# Gender Dynamics in Sports Governance: A Comparative Study of Volleyball and Rugby Federations in Senegal

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**ABSTRACT:** Women's participation in sports governance remains a major issue in Senegal and, more broadly, in Africa. Although legislative and symbolic advances (notably the 2010 parity law) have led to some progress, their actual presence in decision-making positions remains limited. This article offers a cross-analysis of two cases: the Senegalese Volleyball Federation, often cited as a relative model of openness, and the Senegalese Rugby Federation, where resistance is more pronounced. We clarified and strengthened the methodological protocol, justified the comparative choice of the two federations, and introduced more measurable empirical data to support the analyses. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and field observations, we highlight the organizational and socio-cultural obstacles faced by women leaders, as well as the strategies they develop, such as female solidarity, alternative leadership styles, and mentoring. The study reveals contrasting results, supported by specific comparative examples, which provide a clearer understanding of the mechanisms through which gender relations are reproduced or transformed. It also shows that the strategic use of digital media can serve as a potential lever to enhance the visibility and legitimacy of women in sports governance. In addition, the comparative analysis indicates that the disciplinary context and the historical trajectories of federations strongly influence women's access to decision-making positions and their capacity to bring about lasting change.

**KEYWORDS:** sports governance, women's leadership, gender, federation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In many African contexts, sport functions both as a space for identity affirmation and as a site where gender relations are reproduced, a dynamic already emphasized in the works of Saouter (2000) and Duret & Augustini (2010). Long perceived as a domain reserved for men, it remains shaped by gendered power dynamics that influence the distribution of roles, the recognition of skills, and access to positions of responsibility, reflecting what Bourdieu (1998) describes as the naturalization of masculine domination within social fields. In Senegal, a pioneer in political gender parity with the 2010 parity law, women's participation in sports governance reveals the paradoxes of this institutional progress. While female athletes have gained increased visibility on both the national and international stage, their presence in governing bodies remains marginal, often symbolic, and insufficiently recognized, echoing Touré's (2018) observations on persistent structural inequalities in Senegalese sport. This imbalance becomes particularly clear when comparing different sports disciplines. Some federations, such as volleyball, appear more open to women's inclusion in decision-making structures, whereas others, like rugby, remain marked by a culture of virility and a persistently male-dominated environment, in line with Connell's (2009) concept of hegemonic masculinity and the cultural reproduction of "appropriate" gender roles. Within this contrasting landscape, the processes of sport professionalization, the increasing influence of international funding agencies, and the rise of women's leadership initiatives offer new opportunities while also creating new challenges for female leaders, dynamics explored at the African level in studies such as Adjepong (2021) and Moola & Hargreaves (2014). These developments invite a rethinking of sports governance not only as a formal space of power but also as a setting in which social norms, identities, and individual trajectories

are negotiated, consistent with Goffman's (1977) interactionist perspective. These contrasts reflect the diversity of gender dynamics within the Senegalese sports sphere and raise several key questions: how do women establish themselves in spaces historically dominated by men? What strategies do they adopt to resist symbolic domination, legitimize their roles, and subtly transform power relations within sports organizations?

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study draws on three complementary sociological perspectives to analyze gender dynamics in Senegalese sports governance.

### 2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1.1 MALE DOMINATION (BOURDIEU, 1998)

The concept of male domination developed by Bourdieu (1998) helps illuminate how the masculine is naturalized as the norm within sports institutions. This perspective enables an interpretation of interviews and observations that shows how gendered habitus continues to shape role distribution within federations: strategic positions remain predominantly occupied by men, while women are frequently assigned peripheral or symbolic functions, even within the FSVB, which has historically been more open. The logic of male domination is also reflected in the institutional recognition and legitimacy accorded to different profiles, demonstrating that the visibility or engagement of women is not in itself sufficient to challenge established hierarchies.

#### 2.1.2 HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY (CONNELL, 2009)

Second, the perspective of hegemonic masculinity proposed by Connell (2009) enables an analysis of the governance styles and organizational practices observed during meetings and in the allocation of tasks. The interviews show that the FSR maintains a highly hierarchical model in which authority is expressed through control of speech, the imposition of decisions, and the regulation of interactions. At the FSVB, women benefit from a somewhat more participatory environment, yet hegemonic masculinity remains evident in strategic decision-making and in the control of symbolic and technical resources. Thus, the expression of hegemonic masculinity varies according to each federation's disciplinary culture and historical development, directly influencing women's access to leadership positions and their legitimacy once in those roles.

#### 2.1.3 INTERACTIONISM AND THE STAGING OF GENDER (GOFFMAN, 1977)

Finally, Goffman's (1977) interactionist approach sheds light on the "staging of gender" in everyday interactions. Observations and interviews reveal that women must constantly negotiate their visibility and legitimacy: they are frequently interrupted, assigned logistical or administrative tasks, and required to demonstrate their competence during meetings or on digital platforms. These practices illustrate how gender is performed and regulated in daily interactions, exposing subtle mechanisms of domination and selective inclusion. Women nonetheless manage to construct alternative spaces of legitimacy through their leadership styles, mentoring practices, and strategic use of digital media, thereby partially circumventing the implicit rules shaped by gendered habitus and hegemonic masculinity. By combining these three perspectives, the theoretical framework allows for an analysis of gender dynamics at multiple levels: structural (Bourdieu), organizational and cultural (Connell), and interactional and symbolic (Goffman). This integrated approach provides a robust analytical lens for interpreting the interview and observation data collected in the FSVB and the FSR, identifying both the obstacles to women's participation and the strategies of emancipation and resilience developed by women leaders.

### 2.2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted relies on a qualitative approach combining documentary analysis, digital content observation, and semi-structured interviews. The documentary material derives from historical archives, institutional reports, and traditional media sources, while the digital analysis is based on a corpus of publications from platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and specialized Senegalese sports news sites. This combination aims to capture the evolution of institutional discourses, contemporary media practices, and modes of reception within sports communities. A set of fifteen semi-structured interviews, conducted between February and July 2024, forms a central empirical basis for understanding the internal dynamics of the federations and the actors involved in sports governance in Senegal. Eight participants were members of the Senegalese Volleyball Federation (FSVB), and seven were members of the Senegalese Rugby Federation (FSR). All interviewees were

selected according to a minimum responsibility criterion, requiring that they had held a position on an executive board, a federal commission, or a technical staff for at least one season. The access strategy relied on purposive sampling, complemented by snowball sampling to identify key actors who were difficult to reach through institutional channels. This approach made it possible to gather a variety of perspectives on evolving practices, digital uses, internal resistance, and innovation processes. The analysis of interviews and digital content was conducted using a socio-semiotic approach designed to identify shifts in narrative modes, logics of spectacularization, the construction of sports authority figures, and emerging forms of community participation. Triangulation across historical sources, digital traces, and interview discourse strengthened the validity of the results by cross-referencing different observational scales. This plural methodology is especially suited to understanding how digital platforms act as agents of transformation within federations, sports communities, and cultural practices.

## 3   RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the collected materials shows that digital media constitute only one dimension of a broader transformation of Senegalese sport, in which visibility dynamics, governance models, and role distributions remain strongly shaped by gender relations. The combined perspectives of Bourdieu, Connell, and Goffman illuminate these transformations from a sociological standpoint, demonstrating that digitalization does not neutralize existing power structures but rather reconfigures them in ways specific to each federation. These findings align with studies in other African sport contexts, where digital innovations tend to reinforce established symbolic structures rather than disrupt them (Adjepong 2020; Saavedra 2019).

### 3.1   SENEGALESE VOLLEYBALL FEDERATION

The interviews conducted within the FSVB highlight an internal evolution marked by the gradual professionalization of digital communication and an increase in the visibility of federal activities. Several executives note that this transition has allowed the federation to expand its fan base and strengthen its institutional image. However, the analysis of narratives shows that this evolution is accompanied by a subtle reproduction of the patterns of male domination described by Bourdieu: strategic decision-making positions, including those related to digital image management, remain predominantly occupied by men, while women are often assigned tasks deemed "natural," such as administrative work, coordination, or internal communication. Comparable phenomena have been observed in other Sub-Saharan African federations, where women's access to digital communication roles is frequently framed as an extension of stereotypical "care" or "support" functions (Mwisukha & Mabagala 2021). This gendered division of responsibilities reflects the persistence of a gendered habitus shaping perceptions of legitimate skills and their institutional recognition. It also illustrates how "symbolic violence" operates in routine professional practices, making unequal divisions of labor appear normal and legitimate (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).

### 3.2   SENEGALESE RUGBY FEDERATION

In the FSR, this dynamic manifests differently. The interviews describe an organization marked by the concentration of power among a few male figures, reinforcing the hegemonic model of masculinity conceptualized by Connell. Respondents depict meetings dominated by vertical communication, where authority is expressed through physical presence, vocal power, or the ability to impose one's viewpoint. This resonates with international research on rugby, where leadership is often associated with bodily capital and forms of virility (Liston 2006; Anderson & McCormack 2010). This style of governance contrasts with the more collegial, yet still masculinized, model observed in the FSVB, and demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity takes different forms depending on the sporting culture of each discipline. Digital practices do not constitute a rupture in this context: they are often appropriated by the same dominant actors or regarded as secondary tasks informally delegated to members perceived as less central to the decision-making hierarchy. This reflects a broader organizational trend in which digital work is undervalued and often feminized, despite its strategic relevance (Dart 2014; Freelon 2020).

### 3.3   STAGING OF GENDER AND DIGITAL USES

The observations and testimonies collected also support the use of Goffman's interactionist approach. In both federations, the "staging of gender" appears in daily interactions: frequent interruptions when women speak, condescending attitudes, and the implicit assignment of logistical or relational tasks rather than strategic responsibilities. This aligns with research showing that micro-interactions play a central role in reproducing gender inequalities within sport institutions (Claringbould & Knoppers 2012). Several interviewees mentioned the need to "prove themselves" more strongly, particularly during meetings or in digital workspaces where decisions and comments are publicly visible. Digital environments thus become spaces of exhibition that amplify gendered performance, reinforcing certain implicit expectations while paradoxically offering opportunities to challenge

them. The analysis of digital content reinforces these patterns. At the FSVB, media coverage most often highlights men's teams, whose videos receive greater visibility, whereas women's performances are shared less frequently or in less elaborate formats. This tendency reflects widely documented gendered asymmetries in sports media, even on digital platforms ostensibly designed to democratize representation (Cooky, Messner & Musto 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe 2018). Finally, the interviews reveal that fan communities play an ambivalent role. On the one hand, they reinforce certain forms of domination by privileging narratives centered on virility and male performance; on the other, they can support a redistribution of visibility, particularly when individual initiatives, often led by women or young volunteers, gain traction on social networks. This broader participation reconfigures spaces of legitimacy while exposing actors to new forms of public scrutiny that may either reinforce or destabilize established hierarchies. Such ambivalence is common in participatory digital cultures in sport (Hutchins & Rowe 2012; Highfield 2016).

### 3.4 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: FSVB VS FSR

The table below summarizes the main differences between the two federations studied:

*Table 1. Key Differences in Women's Participation and Governance Between FSVB and FSR*

| Dimensions | Fédération Sénégalaise de Volleyball (FSVB) | Senegalese Rugby Federation (FSR) |
|---|---|---|
| Women's place | Relatively more open | More marginal, very masculine |
| Institutional presence | Some women leaders in the commissions | Very low presence |
| Governance style | More participatory, horizontal | Hierarchical, authoritarian |
| Resistance encountered | Softened by the female history of sport | Very strong, based on stereotype |
| Perspectives | Potential for greater parity | Persistent Blocks |

This comparison highlights the importance of disciplinary context. Whereas volleyball, historically played by women, offers certain "breaches," rugby remains more tightly constrained by masculine logics.

### 4 DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight complex gender and power dynamics within Senegalese sports federations, dynamics that cannot be fully understood without reference to the theoretical frameworks mobilized. The Bourdieusian perspective helps explain the persistence of male domination in federal structures: gendered habitus continues to shape the distribution of roles, legitimize certain profiles, and naturalize men's presence in decision-making positions. This aligns with research demonstrating that sport remains one of the most enduring sites of gendered symbolic domination worldwide (Hargreaves 1994; Clément 2020). Thus, despite the relative openness of the FSVB or the growing use of digital media, women are often still assigned to peripheral functions, illustrating that digital visibility alone is insufficient to transform structural hierarchies. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity also sheds light on the differences observed between federations. The FSR appears as a highly hierarchical space, where male governance is expressed in speech, task distribution, and organizational practices. The FSVB, although more open and participatory, is not entirely exempt from these dynamics: strategic decisions remain largely controlled by men, and women must continuously negotiate their legitimacy. Such negotiations echo Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument that hegemonic masculinity is constantly reconstructed within localized institutional contexts. These observations underscore that hegemonic masculinity is not uniform but shaped by disciplinary history, federal culture, and institutional opportunities. Analyzing everyday interactions through Goffman's lens helps reveal the subtle mechanisms through which gender is enacted daily. The interruptions, looks, and implicit task assignments observed in meetings and on digital platforms show that women must simultaneously manage the visibility and social acceptability of their actions. This mirrors findings in sport leadership literature showing that women face heightened scrutiny and greater accountability pressures (Shaw & Hoeber 2003; Burton 2015). Digital spaces thus become both vectors of legitimation and arenas where symbolic power relations are replayed, illustrating the ambivalent nature of technologies: they expand opportunities while exposing users to existing forms of judgment and resistance. The discussion also highlights the importance of women's individual and collective strategies. Mentoring, women's networks, and intergenerational solidarity emerge as essential levers for circumventing institutional barriers and gaining access to decision-making spheres. Studies in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana similarly emphasize the role of informal female alliances in creating pathways to leadership within male-dominated sport institutions (Agergaard & Tiesler 2014; Banda 2020). These practices constitute a form of alternative social capital, enabling women to build legitimacy that interacts with, yet does not replace, dominant hierarchies. Comparison with other African contexts reinforces these conclusions. As research in Nigeria and Rwanda has shown, the adoption of digital tools

and the introduction of more restrictive quotas can enhance women's visibility and participation, but their actual impact depends on local organizational cultures and power relations. In Senegal, despite the 2010 parity law, institutional translation into sports governance remains partial: progress is often symbolic and fragile, revealing a gap between official discourse and everyday practice. This corresponds to broader findings on the limits of gender quotas when institutional cultures remain unchanged (Burnet 2011; Krook & Zetterberg 2014). Finally, the discussion underscores the ambivalence of digital media. While they expand spaces of visibility and participation, they can also reproduce existing hierarchies and expectations. Digital platforms are therefore neither neutral nor uniformly emancipatory; they constitute new arenas where the negotiation of power and gender unfolds under specific rules and constraints. In summary, the results confirm that Senegalese sports governance is permeated by constant tensions between exclusion and legitimation. The theoretical frameworks employed show that these tensions are embodied in formal structures (Bourdieu), disciplinary cultures and governance styles (Connell), and daily and mediatized interactions (Goffman). The progress observed, whether digital or organizational, remains dependent on individual and collective initiatives and requires stronger institutional mechanisms to shift from isolated exceptions to structural norms. Without deeper institutional reform, digital innovation alone cannot dismantle long-standing gender hierarchies (Fink 2016).

## 5 CONCLUSION

The comparative study of the Senegalese Volleyball Federation (FSVB) and the Senegalese Rugby Federation (FSR) highlights the complexity of gender dynamics in sports governance in Senegal. The results show that despite legislative and symbolic progress, particularly the 2010 parity law, women's access to decision-making positions remains limited and conditioned by persistent male domination, cultural stereotypes, and specific disciplinary hierarchies. Interviews and observations identified clear organizational and socio-cultural barriers: informal concentrations of power, marginalization in decision-making processes, implicit expectations related to domestic roles, and assignment to peripheral functions. These constraints are more pronounced in the FSR, whereas the FSVB, historically more open to women, offers greater, albeit limited and often individually dependent, room for manoeuvre. Moreover, the strategies developed by women, mentoring, women's networks, intergenerational solidarity, and the progressive mastery of digital tools, serve as essential levers to strengthen their legitimacy and transform existing practices. These "breaches" are concrete examples of positive transformations observed on the ground, illustrating how women can partially redefine governance modes and norms of legitimacy within sports federations. However, these advances remain fragile and insufficiently institutionalized. Failures, regressions, and forms of resistance persist, particularly in rugby, where hegemonic masculinity remains highly structuring. These findings underscore the importance of supporting individual initiatives with structural measures: the introduction of binding quotas in governance bodies, the formalization of mentoring and women's networks, the development of indicators to monitor parity, and the active involvement of public authorities and regional bodies (Ministry of Sports, CONFEJES, CAVB). Finally, this study confirms that digital media, while offering new opportunities for visibility and participation, can also reproduce gendered hierarchies and expectations. They constitute a space that is both liberating and constraining, where power relations and symbolic performances are continually re-enacted. The strategic use of these platforms, combined with strong institutional frameworks, appears to be a key lever for sustainably enhancing equality and the recognition of women in Senegalese sport. In conclusion, Senegalese sports governance is at a crossroads, situated between the reproduction of longstanding hierarchies and gradual openings. The question is no longer whether women have a place, but how to consolidate and expand this place so that parity moves beyond a slogan and becomes a tangible institutional and social reality.

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