

PROMOTING DIVERSE AND PROACTIVE SPORT LEADERSHIP



Benchmark Data: The Status of Pacific Women Leaders in Sport

Acknowledgements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leadership in sport, as in other facets of life, is key to effecting positive change and achieving desired outcomes. Bold, proactive and ethical leadership that is inclusive and consultative, enhances an organisation and brings value to its people and programs. An absence of inclusive leadership (that lacks strong representation of women) has been identified as an issue in sport and growing recognition exists among the sporting community that more needs to be done to ensure leaders are championing equality, inclusion and wellbeing.

This project comprises two phases with this report forming phase one where benchmark data on the status of women leaders in sport is collected. This benchmark data will inform phase two in which key stakeholders will co-design a contextualised leadership initiative to support and increase women leaders in sport.

The findings from this scoping research fills the data gap on the status of Pacific women leaders in sport and can be used by stakeholders to inform other initiatives.

This scoping research, conducted through an online survey facilitated by the Australian Government's sport for development program, Team Up, attracted 52 participants, and gathered benchmark data on opportunities and challenges experienced by Pacific women leaders in sport.

Challenges Faced by Women Leaders

Women leaders reported they have, and continue to, face barriers that inhibit their career progression in sport leadership. Six key challenges included not feeling valued, a tough leadership journey, lack of suitable programs, undefined leadership career pathway, lack of opportunities, and barriers.

Three-quarters (77 per cent) of women leaders reported at least sometimes feeling their input or ideas were valued less in their leadership role due to their gender, which was reinforced by men leaders (75 per cent). The biggest challenges for women in their

leadership journeys are balancing work and family responsibilities (68 per cent), perceptions within the community about women in leadership (46 per cent), and difficulty accessing networks and opportunities outside the country (46 per cent).

The barriers included: systemic organisational issues, gender bias and discrimination, lack of support, personal and cultural barriers, and racial prejudice.

Opportunities for Women Leaders

Women leaders show aspirations to progress as sport leaders and opportunities were identified. Four key opportunities were revealed: career aspirations, organisation culture, mentorship, and good practices.

Most women leaders are focused on being the best in their current role (68 per cent), nearly half are looking for leadership opportunities external from their community or country (46 per cent), and around a third (36 per cent) are looking to progress within or outside of sport and a third (36 per cent) of the women shared they would like a senior position.

Positively, the vast majority (91 per cent) of women believe that the organisation they work for is supportive of women leaders. Approximately three quarters (73 per cent) of women leaders have experienced some mentorship or sponsorship however, only 41 per cent believed it was valuable.

Five good practices to support women leaders included: pathways and opportunities, empowerment and support, organisational culture and policies, targeted development and upskilling, and visibility and recognition.

Methodology and Respondent Characteristics

This section of the report outlines the methodology and the demographics of the research respondents, including information on their leadership type and duration, and role pathway.

Methodology

Data for this report was collected through an online survey, facilitated by Team Up and hosted by Victoria University on Qualtrics. To ensure anonymity, a generic link to the survey was distributed to sport leaders through Team Up networks in the Pacific. Two versions of the survey were created, one tailored for women leaders and another for men leaders, both focusing on the topic of women as leaders within the sporting industry.

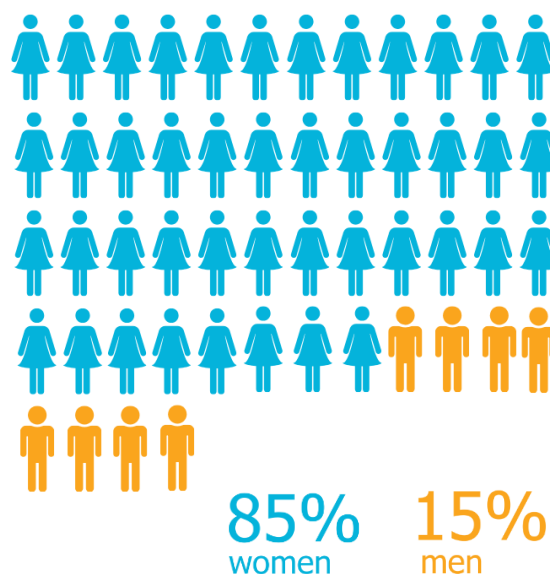
Data collection took place between July and November 2024. The survey instrument comprised approximately 20 items, utilising a variety of question formats including multiple choice, multi-select, Likert scales, and open-ended questions. Following data collection, responses were cleaned and subsequently analysed using IBM SPSS 29 statistical software.

Respondent Characteristics

This report analysed the demographics of a group of 52 individuals, with 85 per cent of the people (44 individuals) completing the women leaders' version of the survey and 15 per cent completing the men leaders' version of the survey (8 individuals).

Within the women's group, a small percentage identified as:

- having a disability (14 per cent)
- LGBTQIA¹ + (9 per cent)



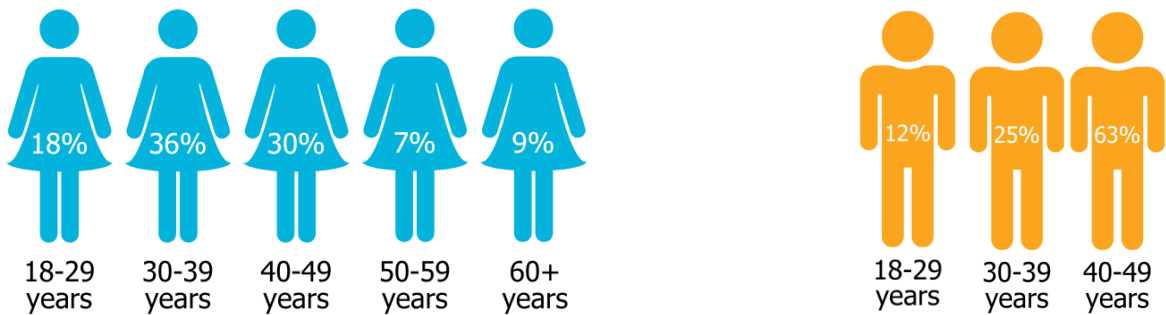
¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual

- Non-binary or transman (7 per cent)
- Minority ethnic group (11 per cent)
- Recent immigrant (2 per cent)

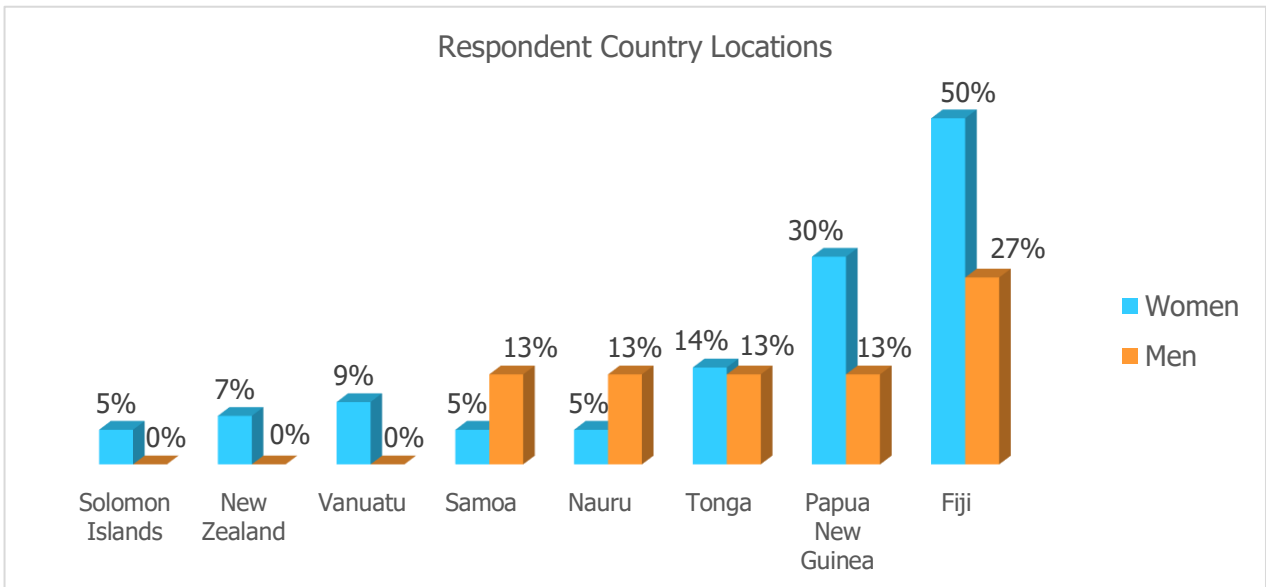
Within the men’s group, a small percentage identified as:

- having a disability (13 per cent)
- minority ethnic group (13 per cent)
- recent immigrant (13 per cent)

The age breakdown for both women and men respondents were as follows:

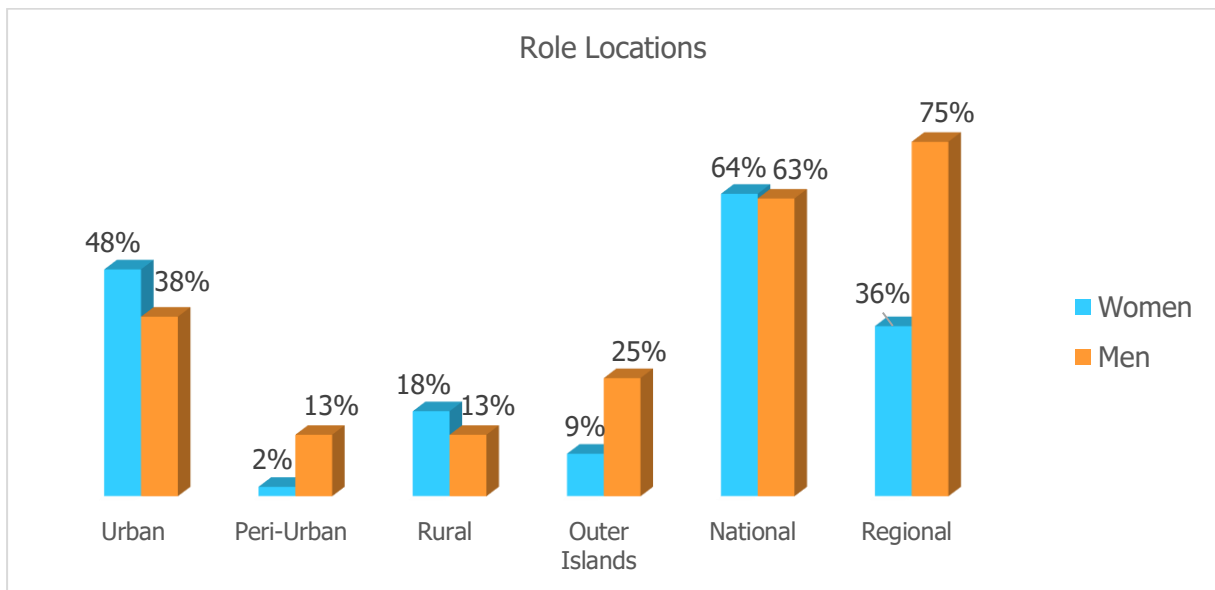


The location breakdown for both women and men respondents were as follows:

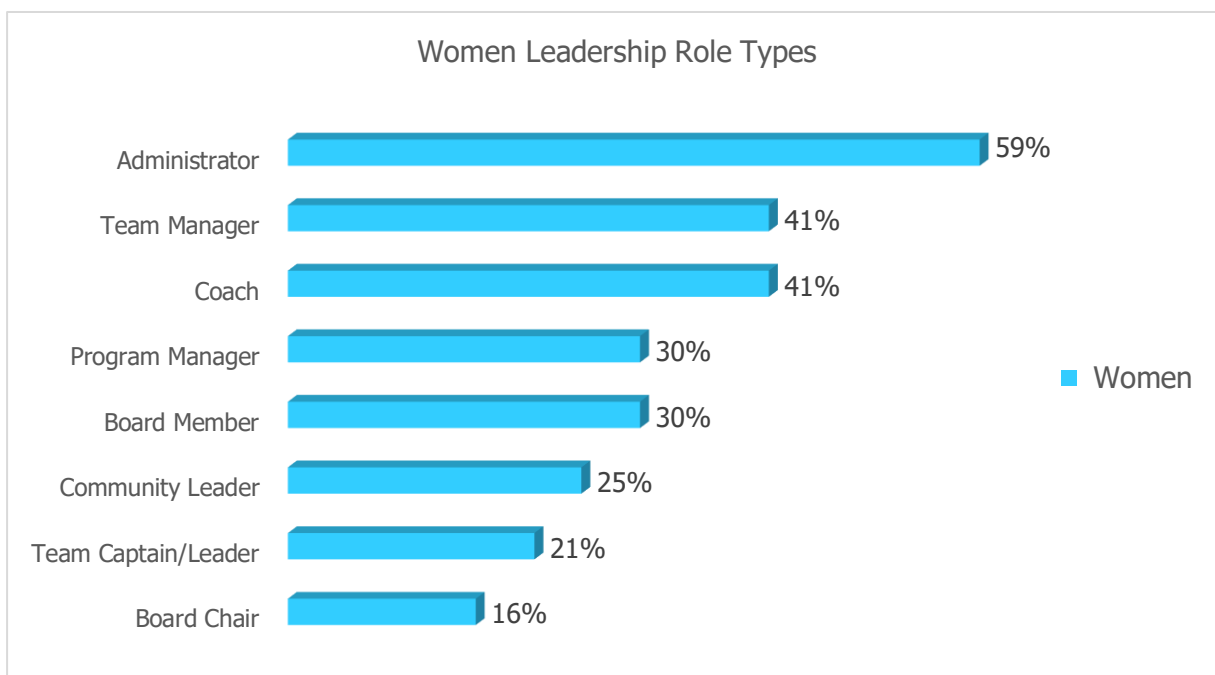


The respondents represented a variety of leadership levels, experiences, and career journeys. The following section is characterised as role location, role type and duration, and role pathway.

The role location breakdown for both women and men respondents were as follows:



Women respondents were involved in multiple leadership roles highlighting the multi-faceted nature of women's contributions and their diverse skillsets, as they engage across different leadership roles and functions within sport. The leadership role types breakdown for women respondents were as follows:

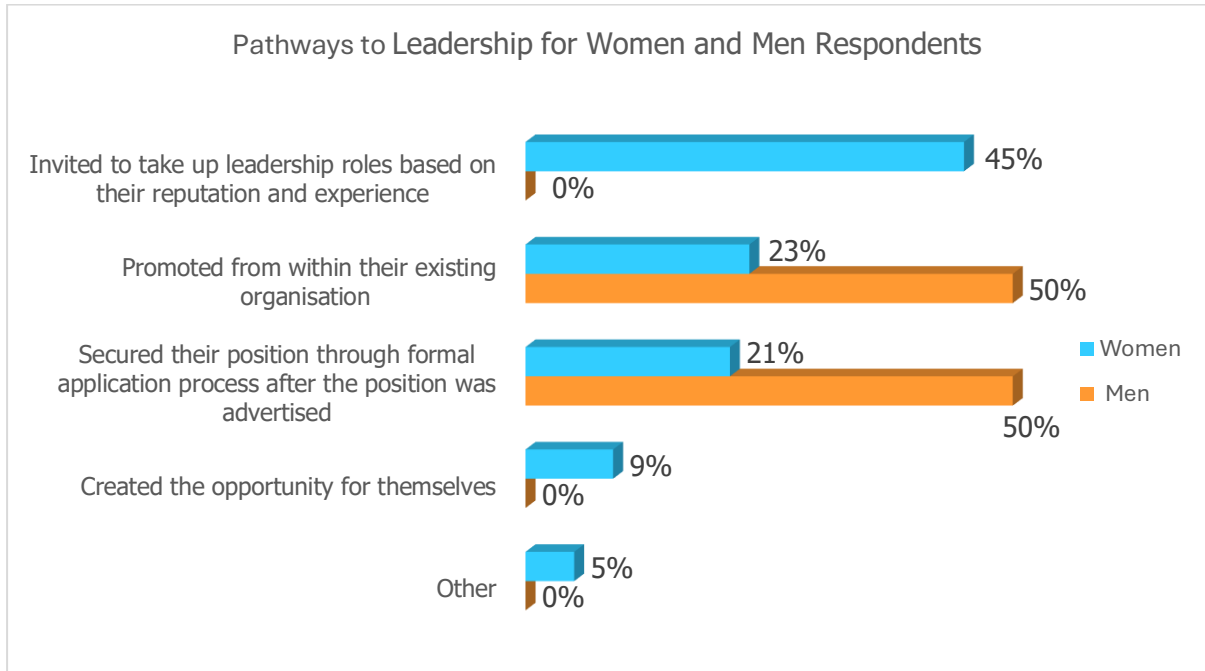


The men respondents to the survey described holding positions of managers (87 per cent) and board members (13 per cent).

On average, women dedicated 12 years to these positions, with a range of 1 to 40 years, showcasing a wide spectrum of experience levels and dedication to lead in sport.

Similar to women, men averaged 12 years in sport leadership roles, although their range spanned from 6 to 29 years.

Both the respondents shared the following as the most common pathways for them to gain their leadership role:



The leadership role pathways reveal an opportunity to review internal promotions and recruitment in the workplace to ensure equitable representation of women and men leaders.

Key Findings

The survey allowed for a range of beliefs, thoughts, and opinions to be captured and this report highlights the challenges faced by women leaders, and the opportunities for women leaders and organisations to activate to increase and support women leaders in sports.

Challenges

Women leaders have, and continue to, face barriers that inhibit their career progression in sport leadership. The following section is divided into six sub-sections: not feeling valued, a tough leadership journey, lack of suitable programs, undefined leadership career pathway, lack of opportunities, and barriers.

1) Not Feeling Valued

A significant portion of women respondents experienced challenges related to gender and leadership. Three quarters (77 per cent) of these women reported at least sometimes feeling their input or ideas were valued less in their leadership role due to their gender, which was reinforced by men respondents (75 per cent). Additionally, one woman with disability reported that her line manager may be intimidated by her.

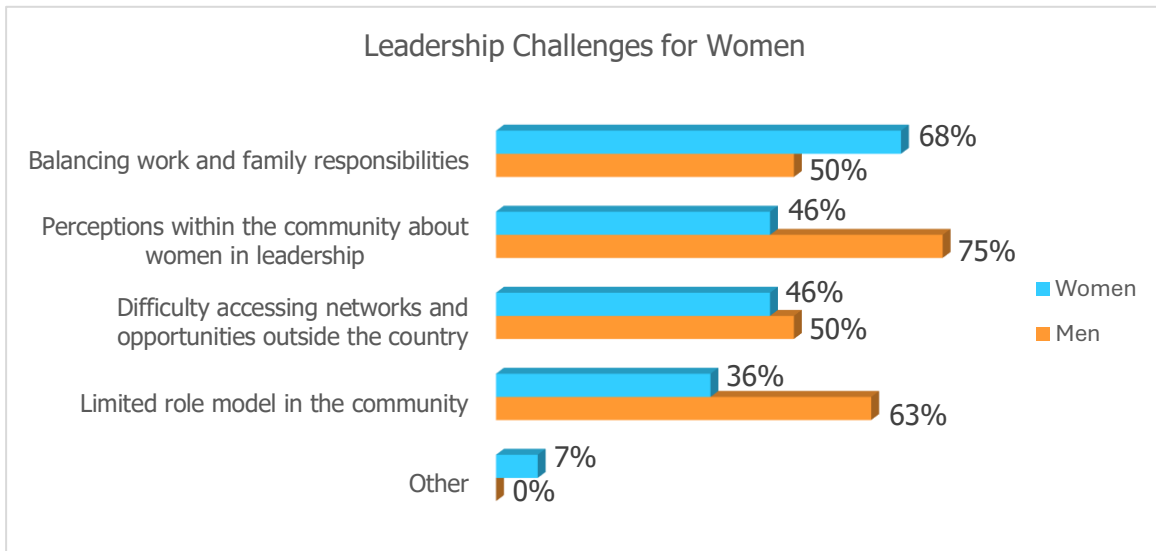
“The new head of the organisation needs to believe in his staff and appreciate that all staff, especially women are more than capable of leading in their roles. Sometimes, I think he feels intimidated by me” (Women with disability)

Interestingly, the vast majority of women leaders (95 per cent) found balancing leadership responsibilities with family or community expectations to be at least an occasional challenge, only half of men leaders believed it was an occasional challenge for women.

2) A Tough Leadership Journey

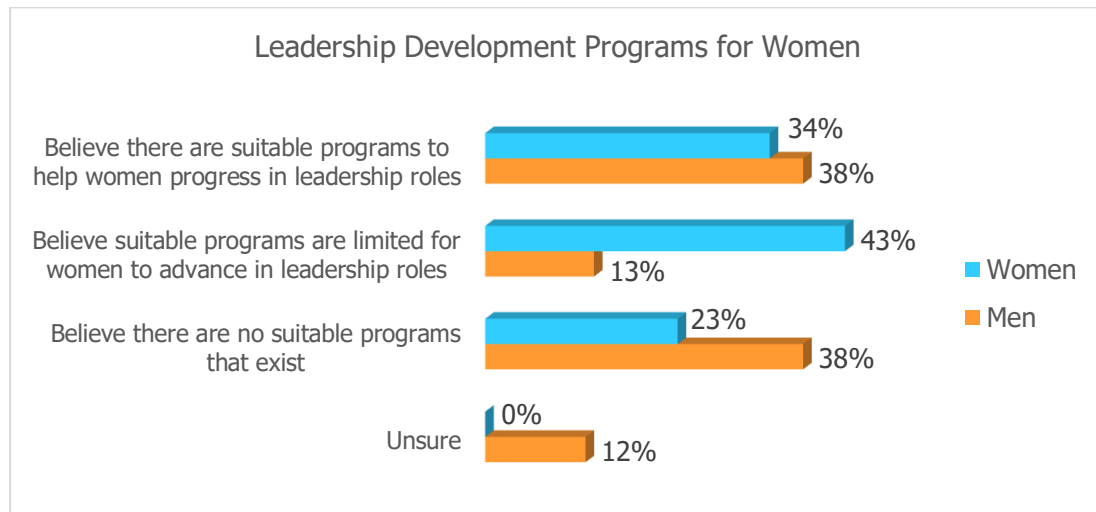
According to both men and women respondents, the leadership journey for

women is tough due to the following reasons and respondents who identified ‘others’ chose not to elaborate on it.



3) Lack of Suitable Programs

Below are the breakdown highlighting the differences in perceptions between women and men regarding leadership development programs for women:



For those who believed no suitable programs exist, mentoring programs and leadership/management training were the most desired.

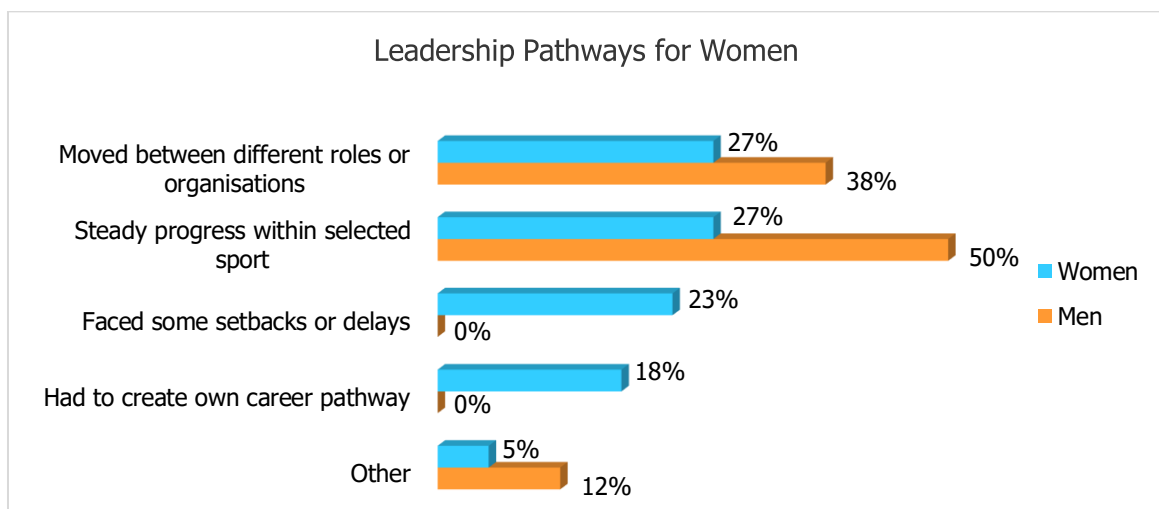
“Perhaps a buddy type role where at multiple levels you are partnering with females from other sports, like a mentorship program but across sports and then have regular

group sharing sessions” (Woman leader)

“Since I coach women from urban and rural areas, I would like to see programs that will help these women build life skills so they can be able to sustain themselves” (Woman leader)

4) Undefined Leadership Career Pathway

The leadership pathway has not been straight for women, and nearly a quarter (23 per cent) faced some setbacks or delay and 18 per cent of the women respondents said they had to create their own career path. The following highlights what the career pathways were like for women respondents and what men respondents thought the career pathways for women looked like.



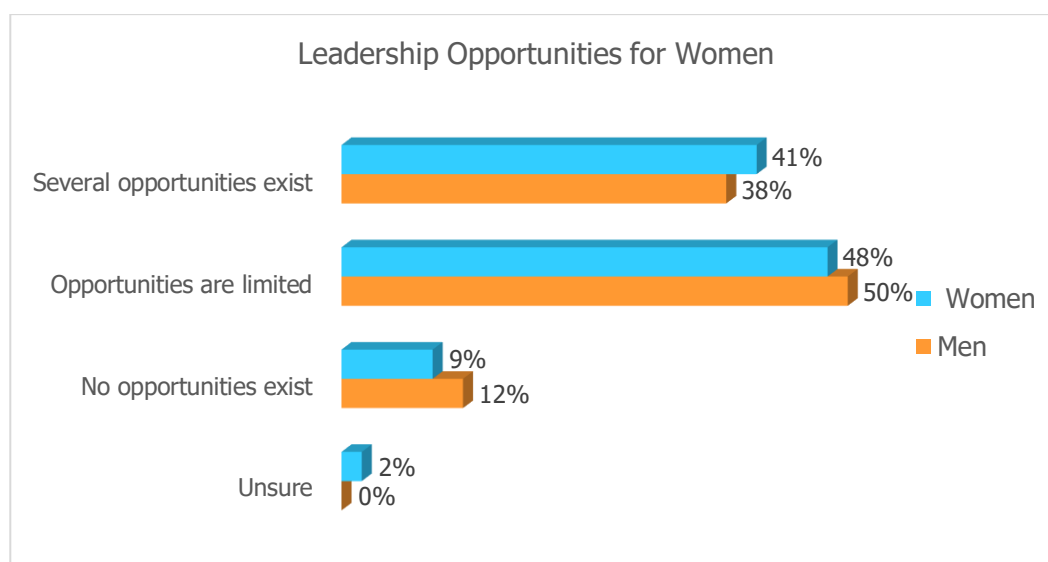
One response was provided for ‘Other’ by a woman, noting her leadership pathway was due to being recognised as an advocate and lobbying and assisting to rebuild the sport

5) Lack of Opportunities

Women in leadership position found it difficult to obtain leadership experience. Less than half of both respondent groups believed several opportunities exist for women and half believed opportunities are limited. Additionally, one woman with disability reported that opportunities can be harder to obtain for people

with communication difficulties.

"We can't get there because of our disability, especially Deaf women who fear to face people because of communication difficulty" (Woman with disability)



6) Barriers

To capture thoughts on barriers, an open-ended item was presented 'Are there any barriers in your organisation that affects your ability to progress as a woman leader in sports or any barriers that would make it difficult for other women to get a leadership role?'

Responses were gained predominantly by women. Five themes emerged: systemic organisational issues, gender bias and discrimination, lack of support, personal and cultural barriers, and racial prejudice.

Systemic Organisational Issues:

- Lack of funding support for capacity strengthening
- Lack of knowledge on where to find job opportunities
- Inactive board directors result in lack of support or guidance

Gender Bias and Discrimination:

- Discrimination and inequality faced when appointed to key leadership roles
- Women not allowed as board directors

Lack of Support:

- From other women in leadership roles
- Between women due to competition of limited leadership roles available for women
- To adopt sign language as a form of communication
- To provide flexible work policies, including remote work, job sharing, and paid parental leave

Personal and Cultural Barriers:

- Fear of failure, self-doubt, and change
- Leadership traditionally rests with men - disempowering women to be confident to take up leadership roles
- Open and honest communication on the progress of women in leadership roles

Racial Prejudice:

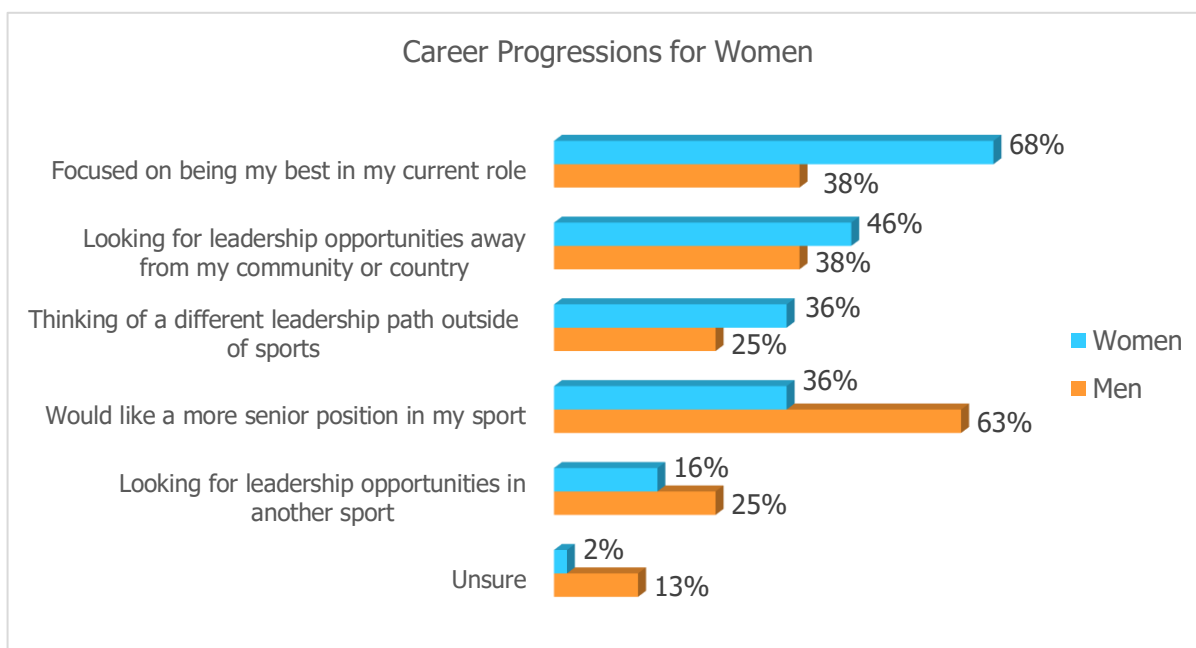
- More difficult for women of colour/ethnic backgrounds to progress in leadership roles
- *"Coming from less developed countries working with white people they always assume you don't know much, or you don't deserve to be a leader until you open your mouth and speak"*

Opportunities

Women leaders showed aspirations to progress as sport leaders and opportunities were identified by respondents for this to occur. The following section is divided into four sub-sections: career aspirations, organisation culture, mentorship, and good practices

1) Career Aspirations

According to both men and women respondents, below are some key career progressions regarding women:



2) Organisation culture

Organisational culture influenced how women felt about their sport leadership opportunities. The vast majority (91 per cent) of women respondents believed the organisation they work for is supportive of women leaders. Every man respondent believed that current organisational cultures are supportive of women leaders. However, the quote below highlights there are still areas for improvement, especially for women with disabilities

“There is a need to allow women to be leaders. Do not hinder their progression by blocking opportunities meant to allow women leaders to grow, and be supported and appreciated, for their personal development and the value they add to the organisation. Create opportunities and not rely only on grants offered by other organisations for women leaders. Provide scholarships specifically to personal development that also ties in with the organisation's goals” (Women with a disability)

3) Mentorship

Approximately three quarters (73 per cent) of women leaders had some mentorship or sponsorship however, only 41 per cent believed it was valuable.

Conversely, all male leaders (100 per cent) believed women leaders have, to a limited extent, access to mentorship or sponsorship.

4) Good practices

To capture thoughts on what good practices respondents believe are possible to advance women as leaders in sport, an open-ended item was presented '*How can sports organisations and/or management support women leaders?*'

Responses were gained predominantly by women. Five themes emerged: pathways and opportunities, empowerment and support, organisational culture and policies, targeted development and upskilling, and visibility and recognition.

Pathways and Opportunities

- Create 'pathways for progress' including mentorship programs, networking, and capacity building
- Open more opportunities for women in leadership roles
- Appoint women on merit rather than 'wantok system'
- Conduct mandatory workshops for all women employees to allow information sharing, awareness of leadership opportunities and steps required, and formation of networks
- Guide organisations on how to plan and initiate action to increase women in leadership positions
- Showcase organisations who have strong leadership pathways for women as leaders

Empowerment and Support

- Encourage women to stand up and be nominated for roles within their organisations and sport federations
- Men to support women in their leadership journey and to allow them to 'use their voice'.
- Men leaders to support and mentor woman counterparts and assist them to excel
- Allow women to access scholarships or pay for them to attend leadership

courses

Organisational Culture and Policies

- Introduce diversity policies in sports organisations
- Embrace affirmative actions and respect for diversity
- Establish flexible work arrangements
- Create more inclusive and supportive environments by providing equal opportunities for ‘all people’ in leadership roles
- Enable a welcoming environment with measures to recruit, retain and support women leaders

Targeted Development and Upskilling

- Showcase the transferable skills women can gain across leadership roles
- Provide access to leadership tasks for women to experience
- Invite women to participate in organisational and community leadership workshops
- Conduct subconscious bias training and foster inclusive leadership models

Visibility and Recognition

- Continually showcase and ensure the visibility of women as leaders
- Award women leaders who volunteer

Despite the small percentage of responses from the women group who identified as living with a disability, being of diverse gender expression and sexual orientation, and belonging to different ethnic groups it is important to:

- Understand that intersections of different social identities create specific experience and marginalisation in sport leadership for women with disabilities, women from minority ethnic groups or non-binary women
- Provide opportunities for sports leadership that are inclusive for diverse groups of women
- Create visibility of diverse women leaders
- Continually seek the voices of people with marginalised identities to help identify their needs, particularly in relation to communication, accessibility, and career progression