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10.1123/jsm.24.4.379

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# **“I Was Banging My Head Against a Brick Wall”: Exclusionary Power and the Gendering of Sport Organizations**

**Ruth Sibson**

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The under-representation of women in sport management has increasingly been recognized by government and nongovernment organizations, and there has been some attempt to redress the imbalance. Research has indicated, however, that the gendering of sport organizations is not simply a numbers' game. The purpose of this study was to analyze the exercise of exclusionary power as an aspect of gender relations within a six member volunteer Board of Directors of an Australian local, grass-roots sport organization. Data were gathered using semistructured interviews, participant observation and documentary evidence over a 15-month period. This study identified that, although numerical under-representation of men or women on this Board was not an issue for either sex, exclusionary power was exercised in a number of overlapping ways which ultimately limited the participation, input, and influence of its female members.

The placement of gender on the sport agenda is clearly not a new development, as feminist interventions in sport have been fairly widespread since the early 1970s. Over the last four decades, important inroads have been made in highlighting the ways in which sport can be demonstrated to be quite obviously a gendered pursuit, and how the sport experiences of all individuals are clearly structured and constrained by prevailing social and cultural conditions. However, as a number of academicians have pointed out, the way in which gender has been incorporated into analyses of sport has changed considerably over time, and while feminist sport studies have uncovered and challenged the relationship between sport and the domination and power of men, there are still many important areas to be examined (Birrell, 2000; Hargreaves, 1990, 1994; Shaw, 2006b).

One of the main concerns of the liberal feminist approaches which have dominated academic analyses of gender and sport, and the development of much sport policy, since the 1980s has been its central tenet of gender equity. Rather than critiquing the way sport organizations operate, such approaches have worked toward increasing women's involvement by developing women's skill-sets, removing any existing structural barriers and valuing the differences between men and women (Aitchison, 2000; Cunningham & Sagas, 2008; Hargreaves, 1994; Shaw

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& Frisby, 2006; Talbot, 2002). More importantly, as Ely and Meyerson (2000, p. 113) pointed out, although such interventions have been important in targeting and bringing about some change to organizational policies and structures, they “are not sufficient to disrupt the pervasive and deeply entrenched imbalance of power in the social relations between men and women.” In addition, the creation of such equity policies and programs may even be detrimental to women in that they work to reinforce sex stereotypes, and can generate resentment and backlash from men (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). As a consequence of these concerns, researchers have argued for a new conceptual ‘fourth frame’ approach to understanding gender equity and change, based on poststructural feminist theory (Aitchison, 2000; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). Shaw and Frisby (2006) have proposed that sport management needs to engage with this approach more readily so that the prevailing structures, practices, discourses, and values which are taken for granted in sport organizations are critiqued. Such a critique will enable, and open up the possibilities and potential for, organizational transformation and, thus, create a better work environment for individuals.

Rao, Stuart, and Kelleher (1999) argued that there are four key aspects of the institutional arrangements of organizations that inhibit gender equity: the valuing of heroic individualism, the split between work and family, exclusionary power, and the monoculture of instrumentality. Although all of these aspects require further identification and critique in the context of sport organizations, such an aim is beyond the scope of this research. Consequently, the purpose of this research is to analyze the exercise of exclusionary power as an aspect of gender relations within a six member volunteer Board of Directors of a local, grass-roots sport organization in Australia—the Sport Center Limited Company.<sup>1</sup> Numerical under-representation of men or women on this Board is not an issue for either sex, as each of the Men’s Sport Association (MSA) and the Women’s Sport Association (WSA) has three representatives as Directors. However, this paper argues that certain men on this Board have used practices of exclusionary power to limit the voice and participation of the women and their interests. Thus, even under circumstances where gender equity is outwardly portrayed through distributive arrangements, the gendering of sport organizations exists. The next section establishes the theoretical framework of this paper; first, the fourth frame approach to gender equity research and practice based on Meyerson and Kolb (2000) and Ely and Meyerson’s (2000) research is elaborated; then, Rao et al.’s (1999) conceptualization of exclusionary power is outlined.

## Theoretical Framework

The fourth frame provides a more complex approach to understanding and conceptualizing gender. As Meyerson and Kolb (2000, p. 563) argued, “gender is not primarily about women nor is it localized in discrimination practices; it is about the more general process of organizing itself. Gender is an axis of power, an organizing principle that shapes social structure, identities, and knowledge.” From this perspective, it is argued that organizations are inherently gendered. That is, the institutional arrangements of organizations are reflective of socially constructed sex differences where men are privileged and women are devalued or ignored (Acker, 1992; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Rao et al., 1999). Moreover, the

gendering of organizations impacts on the overall effectiveness of the organization, where effectiveness is not simply correlated to an organization's bottom-line or economic productivity, but is also cognizant of the importance of tolerant and meaningful social and interpersonal relations within the organization (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Central to this fourth frame is the enabling of alternatives to the dominant discourses of masculinity that are detracting from the organization's performance (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Rao et al., 1999). Ely and Meyerson (2000) suggested that this may be achieved through the use of three distinct phases: critique, narrative revision and experimentation. Each phase builds on each other, and to fulfill its potential as a method of change requires identification, knowledge generation and revision of practices and, in the experimentation phase, a process of researcher intervention (see also Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). Although acknowledged as still underdeveloped in sport management (Shaw & Frisby, 2006), this study does not go to the extent of using interventions or experiments. It does, however, respond to the challenge Shaw (2006b) and Shaw and Frisby (2006) have explained in that sport management research needs to find alternative analyses and undertake empirical studies which extend and inform our understandings of gender and sport organizations; a challenge that has received only limited attention to date.

Accordingly, this paper draws on the work of Rao et al. (1999, p. 2) who discussed the institutional arrangements or 'deep structure' of organizations: "that collection of values, history, culture and practices that form the unquestioned, "normal" way of working in organizations." As noted earlier, these authors argued that there are four key aspects common to the deep structure of most organizations which go unseen and perpetuate gender inequality. Analyzing all of these aspects is beyond the scope of this research; the exercise of exclusionary power, however, limits participation, input, and influence and prevents gender equality (Rao et al., 1999). Examining how the exercise of exclusionary power influences the gender relations of organizations is a positive step in moving toward meaningful organizational change. It is also a positive step forward for sport management in developing our understanding and critique of gender power relations, which has been notable for its absence (see Frisby, 2005; Shaw, 2006b; Shaw & Frisby, 2006).

## Power

Broadly speaking, power is understood in two ways (Dyrberg, 1997; Rao et al., 1999). In the first, power is theorized as a limited commodity or as something which people have in their possession. As a consequence, if actor A has more, then actor B has less, and actor A is able to get actor B to complete a task or perform an action that they would not have normally done (Halford & Leonard, 2001; Lukes, 2005; McNiff, 2000; Rao et al., 1999). The second view began with Foucault (1980), who argued that power was not something that was possessed but is a feature of the relationships among people. As McNiff (2000, p. 101) elaborated "power exists in who people are and what they do in relation with one another . . . How we are with one another constitutes the nature of our power." From this perspective, it cannot simply be argued that certain groups of people, whether they are men or women, or white or black, are all-powerful while others are powerless. Instead, an individual is "both *produced* by power, and a producer

of power, rather than something completely distinct from it" (Halford & Leonard, 2001, p. 34, emphasis in original). This theoretical perspective argued that people do not take on an immutable identity that is created by others, but that identities are created by individuals through their own interpretations, ideals, and values (Halford & Leonard, 2001; McNiff, 2000). Rao et al. (1999, p. 6) argued that "neither of these views about power is true or untrue," but the way in which power is viewed has implications for the way in which it is practiced. Likewise, as McNiff (2000, p. 106, emphasis in original) pointed out "discourses *about* power are discourses *of* power"; those who see or value power as a possession often use strategies of control to maintain that power.

On the one hand, power can be engaged in weakening and destructive ways affecting not only the organization's productivity but, more significantly, the organizational lives of actors. On the other hand, power can be practiced as encouraging and inclusionary and in this way, it can be employed in organizations to produce positive outcomes for men and women and organizational effectiveness (McNiff, 2000). Rao et al. (1999) argued that there are at least five intersecting types of exclusionary power which, when exercised, perpetuate gender inequality in organizations: positional power, agenda-setting power, hidden power, power of dialogue, and power of conflict.

### Exclusionary Power

"Positional power is the authority derived from an office or title in an organization" (Rao et al., 1999, p. 6). Positional power, therefore, is assumed and can be exercised by any person in an organization, from the top line CEO to a front line worker; although, depending upon the function assigned to it, some organizational positions provide for higher levels of power than others. There are a range of ways in which this authority can be used including, but not limited to, the allocation of money, time, people, information, and other resources. As Rao et al. (1999) pointed out, positional power can be coercive or abusive when used to control or limit the power of others, but it can also build capacity and bring about change. The continued domination of men in senior management and leadership positions in national sport organizations and international federations continues to undermine and limit women's access to power, and perpetuates gender inequality (see Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Hall, 1995; Hargreaves, 1990, 1994; Hovden, 1999a, 2000; McKay, 1992, 1997; Talbot, 2002; Shaw & Hoerber, 2003). The noticeable trend is that women occupy positions of a lower standing and responsibility than men, and scholars argued that this situation is commonly based on the stereotyping of sex roles. For instance, Talbot (1988) argued that within leisure organizations, there has been a tendency to assign traditional culturally recognized roles. That is, because the cultural assumption is that women are better at supporting roles (essentially associated with their primary child-care and domestic labor positions within the home), and that men have better managerial, leadership, and decision-making skills, then roles are most often ascribed on this basis. Similarly, McKay (1997, p. 51), in his study of the management of national sport organizations in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, found that male managers often attribute the under-representation of women in decision-making positions to "'tradition', 'society' or 'natural' sex differences." As Hall (1995, p. 273) stated, research on the gendered structuring

of sport organizations indicates that female under-representation in leadership positions can be explained in part by the fact that:

[W]omen face stereotypical notions about their competence, despite their formal qualifications, organizational resources, and technical expertise [and] women are assumed (in actuality or in the perception of themselves and others) to lack the proper training, motivation, and skills to succeed.

The titles of positions are also indicative of the dominance of masculinity within organizations. For example, the use of the term 'chairman,' once thought to be unproblematic, disassociates women from this role and gives the impression that women are not expected to hold such a position (Shaw & Hoerber, 2003).

As outlined, much of the recent focus in regards gender equity in organizations has been about equaling out the numbers or bringing more women into higher level positions. In doing so, it is assumed that women will have more influence in organizational decision making and process and, as a consequence, the outlook of the organization will be improved. Critically, though, positional power is not the only element at play; positional power brings with it agenda-setting power. In a very basic way, the CEO has the ability to decide what tasks take priority, what resources they are going to allocate and/or who is going to get a vacant job position. Agenda-setting power, however, goes further than that merely set by an individual. Agenda-setting power is about what is, and what is not, on the agenda of an organization due to its culture, values and history. As organizations are gendered, Rao et al. (1999, p. 7) argued that "what is not on the agenda is often what is not important to men, although it may be important to women."

At a national level, many governments have introduced policies based on equal opportunity, gender equity, and affirmative action that promote the status of women within sport organizations (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1994; Hall, 1994, 1995, 1996; Hall, Cullen, & Slack, 1989; Hovden, 2000; McKay, 1993, 1997, 1998; McKay, Lawrence, Miller, & Rowe, 2001; Shaw & Penney, 2003). To receive funding, sport organizations are now being forced to examine the notion of gender equity; to demonstrate in some way that their organization does not have a 'gender issue or problem.' The way in which sport organizations have addressed this requirement, however, is dependent upon the view management has privileged, or on the setting of their agenda. Shaw and Penney (2003) showed how managers of national sport organizations used participation levels (which indicated quantitative equity between men and women) to demonstrate gender equity in their organization, despite knowing that very few women held senior management positions in their organization (Shaw & Hoerber, 2003). Shaw (2006a) argued that this selective disclosure is indicative of gender suppression. She argued that "within organizations themselves, members may well be aware of gender relations but limit or suppress the ways in which they are presented or discussed" (p. 557). An even more subtle and complex type of power is hidden power or the unobtrusive exercise of power (Lukes, 2005), where "not only is your issue not on the agenda, you are not even aware that it is an issue" (Rao et al., 1999, p. 7). The complexity and risk in this type of power is the way in which it is able to control or limit other people. No resistance can be provided against hidden power as the individuals are not even aware there is anything wrong, or that they are being victimized or oppressed (Rao

et al., 1999). The suppression of gender or the normalization of sport organizations as gender-free enables the institutionalized patterns and existing practices of masculine hegemony to continue unquestioned. As such, women's involvement and achievements in sport in many countries are still systematically constrained, rather than improved.

The power of dialogue can build or prevent equity according to the voices that are present and/or privileged in the organization (Rao et al., 1999). According to Maddock (1999, p. 101),

Male cultures have the effect of silencing women . . . [because they] have a 'high' level of informal agreement between those who hold similar views and have common assumptions. Consequently they need say very little to each other and talk in a minimalist fashion as they have no need to explain themselves. Women in the same work environment are not only outside the magic circle but . . . have to be explicit in a language to which they are unaccustomed. This results in a mismatch of gendered cultural codes. Since the male codes dominate and determine the very fabric of management language, women are unheard and frustrated.

Maddock (1999) argued that, because women are largely 'outsiders' to the male-dominated culture of organizations, they commonly have to adopt certain strategies, techniques, and behaviors to negotiate and manage their role within the group. She stated that the gender management strategy that each woman adopts depends on her own gender identity and the culture in which she is required to work.

Rao et al. (1999) reiterated the point that if change is going to occur in an organization that conflict and pressure, or confronting the 'normal way' of working must occur alongside compromise; this is the power of conflict. In a sport management context, Fasting and Sisjord (cited in Talbot, 1988, p. 164) argued that fundamental to women becoming more influential within sport organizations is the need for them to contribute more to central issues and not allow men to dominate the verbal interchange. In another study, also of mixed-sex sport organizations in Norway, Hovden (1999b) examined the patterns of interaction and power in organizational processes, and noted how women are able to resist the dominant practices of men in different ways, for example through criticizing certain practices and suggesting alternative procedures. Shaw and Hoerber (2003) also pointed out how challenges to discourses of masculinity have increasingly led to the word 'chair' replacing the term 'chairman' in sport organizations. They argued that "resistant discourses may be created which can contribute to incremental change in attitudes and lead towards alternative understandings of employment roles in sport organizations" (p. 354). Clearly, such challenges or resistance to the dominance of masculinity in sport organizations are important and necessary if change is going to occur. Of significance to the institution of sport, however, should be the limited research that has examined why women leave or drop out of leadership positions. Research by Hovden (1999a) and Pfister and Radkte (2006) in Norwegian and German sport organizations respectively, indicated that when the conflicts of being in these positions become too much, many women choose to leave the organization as they see the cost to their lives of trying to promote change as far outweighing the benefits. These are worrying signs for sport management, because without the power of

conflict, which seeks to confront behaviors conducive to inequality and open up the possibilities for change, the overall effectiveness of organizations will continue to be limited.

This framework has shown how alternative, gender equitable social relations and work practices can be encouraged and enabled in organizations through the use of the fourth frame approach. Focusing on one aspect of the institutional arrangement of organizations that requires further critique, the framework then explained how exclusionary power, as a gendered practice, may be conceived and examined. The following section outlines the case study approach that was taken in this study, including the methods of data collection and analysis.

## Methods

### A Qualitative, Case Study Approach

The findings presented in this paper are part of a much larger research project examining how global processes (such as the penetration of commercial enterprise) are shaping and reshaping sport, particularly at the local, grass-roots or community level. A multimethod qualitative approach of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and the analysis of secondary document sources was used to examine the specific case in question over a 15-month period. A case study method is an appropriate empirical research strategy to employ as it contributes to an holistic understanding of a phenomenon within its social context, ensuring that the complexities of the setting and its participants are taken into account (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003). As Yin (2003) pointed out, such research seeks to develop in-depth knowledge about a single case or a small number of multiple cases, and its strength lies in its ability to use several research techniques to gather multiple sources of evidence. Crucial to case study research is that individual cases are studied contextually as 'everyday' contemporary occurrences in their own right, not as representative statistical samples from a population (Robson, 2002). Moreover, as case studies are generally longitudinal in nature, they demonstrate an orientation toward change and process by examining sequences over a broader time frame, rather than just the 'snapshot' cross-sectional inquiry approach of much survey research (Bulmer, 1986). For reasons of confidentiality the locale and explicit sport organizations of the case are not identified in this paper and pseudonyms have also been used to protect the identity of participants.

### The Case Study Context

In broad terms, the case under examination encompassed the sport organizations and members involved in the participation and management of their sport at their local facility (the Sport Center). The operating structure of the facility was such that its day-to-day management was the concern of paid administrative staff and duty officers. The supervision of these staff members was, in turn, the responsibility of the volunteer Board of Directors of the Sport Center Limited (SCL) Company, which managed the facility. The SCL Board consisted of three representatives from each of the Men's Sport Association (MSA) and the Women's Sport Association (WSA). The MSA and the WSA were the main organizations responsible for the



management of their respective competitions, with the MSA having 10 affiliated clubs (with a total of 36 teams) and the WSA having 20 affiliated clubs (with a total of 44 teams). Of these affiliated clubs, 24 were administered as sex-separate organizations, while three affiliates jointly managed their men's and women's teams through the same committee. Historically, the administration and operation of the MSA and the WSA, and their respective clubs, occurred in totally separate domains. Since their establishment in 1932, each association organized and managed their respective competitions (which were played at different venues in the locality) according to the priorities of their members. Consultation between the organizations was, therefore, not considered necessary. The formation of the SCL Company in 1985 and the subsequent opening of the Sport Center in 1991 as a new facility designed to accommodate all the playing and training needs of both organizations changed all that; although the MSA and WSA have continued to exist as separate organizations for the administration and management of their own competitions, they now have to work together to manage the facility and its use through their member representation on the volunteer Board of Directors.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The researcher was a "known investigator" (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 36) to some of the research participants, having been a member of one of the WSA clubs for a year before the commencement of the study. Initial negotiations to enter the field, initially as a participant observer, were made when contact was initiated with the Secretary of the MSA, and the President of the WSA, and a request to attend their monthly committee meetings was approved. Access to the monthly SCL Board meetings was then negotiated with the help of these established contacts. Being a 'known observer' certainly facilitated initial and continued access to the setting, as well as the process of 'getting along' (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). This familiarity also enabled the researcher to make observations and ask questions in a relatively unrestricted manner, and be privy to some conversations they may otherwise not have heard. However, it also must be acknowledged that toward the end of the research process access to some information may well have been hindered, as the researcher came to be identified (incorrectly) as a WSA committee member by some male members of the SCL.

Participant observation was conducted at a total of nine SCL Board meetings. These observations were supplemented with attendance at another 23 MSA and WSA Committee meetings, as well as more general observations of the setting (at sport matches and social events) and discussions with club members. Naturalistic observational methods are an exceptionally good research technique for studying processes, continuities and changes, the relationships and organization of people and events, as well as the immediate sociocultural context, because they are not bound by predetermined categories of measurement or response (Adler & Adler, 1994; Jorgensen, 1989; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). In undertaking on-site observations, it is vital that the researcher keeps an account of events through the recording of accurate and comprehensive field notes. In this type of qualitative inquiry, the observer's own experiences are also an essential part of the data, meaning that it is also important to make notes regarding personal feelings and impressions, hunches, speculations, and predictions, to ensure that both the nature and the intensity of these reactions are

recorded (Jorgensen, 1989; Patton, 2002). In considering these guidelines, handwritten field notes were recorded during all the meetings and any further impressions were also written down straight after the event. For ease of data analysis, these field notes were then typed and stored on a computer to create a collection of data files. The recollections of all other supplementary observations, conversations, and encounters with members in the setting were also recorded through the use of field notes. Numerous secondary sources of information (including newspapers, websites, and sport organization records) were also gathered and analyzed as a way of understanding historical backgrounds, to substantiate and supplement evidence from other sources and, following Yin (2003), were used to check for any contradictory evidence.

As part of the wider project, a total of 16 semistructured interviews were conducted. Judgmental or purposive sampling was used to select interviewees with experience and knowledge (Flick, 2006; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) of the sport setting who held voluntary executive positions within the MSA (two men), WSA (two women) or affiliated clubs (seven men and five women); this criterion included three of the SCL Board members (one man and two women). Each interview had an identified sequence of topics to be covered (which formed an interview guide), but the interview process was open to changes in form and sequence (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, participants were prompted and encouraged to respond with as much detail as possible. All interviews gathered information about changes evident in the sport and their effects, such as the introduction and management of the new Sport Center. Interviewees were asked about their thoughts on the relationships between the Center, their organization and its counterpart men's or women's organization and, where relevant, their club. The interviews also sought to elucidate further the lines of inquiry that had emerged from the participant observation and the analysis of secondary sources. The three SCL Board members were asked specific questions about the way the SCL operated and about the relationships between the SCL and their organization, as well as with the other organizations and other clubs. For example, all three interviewees were asked whether they agreed with the way the SCL was run and whether there were any changes they would like to see. The interviewee from the WSA was asked about their relationship with the MSA (and vice-versa) and whether, or how, negotiations took place over facility allocations for training or playing times. Informed consent was gained before each interview. All interviews were audiotape-recorded and then transcribed, and each interview lasted between 30–60 min.

Data analysis was a twofold process which involved the use of coding techniques. First, through the initial reading of the data, a process of open coding took place (Strauss, 1987). A number of categories were initially produced, including the gendering of executive roles, decision-making power, strategies of control, and women's resistance. The rereading of the data (Strauss, 1987) showed that Rao et al.'s (1999) explanation of exclusionary power would be a useful theoretical framework. Using manual coding techniques, the transcripts were then examined for types of exclusionary power, and the themes of positional power, agenda-setting power, power of dialogue, and power of conflict were confirmed as the most robust and workable in terms of the participant observation and interview data. Consequently, the four themes, which are addressed in detail in the following section, are: positional power; the power of setting and maintaining the agenda, and the power of dialogue; and the power of conflict. The data also showed how these four,

overlapping forms of power worked in exclusionary ways to the extent that it forced the departure of one, female Board member; but that there may be possibilities for improving the work practices and capacity of the organization when the prevailing narratives are exposed or disrupted.

## Results and Discussion

### 'Canteen, Catering, and Minute-Taking:' Positional Power

As noted above, the SCL Board consisted of three representative Directors from each of the Men's Sport Association (MSA) and the Women's Sport Association (WSA). These Directors are appointed by their respective associations for a term of two years and, after that time, they must step down. However, upon stepping down they are available for immediate reappointment. Thus, on face value, this representation may seem to be a fair and equitable distribution of positional power in the management of the Sport Center. The underlying issue of the exercise of power and how it is manifest in organizational operations, however, goes much deeper than simply calculating the number of representatives present. What became evident in this study was that while women were not under-represented on the SCL Board, they struggled to be heard and make a difference.

At the commencement of this field research, it was identified from the annual Directors' report that four formal 'positions/special responsibilities' existed for assignment to the six Directors. During the 15-month period of field research, the three male members of the SCL Board of Directors representing the MSA held the positions/special responsibilities of Chairman (Colin), Design and Construction (Tom), and Maintenance (John), and their professional qualifications were listed as Solicitor, Company Director and Technician respectively. Colin and Tom had been in their positions as Directors since 1991 when the facility opened, while John had been on the Board in his position for two years. Conversely, the three female members representing the WSA, all professionals in their own daily workplace (Anne, Information Technologist; Sarah, Chartered Accountant; and Jane, Teacher) had no outlined position/special responsibility. Anne, like Colin and Tom, had been on the Board since 1991, while Sarah and Jane had been Directors for less than one month. Interestingly, over the period of the field research, there was one position/special responsibility which was not allocated to any Director. The position/special responsibility of Canteen and Catering, which had been previously held by a female Board member who had completed her term as Director before the commencement of this study, was not reallocated or taken up by any of the Board members. This was despite the suggestion and agreement by Colin and Tom at one of the Board meetings that, "it was really a 'portfolio' that belonged to one of the Board members" (*SCL Board Meeting*). Given that all the male members already had allocated positions/special responsibilities it was clear that, if the position was to be occupied by a Board member, it would have to be assigned to one of the women. One other role that was not allocated on a permanent basis, but was required to be undertaken by one of the six Board members at each meeting, was that of minute taker. Over the research period, it was observed that this role was only ever performed by Jane or Anne, most often after requests by either Colin or Tom who chaired all of these meetings.

As previously discussed, the absence of women from powerful positions of authority has been observed in the staffing configurations of many different sport and leisure organizations. In this case, however, inequities in power relations were not manifest in the number of representatives that organizations had on the Board, but were reflected in the positions that the Directors held. The assignment of positions within the SCL Board is consistent with the observations from the academic literature that, in sport and leisure organizations, men and women tend to hold certain types of employment roles based on assumptions about their sex (Hall, 1995; Hall et al., 1989; McKay, 1997; Talbot, 1988; Shaw & Hoerber, 2003). The assertions and practices that facility management and maintenance are appropriate for male members, while clerical work and home/kitchen based responsibilities (i.e., Canteen and Catering) are suitable for female members, are indicative of traditional discourses of masculinity and femininity. Moreover, the unquestioned use of the term 'chairman', as opposed to the gender neutral title 'chair', shows the implicit acceptance and dominance of masculine discourses as the 'normal' way of working in this organization. As will be discussed below, the distribution of positional power is strongly linked to the management history of the Sport Center. However, it is not only positions that determine organizational power. The ability to set the agenda for the Board and the use of language and the style of interaction between Board members are also significant in the construction and maintenance of gender power relations.

### **“We Basically Felt Like We Were Being Railroaded”: The Power of Setting and Maintaining the Agenda, and the Power of Dialogue**

Administrative processes and the exercise of specific forms of linguistic and verbal power have been shown to affect policy and decision making within mixed-sex sport organizations. From their analysis of Norwegian sport organizations, Fasting and Sisjord (cited in Talbot, 1988, p. 164) found that women behave more passively than men in mixed situations, speak less frequently and for less time, and do not speak as often on policy issues. Similarly, over the 15-month period of observations of nine SCL Board meetings, it was noticeable that, in comparison with the three male Directors, the three female Directors participated less in the discussion of agenda items, and when they raised specific issues for discussion these were often 'glossed over' and, in some instances, completely ignored. Although there was some questioning by the female Directors of certain decision-making processes or outcomes at differing times, the answers to their questions were frequently delayed, vaguely provided, or not given at all.

The ability to set the agenda through what is said and, just as importantly, left unsaid in Board meetings is a more subtle example of the exercise of power, which builds upon the power of dialogue discussed above. The purchase of a demountable building and its subsequent construction into a more permanent fixture at the Sport Center was one such issue where information on the purchase, finance, planning, and construction of the facility was not available to all Board members. Although presented as general business at one of the Board meetings that the purchase of a demountable building had been made by the Sport Center and, therefore, tacitly approved by the SCL Board, over the course of the fieldwork research it became clear that the initial purchase decision was made only by Colin (Chairman) and

Tom (Maintenance and Construction). Further decisions regarding the financing and progress on this facility also bypassed the Board, and when Sarah and Anne raised questions about the project at monthly meetings, no specific expenditure figures were ever provided, and answers concerning the ongoing construction process were extremely vague. As Sarah explained in an interview:

That was the most bizarre set up. The demountable [building] came off the [steelworks] site and Tom was able to pick it up quite cheaply. He made the decision with Colin to actually get it on site and then to start getting it renovated. At my very first meeting Tom said that it had been agreed with Anne that the women would actually pay for the renovations and pay to get the building up to speed, which at that time I knew was not correct, but I didn't say anything because I wasn't a 100 percent sure of my facts. There was a very hastily made phone call, i.e., Anne had a phone call by eight o'clock the following morning to say 'you know this is what we've all agreed on,' and Anne said 'hang on a minute we haven't agreed to this at all,' and that's when it started. That's when the problems started because we were not involved in the initial consultation phase, we were not involved in the budgets and we weren't involved in getting any of the plans approved, and we basically felt like we were being railroaded by two people in particular to pay for it.

There was certainly an initial reluctance on the part of Anne and Sarah, two of the newest female Directors, who had only been recently appointed to the Board, to actively participate and question the decisions that were being made. Anne indicated her hesitance about getting too involved when she was asked in an interview, held four months into her appointment on the Board, whether she agreed with the way the Sport Center was run and whether there were any changes she would recommend. She stated:

It seems to be operating smoothly . . . it takes time to know how things run . . . we just hope we can offer them assistance in some areas that perhaps they need, but it seems to be running [smoothly] . . . There are people out there playing [sport] so that's the main thing.

This example shows, therefore, how the processes of organizational decision making are often left unquestioned as 'the way things are done around here,' and how this normalization allows and perpetuates the exclusionary use of positional, dialogue and agenda-setting power. That is not to say, however, that such power is immutable. Over the observational research period of the SCL Board meetings it became evident that in seeking, first to understand the organization's practices and second, to contribute to the decision-making process (and, thus, the effectiveness of the organization) both Anne and Sarah took on a more active and co-operative approach to their executive roles.

### **We Always Had Our "Master Race Plan": The Power of Conflict**

In an informal discussion with Anne before a meeting held midway through the research, she stated that, rather than having all decisions regarding the facility being made by the men, the women would be more proactive in coming up with the solutions or actions that they deemed suitable. It should be acknowledged here

that the following discussions pertain to the manner in which these two newest female Directors (Anne and Sarah) approached the situation. Jane, the third female Director, who had been on the SCL Board since its inception, did not outwardly commit herself to questioning how Board decisions were made. Furthermore, it should be noted that, although the three male members of the SCL Board all held positions of authority and responsibility, the exercise of power essentially stemmed from Colin and Tom, two of the longest serving male members.

The approach Anne and Sarah took became evident when, over three consecutive Board meetings, they repeatedly tried to examine issues of staffing at the facility, including the process of employee schedules, employment responsibilities, and the provision of feedback on work practices. Again it was observed that the answers provided by Colin and Tom who presided over all the meetings were generally brief replies, whereupon discussion moved to the next agenda item. In an interview after these three meetings, Sarah outlined the problem she encountered in receiving answers to her questions on processes concerning staff employment:

The whole problem was that it all comes back down to the fact that one of the major expenses was wages. They seemed to be getting out of control and no one seemed to be responsible for making sure that these expenses were actually correct. There also seemed to be a bit of an 'old boys club' where the same sort of people were getting shifts, and whether they were doing their shift work or not also became debatable . . . No one could give us any answers as to how a duty officer was actually employed, or how a duty officer was actually rostered [or scheduled] on, and when you went to the roster [workplace schedule] books there were people who were having a large number of hours and other people who were having none. And we said, 'well what are the reasons behind this?' and . . . there were no answers.

Nevertheless, through a concerted effort of verbal assertion and a dual presence at these aforementioned Board meetings, Sarah and Anne organized for the fourth of these consecutive meetings to be dedicated to the reassessment of staffing. Sarah confirmed this type of strategic approach:

We always had our 'master race plan.' We'd have Anne as the bad guy, Sarah as the good guy and then change around, and Sarah as the bad guy and Anne as the good guy. We always discussed after our WSA meetings what we wanted to achieve. Anne and I were in contact a lot about issues and concerns and suggested approaches, we were always trying to come up with solutions.

Although it was a scheduled monthly Board meeting and it had been 'allocated' to addressing issues of staffing, for various reasons (such as, training and claims of 'being busy'), only three of the Directors attended; those present were Sarah, Anne and Colin. At the commencement of the meeting, Colin stated that as there were only the three of them in attendance, the meeting was to be an 'informal' discussion on the matters that these women had raised.

One of the main issues discussed at the meeting was the role and standard of cleaning duties undertaken by staff, and the avenues for feedback on their work practices. Anne and Sarah felt that the cleaning was not being completed to a satisfactory standard, but they were unsure of the exact cleaning requirements of staff. As Sarah stated:

One of the big issues that was actually brought to us—it wasn't an issue that I had as a person, but it was an issue that a club member came to me with—was the fact that we turned up to [the Sport Center] on a Monday night and went into the ladies' toilets and it was filthy. The club member said 'I can't get changed in here, this is not clean' and I actually went in with them and I agreed. We brought it up at the next SCL Board meeting and it was denied that the cleaning wasn't being performed.

To address this problem Anne and Sarah recommended the implementation of a cleaning checklist for duties performed, and also suggested that a staff appraisal system be put in place. In response, Colin indicated that historically he had been involved with staffing, so if there were any issues with staff not completing their work satisfactorily, then he would speak to them on an individual basis. It was also his opinion that the cleaning was satisfactory and there was no need to implement any kind of formal employee appraisal system, as "it was not a big corporation and most staff worked hard" (*SCL Board Meeting*). The discussion continued in this vein until Colin undertook to speak to all the staff at their next training day, and if the standards had not improved in the next three months then they would come back and talk about the issue again.

This example demonstrates that Anne and Sarah, far from being passive observers on the SCL Board of Directors, realized that, if they were to have any influence in the running of the Center, they would have to employ a strategy of active participation and questioning of Board matters. By employing such an approach they were able to bring an issue that they saw as important to the fore, and suggest a solution that enabled them to work through their concerns. It is also important to note that the issue that these women chose to initially tackle related to the 'house-keeping' of the Center (a traditional domain of the female in the home), and most likely an issue where these women thought that change could be enacted. Likewise, Maddock (1999), who studied women managers working within local government in the UK, argued that many women who consciously involve themselves in challenging the dominance of masculinity in organizations make 'mindful' decisions to tackle projects where there are likely to be tangible processes and outcomes, rather than attempting to change individual behavior. Nevertheless, the positioning and dominance of certain members of the SCL Board, made this task almost impossible.

Power has been shown to be exercised in a number of overlapping ways in this organization, largely to the exclusion of the newest, female board members. In an effort to improve the effectiveness of the organization, Anne and Sarah began to question 'the way things work around here' and sought new ways of operating. Although, as is further outlined below, the strategies they were able to employ against the complex and multifaceted nature of this exclusionary power were limited, and the threat this posed to the agenda of gender equity was strong.

### **"It Was Time to Either Dig My Heels In or Consider Going": Exclusionary Power**

The difficulty that Anne and Sarah faced in attempting to play a role in decision making appears to be compounded not only by the length of time some of the male members have been in their role as Directors, but also by the history of their

positioning. As discussed, the MSA and the WSA each have three representatives on the SCL Board, each of whom serves a two-year term before retirement. Upon retiring, representatives are available for immediate reappointment. Colin and Tom, who have served on the Board since the facility opened, have established their positions within this local sport community through their off-field commitment to the establishment and functioning of the facility over the past 20 years and also by their on-field involvement over the previous three decades. Following Slack (2000), it is also argued that through their professional workplace skills, local business contacts, and their positioning within the sport, both Colin and Tom have the ‘credentials’ which have enabled them to justify their dominant position on the Board.

Throughout the observational research it also became apparent that both Colin and Tom did not expect to consult the Board as a collective organizing body for what they termed ‘minor decisions’ within their positions, but considered they were allowed to make these discretionary decisions on behalf of the facility. For instance, when Anne and Sarah raised questions regarding the responsibilities of individual Board members at the aforementioned meeting dedicated to discussing issues of staffing, Colin replied that “each Director, within the spheres of their outlined responsibilities, had to use their own nous [common sense] to make decisions” (*SCL Board Meeting*). By making this statement, he was effectively arguing that those Directors who had designated positions/special responsibilities—that is, the three male members of the Board (in the absence of the fourth position being filled)—possessed the power to make stand-alone decisions regarding the facility. Shaw and Slack (2002) demonstrated how the historical construction of gender relations that favor masculinities over femininities within sport organizations are difficult to challenge. However, they also argued that:

[W]hile traditional practices may be highly influential, they may be changed by a willingness of individuals to create alternative knowledge about gender power structures that have previously been taken for granted. [However] these power relations are also unstable and may face resistance from those who believe that more traditional, masculine dominated gender relations are preferable. (pp. 103-104)

Even though the SCL Board is a relatively new body that brings together two formerly independent organizations with equal representation, the practices of the Board have made it difficult for women to contribute to its decision-making processes.

The exclusion that was experienced by the two newest female Directors was summed up in a response by Sarah to a question about her position on the Board, and about the contribution she was able to make to the management of the facility:

I was totally not accepted. One, because I was female and two, because I was a female representative from the WSA. To me, the impression was, I was there to rubber stamp any decisions that were made by two members of the Board, there was no correspondence to be entered into. If I did want to debate any issues, the debate was either not going to occur, or if it was to occur . . . I actually walked away from a meeting feeling like I had been patted on the head, told to go home, and act like a good little girl and don’t rock the boat.



After serving just 12 months on the SCL Board, Sarah resigned from her position and, in a letter of resignation, stated:

During my time on the Board, I believe that I have not been able to be actively involved in the decision-making process and effective organization of the company . . . When I was appointed to the Board of the SCL, my intention was to use my skills and assist the SCL in moving forward . . . At the current time, I feel that I have been unable to use the skills that I have, and I have great concerns regarding the effectiveness of the SCL Board as a whole.

Clearly, the practices of the Board had marginalized and hampered her position to such an extent that she felt that withdrawal was the only available option. Sarah had an indication of her positioning within the hierarchy of the SCL Board, and made her decision to leave based on her understanding of this hierarchy and its evident strategies of control.

The exiting of women from the management of sport organizations is an area of research that has not yet been fully explored. In her study of elected members and coaches involved in the Norwegian Volleyball Federation, Hovden (1999a) noted that leaving was often seen as the more logical and rational choice when women were faced with barriers stemming from male-dominated work cultures and environments. More recently, Pfister and Radtke (2006) interviewed former male and female volunteer leaders in German sport organizations, and noted that the majority of women left office because of conflicts (such as being harassed, being unable to implement their ideas, being viewed as outsiders, and/or being deceived by the false priorities of committees and other members). Even more damningly, the authors concluded that, for women, "when a certain limit of their endurance was reached, they were no longer prepared to invest energy and nerves" (p. 129). Likewise, research focusing upon women's actions within male-dominated work organizations has demonstrated that, after periods of striving for recognition and change, some women decided to "take control of their lives" by leaving (Marshall, 1994, p. 185). Marshall (1994) explained that women tend to leave organizations not because they do not have the skills or are incapable of doing their job, but rather because of the male-dominated organizational culture.

The other important factor in Sarah's decision most likely related to the voluntary status of her position. As the nature of voluntary work suggests, she was giving up some of her own time to assist in the management of the Sport Center and, as she felt she was unable to provide any significant level of assistance, she was effectively misusing her time. For instance, when Sarah was asked about what she thought was achieved from the 'informal' meeting on staffing, she stated:

To me it was a waste of time because he [Colin] is such a defensive person and he takes everything personally. It was as if we were trying to personally attack him over these issues and it wasn't, we were just trying to get answers. We were new Board members who wanted to know how the system worked and whether or not there were systems in place. I think from that moment on I realized that we weren't going to get anywhere and I was banging my head up against a brick wall, and it was time to either dig my heels in or consider going.

As Auld and Cuskelly (2001), in their study of the behavioral characteristics of volunteers in Australian community-based organizations, pointed out although volunteers most often leave their positions due to other personal commitments, the next most important reason is related directly to the nature of the organization itself. Some of these reasons include not liking the way in which the organization is run, believing that the organization lacks direction, the poor attitude of other volunteers, their work not being recognized or rewarded, and responsibilities being poorly defined.

### **“After That It Did Change . . . He Was a Lot More Positive”: The Possibilities for Change**

Scholars in sport and leisure studies argued that, to enact any type of gender equity reform in the sport and leisure services domain, the culture of organizations and the supporting discourses and networks of power, must be examined, alongside the recognition of structural inequalities (Aitchison, 2000; McKay, 1997; McKay et al., 2001; Shaw, 2006b; Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003; Talbot, 2002). Going one step further, the fourth frame approach highlights the need for, not only identification, but the acknowledgment and revision of social relations and work practices by individuals affected by the organizational arrangements (see Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). In cases such as this one, though, it is difficult to imagine how gender equity might be achieved, particularly where the sport organization operates under a system of volunteers (many of whom have historically been involved in the establishment and operation of the organization) and, outwardly at least, the organizational structures of representation display the signs of egalitarianism. For instance, when Sarah was asked about the effect that she thought that her resignation had had on those at the Board meeting where it was tendered, she said:

I'll never forget it, Colin actually literally sat back in his chair, got half a smile on his face and said 'you'll be sorely missed', and at that I felt 'you patronizing git.' Colin could have got up and done cartwheels. I think he thought his whole problem child had now disappeared.

On a more positive note, upon her resignation Sarah received a belated show of support from James (the third male Board member who, until this time, had not been directly involved in the power struggles discussed above, but had not challenged them either). In addition, she indicated that, from the contact that she had had with her fellow female Directors (including her replacement WSA representative member), there were at least some signs of improvement in the levels of communication between Board members. Nonetheless, it must also be recognized that 'change' was only enacted after Sarah's resignation and, again, it occurred only after the intervention of another male. As Sarah noted:

James was devastated, he actually said 'I think that is the most ridiculous thing that has ever happened, I am really disappointed to lose someone with these skills that we are missing on the Board' . . . After that meeting, it did change and Colin was a lot more positive, he was actually answering Anne's questions, and Anne had some really detailed questions . . . I will be interested to see how they will go.

If the gendered nature of organizations is going to be challenged then, at some level, reflection and action is required by all members. Ely and Meyerson (2000) highlighted the importance of the surfacing of 'suppressed conflicts' to organizational effectiveness. In discussing the use of narrative revision in one of their projects, they argued that, although "surfacing suppressed conflicts can take a toll on members of the majority, failing to surface them may be costly to those who have borne the brunt of them, and may also be costly to the organization as a whole" (p. 138). In this case, the conflicts were costly, not only to Sarah who made a decision to resign from the organization but, to the other Board members and the management of the Sport Center which suffered under continual power struggles and then the loss of Sarah's skills and experiences. Significantly, however, the surfacing of these conflicts may have disrupted the prevailing narratives enough to allow for some level of organizational change.

### Concluding Remarks

This paper recounts the lived experiences of women and seems to support Talbot's (2002, p. 278) claim that, despite the recent affirmative action policy gains that have been made in some sport organizations, the organizational practices of many sport organizations continue to exist that "appear to be designed to maintain the (male) status quo." Moreover, this paper contributes empirically to Talbot's (2002) plea, which is in line with the fourth frame approach, that more evidence regarding the individual experiences of women in such situations needs to be accumulated, first to identify the exclusionary practices that women face as elected members of committees and boards of sport organizations, and, second, to help those who control sport to transform organizational practices and effectively use the contributions that all members can make.

The governing bodies of the MSA and the WSA while still organizing and administering their own organizations and respective competitions, have been compelled to take up a joint managerial position with the introduction of a new, shared sport facility. This process has essentially required the assimilation of representatives from two organizing bodies into one, which, like many other sport organizations, is gendered. Effectively, the MSA and the WSA have the same aim of making their sport accessible and appealing to a wide range of participants and, likewise, the SCL Board, as an extension of these governing bodies, must share a similar view. In this case study, the difficulties for the female Directors were that in attempting to be an effective and equal partner in this new relationship, they had to negotiate and adopt strategies just to be heard (and, as demonstrated, such techniques were not always successful). Moreover, the continued exercise of exclusionary power by some male Board members left one female Board member with, what was in her mind, no option but to leave. Significantly, though, this action exposed many of the underlying conflicts and, at the very least, current work practices were put under the spotlight, and they were revised to some degree.

This study has indicated that many women are not willing to be passive victims of power, and that changing work practices is possible; it is also a necessity if gender equity, organizational effectiveness, and the satisfaction of organizational members are important. Although this is not a new call, it does emphasize that further empirical research needs to, not only identify the underlying aspects of

the culture of sport organizations which may be hindering these goals but also, as the fourth frame approach advocates, work with those involved (see Shaw, 2006b; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Thus, not only does the problem have to be identified, the conflicts on which the problem is based and the strategies of resistance, compromise, and change in solving the problem also have to be expounded. Engaging more research into why women leave or exit sport organizations and sharing these findings could, therefore, be of benefit to a range of sport management practitioners. The initial research that has been conducted in this area (see Hovden, 1999a; Pfister & Radtke, 2006) and the results of this study indicate that women often choose to exit sport organizations when the conflict they experience becomes too much. A more comprehensive understanding and dissemination of the reasons as to why women leave would first, highlight the nature and extent of this issue and second, shed more light on the potential conflicts women face. It may also serve to highlight the possibilities of how compromise and change in work practices could avoid this situation. The regendering of sport organizations is clearly not simply a women's issue. As this study shows, men, alongside women, need to recognize and challenge existing sport management practices before women even start thinking about a point of no return. For this to be possible, though, research needs to include and reach the domain of those involved in the management of sport organizations to raise their consciousness of the important contribution a diversity of actors can bring to their setting, and how this setting can best be managed for all those involved.

## Note

This company is incorporated but is limited by guarantee, which means that it has members who guarantee the viability of the company for a nominal, monetary amount, instead of shareholders who provide capital to, and profit from, the organization. This type of statute is commonly used in many sport organizations, clubs, and groups in Australia that require corporate standing but which are not-for-profit in nature.

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