

PERCEIVED GENDER INEQUALITY, DISCRIMINATION AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN MALAYSIAN SPORTS LEADERSHIP: A CORRELATIONAL STUDY

AHMAD, N.¹ – WAHAB, S. A.^{2*} – HAMID, S. F. A.² – HAMDAN, N. S.² – SHAFIE, A. C. A.³ – KUTIP, M. F.²

¹ *Majlis Sukan Negara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.*

² *Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor, Malaysia.*

³ *Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Sarawak Branch, Sarawak, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author
e-mail: sitia532[at]uitm.edu.my*

(Received 08th May 2026; revised 24th June 2026; accepted 05th July 2026)

Abstract. Women remain underrepresented in sports leadership globally and in Malaysia. This study examined three perceived barriers contributing to this issue: gender inequality, gender-based discrimination, and work-life balance challenges. Using a structured questionnaire adapted from previous research, data were collected from 100 respondents in Malaysian sports organisations in the Klang Valley, with 91% representing the government sector. Perceived gender inequality recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.31$), followed by work-life balance challenges ($M = 3.11$) and discrimination ($M = 2.98$), indicating neutral to slight agreement. Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant moderate to strong positive relationships among all three variables ($r = 0.552-0.723$, $p < 0.01$). The findings demonstrate the interconnected nature of these barriers and highlight the importance of integrated organisational interventions to strengthen gender inclusivity in sports leadership. These efforts support the continued implementation of Malaysia's Women in Sport Action Plan 2021–2025, promoting equitable opportunities and sustainable leadership development.

Keywords: *gender inequality, discrimination, work-life balance, women in sports leadership, Malaysia*

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in sports leadership is a well-documented global phenomenon rooted in structural bias, cultural norms, and organisational practice (Adriaanse and Claringbould, 2020; McGillivray and McDonald, 2020). Men continue to dominate governance and senior management in sports organisations, maintain hierarchies that institutional change has been slow to disrupt (Olafsdottir and Williams, 2021; Madsen, 2020). Three barriers consistently emerge in the literature. First, gender inequality in sports organisations reflects the persistence of masculinised leadership norms, where assertiveness and competitiveness are coded as leadership traits, leaving women structurally undervalued (Elling et al., 2019; Ryan and Haslam, 2005). Qin et al. (2023) demonstrated that in more gender-restrictive cultural environments, women are systematically underrepresented at executive and governance levels. The WEF (2023) confirmed that unequal pay and constrained professional development opportunities continue to sustain the gender gap in sports leadership. Second, gender-based discrimination manifests in biased recruitment and promotion, restricted access to mentoring, and wage differentials (Hancock and Hums, 2019; Claringbould and

Knoppers, 2012). Evans and Pfister (2021) and Burton (2015) documented how male-dominated selection processes and organisational culture reinforce these inequalities. In Malaysia, Aman et al. (2019) found that perceived incongruity between gender and leadership roles contributed to fewer leadership opportunities for women in national sports associations.

Third, work-life balance challenges are disproportionately borne by women, particularly in sport sectors that demand long hours and frequent travel (Burton and Leberman, 2017; Ismail et al., 2022). Traditional Malaysian norms that prioritise women's caregiving responsibilities compound this challenge. Brue (2019) found that women in leadership roles in similarly male-dominated STEM fields relied heavily on spousal, peer, and mentoring support to manage dual demands. Despite international commitments such as the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5, organisational adoption of flexible work arrangements in sport has been slow (WEF, 2023). In Malaysia, the *Pelan Tindakan Wanita dalam Sukan 2021–2025* launched by the Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia represents the most comprehensive government-level response to these challenges, targeting 30% female representation in sports leadership (Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, 2021). This policy context makes Malaysia a particularly relevant setting for examining how these three barriers operate and interrelate at the organisational level.

This study had three aims: (a) to describe the levels of perceived gender inequality, gender-based discrimination, and work-life balance challenges among respondents in Malaysian sports organisations; (b) to examine the relationships among these three variables; and (c) to situate these findings within Malaysia's policy context. Given the correlational design, no causal claims are advanced. Specifically, its include: RO1: To examine the perceived gender inequality dimension in sports leadership; RO2: To examine the prevalence of gender-based discrimination in sports organisations; RO3: To examine work-life balance challenges faced by women in sports leadership; RO4: To compare the relative prominence of perceived gender inequality, work-life balance challenges, and experiences of discrimination in sports organisations; RO5: To explore the significance of the relationships among perceived gender inequality, work-life balance, and experience of discrimination in sports organisations.

Materials and Methods

A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The target population comprised personnel in both leadership and non-leadership roles employed by sports organisations in Malaysia's Klang Valley. A total of 100 participants were recruited via stratified sampling. Using Kish's Allocation Formula (Kish, 1965) to proportionally distribute the sample across the estimated population of 500, 40 respondents were allocated to Stratum 1 (leadership positions) and 60 respondents to Stratum 2 (non-leadership positions). Data were analysed in aggregate to capture overall organisational climate. A structured questionnaire was adapted from two validated instruments: Channar et al.'s (2011) gender discrimination scale and Gurieva et al.'s (2022) gender perceptions scale. The questionnaire was produced in English and Malay. Three constructs were measured using five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree): (1) Perceived Gender Inequality (4 items): gender stereotypes, structural favouritism, challenges for women seeking senior roles, and recognition of women's achievements. (2) Experience of Discrimination (5 items):

observed discrimination, scrutiny of female leaders, authority disparities, promotion bias, and pay inequality. (3) Work-Life Balance and Leadership (6 items): perceived difficulty balancing responsibilities, schedule flexibility, organisational support, women's representation, and perceived improvement over time. A pilot study with 30 participants from a State Sports Council established internal consistency (*Table 1*). The overall instrument demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = .880$). The Work-Life Balance subscale fell slightly below the conventional 0.70 threshold ($\alpha = .666$); results for this subscale should be interpreted with commensurate caution.

Table 1. Reliability coefficients.

Construct	No. of items	Cronbach's α
Perceived Gender Inequality	4	.841
Experience of Discrimination	5	.873
Work-Life Balance and Leadership	6	.666
Total	15	.880

Note: *Below the conventional $\alpha = .70$ threshold; interpret with caution.

Questionnaires were distributed via Google Form through WhatsApp and email following institutional approval from participating organisations. Data collection ran from December 2024 to January 2025, with completion taking approximately 8–10 minutes. Data were analysed using SPSS v.28. Descriptive statistics characterised each construct. Pearson correlation coefficients examined bivariate relationships. Following Cohen (1988), correlations of .10–.29 were considered small, .30–.49 medium, and $\geq .50$ large. The sample is drawn exclusively from the Klang Valley and is predominantly government sector (91%), limiting applicability beyond public sports agencies. The gender imbalance in the sample (67% female) may inflate perceptions of inequality and discrimination relative to a gender-balanced sample. The study used Pearson correlation on aggregate data: no causal direction can be inferred, and no male-female subgroup comparisons were conducted. The work-life balance subscale showed below-threshold reliability ($\alpha = .666$). The actual stratification (64% leadership) differed from the planned allocation (40%), which should be considered when interpreting results.

Results and Discussion

Among 100 respondents, 67% were female and 33% male. The majority (52%) were aged 40–49 years; 75% were married. Educational attainment was predominantly bachelor's degree (45%) and diploma (22%). Most respondents (91%) worked in government sports organisations. Leadership roles (Director to Assistant Officer levels) accounted for 64%; administrative and other non-leadership roles, 36%. Work tenure was distributed broadly, with 26% in their current role for five years or fewer and 16% for 21 or more years.

Descriptive statistics

Perceived Gender Inequality (RO1)

Mean values ranged from $M = 2.89$ to $M = 3.75$. The highest rated item concerned challenges facing women aiming for senior positions ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.04$), while women's achievements being underappreciated had the lowest mean ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.09$), indicating a tendency towards partial disagreement on that item (*Table 2*).

Table 2. Descriptive statistic.

Category	Mean	SD
Perceived Gender Inequality (RO1)		
Women face greater challenges than men when aiming for senior leadership positions in sports	3.75	1.04
The sports industry is structured in a way that favours men over women in leadership roles	3.35	1.14
Gender stereotypes affect women's chances of achieving leadership positions in sports	3.24	1.10
Women's achievements in leadership positions are often underappreciated compared to those of men	2.89	1.09
Experience of Discrimination (RO2)		
Women in sports leadership positions are given less authority than men in similar roles	3.30	1.04
Female leaders in sports face more scrutiny and criticism than their male counterparts	3.18	0.99
Gender bias affects the promotion of women to higher leadership positions	3.15	1.21
I have observed gender-based discrimination in my sports organisation	2.93	1.18
There are clear inequalities in pay between men and women in similar leadership positions	2.35	1.23
Work-Life Balance and Leadership (RO3)		
Organisations in the sports industry need to offer better work-life balance options for women in leadership	3.96	0.70
Balancing personal life and career is more challenging for women in sports leadership than for men	3.91	0.98
The sports industry does not provide sufficient flexibility in work schedules for women with family responsibilities in leadership roles	3.41	1.17
Women are adequately represented in leadership roles in my sports organisation	2.71	0.98
Work-life balance support in my organisation is sufficient for women aiming for leadership roles	2.41	0.82
The representation of women in leadership positions within the sports industry has improved in recent years	2.26	0.82

Perceived gender inequality registered the highest composite mean ($M = 3.31$) and was the most prominently acknowledged barrier. Women's challenges in accessing senior positions attracted the strongest agreement ($M = 3.75$), consistent with Elling, Hovden and Knoppers (2019) and Ryan and Haslam (2005), who found that masculinised leadership norms structurally disadvantage women. However, the relatively lower score for recognition of women's achievements ($M = 2.89$) suggests some respondents perceived progress in this area. This is consistent with Eagly and Heilman's (2016) observation that those who have not personally encountered barriers are less likely to recognise their existence, and may also reflect the gradual effect of policy initiatives such as the Pelan Tindakan 2021–2025.

Experience of Discrimination (RO2)

Respondents held neutral to slightly disagreeing positions on discrimination items (range: $M = 2.35$ – 3.30). Women being given less authority than men received the highest rating ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.04$). Pay inequality received the lowest ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.23$), likely reflecting the standardised pay scales of government organisations (Table 2). Discrimination was present but rated lower than gender inequality overall. Respondents most strongly acknowledged that women in leadership are given less authority than male peers ($M = 3.30$) and that female leaders face greater scrutiny ($M = 3.18$), consistent with Evans and Pfister (2021) and Burton (2015). Notably, pay inequality received the lowest rating across all items in the study ($M = 2.35$), diverging from global patterns where pay gaps are a primary discrimination concern. This likely reflects the standardised pay structures of government civil service organisations, which made up 91% of the sample, and highlights an important sector-specific finding that limits generalisation to private sports organisations.

Work-Life Balance and Leadership (RO3)

Respondents strongly agreed that better work-life balance provisions are needed ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.70$) and that balance is harder for women than men ($M = 3.91$, $SD =$

0.98). Current support was rated inadequate ($M = 2.41$), and perceived improvement in women's representation scored lowest across all items ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.82$) (*Table 2*). Work-life balance produced the strongest individual item means in the study: respondents overwhelmingly agreed that organisations need to offer better provisions ($M = 3.96$) and that balance is more difficult for women than men ($M = 3.91$). Yet current organisational support was rated inadequate ($M = 2.41$), and perceived improvement in women's representation was the lowest-rated item in the entire questionnaire ($M = 2.26$). This gap between demand and provision aligns with Ismail, Zainal and Hamzah (2022) and Brue (2019), and suggests that while awareness of the problem is high, structural responses remain insufficient. The low SD on the adequacy item ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.70$) indicates this need for better provisions was among the most consistently agreed-upon findings across the entire sample.

Comparative Overview of All Three Constructs (RO4)

Perceived Gender Inequality ranked highest ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.90$), followed by Work-Life Balance and Leadership ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.47$) and Experience of Discrimination ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.92$). All three constructs clustered near the midpoint of the scale, indicating a neutral to slight agreement stance across the sample rather than strongly held positions (*Table 3*).

Table 3. Overall construct means and rankings.

Construct	Rank	Mean	SD
Perceived Gender Inequality	1	3.31	0.90
Work-Life Balance and Leadership	2	3.11	0.47
Experience of Discrimination	3	2.98	0.92

Across all three constructs, the ranking of perceived gender inequality ($M = 3.31$) above work-life balance ($M = 3.11$) and discrimination ($M = 2.98$) reveals a consistent pattern: structural and attitudinal inequalities are more readily perceived than overt discrimination. This is theoretically coherent. Systemic inequalities embedded in organisational culture, male-dominated promotion pathways, gendered leadership norms—are more visible to all personnel, whereas discrimination is often experienced individually and may be less visible to those who do not encounter it directly (Eagly and Heilman, 2016). The narrow range across all three means (3.31 to 2.98 on a five-point scale) indicates that none was perceived as a severe barrier, suggesting that normalisation of male-dominated leadership structures may reduce the perceived urgency of each factor in isolation. Addressing the three barriers together, rather than sequentially, is therefore warranted.

Relationships Among Variables (RO5)

All three variables were significantly and positively correlated. The strongest association was between perceived gender inequality and experience of discrimination ($r = .723$), classified as large by Cohen's (1988) criteria. Perceived gender inequality and work-life balance ($r = .564$) and work-life balance and discrimination ($r = .552$) showed moderate-to-large associations. Respondents who perceived higher gender inequality also tended to report more discrimination experiences and greater work-life balance difficulties (*Table 4*).

Table 4. *Pearson correlation matrix.*

Category	Perceived Gender Inequality	Work-Life Balance	Experience of Discrimination
Perceived Gender Inequality	1	.564**	.723**
Work-Life Balance	.564**	1	.552**
Experience of Discrimination	.723**	.552**	1

Note: ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed); $N = 100$

The correlation structure confirms that these three barriers are not independently experienced. The strongest relationship was between perceived gender inequality and discrimination ($r = .723$, $p < .01$), indicating that respondents who more acutely perceived structural inequalities were also more likely to report discriminatory experiences in their organisations. The moderate correlations involving work-life balance ($r = .564$ with gender inequality; $r = .552$ with discrimination) further suggest that inflexible work environments and discriminatory practices tend to co-occur. This interconnection supports LaVoi and Wasend's (2020) argument that organisations must adopt a holistic strategy: addressing discrimination without improving work-life balance provisions, or vice versa, is unlikely to produce meaningful change. The Pelan Tindakan 2021–2025 reflects this integrated approach in principle; the data suggest implementation has yet to translate it fully into workplace experience.

Conclusion

This study examined perceived gender inequality, gender-based discrimination, and work-life balance challenges as interconnected barriers associated with the underrepresentation of women in Malaysian sports leadership. All three constructs were present in respondents' perceptions, though none was rated as an extreme barrier, suggesting that normalisation of male-dominated leadership structures may dampen perceived severity. Perceived gender inequality was the most salient concern; pay disparity was the least recognised form of discrimination, likely due to the government-sector pay structure predominant in this sample; and the need for better work-life balance provisions was the most consistently agreed upon finding across all 15 items. The significant positive correlations among all three variables ($r = .552$ to $.723$) confirm that these barriers reinforce one another and must be addressed simultaneously. The Pelan Tindakan Pembangunan Wanita dalam Sukan 2021–2025 provides the policy foundation; organisations must move from policy intent to measurable practice through equitable recruitment procedures, transparent pay structures, and genuine flexible work provisions. Future research should employ regression or structural equation modelling to examine directional effects, conduct gender-disaggregated analysis to determine whether men and women perceive these barriers differently, expand sampling to private sports organisations and regions beyond the Klang Valley, and use qualitative methods to capture lived experience. Longitudinal designs would allow tracking of change as the action plan progresses toward its 30% leadership target.

Acknowledgement

Siti Aishah Wahab: Conceptualisation, methodology, supervision, writing, review and editing. Norain Ahmad: Project administration, and investigation. Siti Fadhilah Abdul Hamid: Literature review, data management, and writing original draft. Asmalini Che Abu Shafie: Literature review and data management. Muhammad Faizal Kutip and

Nurul Shahida Hamdan: Manuscript preparation. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. This research is self-funded.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adriaanse, J., Claringbould, I. (2020): Gender diversity in sport leadership: progress and challenges. – *European Sport Management Quarterly* 20(2): 225-243.
- [2] Aman, M.P., Yusof, A., Razali, A.B., Dev, R.D.O. (2019): Perceived incongruity of gender and leadership roles: experiences of top women leaders in Malaysian sports associations. – *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 9(11): 1429-1433.
- [3] Brue, K.L. (2019): Work-life balance for women in STEM leadership. – *Journal of Leadership Education* 18(2): 32-52.
- [4] Burton, L.J. (2015): Underrepresentation of women in sport leadership: a review of research. – *Sport Management Review* 18(2): 155-165.
- [5] Burton, L.J., Leberman, S. (2017): *Women in sport leadership: research and practice for change*. – Routledge, London 288p.
- [6] Channar, Z.A., Abbassi, Z., Ujan, I.A. (2011): Gender discrimination in workforce and its impact on the employees. – *Pakistan Journal of Commerce and Social Sciences* 5(1): 177-191.
- [7] Claringbould, I., Knoppers, A. (2012): Paradoxical practices of gender in sport-related organizations. – *Journal of Sport Management* 26(5): 404-416.
- [8] Cohen, J. (1988): *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). – Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale 567p.
- [9] Creswell, J.W., Creswell, J.D. (2018): *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. – SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks 275p.
- [10] Eagly, A.H., Heilman, M.E. (2016): Gender and leadership: introduction to the special issue. – *The Leadership Quarterly* 27(3): 349-353.
- [11] Elling, A., Hovden, J., Knoppers, A. (2019): *Gender diversity in European sport governance*. – Routledge, London 240p.
- [12] Evans, A.B., Pfister, G. (2021): *Women in sport leadership: research and practice for change*. – *Sport in Society* 24(5): 789-807.
- [13] Gurieva, L.K., Gornostaeva, Z.V., Ukhanova, E.M. (2022): Social perceptions of gender differences and the subjective significance of the gender inequality issue. – *Psychology in Russia: State of the Art* 15(2): 72-84.
- [14] Hancock, M.G., Hums, M.A. (2019): A decade of Title IX: the impact on women in sports leadership. – *Journal of Sport Management* 33(6): 509-523.
- [15] Ismail, N., Zainal, N., Hamzah, M. (2022): Gender barriers in Malaysian sports leadership: a cultural perspective. – *Asian Journal of Gender Studies* 15(3): 89-110.
- [16] Kish, L. (1965): *Survey sampling*. – John Wiley & Sons, New York 643p.
- [17] LaVoi, N.M., Wasend, M.K. (2020): The impact of gender stereotypes on women coaches and sport leadership. – *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 28(1): 60-68.
- [18] Madsen, L.A. (2020): Leadership theory and practice in the context of gender equality. – *Journal of Leadership Studies* 14(2): 101-117.

- [19] McGillivray, D., McDonald, M.G. (2020): Gender representation in sport governance: a global perspective. – *Sport in Society* 23(7): 1125-1141.
- [20] Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia. (2021): *Pelan Tindakan Wanita dalam Sukan 2021–2025*. – KBS, Putrajaya 48p.
- [21] Olafsdottir, G., Williams, T. (2021): Leading sports organizations: gender perspectives and organisational changes. – *European Journal of Sport Management* 15(2): 157-172.
- [22] Qin, X., Chua, R.Y.J., Tan, L., Li, W., Chen, C. (2023): Gender bias in cultural tightness across the 50 US states, its correlates, and links to gender inequality in leadership and innovation. – *PNAS Nexus* 2(8): 12p.
- [23] Ryan, M.K., Haslam, S.A. (2005): The glass cliff: evidence that women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions. – *British Journal of Management* 16(2): 81-90.
- [24] World Economic Forum (WEF) (2023): *Global gender gap report 2023*. – WEF, Geneva 382p.