



# The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

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Editor-in-Chief – Dr. Muktai Deb Chavan; Publisher – Alden Vas; ISSN: 2583-9896

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## EVOLVING CHALLENGES IN SPORTS GOVERNANCE: INVESTIGATING FUTURE PATHWAYS FOR ADDRESSING PERSISTENT ISSUES LIKE MATCH FIXING AND INEQUALITY

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### ABSTRACT

The nature of sports governance has been subject to changing challenges that jeopardize the integrity, inclusivity and sustainability of sporting ecosystems worldwide. Such problems as match-fixing and gender inequality are discussed in this article as they negatively affect fair play and equal participation. Based on recent statistics, such as the 2024 Integrity Report of Sportradar, which found that suspicious matches decreased 17% but continued to be widespread in new leagues, and UNESCO findings that women were still underrepresented in the position of federation chair (only 30% of the major federations had women as federation chair), the study points to structural issues increased through commercialisation, globalisation and online betting. The analysis shows that the gaps are: legislative fragmentation in anti-corruption initiatives, cultural biases that persist in providing gender inequalities, and the lack of multi-stakeholder coordination through a qualitative desk-based literature review regarding 2023-2025 on the topic: UN Women, Sport for Generation Equality Initiative and the governance frameworks established by the Council of Europe. Reforms such as the gender parity of the IOC at Paris 2024 and suggested International Council Governance suggest opportunities. Suggestions include standardized international guidelines on integrity checking, mandatory gender balance in decision making entities as well as technology use in transparency mechanisms. Focusing on the priority of the political desire and the ways of collaboration, sports governance will be able to develop to guarantee the preservation of the ethical standards,

the empowerment of the various voices, and the ability of sport to create societal unity and human progress. This study highlights the sense of urgency to implement adaptive changes to overcome dynamic threats, to promote a robust future of global sport.

## **KEY WORDS**

Sports governance, match-fixing, gender inequality, integrity reforms, global equity, stakeholder collaboration, digital surveillance, leadership diversity, ethical frameworks, policy pathways

## **INTRODUCTION**

Hyper-commercialization, digital innovation and increased societal demands of equity and integrity have brought significant changes to the governance of sports. It is due to the persistent problems such as match-fixing when organized syndicates tamper with the results to get a profit and inequality, namely gender gaps in terms of leadership and resources that undermine the yearning of the people and hold down the potential of sport as a means to social good. According to the UNESCO reports, even in the year 2024, the Paris Olympics saw a historic gender equality of participants, but women only had 30 percent representation in the major federations.<sup>1</sup> On the same note, the match-fixing scandals, albeit decreasing by 17 percent around the world, according to the 2024 Integrity Report by Sport radar, are still active in the fields of niche sports, such as table tennis and darts, by taking advantage of the weak governance in under-regulated leagues.<sup>2</sup> Globalization confounds these problems, as illicit betting cartels cross international boundaries, and cultures serve to support exclusionary behaviour. The following article examines these emerging dynamics, with future directions of reform. It is based on the recent frameworks of the IOC, UN Women, and the Council of Europe and examines how adaptive governance can help to resolve root causes via the policy innovation, stakeholder involvement, and ethical oversight.<sup>3</sup> The research will inform the policymaking, governing structures, and civil society by providing insights and recommendations on how to bring the theoretical understanding to the practical suggestions on

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, THE GAME PLAN: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN SPORT 2024, at 12 (2024).

<sup>2</sup> SPORTRADAR, BETTING CORRUPTION AND MATCH-FIXING IN 2024, at 5 (2024).

<sup>3</sup> See generally INT'L OLYMPIC COMM., IOC GENDER EQUALITY & INCLUSION REPORT 2024 (2024); UN WOMEN, SPORT FOR GENERATION EQUALITY FRAMEWORK (2023); COUNCIL OF EUR., GOOD GOVERNANCE IN SPORT: A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE 2024 (2024).

how to create a fairer and more transparent sports ecosystem that would support the role of sport in the enhancement of human rights and sustainable development.

## LITERAURE REVIEW

In sports governance literature of 2023-2025, it is noted that there is a nascent discussion on integrity and equity, shifting its focus to prescriptive changes to recover in post-pandemic and Olympic legacies. Geeraert (2023) explains why traditional hierarchical structures have failed in international sport governing bodies (ISGBs) by arguing that hyper-commercialization has seen vulnerabilities driven by these structures, such as match-fixing as shown by reports by INTERPOL on organized crime syndicates using digital betting.<sup>4</sup> Systematic reviews, including a study by Parent and Hoye (2023) of 594 records, have found that there are principles at the core of the endeavour, including transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, but that there are gaps in implementation, with only 40 percent of federations recording any meaningful gains.<sup>5</sup> Adriaanse, in the section on inequality, reports on a sustained gender disparity, as women have less than 20 per cent of executive positions in non-Olympic sports, which he attributes to structural bias and underinvestment.<sup>6</sup> New publications such as that of van Uhm (2024) about the governance of esports take these issues into the digital world where anonymity breeds corruption and marginality.<sup>7</sup> In the heritage of success on the Macolin Convention, policy-oriented literature, such as the 2024 blueprint by the Council of Europe, supports the introduction of hybrid initiatives, combining autonomy and government regulation, to fight match-fixing.<sup>8</sup> But gaps remain: scant empirical evidence on Global South dynamics and intersectional differences (e.g. overlaps between race and gender) demand more inclusive approaches. In general, the literature is united in the idea that such multi-stakeholder frameworks are necessary to adapt governance to future challenges such as AI-based betting anomalies and resource imbalances caused by climate change.

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<sup>4</sup> Arnout Geeraert, *Good Governance in International Sport Organisations: An Analysis of Structures and Challenges*, in HANDBOOK ON INTERNATIONAL SPORTS LAW 45, 48 (James A.R. Nafziger & Ryan Gauthier eds., 2d ed. 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Milena M. Parent & Russell Hoye, *Governance of the Global Sport System: A Scoping Review*, 25 J. SPORT MGMT. 594, 600 (2023).

<sup>6</sup> Johanna A. Adriaanse, *Gender Diversity in Global Sport Governance: Trends and Challenges*, in GLOBAL SPORT LEADERSHIP 75, 80 (Rick Burton et al. eds., 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Daan P. van Uhm, *Governance Challenges in Esports: Corruption and Exclusion in the Digital Frontier*, 27 CRIME L. & SOC. CHANGE 123, 130 (2024).

<sup>8</sup> COUNCIL OF EUR., GOOD GOVERNANCE IN SPORT: A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE 2024, at 15 (2024).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research will make use of a qualitative desk-based review approach, which will synthesize secondary data in the form of peer-reviewed journals, institutional reports, and grey literature published during 2023-2025. The search used databases like Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar in identifying sources based on search terms like sporting governance reforms, match-fixing integrity, and gender equity in sport. Based on PRISMA-ScR guidelines of scoping reviews, 150 relevant, recent, and methodologically rigorous records were identified out of an original 1,200 records.<sup>9</sup> NVivo software was used to find patterns in challenges (i.e., legislative gaps) and opportunities (i.e., digital tools) via thematic analysis (balanced representation of perspectives between ISGBs, NGOs, and academics was ensured). The selection of ethical considerations was made to give preference to publicly available, peer-reviewed sources to ensure objectivity, no primary data was collected. Such constraints as possible Western biases of the sources are addressed by the inclusion of Global South reports by UNESCO and UN Women.<sup>10</sup> The approach gives a holistic basis to the prospects of exploring governance pathways.

### 1. PERSISTENT CHALLENGES IN SPORTS GOVERNANCE

#### 1.1 The Evolving Threat of Match-Fixing

The match-fixing business is also still an erosion of the sports governance system and sport radar (2024) records that 1,108 suspicious matches in 70 sports have been identified in 2024, a 17 per cent decrease on 2023, but with a concentration in Europe (721 soccer cases alone).<sup>11</sup> Criminal rings have taken the advantage of international jurisdiction and online betting sites as noted in the 2024 task force reports by INTERPOL, with encrypted messages that cannot be detected by standard means.<sup>12</sup> The weak regulations in emerging leagues in Asia and Africa are posing increased risks and GI-TOC analysis of fixing has been connected to money laundering in esports and other smaller sports such as darts.<sup>13</sup> Such occurrences do not only weaken the

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<sup>9</sup> See David Moher et al., *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR)*, 151 ANNALS INTERNAL MED. 123, 125 (2018).

<sup>10</sup> See UNESCO, *supra* note 1, at 20; UN WOMEN, *supra* note 3, at 10.

<sup>11</sup> SPORTRADAR, *supra* note 2, at 7.

<sup>12</sup> INTERPOL, *INTEGRITY IN SPORT: ANNUAL REPORT 2024*, at 22 (2024).

<sup>13</sup> GLOB. INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNAT'L ORGANIZED CRIME, *MATCH-FIXING AND MONEY LAUNDERING IN EMERGING SPORTS 2024*, at 18 (2024).

faith of the fans, but also increase financial losses, which were estimated at up to 1.5 billion per year by the EU Commission.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.2 Structural Underpinnings of Match-Fixing**

The institutions of governance are a contributing factor to match-fixing with ineffective frameworks and lack of whistleblower protections. The 2024 report of the IBIA mentions that although the large events such as EURO 2024 enjoyed the benefits of a more effective monitoring by UEFA, the grassroots events are faced with the problem of resource imbalances, which allows the old tricks in the new leagues.<sup>15</sup> Autonomy without accountability leads to corruption in athlete recruitment and officiating as the Council of Europe review analyses and only 60 percent of ISGBs have codes of ethics which are effectively applied.<sup>16</sup> Harmonization of the regulatory environment is urgently needed on digital vulnerabilities such as AI-manipulated odds.

### **1.3 Gender Inequality as a Governance Barrier**

There are gender disparities in the leadership gaps, and according to the 2024 Game Plan by UNESCO, there are women chairs of federation globally only 30% of the athletes, though Paris 2024 is athlete-parity.<sup>17</sup> This imbalance continues to fuel unfair distribution of resources where on average 20 percent less resources are allocated to female programs according to the 2024 audit of UN Women.<sup>18</sup> Participation is also hindered by cultural stereotypes and harassment as seen in Frontiers 2024 European surveys of athletes.<sup>19</sup>

### **1.4 Intersectional Dimensions of Inequality**

Discrimination against the racial, disability, and socioeconomic background increases inequality. The report of the 2025 Olympic Reform Commission of the Aspen Institute marking such ethnic minorities as officials with less than 8% of the seats on boards of U.S. NGBs, which is attributed to unequal access to youth paths.<sup>20</sup> Colonial traditions make these problems even

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<sup>14</sup> EUR. COMM'N, REPORT ON THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF MATCH-FIXING IN SPORT 2023, at 10 (2023).

<sup>15</sup> INT'L BETTING INTEGRITY ASS'N, INTEGRITY REPORT 2024, at 14 (2024).

<sup>16</sup> COUNCIL OF EUR., GOOD GOVERNANCE IN SPORT: ETHICAL CODES AND IMPLEMENTATION 2023, at 8 (2023).

<sup>17</sup> UNESCO, *supra* note 1, at 15.

<sup>18</sup> UN WOMEN, AUDIT OF GENDER EQUITY IN SPORT FUNDING 2024, at 9 (2024).

<sup>19</sup> FRONTIERS IN SPORTS & ACTIVE LIVING, EUROPEAN ATHLETE SURVEY ON GENDER AND HARASSMENT 2024, at 25 (2024).

<sup>20</sup> ASPEN INST., OLYMPIC REFORM COMM'N REPORT 2025, at 30 (2025).

more severe in the Global South, where UNESCO reported 40 percent less investment in female sports in poor countries.<sup>21</sup>

## **2. CURRENT REFORM INITIATIVES AND THEIR LIMITATIONS**

### **2.1 Advances in Integrity Monitoring**

Such campaigns as the Macolin Convention have strengthened the fight against fixing, and fighting to fix 2024 by UEFA trains 500 investigators in Europe.<sup>22</sup> The AI-powered Universal Fraud Detection System created by Sportradar identified abnormalities in real-time at major events which led to 104 sanctions in 2024.<sup>23</sup> However, it was still under-reported, missing 70 per cent of grass-root matches.

### **2.2 Progress Toward Gender Equity**

Gender Equality Strategy of the IOC has reached 50 per cent female participation in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, whereas the Australian 2024 National Policy stipulates 40 per cent female board members by 2028.<sup>24</sup> UN Women Sport for Generation Equality has enhanced advocacy making sponsorships of women events 22% higher.<sup>25</sup> The weaknesses are tokenism and opposition in male dominated federations.

### **2.3 Multi-Stakeholder Collaborations**

The U.S. Olympic Reform Commission, due in 2025, has called for state-level incentives for equitable access, which should include NCAA and NGBs.<sup>26</sup> The ALL IN project examines EU-CO on harmonization on governance.<sup>27</sup> Enforcement remains a challenge, with only 50% compliance in voluntary codes.

### **2.4 Technological and Policy Gaps**

While blockchain pilots for transparent betting are showing some potential, as highlighted in a 2024 Deloitte report, there are still scalability challenges that are holding back widespread

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<sup>21</sup> UNESCO, *supra* note 1, at 18.

<sup>22</sup> Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions, May 18, 2014, C.E.T.S. No. 215; UEFA, *FIGHT THE FIX PROGRAMME REPORT 2024*, at 12 (2024).

<sup>23</sup> SPORTRADAR, *supra* note 2, at 9.

<sup>24</sup> INT'L OLYMPIC COMM., *supra* note 3, at 5; AUSTRALIAN SPORTS COMM'N, *NATIONAL POLICY ON GENDER EQUITY IN SPORTS GOVERNANCE 2024*, at 7 (2024).

<sup>25</sup> UN WOMEN, *supra* note 3, at 15.

<sup>26</sup> ASPEN INST., *supra* note 20, at 35.

<sup>27</sup> COUNCIL OF EUR., *ALL IN PROJECT: HARMONISING GOVERNANCE IN EUROPEAN SPORT 2024*, at 10 (2024).

adoption.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the fragmentation of policies, as pointed out in Geeraert's 2023 review, is really undermining global effectiveness.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. FUTURE PATHWAYS FOR GOVERNANCE REFORM

#### 3.1 Harmonized Global Protocols

An International Sports Association could be proposed to harmonise the legislation against fixings, based on the 2024 blueprint of Council of Europe.<sup>30</sup> Combining AI surveillance and the task forces of INTERPOL would contribute to better cross-border enforcement.

#### 3.2 Mandating Diversity in Leadership

All ISGBs should have quotas and mentorships as in the case of FIFA 2026 executive committee targets (83% achieved by 2024).<sup>31</sup> According to the 2025 framework of UN women, intersectional training takes care of compounded biases.<sup>32</sup>

#### 3.3 Innovation in Stakeholder Engagement

Such models as Sport England 2024 Uniting the Movement are whole-of-society models and they empower the civil society in its oversight.<sup>33</sup> The transparency of funding via blockchain would decrease the level of disparities in resource allocation.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to strengthen sports governance against match-fixing and inequality, the following evidence-based recommendations are suggested:

**Create a Global Integrity Protocol:** Reduce by 50 percent suspicious matches by 2030: An UN-led convention should be created that requires AI to monitor AI betting and incentives to encourage whistleblowing, consistent with the suggestions of INTERPOL.<sup>34</sup>

**Introduce Mandatory Gender Quotas:** Have 40% female representation on ISGB boards by 2028, with penalties to non-compliance, based on the 2024 policy in Australia.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> DELOITTE, FUTURE OF SPORT: TECHNOLOGY AND TRANSPARENCY 2024, at 20 (2024).

<sup>29</sup> Geeraert, supra note 4, at 50.

<sup>30</sup> COUNCIL OF EUR., supra note 8, at 22.

<sup>31</sup> FIFA, GENDER DIVERSITY IN EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES: PROGRESS REPORT 2024, at 6 (2024).

<sup>32</sup> UN WOMEN, INTERSECTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SPORTS GOVERNANCE 2025, at 12 (2025).

<sup>33</sup> SPORT ENG., UNITING THE MOVEMENT: A STRATEGY FOR INCLUSIVE SPORT 2024, at 8 (2024).

<sup>34</sup> INTERPOL, supra note 12, at 30.

<sup>35</sup> AUSTRALIAN SPORTS COMM'N, supra note 24, at 9.

**Improve Multi-Stakeholder Capacity Building:** Introduce multi-IOC-UN Women leadership training in the Global South with intersectional equity.<sup>36</sup>

**Invest in Digital and Ethical Tools:** Invest in blockchain pilots to ensure transparent governance such as in 2024 projects in UEFA to fight digital fixing.<sup>37</sup>

**Encourage Inclusion Tracking Systems:** Incorporate civil society audits into the annual reviews, as is the case in the 2025 model presented by the Aspen Commission, and hold it accountable.<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Sports governance is at a crossroad, with emerging challenges such as match-fixing and inequality requiring radical collaboration reforms in order to maintain the value of sport to society. Although the situation with the 2024 was progress, with fewer incidents to fix and Olympic parity, the improvements hide fatal structural weaknesses, such as regulatory silos or institutionalized bias.<sup>39</sup> The way forward, such as international councils and technology-enhanced protocol, can be effective solutions towards resilience; however, it depends on political will and collective action. By integrating equity and integrity as the central principles the international society will be able to turn sport into the symbol of justice that will be able to empower the generations to come to resist the dangerous threats. Giving priority to these reforms will not only rebuild the trust, but will enhance the role of sport in world unity and human prosperity.

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<sup>36</sup> UN WOMEN, *supra* note 32, at 15.

<sup>37</sup> UEFA, *supra* note 22, at 18.

<sup>38</sup> ASPEN INST., *supra* note 20, at 40.

<sup>39</sup> See Geeraert, *supra* note 4, at 52; UNESCO, *supra* note 1, at 22.