Women, Leadership and the Olympic Movement

Executive Summary

Prepared by the Institute of Sport & Leisure Policy for the International Olympic Committee

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Women’s Leadership in the Olympic Movement
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Introduction

This document is an Executive Summary of the findings of a joint project undertaken by the Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy at Loughborough University and the International Olympic Committee, directed by Dr. Anita White, Visiting Professor at Loughborough University and Katia Mascagni, Project Manager, Department of International Co-operation and Development at the IOC. The work was conducted by a team of researchers, directed by Professor Ian Henry, from the Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy, evaluating the impact of IOC policy in respect of the roles, which women play on the Executive Committees of National Olympic Committees (NOCs) in each of the five continental Olympic Associations.

1. Context and Purpose of the Project

In 1997, as part of its Women and Sport policy, the IOC established targets for women’s membership of NOC Executive Committees. These were for women to hold at least 10% of executive decision-making positions in NOCs by Dec 2001 rising to at least 20% by Dec 2005. The IOC has regularly collected statistics on the numbers of women on NOC Executive Committees and measured progress towards the achievement of the targets. The purpose of the research project was to provide information and evaluate progress on the implementation of the IOC policy in relation to women’s leadership in the Olympic Movement. The research project thus evaluates the processes of recruitment of women to decision-making structures, their career paths into Olympic leadership, their impact on the activities of the organizations themselves, and the nature of training and support required by both the women members and the sports organizations to ensure that the benefits of wider involvement in decision-making by women are realised. In so doing the project has explored the views of both women Executive Committee members and NOC Secretary Generals on the implementation and impact of the policy.

2. Methods

The research, undertaken between January 2002 and December 2003, consisted of four elements:

2.1: Questionnaire survey of all women members of NOC Executive Committees
There were 146 usable responses, estimated as a 49.7% response rate¹ of all female members representing 46% of countries. The geographical distribution was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of Countries</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americas</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2: Questionnaire survey of Secretary-Generals of all NOCs
There were 89 usable responses representing a 48.2% response rate¹ of all Secretaries General. The geographical distribution was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of Countries</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americas</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The response rates of 49.7% and 48.2% provide very respectable return rates, and are well above industry norms (Market Research Society - http://www.mrs.org.uk/).
Oceania 3 countries (21% response rate)

2.3: Detailed interviews with women members of NOC Executive Committees
Thirty interviews were conducted with Women executive members: 4 from Africa, 8 from the Americas, 8 from Asia, 8 from Europe and 2 from Oceania.

2.4: Detailed interviews with Secretary Generals
Twenty five interviews were conducted with Secretary Generals: 8 from Africa, 4 from the Americas, 7 from Asia, 5 from Europe, and one from Oceania.

3. Main Findings from Questionnaire Survey of All Women Members of NOC Executive Committees

3.1 The women recruited to the NOC Executive Committees were very well educated (78% of those responding had degrees and/or teaching qualifications; 29.5% had postgraduate degrees, and 8% PhDs) a significant proportion had experience as elite athletes (46% had been international athletes, and 20% had been Olympians) 61% were in employment and 70% were married/cohabiting, most of whom had children.

3.2 Recruitment of women to NOCs was very recent reflecting response to the establishment of targets; 71% had been appointed since 1996 when the targets were announced.

3.3 Two thirds of the group reported that they had been elected to the Executive Committee, with the remainder co-opted. In several cases election had followed after a period of co-optation.

3.4 59.4% of women reported that their NOCs had established a Women’s Committee though in many instances they were relatively recently established.

3.5 64% of women perceived their work as being primarily or solely concerned with general matters rather than primarily with women and sport, although 49% served on Women’s Committees.

3.6 More than half of the respondents (52%) reported having received training since joining the NOC, which is notable given the voluntary nature of the work. IOC regional seminars had been well received. The sample expressed interest in a range of potential training activities, including generic issues such as sports administration and management, language proficiency, skills in dealing with the media, as well as aspects relating to women and sport specifically.

3.7 Most female respondents argued that significant benefits were associated with the introduction of women to Executive Committees (though a minority reported no positive impact). The benefits cited include the promotion of women’s influence in the NOC; stimulation of specialist provision for women; having more women on sports leadership training courses, more female candidates appointed to other committees on sports and administrative functions as well as a generally increased profile for women in sport.

4. Main findings from Questionnaire survey of Secretary Generals of all NOCs

4.1 The SGs also reported that women’s membership of Executive Committees had grown since the announcement of the targets in 1996 and that they came disproportionately from elite athlete backgrounds.

4.2 64% of respondents indicated their NOC had taken special measures to recruit women to their Executive Committees following the introduction of the targets. These measures included reserving places specifically for women, revising their statutes, encouraging NFs to nominate women candidates, setting up a taskforce to nominate suitable women candidates, inviting potential women candidates to attend special functions, and directly approaching suitably qualified women.
4.3 The most regularly cited difficulty experienced in attracting women to work on the Executive Committees of the NOCs was the “structural” issue of getting women nominated and elected from a constituency of National Federations whose representatives were predominantly and traditionally male. Secretary Generals tended to suggest that difficulties were the product of ‘problems’ with women (lack of availability of qualified women, reluctance because of family commitments etc) rather than as a result of ‘problems’ with the strategy adopted by the NOC to recruit women (e.g. lack of flexibility in working or recruitment patterns etc.).

4.4 The SGs described those women who were members of the Executive Boards as being among the most active members of the Executive (51.4% in the most active quartile and 78.2% in the upper 50%)

4.5 As with the responses from the women’s questionnaire, SGs indicated that the work of a majority of women Executive Committee members (71%) was largely or solely concerned with general rather than women’s issues. Like the women respondents, the SGs suggested that women’s committees had as yet had little impact The mean proportion of women as chairs of NOC commissions was low at 21.3%.

4.6 There was a strong association between those countries which had adopted policies on women and sport and those in which programmes to promote women and sport were run.

5. Main Findings from detailed interviews with a sample of women members of NOC Executive Committees

5.1 The interviewees nearly all regarded the IOC targets as a positive force for change and did not see themselves as “tokens”. However targets on their own may well not be enough to reduce inequalities as although they may deal with the effects of inequity by opening access to leadership positions, they do not directly address the circumstances or attitudes which cause such an imbalance in the first place.

5.2 Given the high levels of qualification and competence of many of the women interviewees, considerable frustration was expressed about apparently less well qualified male members of Executive Committees being given preference for posts of responsibility.

5.3 Some women in full time employment, with family responsibilities found themselves in very pressured situations particularly where traditional gender roles and patterns of domestic labour were maintained in the home. They relied heavily on support from families and partners and there was some evidence of personal sacrifices being made in terms of personal relationships.

5.4 In the vast majority of cases, recruitment to NOC Executive Committees, and subsequent effectiveness was fostered by the support and encouragement of senior NOC members, both male and female.

5.5 The solution of dealing with NOC targets by co-opting women or encouraging individuals to stand for election, means that the structure of National Federations may remain relatively untouched by such changes and thus the NF delegates to the NOC Assembly are likely to continue to be predominantly male.

5.6 Interviewees suggested that their impact / effectiveness on Executive Committees increased disproportionately where there was more than one female member and therefore more than one female voice on the Executive Committee.

5.7 The value of the IOC Women in Sport seminars and other international links for many respondents was very clear. Not only did such events provide a source of new ideas in policy terms, they also provided support networks for women who might otherwise be isolated if they were among a small minority on the NOC Executive.

5.8 Training needs reported were very similar to those specified in the questionnaire responses. However it is important also to acknowledge that forms of support other than training (e.g. mentoring, networking and internet resources) may be required if women are to be successfully recruited and retained.
5.9 Women are not a homogenous group and the data from the interviews suggest that differences across socio-economic, ethnic, religious and geographical boundaries implies the need for very different approaches in different cultural contexts.

6. Main findings from detailed interviews with a sample of NOC Secretary Generals

6.1 Although the establishment of the targets had served to raise consciousness of the issue of women’s involvement in Executive Committees, the target had not been met by all of the interviewees’ NOCs. Even where it had, 10% had been regarded as the maximum or norm rather than a minimum level to be achieved. One NOC president indicated that he felt that unless sanctions were incorporated in the system that NOCs would continue to treat the matter less seriously.

6.2 Several SGs highlighted the structural problem of the make up of NOCs in that the majority of the membership is made up of delegates from National Federations who are largely male. This leaves relatively few women who are delegates to the NOC Assemblies to stand for membership of the executive.

6.3 Expectations placed on women recruited as role models often implied high standards as elite performers, and / or high levels of academic qualifications which were not necessarily applicable to male candidates.

6.4 The competences sought in respect of women (as opposed to qualifications and sporting experience) were not clearly articulated and hence the training needs of new women members were difficult to establish.

6.5 Although the great majority of respondents recognised traditional gender roles as barriers to female participation in the work of the Executive, few looked for flexible policies through which to respond to these barriers.

6.6 There are dangers in treating ‘women’ as a homogenous group since differences among women may reflect significant sources of disadvantage (e.g. urban-rural, regional differences).

6.7 The respondents were positive about the decentralisation of Olympic Solidarity Funding and about the potential of Solidarity Funds to be used effectively to support women’s development. However there was evidence that in practice this had been happening in only limited ways.

7. Conclusions

7.1 The Success of the Targets

Perhaps the most obvious point to make is that the introduction of targets has had a clear and positive impact on the proportion of women in NOC Executive Committees. The rapid growth of the numbers of women in such positions, from a very low base, immediately after the announcement of the targets is clear both in numeric terms from the questionnaire data, and also from the observations made by women and the Secretary Generals during the interviews. Thus the target approach can be said to have had success in raising awareness of gender inequalities, in bringing talented women into the Olympic family, and of improving Olympic governance by setting an example and providing moral leadership to the world of sport in terms of equity in representation.

The data collected provide a clear indication of the quality of the cohort of women recruited. They were very well educated as a group, many brought valuable transferable skills from their professional work and many were former elite athletes. They were also very active and hard working as evidenced by the fact that Secretary Generals indicated that 51% of the women on their Executive Committees were in the top quartile in terms of the most active members, with 78% in the top half. Thus the introduction of the targets policy has helped to unlock the source of a skilled, educated, and committed workforce which has considerable potential to grow.
The use of targets of 10% and 20% has the merit of providing a simple, understandable, measurable and transparent policy goal. Perhaps the only area of confusion in relation to the goal was that relating to the difference between quotas and targets, and respondents almost universally used these terms interchangeably. Notwithstanding this fact, and the implication that quotas are compulsory there was little sympathy generally for the imposition of penalties for failing to achieve “quota” or target numbers.

The importance of the leadership of the IOC in respect of addressing the issue of inequitable representation on decision making bodies should not be underestimated. Some respondents felt empowered in making demands on other sporting organisations not covered by the IOC policy simply by virtue of the IOC’s position on this matter. Thus the notion of targets as a reasonable expectation in the sporting world was legitimated to some degree by the fact that the Olympic Movement had adopted such an approach.

7.2 The Limitations of Targets

There are perhaps three principal limitations of the target policy evident from the data. The first is that they affect only part of the system of Olympic and sports administration. As one respondent put it there is a hierarchy from clubs at the base to regional, national and international federations, and to NOCs, Continental Olympic Associations and the IOC. One interviewee pointed out that the NOCs are failing to recommend women for consideration as potential candidates and thus the IOC itself has restricted room for manoeuvre in terms of appointing more female members. By focusing solely on NOCs and IFs (the latter not investigated in the current project) important elements of the system are ignored. Co-opting or even electing one or more women into the NOC Executive is unlikely to have a lasting effect if the predominantly male electorate for the Executive (in the form of the NF nominees to the NOC Assemblies) is left unchanged. Thus the policy only addresses certain points in the pyramid with the result that it may not foster organic growth of the number of women in decision making positions. A long term sustainable solution to the involvement of women in executive decision making is thus likely to require work at the level of clubs and regional / national federations in addition to the NOCs and IFs per se.

The second limitation of the targets approach is that even where the targets themselves are achieved this has not necessarily led to the adoption of policy initiatives that foster women’s participation in sport or in executive decision making. There is a danger that some NOCs see the achievement of targets as an end in itself rather than a means towards a more effective Executive Committee. Many NOCs have set up Women’s Committees but few respondents reported much impact as yet. Guidance and advice on ways of ensuring the effectiveness of Women’s Committees could be useful both to NOCs and the committees themselves.

The third limitation of the targets is that the universal percentages do not take account of the social and cultural conditions in different countries. In some countries women’s equality is well accepted and advanced in all aspects of life, in others women still face significant inequalities. NOCs operate both in the context of the values of the Olympic Movement and also within the cultural conditions that exist in their own country. The targets were set to represent the minima rather than maxima, but several NOCs appeared to regard them as a ceiling to be attained rather than a base from which to build. Others were justly proud that they had exceeded the targets by a considerable amount. There is scope for further emphasis of the desirability for NOCs to strive to achieve higher levels of equality in their governance structures from whatever base they start.

7.3 The Recruitment Process

The interviews with women in particular highlighted the importance of both encouragement / sponsorship of candidates by senior figures within the NOC who showed belief in their ability to do the job, and also the importance of female role models. Secretary Generals were largely
unaware of the critical importance of encouragement by experienced NOC members. It is ironic that given the very well qualified nature of the female members that they should be less confident than some of their male counterparts, but being the first, or among the first women to submit to election from a predominantly male electorate can be daunting. Acknowledging the difference that such encouragement has made may be helpful in promoting the active sponsorship of candidates by experienced members of the NOCs.

Two thirds of NOCs reported taking special measures to recruit women and one third reported not having attempted any measures. One indicated a backlash when attempts to vote through measures had been rejected by the NOC. There is no doubt that special measures have been effective for those NOCs that have adopted them. NOCs that have not yet met the 10% target could learn from the experiences of NOCs that have taken special measures, both formal and informal, to successfully recruit women Executive Committee members.

7.4 Training, support and networking

Major sources of policy ideas on the development of women and sport were seen to grow directly out of the IOC organised regional seminars and other international forums on Women and Sport. These meetings provided two critical ingredients for the development of policy – a source of policy ideas, which may be adapted and reshaped for local application elsewhere, but also as a source for promoting confidence and creating networks among women who may often be working alone or in small numbers on the Executive Committees. The importance of providing moral support for women seeking to make a contribution as a minority in the context of their own organisation should not be taken lightly. Time and again the women interviewed referred to the importance of confidence in relation to their willingness to submit themselves for election, and in relation to their willingness to speak out in promoting policies for women and for the general population. It was equally clear from the feedback of Secretary Generals that while they understood the significance of the Women in Sport conferences and seminars for promoting policy ideas, the issues of confidence building, and networking were not always fully appreciated.

The nature of the training needs cited by women was not unexpected. Management, sports administration, technical skills (sports law, sports medicine, coaching) were mentioned together with the need to learn about successful initiatives elsewhere. However a key element of the training and support requested was the exchange of ideas in seminars and workshops etc (rather than the passive receipt of ideas) such that networks might be established and maintained. Internet communication could be built into these initiatives to allow networking and mutual support groups to flourish outside the context of face-to-face meetings. Such networks might require some (light touch) management but would have the potential to capitalise on the investment made in training.

While the IOC Women and Sport seminars have been a very important means of support in facilitating confidence building, networking among women and in providing project management tools, it may be appropriate to consider organising seminars that include more men in the future. Several respondents pointed out that if gender issues are to become mainstream concerns and real progress made, men and women must work together to take responsibility for promoting gender equality in sport. So far women’s awareness and understanding of gender issues has been raised through training but there has been limited engagement of men.

7.5. Next Steps

The research has provided evidence of the way in which the policy targets have been successful, and sought the views of those most involved in its implementation – women Executive Committee members and NOC Secretary Generals. Many examples of good practice have been identified. Dissemination of the findings of the research should assist the Olympic Movement in the continued implementation and development of the policy. The
areas in which further work would seem appropriate include work with Continental Olympic Associations of NOCs, Women’s Committees of NOCs, and other members of the Olympic family, in particular International and National Federations. It is hoped the experiences of those who have contributed to the research as respondents will assist in taking forward this work and be used to help NOCs achieve and exceed the 20% target in the months leading up to December 2005.

Anita White / Ian Henry
Institute of Sport and Leisure Policy
January 2004