

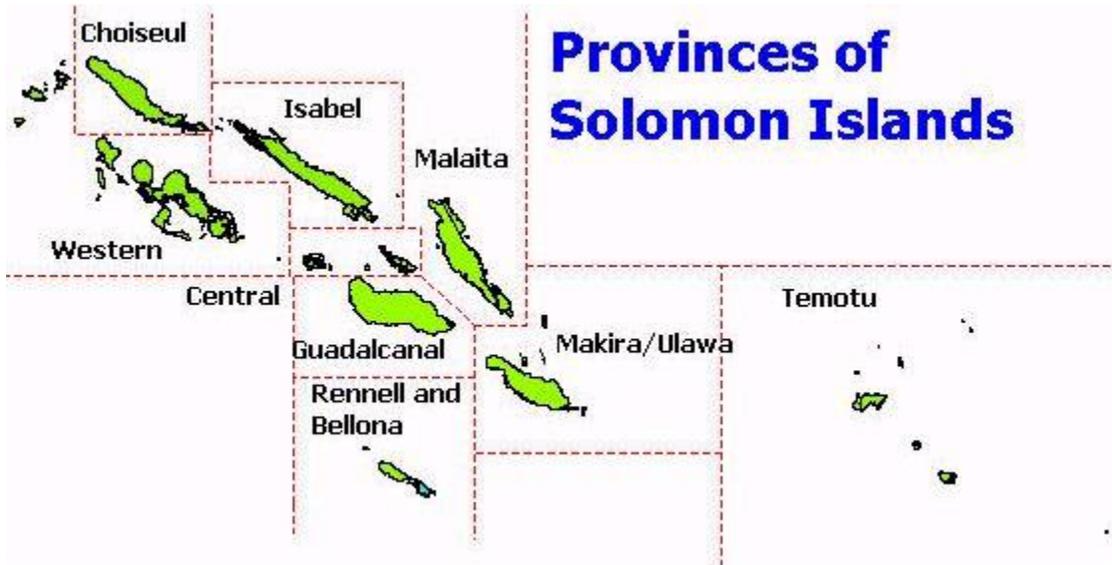
Women and sports in Solomon Islands

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Abstract

This study sought to gather consensus from sports practitioners, strategies that could be employed to improve women's sports in Solomon Islands. Utilising the Nominal Group Technique, 16 participants underwent half a day's workshop and agreed on the salience of changing mindsets by breaking cultural and religious beliefs around female positioning in society. Part of this, is implementable strategic plans at the government level that provides an enabling environment for ample opportunities for women to participate in sports at all levels. This includes increased numbers of women's expertise in major sports roles such as coaching, technical officials and administrators.

Introduction



Source: Pipolfastaem network.

Located in the South Pacific, Solomon Islands has nine provinces, indicated by the map above: Choiseul, Isabel, Western, Malaita, Central, Guadalcanal, Rennell and Bellona, Makira/Ulawa, and Temotu provinces. In 2007, the population is about 515, 870 where 60 per cent of this are below 24 years of age. Gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1978, its economy relied on agriculture, forestry, fisheries and minerals (Asian Development Bank, 2015).

While gender inequalities have improved in various facets of Solomon Islands society, the judicial system is largely male dominated with no female judges in the high court and virtually all leadership in local courts are male. 80 per cent of women in Solomon Islands are attended by health professionals at birth, which is relatively high in developing countries' terms, but contraception use is low, with only 25 per cent of married women and lower for unmarried females, using modern contraceptive methods (Asian Development Bank, 2015). The Asian Development Bank (2015) further stated that gender gaps in education have narrowed in Solomon Islands but there still exists a disparity in higher education dominated by males. In terms of overall labour participation, the gender gap is small, but only 5 per cent of women make up senior public service positions. 64 per cent of Solomon Islands women experienced physical and/or sexual abuse at some stage in their lives (Asian Development Bank, 2015). The World Health Organisation (2013) claimed that a very strong manifestation of gender equality in Solomon Islands is the high gender-based violence against women and may be considered normalised especially when both 73 per cent of men and women believe that it is justifiable if there is infidelity, 'disobedience' and not keeping to gender roles imposed by society (World Health Organisation, 2013).

Greener, Fish, and Tekulu (2011) suggested in the Solomon Islands context the notion of blending sensitivity to gender-based considerations with sensitivity to cultural considerations.

Different cultures may have different understandings to concepts such as ‘law’, ‘order’, or justice, for instance. This means that those who work in the Solomon Islands require, or other contexts foreign to you, cultural competence to be able to meaningfully intervene, whether it be law and order or gender issues. It is important to understand the role of culture and gender in specific contexts to be able to fully intervene. Cultural competence should be the core value in pursuing an issue with Solomon Islands (Greener, Fisher, & Tekulu, 2011). Dyer (2017), in her study of Solomon Islands women’s opinion about gender norms, advocated the need for creating space for women to self-reflect, allow public commentary and have far more visibility in secular spaces.

Marginalisation of women’s sports has a long history throughout the world. In Solomon Islands, there is lack of research papers on women and sports. However, Dorovolomo (2015), in the analysis of Solomon Islands’ participation in Pacific Games, found that although the Solomon Islands, in recent years, has positively included women in Pacific Games who accounted for most of the medals in the 2011 Pacific Games, they have only achieved 37 percent of medals only overall since the inception of the Pacific Games in 1963 (Dorovolomo, 2015). At a global level, it is only in recent decades that women were officially allowed to compete in traditional men’s sports, from a marathon, to boxing and ski jumping. For instance, it was only at 2012 London Games that women were able to compete in all Olympic sport events for the first time (Pfister, 2015). In the Fiji context, where the lead author is based, according to Besnier and Brownell (2016), the Fijiana, the women’s rugby team, would need far more support than it is currently receiving and that the Fiji Rugby Union (FRU) should not “treat them as a distant second to the men’s team”. Besnier and Brownell (2016) explain the difference in sponsorship and financial support by stating that, leading to the Rio Olympics, while the men’s rugby sevens

team were accommodated at a luxury hotel, the Fijiana lodged at a Christian camp nearby with five players to a room with only basic amenities (Besnier & Brownell, 2016). The Fijiana team often lack corporate sponsorship, proper contract, and medical insurance than male rugby players. Female rugby players are also often stigmatised as being lesbians and socially ostracised when they disobey playing a game parents perceive to be meant for men (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013).

Welford (2011: p. 367) stated that ‘sport organisations are often places that still reproduce traditional gender roles and discourses. Women struggle for recognition in areas they have traditionally been excluded from because they have limited historical entitlement to draw upon and few role models or networking arrangements to help’. Sport is often a vehicle for reproducing gender inequality in society and Norman (2012) argues the need to contest and challenge the patriarchal culture of sport which also involves sexism, elitism and discrimination. Gender is a social construction which permeates society. It is reproduced through socialization and positions individuals in the social field in-line with prevailing gender arrangements (Pfister, 2015). Thus, this study aimed to garner opinion from sports practitioners, strategies for the improvement of women’s sport in the Solomon Islands

Methodology

Gender equality is important not only in other sectors of society such as in education, employment, governance, and access to quality health services, but also in the sporting arena. Women participation in sport is slowly declining and there needs to be an inclusive environment at community, club and elite levels. Thus, this study sought to answer this research question:

What are the opinions of sports practitioners could be strategies to improve women's sports in Solomon Islands?

Nominal Group Technique

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is a qualitative method of collecting data that is widely used today (Bailey, 2013). It is appropriate in identifying aspects of a situation being investigated and in establishing priorities, from participants who have working knowledge of the topic (Bailey, 2013), in this study, those who have a role in sports in the Solomon Islands. NGT informed the selection of our participants all whom were involved in sports in the Solomon Islands. This study incorporated the NGT processes suggested by Bailey (2013) which include the following stages: individual generation of ideas, recording of participants' ideas, group discussions of generated ideas, voting to rank the most important ideas, rankings in order of importance, second round of ranking. The 3-2-1 method of ranking and prioritization in a NGT (Hall, 2014) assigns 3 points for the most important, 2 points for the item each individual regards second in importance and 1 point for the one considered third in their ranking of strength or areas of improvement.

The Workshop and Findings

A data collection workshop was held at Honiara (capital of the Solomon Islands) in 2016 at the Panatina Campus of the Solomon Islands National University (SINU). Sixteen (16) participants were at the NGT workshop from sporting federations, SINU, schools, non-governmental organizations, and government ministries. A limitation of the study is that only two women attended. This, however, is a wider societal perception that coaching, administration and governance in sports is a male realm. Thus, female coaches and administrators are inadvertently

less than male participants. The participants were given notebooks and pens for the NGT exercise. Morning tea and lunch was provided for them. Co-authors opened the workshop, highlighted the purpose of it and, made concluding observations. The lead author facilitated the NGT process with the participants, while the co-authors joined the general discussions. The question posed was ‘what kind of strategies do we need to have in place to improve women’s sport in Solomon Islands?’. Time was given to the participants to list strategies individually on paper. The participants were then asked to supply a strategy each in a round robin until points were exhausted. These were listed as follows, unranked:

1. Encouragement for girls’ sports in schools as starting early is paramount;
2. Women’s sports participation is limited by cultural perceptions that may need to change, including possibly religious reasons;
3. A culture of inclusivity from the home to other systems, that emphasises equal treatment and equal access;
4. A strategic plan by the Ministry of Home Affairs with a number of programmes including identification of female talent and participation throughout the sports system;
5. Changing of mind-sets and viewpoints on sports that target gender, social issues, health, and other pathways including high performance;
6. The need to increase female coaches, administrators, technical experts and leaders;
7. Encourage women in community sports;
8. To education women about the importance of sports and its benefits;

9. Increase opportunities for women to participate in sports country wide;
10. The use of female role models who have been to the Olympics or similar competitions;
11. Innovate mixed competitions and participation in sports such as softball that involves both male and female young players;
12. Monetary investment in encouraging female participation;
13. Providing women with overseas scholarships that include both sports and academic aspects;

When strategies from participants were exhausted, the forum was opened for further comments.

The participants made the following comments:

- Policy to explicitly include statements on women's sport participation;
- Extensive recruitment and provision of opportunities for female participation in sports clubs;
- Mixed sports activities for boys and girls;
- Formal as well as recreational pathways in sports, as not all become elite players;
- The need for the sports ministry to fund annual women's sports tournaments and events;
- Facilities and infrastructure are vital to developing women's sports including functioning washrooms;
- To change people's attitude towards public amenities so those are properly take care of;
- Policy should cater for traditional sports which often provide the foundational skills of individuals;

The participants were then instructed to use Hall’s (2014) 3-2-1 method, assigning 3 points for the most important, 2 points for the item each individual regarded second in importance and 1 point for the one considered third in their ranking of strategies. The participants were then asked to provide their rankings, which were tallied by facilitators. The total points that each item gathered provided the overall ranking of strategies. The items that did not receive ranking points were eliminated. The table below shows the ranking:

Rank	Strategy	Ranking marks
1	Changing of mind-sets and viewpoints on sports that it can target gender, social issues, health, peace building and other pathways including high performance.	28
2	A strong strategic plan with the Ministry of Home Affairs with a number of programs including identification of female talent and participation throughout the sports system.	12
2	Increase opportunities for women to participate in sports country wide.	12
3	The need to increase coaches, administrators, technical experts and so forth, that are female.	9
4	Encouragement for girls’ sports in schools should be given attention as starting early is paramount.	8

5	Women’s sports participation surrounds a number of cultural perceptions that may need to change. These cultural barriers may also include possibly religious reasons as well.	6
5	Giving scholarships for girls abroad, that includes both sports and academic attachment.	6
6	There needs to be ‘education’ in the importance of sports and its benefits for women.	5

Discussion

The most highly ranked strategy was that gender equality should be one of multiple pathways the Solomon Islands sports can take, which needs to encompass health, other social issues, peace building, and high performance. There was also discussion on the need for formal and recreational pathways for sports, as not all female athletes would become elite players. This recognises that sports can have multiple benefits to society, from gender equality, fighting non-communicable diseases (NCDs), to continual peace building in post-conflict Solomon Islands. Solomon Islands went through what is known as the ‘ethnic tension’ between 1998 to 2003, considerably disturbing economic and social growth (Asian Development Bank, 2015). The Pacific Islands have a significant challenge of NCDs, with 60 percent of deaths in the Solomon Islands to 77 percent of deaths in Fiji attributable to chronic diseases. Diabetes is particularly prevalent, with seven Pacific Island countries ranked among the top ten countries with the highest prevalence rates. Physical inactivity, besides high fat intake, and tobacco and alcohol

abuse, is a major risk factor (Hou, Anderson & Burton-McKenzie, 2016). The major female sport in Solomon Islands is netball and it can play a role in nation-building and focus on its development by the Solomon Islands stakeholders, can have positive impacts on gender equality in sports. In terms of peace building in the South Africa context, Pelak (2005) studied women's netball to investigate strategies in which athletes and sport administrators served as agents of change. She found that netball athletes and administrators could contribute to nation building in post-apartheid South Africa by helping construct a collective identity across racial boundaries (Pelak, 2005). The Solomon Islands had gone through a period of civil unrest, or what is often referred to as the 'ethnic crisis', in the late 1990s to the early 2000s. This led to external military intervention in the form of the Regional Assistance Mission (RAMSI) led by Australia (Connell, 2006). Sports has a major role in peace and nation building in the Solomon Islands and while females are often major victims of conflicts, sports is a viable tool for nation building. As Kaufman (2016) stated, women and children are major victims of conflicts, but are also resilient and often actively seek to work for peace. Sports can be a vehicle in which women can be active participants in peace building rather than victims.

In terms of high performance sports, Green and Oakley (2001) suggested targeting women's sports for elite outcomes. The Solomon Islands can build on the strengths of female athletes for international success. Women's sports participation in elite events can be an area of strategic resourcing. Australia has, for example, in the 2000 Olympic Games specifically targeted resourcing certain 'softer medals' in various women's disciplines and gained medals through such a strategy (Green & Oakley, 2001). Possible sports for 'softer medals' refers to sports not as many countries normally enter athletes for. The Solomon Islands can realistically target certain women's sports and disciplines for international success. Focused weightlifting for Solomon

Islands female athletes, for instance, has led to a domination of medals won in the Pacific Games. More attention put on Solomon Islands female athletics has seen an improvement in medals on track. These examples and arguments indicate the importance of sports in helping address a variety of social and development issues in a country. The participants agreed that sport is a viable vehicle to address a multitude of issues affecting the Solomon Islands. The Commonwealth of Australia (2010) in its policy promotes a national system that integrates the whole sporting pathway from the grassroots and communities up to the elite level. This embraces investment throughout the pathway as an integrated whole. This is important as the levels of sport participation feed on each other. Women's sports should be integrated into this multi-pathway to sports development in the Solomon Islands.

The second most highly ranked item in the NGT process was the suggestion of a strong strategic plan by the Solomon Islands Ministry of Home Affairs, which should encompass a number of programs including identification of female talent and participation throughout the sports system. The participants argued the need for a sports policy that has explicit statements on women's sport participation. Moreover, they suggested that the policy should cater for traditional sports which often set the foundational skills of individuals. Morris, Arthur-Banning, and McDowell (2014) support this by stating that a policy and legislative environment that is accepting of women in sports and diversity is required to bolster female participation and representation. In addition, Thibault, Slack, and Hinings (1994) also state that in order to maximise opportunities for women, developing practical strategies is imperative. Strategic planning is an important requirement, which in broad terms, means provision of purposes, policies, programs, actions, decisions, or resource allocations that defines what the country wants, what it does, and why it

does it. Strategic planning at a national scale for sports must not be underestimated and be accorded priority (Thibault, Slack & Hinings, 1994).

Thus, it is important for the Solomon Islands to know where it is going in terms of women's sports. The country needs to be systematic and deliberate, and intelligently prepare for an actionable strategic plan in sports that promotes women's participation. Yow, Migliore, Bowden, Stevens, and Loudon (2000) added that there should not only be strategic planning but also a process of strategic management. Strategic management involves matching the country's capabilities to its opportunities (Yow et al., 2000). A policy on positive discrimination is also a vital strategy for the development of female coaches and sports leaders when institutional gatekeepers are often male and going through the ranks can be difficult. It is important to challenge existing cultures and recruitment practices (Norman, 2012). Thus, in the Solomon Islands context, the Asian Development Bank (2015) recommended increasingly gender-responsive legislation and policy to promote gender equality.

The next ranked strategy that the participants in this study agreed upon was the provision of increased opportunities for women to participate in sports countrywide. The participants discussed the need for aggressive recruitment and provision of opportunities for female participation in sports clubs. They suggested mixed sports activities for boys and girls at earlier ages in club settings and at schools. Furthermore, the participants suggested that the sports ministry fund annual tournaments and events on women's sports. However, they also recognised that opportunities can only be provided if facilities and infrastructure are available and conducive. The participants further noted the simplest of things such as a functioning washroom, which is often not available at Solomon Islands sporting premises, as vital to developing women's sports. There were also comments regarding changing patterns of attitude

towards public amenities so that people take care of facilities properly. As such, sports can contribute fruitfully towards the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) modelled on the 'sport for all' ideal, which encourages sports participation for often neglected sections of society such as women and those with disabilities (United Nations, 2007). Furthermore, SDGs began in 2016 including SDG 5 which seeks to achieve gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls (Kim, 2017). Women's sports is an area Solomon Islands can help tackle SDG 5. The sporting platform can be an area deep rooted and persistent gender inequalities are addressed. A policy of inclusion and even a section of the country's mechanisms and systems that deals with diversity, inclusion and gender equity, can play major roles in pushing forward women's sporting involvement (Loggins & Scheidner, 2015). MacClain, Bridges and Bridges (2014) recommended that major institutions must develop key diversity indicators with national benchmarks to work and track progress towards diversifying the sporting landscape.

Another area prioritized by participants to this study was the need to increase female coaches, administrators, technical experts. In the United States, Morris, Arthur-Banning, and McDowell (2014) stressed that the rate of female coaches was at an all-time low. Thus, even if exponentially the number of female sporting participants has increased in the US, most are not coached by females in order that they learn from them and relate to them as mentors and role models at all levels of participation including at the elite level. An environment where there is lack female coaches may also be in turn not good for the retention of female coaches. A few who are pursuing coaching positions up the ladder often confront constant hurdles (Morris et al., 2014). According to MacClain, Bridges and Bridges (2014) "mentoring is a process of continual events involving interactions between a more experienced individual to provide counsel,

guidance, and assistance to a lesser experienced individual in a formal or informal collaboration” (p. 18). Consequently, the mentoring process helps reduce barriers, promote leadership skills, provide athletes with advice on avoiding pitfalls, and enhance career development in a sporting organisation.

Moreover, mentoring can help in the retention and promotion of women and other areas of diversity. Mentoring or professional development programs for women are viable strategies for increasing female involvement in top levels of sport administration (Loggins & Schneider, 2015). Therefore, Morris et al. (2014) found that it is important for female coaches to exude positivity, advance coaches career and believe that they could succeed as coaches. An overriding element in breaking through barriers is optimism about careers and changing the lag in the state of women’s coaching situation. Morris et al. (2014) found that females who held leadership roles in sports were all former athletes themselves. They suggest that, to have more females in leadership roles in sports, it is necessary to encourage such transition from being athletes to continued involvement in a sporting organisation. A platform that allows that to occur would be necessary. One way of facilitating this is for coaches to be aware of the need to start mentoring female athletes into various roles later as they will be entering a male dominated coaching and leadership world. The other strategy is to provide female athletes with opportunities for coaching education that is relevant and pitched at the correct level. Coaching courses should be relevant rather than simply resume builders. Morris et al. (2014) also suggested having coaching courses that encourage social capital among female coaches. Coaching courses often do not realise the mentoring effect of other female coaches. Women coaches usually would have to navigate family obligations, work and gendered aspects of the field.

Another finding is that the participants in this study agreed on the need for the encouragement of girls' sports in Solomon Islands schools, as starting early is paramount. The United Nations (2007) called on educational and academic institutions to establish gender-sensitive sports programs and support girls to advance in all areas from community involvement, coaching, administration, to national, regional and international participation. Moreover, the United Nations (2007) called upon governments to promote full and equal participation of girls in extracurricular activities at schools including sports. Stader and Surface (2014) noted in the US that there had been increased opportunities for school girls' sport participation, but they are still underrepresented compared with boys. It is important for schools not to have differential treatment to girls' school sport and to be responsible for equity in facilities, dressing rooms, practice time, equipment, uniform, scheduling, and selection. Where there are inequalities identified, a plan needs to be developed to address these (Stader & Surface, 2014).

Another strategy identified by the participants was that women's sports participation surrounds a number of cultural perceptions that may need to change. These cultural barriers may also include possibly religious reasons. Sport was often seen as incompatible with normal womanhood. In the Solomon Islands context, this could mean that women should be at home to take care of the home, children and often the extended family rather than being out playing sports. Musto and McGain (2016) state that the masculinity of female athleticism was seen with suspicion of deviant sexuality and possibly lesbians. These persisted over time and elements of it exists today. In the Fiji context, the attitudes of parents and society towards women's rugby needs to change as some are not allowed to play rugby and would do so without parents' knowledge.

Furthermore, women playing rugby in Fiji are often stereotyped as tomboys or lesbians (Cava, 2013; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2017). Musto and McGann (2016) also

mention that despite increasing acceptance of women's athleticism, there are also sections of society who still stereotype female athletes as 'mannish' or lesbians.

Team sport has long been associated with men and masculinity while individual sports have historically been constructed to have feminine ideals (Musto & McGann, 2016). Kilty (2006) found her study that one of the barriers to female coaches' professional opportunities is the issue of homophobia. Women who work in a predominantly male domain are often perceived as lesbians and not really women. Kilty (2006) also purported that some of these barriers could be internal such as highly trained and knowledgeable female coaches still being very self-critical. There can often be doubts over their own capabilities and therefore they do not apply for coaching positions. With increase in the level of coaching, there are also progressive increments in the amount of time demanded of female coaches, requiring them to balance work and personal life. Being a coach during child-bearing years and juggling family and a professional career are extremely demanding for women (Kilty, 2006).

The participants in this study also prioritised giving Solomon Islands girls overseas scholarships that includes both sports and academic attachment. Solomon Islands Tennis has been doing this for some years now, where talented young players are identified and given scholarships to train abroad but also attend school with all tennis fees, school fees, accommodation, meals, and support provided. They are based in Fiji initially and can go to the United States later (Oceania Tennis, 2013). A downside has been the non-return of players on scholarship who usually end up marrying in the US and remain there. Even though the idea is based on sound grounds of developing athletes' education and elite sports performance, regulations around benefits for the Solomon Islands can be specified properly prior to deployment. Nevertheless, more young people should be given scholarships that encourage their academic as well as sporting

advancement. Funding should be available for selected elite performers to be exposed to high level training and international competitions each year.

The final priority the participants agreed upon was the need for education and awareness of the importance of sports and its benefits for women. In their study of engaging Croatian women in sports, Sindik, Mikic, Dodigovic and Corak (2016) suggested the importance of specific strategies to improve media coverage of women's sports. In England, Welford (2011) stated that media attention to female football had decreased since the 1980s and that even though the English female football team was in the final in the European Championships, it was the only game that was televised on terrestrial television. Kilty (2006) encourages advocacy for women's coaching and sports, making accomplishments visible and taking deliberate actions to support each other. It is important to advocate for the unique value the female experience brings to sport. Advocacy can help provide convincing information and send messages to the community that can create change. This also means that women who are currently holding positions of power need to realise the impact they can have through advocating women's sports.

Media coverage too is an area that does not allow for creating awareness of female sports. Pfister (2015) commented that "newspaper sports pages, television sports programs and information sport on the internet seem to be produced by men, for men and about men" (p. 639). Women's sports, when covered, are often presented in tantalizing or provocative ways or bringing in eroticism as a 'selling point' to news items (Pfister, 2015). Furthermore, Wuolo (2010) envisioned the need to use the social media as an overall strategy for the advocacy of women's sports. There are so many mediums that can be used today such as websites, emails, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and so forth, to socialise those involved and are active in the field of women and sports. They can permit local as well as global conversations and networking on issues

pertaining to women's sports. Social media can help tell stories, achievements, efforts and opinions across cultures and geographical locations (Wuolo, 2010).

Conclusion

Women's experiences and opportunities in sports are different from men due to cultural and social constraints, expectations, and positions of power. Organisational structures are dominated by males, which causes barriers to women climbing the ladder. Women have to navigate complexities of gendered structures to get into coaching and leadership positions in sports. Identifying strategies to improve women's sports is a worthwhile exercise and it has to begin with a workable strategic plan and policy landscape that caters for multiple pathways, importantly, without neglecting women and traditional sports. Improving women's sports in the Solomon Islands will require not only breaking multiple barriers, but also ensuring female sports at school and clubs levels, special scholarship programs, and continuous advocacy of women's sport participation. All strategies should be directed at bridging the gap of underrepresentation in all facets of Solomon Islands sports. In all these, the importance of women's networks and mentoring must not be underestimated, in order that there is collective power to continually change the field of sports.

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