cultural change may produce formal compliance accompanied by informal resistance. Cultural training without changes in appointment and authority may produce awareness without redistribution. Coalition building without formal rules may create temporary pressure without institutional durability. The model therefore requires coordinated intervention across structure, culture, and collective action. This is consistent with the broader shift in gender-equity scholarship from individual assimilation toward system-level reform (Gardiner et al., 2023; Ryan, 2023).

The Iranian context gives the model a specific empirical setting. Rahbar et al. (2025) identified structural discrimination, symbolic selection, cultural constraints, and personal-life pressures among women leaders in Iranian sport organizations (Rahbar et al., 2025). The present study extends that barrier-focused picture by proposing a transition pathway in which agency and competence interact with relational support, inclusive climate, access to information and resources, decision authority, and accountable institutional rules. These relationships should not be interpreted as a universal ordering. In some organizations, formal institutional reforms may precede and enable individual agency; in others, network access or senior sponsorship may occur before broader climate change. The model therefore allows reciprocal and recursive pathways rather than assuming that transformation always progresses from left to right.

Alternative interpretations also need consideration. Some experiences coded as individual agency may partly reflect organizational selection effects, because women who have already gained access to influential roles are more likely to have opportunities to demonstrate resilience or strategic action. Similarly, reported organizational outcomes may reflect broader institutional change rather than structural empowerment alone. The present model does not resolve these competing explanations; instead, it identifies propositions that can be examined in longitudinal, comparative, and quantitative research.

A final contribution is the distinction between representation and institutionalized leadership. The endpoint proposed by the model is not simply a higher number of women managers, but a condition in which leadership opportunities and authority are less dependent on exceptional sponsors or temporary initiatives. The feedback loop in Figure 1 reflects the possibility that visible, substantively empowered leadership may influence subsequent expectations, networks, and succession practices, whereas symbolic appointments without adequate resources or authority may reproduce existing skepticism and exclusion. This feedback relationship is a theoretical interpretation from the qualitative model and requires longitudinal testing.

Practical Implications for Sport Organizations

For sport organizations, the model implies that leadership-development initiatives should be designed as part of a broader institutional architecture rather than as stand-alone training programs. First, development should combine strategic-management education with challenging assignments, rotation, feedback, and opportunities to demonstrate readiness for senior roles. Second, mentoring should be complemented by sponsorship and access to decision-making networks so that women are not merely advised but are also visible when opportunities are allocated.

Third, organizations should audit whether managerial responsibility is matched by information, budget, personnel, and decision authority. Appointments that lack these conditions should not be treated as evidence of substantive representation. Fourth, appointment and succession processes should use explicit criteria, documented decisions, diverse selection structures, and transparent career pathways. Fifth, independent channels for reporting discrimination, protection from retaliation, periodic gender-equity reporting, and managerial accountability for inclusive practice can help institutionalize change. Finally, change coalitions should include women and men, senior leaders, professional associations, universities, and relevant policy actors so that reform survives leadership turnover and remains connected to evidence.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should guide interpretation. The findings derive from a qualitative sample selected purposively, through snowballing, and theoretically within the Iranian sport context; they are intended for conceptual transfer rather than statistical generalization. Participants' accounts are interpretive and may be influenced by recall, professional sensitivity, or social-desirability concerns. Access to some senior decision-makers was difficult, and the dissertation notes that participants could be cautious when discussing discrimination, power networks, organizational flattery, and informal relationships. The present article reports only the qualitative phase of a larger mixed-method study and deliberately focuses on transition-oriented categories; it therefore does not reproduce the full barrier analysis or use the later quantitative phase to test causal effects. In addition, the available records do not provide a detailed participant profile, complete interview-context information, or the full procedural basis of the reported 76.6% inter-coder agreement. The set of verified participant quotations available for this analysis is also limited, which restricts the ability to display the full range of convergent, divergent, and negative cases. Finally, the available dissertation material does not provide a formal ethics approval number or detailed consent modality. Future research should test the proposed relationships longitudinally and across different national sport systems, compare stakeholder groups, and examine whether structural empowerment is associated with measurable outcomes such as retention, advancement, decision influence, organizational justice, and leadership-pipeline continuity.

Conclusion

Women's leadership transformation in sport organizations cannot be understood solely through individual development or the removal of a single organizational barrier. The grounded model proposed here links individual agency and competence with relational access, inclusive climate, structural empowerment, institutional accountability, and sustainable leadership outcomes. Within participants' accounts, structural empowerment—access to information, resources, and decision authority commensurate with responsibility—emerged as a central link between formal appointment and substantive influence. Institutional accountability was associated with the potential durability of these gains beyond individual sponsors or temporary initiatives. The model should be treated as an interpretive and testable framework rather than a confirmed causal sequence. Its practical implication is that leadership development and organizational redesign should be considered together when sport organizations seek to move from symbolic representation toward more substantive and durable participation in leadership.

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Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

AI use statement

Artificial intelligence tools were used only to support language editing, translation refinement, formatting, and consistency checks. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy of the data, analyses, interpretations, citations, and final content of the manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted using interview and questionnaire data. Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality of participants' responses was preserved. The research procedure was designed to avoid harm to participants and to respect the principles of informed participation and academic integrity.

Transparency of Data

Reasonable requests for research materials should be directed to the corresponding author, subject to university policies and participant confidentiality.

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