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Women's Career Pathways to Nonprofit Leadership Positions

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This study examines women's leadership career pathways in nonprofit sport organizations. Drawing on a narrative approach and reflexive thematic analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews with Finnish women leaders, we identify four career types—Progressive Growth Career, Mission Enthusiast, Externally Catalyzed Career, and Chance-Driven Growth Career—and define their key patterns and distinctive features. The study extends the literature by offering a gender-sensitive analysis of women's leadership careers in nonprofit organizations. In contrast to earlier research, our findings show that women follow diverse career pathways and exercise agency across them. In doing so, the study refines nonprofit leadership typologies, highlights dual routes to legitimacy, and offers practical insights for recruitment, nomination, and development practices aimed at expanding women's leadership in sports nonprofits.

1 | Introduction

The nonprofit sector is in flux. While previously the sector depended heavily on voluntary work, it is now increasingly employing professionals (Stewart and Kuenzi 2018). This trend is visible globally as well as in different nonprofit subsectors, such as the health and human subsector (Stewart and Kuenzi 2018) and organized sports (Mikkonen et al. 2022). Leadership positions in nonprofit organizations have also become professionalized, and the sector now offers meaningful leadership careers in both managerial roles (often salaried positions such as executives and managers) and governance roles (typically unsalaried positions such as board members and chairpersons). This development has attracted growing academic attention (see, e.g., Einolf 2022; Laakso et al. 2016; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018). However, research on nonprofit leadership careers remains fragmented and provides limited insight into how such careers are shaped by social identities, particularly gender. Gender is an important factor that shapes the careers of women (and men) that aim for leadership positions in the nonprofit sector and beyond. Prior research consistently documents women's underrepresentation in leadership positions, gendered differences in lived career experiences, and women's greater exposure to discrimination and career barriers

(see, e.g., Gibelman 2000; Holgersson and Hvenmark 2023; Mikkonen 2023a; Scharfenkamp et al. 2023).

The current body of knowledge have identified some typologies of leadership careers in nonprofit management (Einolf 2022; Harrow and Mole 2005; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018) and governance (Santilli and Scaramuzzino 2021). And while some include gender-based observations (e.g., Harrow and Mole 2005; Laakso et al. 2016; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018), gender is rarely a central analytical lens. Furthermore, research focusing specifically on women in nonprofit leadership has predominantly emphasized barriers and constraints (e.g., Burton and Leberman 2017a; Mikkonen 2023a) rather than examine how women navigate their careers and through what processes their careers evolve. By examining how women's leadership careers evolve in the nonprofit sector, this study extends current theorizations by providing a gender-sensitive analysis of women's leadership careers in nonprofit organizations. By focusing on career processes, turning points, and agency, the study moves beyond barrier-based accounts and contributes a more dynamic understanding of women's leadership trajectories. This perspective is important for theoretical development in the study of nonprofit management and leadership, as women and men often experience career pathways differently. The study also offers

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practical insights for advancing gender equity and supporting women's access to leadership positions in nonprofit organizations.

This study analyzes women's leadership careers in nonprofit organizations, specifically in nonprofit sports organizations, in order to identify distinct women's leadership pathways. We aim to answer the following research question: *What kinds of leadership career paths do women have in nonprofit sports organizations?* Through a narrative analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews on leadership careers with women in the Finnish nonprofit sports sector, we find that women represent all three career types identified in the literature, challenging earlier accounts that offer a narrower view of women's leadership careers. In addition, we identify a fourth career type that has not previously been theorized in nonprofit leadership research.

The Finnish sports sector provides an interesting and underexplored context for this study for several reasons. First, the sector is the largest nonprofit sector in Europe (Groeneveld 2009). Second, women's inclusion in work life and in different decision-making positions has a long tradition in Finland (Niemistö et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the Finnish labor market still exhibits both vertical and horizontal segregation. Men tend to be overrepresented in the highest power positions within organizations in different sectors. Women are predominantly found in certain occupational fields, typically those with relatively lower wages, such as nursing, education, and the public sector. Conversely, men dominate fields that generally offer higher wages, such as industry and technology. This applies to the sports sector as well, in which women in leadership positions are a minority (Lehtonen et al. 2022).

This study contributes to the literature on leadership careers in the nonprofit and voluntary sector (Einolf 2022; Harrow and Mole 2005; Laakso et al. 2016; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018; Santilli and Scaramuzzino 2021) by identifying and analyzing the career trajectories of women leaders in nonprofit sports organizations. By offering a gender-sensitive analysis of leadership career types, the study extends existing typologies and highlights the significance of gender in shaping leadership careers. The study underscores the meaning of gender in future theorizations of women's leadership careers by showing how women's careers are more varied than suggested by previous studies. Furthermore, it moves beyond documenting gendered barriers to explicating the processes, turning points, and agency through which women's leadership careers in sport are formed.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical framework, which focuses on career research, especially in the domain of nonprofit leadership. Next, we describe and justify the methodological choices of this study, namely the narrative approach conducted through reflexive inquiry. Then, we present the empirical findings and discuss them in relation to prior literature before concluding with a summary of the key contributions and implications.

2 | Leadership Careers in the Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector

In this study, leadership careers are understood as encompassing both management and governance positions, a

common approach in sport and nonprofit research (Hartzell and Dixon 2019). Both roles confer institutional power, and women remain underrepresented in them in Finland and internationally (Burton and Leberman 2017b; Lehtonen et al. 2022). In the Finnish (and European) sports sector, the strong volunteer tradition and ongoing professionalization blur the boundary between managerial and governance roles, as leaders often combine operational and voluntary responsibilities (Aarresola et al. 2022; European Commission 2007).

The literature on leadership careers in the nonprofit and voluntary sector has largely focused on typologies of managerial careers, especially in the United States (US), identifying different typologies that slightly overlap. Einolf (2022) identified four types of career paths in the US context: founders, fillers, planners, and risers. Founders start their own nonprofit, fillers hold a board or some other voluntary position and are asked to fill the position after the previous executive leader left, planners actively and consciously aim for an executive position in the nonprofit sector, and risers rise incrementally step-by-step through the ranks until reaching an executive position, either within a single organization or in different ones.

Norris-Tirrell et al. (2018) studied executives in US nonprofit organizations and identified three types of career trajectories: the nonprofit mission enthusiast, the sector switcher, and the nonprofit career climber. Nonprofit mission enthusiasts have mission-focused careers; they have previous nonprofit work and program experience and often relocate because of work. Sector switchers have both for-profit and nonprofit work experience and a graduate degree. The third type, nonprofit career climbers, has experience mainly in the nonprofit sector, a mission-focused career, a graduate degree, and previous executive work experience.

Suarez (2010) explored the careers of nonprofit executives in the USA and described four types of executives: the nonprofit lifer, the social entrepreneur, the substantive expert, and the professional administrator. Nonprofit lifers are described as the most stereotypical leaders in the sector. They are involved in nonprofits as a vocation or calling, often with the aim of addressing a particular social issue and with little experience in management. They progress and develop incrementally over time within the sector. Substantive experts have vast expertise and/or training that fits the nonprofit sector, but the sector itself has little salience for them. Social entrepreneurs are dedicated to the nonprofit sector and typically already have some experience and training in management before entering the field. Lastly, professional administrators have experience in management, similar to social entrepreneurs, but do not feel tied to the nonprofit sector.

Harrow and Mole (2005) explored the career perceptions, experiences, and aspirations of chief executives in English small and medium-sized nonprofit organizations. They developed a typology of career stances for voluntary sector chief executives: paid philanthropists, careerists, and nonaligned. Paid philanthropists are characterized by an emphasis on their job and altruism as a way of life. Careerists employ a certain set of skills that they see best deployed and developed in the nonprofit sector, and they have made a conscious decision to join the sector, while those

who are nonaligned have entered the nonprofit sector through uncertain and sometimes unplanned paths.

In the Finnish sports context, Laakso et al. (2016) explored the careers of elite sport leaders in Finland (three executive leaders, eight governance leaders, and five public sector leaders). They identified four types of career stories: growth, drift, coincidence, and aspiration stories. In the growth story, the central themes include personal development and progression within (competitive) sports from a young age and steady, step-by-step advancement on the leadership career path. These narratives reflect strong individual agency, emphasizing skills and capabilities. In drift stories, key elements involve external guidance, motivation, or encouragement—often from colleagues or acquaintances. In these narratives, individual agency tends to be weaker, with limited emphasis on personal skills or leadership capabilities in sports. Coincidence stories are shaped by meaningful or unexpected events that eliminate other career options, ultimately leading the individual to pursue a path in sports leadership. Finally, the aspiration story is driven by a strong personal desire and ambition to work in sports and sports leadership. These careers are intentionally planned and strategically built with leadership progression in mind.

Driver's (1982) conceptual article explored organizational development and career concepts, identifying four basic types: transitory, steady state, linear, and spiral. The transitory type refers to continuous changes of work, for instance every 1–2 years, that are mainly lateral. The steady state refers to an early, perhaps lifelong, commitment to a field, with only minor changes (such as a change of organization) and inner development possibly leading to some upward movement in one's career. The linear type refers to a career with a series of upward moves within a field. Lastly, the spiral career type entails a series of major cyclic changes in one's career about every 5–10 years. There may be

upward movement, but lateral changes between different fields characterize the spiral type.

Santilli and Scaramuzzino (2021) studied Italian civil society leaders' career trajectories and organizational structures and identified three trajectory logics of nonprofit chairs (or presidents): (a) within: multi-level; (b) within: member organization; and (c) outside: supporting organization. The first two types are based on a trajectory within the organization, either from the local or regional level or within a member organization. The last type is based on a career trajectory outside the organization but often within the same movement or field.

As these studies show, the careers of nonprofit leaders are varied and layered with different kinds of experiences and trajectories. For the purpose of this study, we identify three distinct career types as a preliminary analytical typology for the analysis based on the current body of knowledge (Table 1).

We define gender as a social structural relationship shaped by social processes embedded in societal and organizational hierarchies (see, e.g., Lorber 1994; West and Zimmermann 2020). Gender is (re)produced and challenged through institutions and everyday practices (Holgersson and Hvenmark 2023). Gender impacts the leadership careers of women (and men). For instance, on average, women's salaries tend to be lower, they tend to be less satisfied with their career success, and they are less compensated for their human and social capital compared to men (Aalto-Nevalainen 2018). In addition, men tend to hold a large proportion of top leadership positions in the nonprofit sector, especially when considering the largest organizations, including in the sports sector (Hartzell and Dixon 2019; Lee 2019; Lehtonen et al. 2022). A vast body of literature has explored the barriers to women's leadership careers in the nonprofit sector and beyond (see, e.g., Burton and Leberman 2017a; Hartzell and Dixon 2019). In general, studies have shown that gendered

TABLE 1 | Analytical typology.

Career type	Characteristics	Supporting references
Progressive growth career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Incremental career type, careers built step-by-step – Robust background in (competitive) sports; a career in the sports sector is a continuation of their athletic careers – Some agency in terms of career growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Einolf (2022) “Risiers” – Laakso et al. (2016) “Growth story” – Stewart and Kuenzi (2018) and Norris-Tirrell et al. (2018) “Paid philanthropist” – Harrow and Mole (2005) “Career climbers”
Externally catalyzed career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A distinct pivotal moment in the career, described as a coincidence or a “chance,” including external pushes for the career; for instance, someone offered a position or encouraged the person to apply/stand for election 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Laakso et al. (2016) “Coincidence” and “Drift” stories – Harrow and Mole (2005) “Nonaligned” – Einolf (2022) “Filler” (to some extent, highlighting the uncertainty/unplanned nature of the career)
Mission enthusiast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mission-oriented, strong will and determination to work in the sector, often in a leadership position – Often a background in sports – Differs from the progressive growth career by strong agency and a mission orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Laakso et al. (2016) “Aspiration story” – Harrow and Mole (2005) “Careerist” – Norris-Tirrell et al. (2018) “Nonprofit mission enthusiast” – Einolf (2022) “Planners” – Suarez (2010) “Nonprofit lifer”

processes and practices influence women's careers at the micro, meso, and macro levels (see, e.g., Burton and Leberman 2017a; Mikkonen 2023a). While the focus of this study is not on gendered barriers or how women have experienced them, this body of knowledge offers an important rationale for deep examination of how successful women's leadership careers are formed in order to offer a new perspective on these careers.

Only a few of the leadership career typologies explicitly discuss careers from a gender perspective. The quantitative study by Norris-Tirrell et al. (2018) determined that women have a higher tendency to represent the nonprofit career climber career type. They also concluded that men tend to reach their current CEO positions at a younger age than women and that the number of women executives is significantly higher when comparing younger generations to older ones. Harrow and Mole's (2005) study identified commonalities and contradictions in men's and women's leadership careers. While women tend to belong to the careerist type, men dominate in the nonaligned type. In the paid philanthropists, the number of women and men is rather equal. In general, the career types continued to cross-cut in gender terms, leaving a gap for identifying the careers of women. The narrative study by Laakso et al. (2016) included four women, of which three represented drift stories and one a coincidence story. They concluded that women experience their gender as both promoting their career and causing gendered career obstacles.

As the above shows, while women's leadership careers in nonprofit organizations have received some attention, the body of knowledge is scarce. The studies suggest there are differences in the career paths of women and men that yield for further gender-sensitive analysis.

3 | Data and Methods

3.1 | Research Setting: Organized Sport in Finland

On a global scale, Finland is perceived as a rather gender-egalitarian country that scores highly in various gender equality rankings (e.g., World Economic Forum 2023). Women have long been active participants in the workforce outside of the home, and Finland is characterized by high employment participation rates and full-time work for Finnish parents, particularly mothers (see Moilanen et al. 2025; Tienari et al. 2005). However, regardless of the rather high level of gender equality compared to many other countries, Finland suffers from vertical and horizontal segregation in work life. This segregation is also visible in the sports and physical activity sectors. Increasing gender equality in sports and physical activity has been a strong political goal since the 1990s (Mikkonen et al. 2022). Over the years, the number of women engaging with sports as players, watchers, and other actors has increased. However, the number of women in leadership positions in sports remains rather small. In the latest statistics, the share of women as operational leaders was 34%, as chairs 14%, and as board members 33% (Lehtonen et al. 2022).

The Finnish sports sector is based on voluntary work and voluntary organizations at the grassroots level, according to the European sport model (European Commission 2007; Mikkonen

et al. 2022). The number of paid staff is relatively small in these organizations, and individuals in governance positions (such as chairs or board members) are often involved in operations. Some organizations, especially at the grassroots level (sports clubs), may not have paid staff at all and are run entirely by volunteers. Furthermore, individuals may have governance and managerial positions in different sports organizations at the same time. For instance, one could be a manager of a sports club while holding a governance position in a national sport federation, for instance on a board or a commission. This creates a context in which the lines between managerial and governance positions blur.

In the nonprofit sector, sports organizations have some unique characteristics differentiating them from other types of nonprofits, such as charity organizations or organizations focused on health and well-being. Sports organizations often have an inherent element of competition that may influence their culture and practices as well as who is seen as a competent leader (see, e.g., Mikkonen 2023a). Furthermore, the gender-discriminating history of sports plays its part in institutionalized gender inequality in sports and sports leadership. For instance, women have been excluded from competing in various competitions, such as the Olympic games until 1900. More recently, the English Football Association banned women's football between 1921 and 1971.

3.2 | Data

The data consist of semi-structured interviews of 22 women in leadership either already in a leadership position (such as CEO, manager, chair, or board member) or aiming for a leadership career (Table 2). Fourteen were in a voluntary governance position (such as chair or board member) and twelve in a management position (such as CEO or head of section). Some had both types of positions. This is not unusual in the Finnish sports sector, which is heavily based on sports club activities and voluntary work (Mikkonen et al. 2022). Both position types were analyzed together.

The first author collected the data between January and February 2022 using a video conferencing tool (Microsoft Teams). All participants were informed via email about the purpose of the research project, their right to withdraw, and the use of pseudonyms. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. Ethical prereview was not needed for this research based on Finnish and Tampere University guidelines. The interviewees were purposefully selected (Patton 2023) and recruited through a sport leadership development program for women in which the interviewees had participated or were participating at the time. An open invitation to participate and one reminder was sent to all participants and alumni via the program organizer. In all, 22 (of the 79 program participants) indicated a willingness to participate. This recruiting method enabled us to identify and obtain access to women on a leadership career path. The women represented different levels of sports, as some were affiliated with sports clubs and some with regional-, national-, or international-level organizations. While the sample provides heterogeneity in terms of sports organization type, it must be noted that our sample may not be representative of all women pursuing a leadership career in sports in Finland. Participation

TABLE 2 | Interviewees.

Code	Age	Governance/management position ^a	Code	Age	Governance/management position
1	56–65	Governance	12	36–45	Governance and management
2	36–45	Governance	13	46–55	Management
3	56–65	Governance	14	36–45	Governance and management
4	46–55	Management and governance	15	26–35	Governance
5	36–45	Governance	16	46–55	Governance
6	26–35	Management	17	26–35	Management
7	36–45	Management	18	46–55	Governance and management
8	26–35	Management	19	36–45	Governance
9	36–45	Management and governance	20	36–45	Governance
10	36–45	Management	21	36–45	Governance and management
11	36–45	Management	22	46–55	Governance

^aSome interviewees had roles in both management and governance. In such cases, the position they emphasized during their interviews is listed first.

in a leadership development program suggests that the women interviewed are highly motivated and eager to proceed with careers in sports leadership. The project received external funding, which enabled women to participate regardless of their financial situation. The organization types are not shown in Table 2 in order to protect the interviewees' anonymity. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 min (mean, 71 min). They were conducted in Finnish, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The representative extracts from the interviews were translated into English for this article. The interviewees were asked to talk about their professional backgrounds and careers thus far. They were also asked about their aspirations and goals (if any) for their leadership careers and if these had changed during their careers, as well as about their experiences of leadership in the sports sector in general.

3.3 | Methodology: Narrative Approach Conducted Through Reflexive Inquiry

This study examines women's leadership career paths in non-profit sports organizations by adopting a narrative approach conducted through reflexive inquiry. A narrative approach (Kuoppakangas et al. 2020) is particularly appropriate for this research because "career paths" are not only sequences of roles or transitions but also interpretations of turning points, constraints, and enabling conditions constructed retrospectively and situated in specific organizational and sociocultural contexts (Cohen and Mallon 2001; Miller and Glassner 1997; Richardson 1990; Ricoeur 1984). In this study, narratives are understood as accounts through which participants connect events over time and attribute meaning to challenges and the strategies used to navigate them (Weick 1995).

The narrative has been conceptualized in multiple ways by disciplines. We draw on Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) view of narrative inquiry as examining "the ways humans experience the world" and on Holley and Colyar's (2009) emphasis on the narrative as the telling or retelling of a story in a time sequence.

We also acknowledge a classic understanding of the narrative as recapitulating past experience through a verbal ordering of events and as capturing the temporal character of human experience (Ricoeur 1984). Together, these perspectives position leadership careers as narrated, temporally ordered accounts in which women explain how they entered leadership, moved across roles, confronted constraints, and made sense of overcoming challenges over time.

Our narrative approach is explicitly reflexive (Kuoppakangas et al. 2020), meaning we treat knowledge production as interpretive and co-constructed rather than as a neutral extraction of "facts." Reflexive inquiry requires making visible the researcher's role in shaping the analytic focus, interpretive decisions, and the language through which findings are presented. Accordingly, we make explicit our epistemic assumptions (an interpretivist orientation; narratives as retrospective sensemaking), and we document how analytic conclusions were made and refined through the research process.

3.3.1 | Narrative Inquiry as Investigation and Representation

Following Polkinghorne (1995), we recognize two overlapping orientations in narrative inquiry: analysis of narratives (treating stories as data) and narrative analysis (using a narrative configuration to analyze and present findings). In practice, these orientations often overlap (Holley and Colyar 2009), and narrative inquiry is rarely a standardized, "off the shelf" model; it should be fitted to the studied context rather than treated as a blueprint (James 2017; Kuoppakangas et al. 2020). In this study, participants' accounts are treated as career narratives (analysis of narratives), while the findings are presented as interpretive configurations that preserve temporal and contextual meaning (narrative analysis). This enables us to describe not only what career paths appear in the dataset but also how women narrate movement into and across leadership roles and how they navigate their careers.

Because individual stories draw on shared sociocultural meanings and organizational realities, we also treat the findings as group narratives—analytically constructed patterns built from multiple accounts situated in time and place (Hunter 2010; Kuoppakangas et al. 2020; Miller and Glassner 1997).

3.3.2 | Analytic Strategy: Reflexive Thematic Analysis Within a Narrative and Reflexive Inquiry Framework

In the narrative approach conducted through reflexive inquiry, we used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) as the analytic strategy to develop interpretive patterns across narratives. The analytic focus was guided by the research question: *What kinds of leadership career paths do women have in nonprofit sports organizations?* In keeping with a reflexive inquiry stance, the analysis did not treat themes as “discoveries” that exist independent of interpretation. Rather, themes and typologies were developed through iterative engagement with the narratives, reflexive memoing, and ongoing consideration of how our interpretive lens shaped what was foregrounded and how accounts were configured into analytic storylines.

3.3.3 | Deviant and Negative Cases as Analytic Leverage

Many informants replicated each other's arguments, indicating shared meaning patterns regarding leadership progression and career navigation. At the same time, some accounts partially replicated dominant arguments but also offered negative/deviant cases—contradictory narratives that challenged or complicated our emerging interpretations (Patton 1999). We treated these deviant cases as analytically productive rather than as exceptions to be minimized; they were used to refine typology boundaries, qualify claims, and preserve complexity (Silverman 2011). This practice supported stronger, more defensible interpretations of the varied leadership career paths.

3.3.4 | Trustworthiness, Transparency, and Auditability

We addressed trustworthiness throughout the entire research process by making transparent the sequence of analysis and how conclusions were derived from the data (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). In line with widely used qualitative criteria (e.g., Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Morrow 2005), we adopted Guba's (1981) terminology for enhancing trustworthiness. Credibility/trustworthiness was supported through the richness of the dataset and through triangulation of data, perspectives, and theory (Patton 1999). Transferability was enhanced by detailed description of the research context as well as by the methodological and analytic choices made, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was strengthened with detailed reporting of the inquiry process and analytic procedures. Finally, confirmability was addressed through maintenance of an audit trail documenting interpretive decisions, analytic refinements, and how conclusions were grounded in the data (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Guba 1981).

Consistent with reflexive inquiry, we acknowledge that researcher positionality and subjectivity shape analytic attention and interpretive decisions. We therefore treated reflexivity as an integral part of methodological rigor: we documented evolving interpretations, surfaced assumptions through memoing and analytic discussion, and ensured that claims were grounded through transparent linkage to narrative evidence, including discrepant accounts that refined and qualified findings (Patton 1999; Silverman 2011).

3.4 | Data Analysis

We followed the reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). This was appropriate for the purpose of this study, as it enabled us to explore the experiences and views of people, as well as patterns in their behavior. In the first stage, we familiarized ourselves with the texts. In the second, we coded the transcripts. We used both semantic- and latent-level coding and both inductive and deductive coding approaches. The preliminary deductive analysis was based on the theoretical and analytical frameworks created for this study (see Table 1) consisting of three distinct career types (Progressive Growth Career, Externally Catalyzed Career, and Mission Enthusiast). After the deductive coding round, we approached the data inductively in order to identify any recurring patterns or ideas. In the third stage of data analysis, we constructed the codes into preliminary themes in relation to the research question, after which, in the fourth stage, we reviewed and developed the preliminary themes. In the fifth stage, we redefined the themes into their final forms, and finally, in the sixth stage, wrote them up as part of this article (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the analysis, the authors read the transcripts independently. The thoughts, codes, and ideas provoked by the analysis were collectively discussed until we both felt that the themes identified in the data were representative. This researcher triangulation strengthened the credibility of this study (Denzin 1978). In general, we had no notable disagreements during the coding and theme development process. Rather, discussions enabled reflexivity and refinement of our interpretations.

4 | Findings

The interviewed women exhibited all three types of career models identified in the analytical framework of this study (Table 1). The most common career type was the *Progressive Growth Career*, with 10 of the 22 interviewees representing this type. Four of the interviewees represented the *Externally Catalyzed Career* type, and three represented the *Mission Enthusiast* type. In addition to these three types, our inductive analysis resulted in the identification of a fourth career type: *Chance-Driven Growth Career*.

4.1 | Progressive Growth Career

The Progressive Growth Career is characterized by a strong background in sports and incremental, step-by-step career progression. All the interviewed women representing this career type brought up strong backgrounds in sports: “I have a background in sports, and because of that, I first ended up as a sports

coach in a sports upper secondary school” (Interviewee 3). In addition, incremental career development was evident in the stories of the interviewed women:

I started by making coffee, then became the treasurer, moved on to being the chair, and from there to the district board. Currently, I’m also on the board of [a national sport federation].

(Interviewee 1)

Similarly, Interviewee 3 continued her story:

I was asked by a sports federation to conduct a survey study on [a specific topic]. After that, I was asked to create training programs for coaches and instructors on [the topic of the survey] [in a national sport federation, NSF], and I started doing that. [...] Then an opportunity came up that a [middle manager] of the NSF went on leave, and I was asked to fill in for them. When the replacement period of about one and a half years was coming to an end, I was able to highlight the development needs during a strategic process [...], which led to me being recruited to a permanent position.

Another distinctive characteristic of this career type was the interviewees’ agency in terms of taking their careers into their own hands and making decisions to pursue more challenging positions: “I started to think that if a suitable position came up, I would apply” (Interviewee 17). However, the actions in this career type are not as strategically planned and mission-driven as in the Mission Enthusiast. Even if the career types share commonalities in terms of a background in sports and agency in terms of leadership careers, in this career type, career progression is incremental and advances step by step, and the leadership career is described as a natural continuation of a background in sports.

4.2 | Mission Enthusiast

Similar to the Progressive Growth Career, a characterizing feature of the Mission Enthusiast career type was often a strong background in sports. In the words of Interviewee 6:

I’ve always been interested in sports and physical activity, and I attended a sports-oriented secondary school and upper secondary school. I’ve been actively involved in sports club activities since I was 12 years old. I was even establishing a [name of the sport] club in our small town, with my mother’s assistance. Throughout my teenage years, I did sports and coached in the club. When I moved to study, I continued with sports and coaching [...].

What most characterizes this career type, however, is a strong agency in terms of leadership capabilities and knowledge and a strong will to work in the sports sector. Many interviewees

described how working in sports leadership was their goal. Interviewee 6 continued her story, which illustrated strong agency in terms of being in charge of her career:

I’ve always been interested in the management and development of organizations. [...] After graduation, there weren’t many job opportunities, so I decided to study more about sports at [a university of applied sciences] to gain professional substance skills besides management and organizational development [skills]. Through this [the studies], I interned at the [central sports organization]. In 2016, I got my first position as an executive director [in a sports club] in [a city]. I was there for about two and a half years.

Interestingly, regardless of the mission orientation and agency, not all of the decisions the women made were based strictly on career development; personal values and circumstances also influenced career choices, as in the story of Interviewee 6:

Through [a leadership development program for women], I reflected on my life values and decided it would be nicer to live closer to my family, since I had no other ties in [the city] besides work. So I applied for my current position in [name of a region], got it, and have been working as an executive director there for a couple of years.

The stories of women representing this career type showed that regardless of a strong, values-based will to work in the sector, their career paths were not always straightforward. The interviewees had different twists and turns in their careers:

I worked for about four years in an HR consultant role at [company name] before moving to the [name of the sport] Federation. During that time, I got to see the corporate world from the HR side, but the sports sector kept pulling me strongly. Then, in 2010, an opportunity arose to move to the national sport federation, so I made the switch. I guess I’m a bit of a sports fanatic at heart.

(Interviewee 10)

As this quote illustrates, even if the career path of Interviewee 10 was not straightforward, she had a strong internal motivation to work for the sports sector. She also exhibited strong agency and internal motivation for a career in sports leadership. There was an internal drift toward sports and an active decision made to follow the path.

In this career type, no external push factors were involved. For instance, none of the interviewees mentioned that they had been asked or encouraged to take up a position or stand for election. The central driver was their internal motivation and mission-driven approach to work in the sector.

4.3 | Externally Catalyzed Career

All the women representing this career type had been asked or encouraged to apply for their positions, which was a key juncture in their careers. However, the encouragement or request to apply/stand for election did not always happen early; it also occurred later when transferring to more demanding positions. Without their being asked to join or to apply, their careers would have formed differently. Even if the external factor was essential for the women to actually apply or stand for election, they still exhibited strong agency regarding their careers. The women talked about wanting to influence and deciding to work and be active in the sector. Interviewee 5 described her journey to a board position in a national sport federation:

[T]he autumn meeting was coming up, and I was asked if I would be interested in seeking a position on the board of the national sport federation. I decided that I was indeed interested and ran for the position, and was elected to the board.

(Interviewee 5)

Another distinctive characteristic of this career type is that a strong sector-specific background is not a necessity. None of the women representing this career type had a strong background in sports:

I don't have a very strong sports background myself. I've been more of a hobbyist. I've dabbled in various fitness classes and gym workouts, and when I was younger, I played casual Finnish baseball and did a bit of taiko. I just tried a bit of everything.

(Interviewee 5)

The women typically established their roles based on leadership and management skills rather than subject expertise.

In the football sector, I don't have a background in the sport itself. I'm more of an administrative person and a developer of administration.

(Interviewee 22)

Relatedly and in contrast to the other career types identified in this study, in the Externally Catalyzed Career type, the sector (sport) was not a central motivation to get involved. Rather, the women had different internal or external motivations for their involvement. For instance, Interviewee 4 described how the content of the job itself was so intriguing that she wanted the position:

But what interested me [in the position] was that [...] there was a significant change process they wanted to undertake. And I then accepted it [the position offer], and I went there purely to focus on leadership and management.

(Interviewee 4)

Interviewee 22 described how her children and thus her family had benefited from the sport during a rougher period of time, as

it had given them something else to think about and a structure to life. It was not the sport itself that drove her to become involved but the help she had received during more difficult times: "I made the decision that I had to give back to this sport one way or another." As described above, a level of agency was again evident in the story of Interviewee 22. Instead of being driftwood or ending up in a position by chance, the women took deliberate actions and decided on their careers.

This career type distinguishes itself from other career types by the legitimization of competence stemming from managerial and leadership skills instead of a strong sports background. Their agency in terms of applying for a position and shifting their career toward sports was influenced by an external catalyst, such as invitation or encouragement to apply, after which the women decided to seize the opportunity and act.

4.4 | Chance-Driven Growth Career

In this career type, a central feature was a strong background in sports and incremental career development similar to the Progressive Growth Career type:

I jumped in from the world of athletics, having competed and coached there. At some point, I switched to [another sport], and from there [...] [I went] to the club's board. I also served as the club's chair for a couple of years, and through that, I ended up on the board of the national sport federation. I was there for two, maybe even four years.

(Interviewee 2)

Similarly, Interviewee 19 brought up an incremental career path:

My background is in [a sport]. I competed in the early 2000s, and when that ended in 2008, I quickly started coaching, mainly focusing on the youth side. I'm now the chair of [a sports club], but I also lead our youth groups, coaching 10- to 16-year-olds. So, that's my sports background. [...] My leadership career is probably more a result of a series of coincidences. After my own career, it was clear that I should stay on to coach, which felt quite natural. I couldn't even imagine leaving the sport completely. But when I became the club's chair in 2016, it just felt natural that [I] wanted to influence the larger field, the entire sport. And it was always easy for me. Or I felt that of course I would participate in the federation's annual meetings or other events as the club's representative. I couldn't even think of a reason why I wouldn't participate.

This quote illustrates a strong background in a sport and a natural continuation from an athlete to coaching and decision-making positions. It also illustrates another significant characteristic of this career type: a meaningful coincidence,

an external push, or another unexpected event that influenced the careers that was described as a chance or a coincidence. As Interviewee 13 referred to her career and current position: “Maybe more by happenstance.” Interviewee 8 also brought up how she had ended up in her current position partially by accident:

Well, maybe even a bit by accident, it was more like that an opportunity came up, and I decided to try and apply [to] see if I could get that kind of leadership position. [...] I decided to apply, and I got the position and like that a bit by a coincidence I ended up in [the position].

What characterizes and differentiates this career type from the others is the combination and emphasis given both to the incremental nature of the career and to the external push or coincidence the women brought up and experienced as a meaningful event in their careers.

Table 3 summarizes all the career types and their main characteristics, as identified in the empirical analysis.

5 | Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand the types of leadership careers women have in nonprofit sports organizations and to identify distinct career types. Specifically, we aimed to answer the following question: *What kinds of leadership career paths do women have in nonprofit sports organizations?* The analysis showed that women’s careers are more varied (in terms of type) than is suggested in the literature (e.g., Laakso et al. 2016; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018). The three career types based on prior research, often based on men’s experiences (Progressive Growth Career, Mission Enthusiast, and Externally Catalyzed Career; Table 1) also apply to women, which is a novel finding. In addition, our analysis identified a fourth, previously unrecognized career type: the Chance-Driven Growth Career. These insights extend the still-dominant narrative surrounding women’s careers that focuses on experienced barriers or portrays as women drifting into leadership positions by foregrounding women’s agency while specifying when and how catalysts and coincidences structure career movement.

Extending current knowledge on leadership careers in nonprofit organizations (e.g., Einolf 2022; Harrow and Mole 2005; Laakso et al. 2016; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018; Stewart and Kuenzi 2018) and especially women’s leadership careers in nonprofit sports organizations, the findings extend existing typologies by clarifying key patterns and career type dynamics rather than assuming that women have entirely different career forms. The results illustrate that women become involved through different means, underscoring the variety of women’s careers. This contrasts with previous studies, as they often suggest that women have only certain types of careers, such as in Laakso et al. (2016), where three of the four women represented the *drifted* career type and one the *coincidence* type (in this study, closest to the Externally Catalyzed Career type), and in Harrow and Mole (2005), where the majority of the women informants represented the Mission Enthusiast (careerist) type. Moreover, the women showed strong

agency in terms of their careers and were active actors even in career types where chance or an external catalyst played a role, as they converted an external nudge into purposeful action (cf. Laakso et al. 2016). This nuance helps reconcile earlier illustrations of women’s “drift” with evidence of purposeful career crafting.

The majority of the respondents had career types where incremental development and growth within the sector were central. One explanation for the weighted appearance of incremental development and growth patterns may be the nature of sports. Individuals interested in sports often start playing as young children and continue into adulthood. After quitting sports, for many, sports remain a way of life. Therefore, they want to keep standing on the sidelines or be part of the community in some way. This is a natural launchpad for building careers incrementally in the domain. As in the nonprofit sector in general where a robust background within the sector is an important factor for a leadership career (Stewart and Kuenzi 2018), a robust background in a sport often legitimizes decision-making positions in it (Laakso et al. 2016). Often, this means a robust background as a (competitive or elite) athlete. Based on the findings, this also seems to apply to women in leadership positions. Substantive experience and dedication to the nonprofit sector seem to be the primary pathways to leadership positions (Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018; Suarez 2010). Because people in organizational decision-making positions play a key role in determining and supporting organizational values, a person with a background in the sector is generally preferred (Selznick 1957).

While the Progressive Growth Career, Mission Enthusiast Career, and Chance-Driven Growth Career all share the characteristic of a strong background and interest in sports, they each have characteristics that distinguish them. The Mission Enthusiast type is characterized by the value-based and strategic agency the women showed, especially in terms of their will and determination to have a career in sports and sports leadership (see Laakso et al. 2016). In the Progressive Growth Career (and to some extent in the Externally Catalyzed Career), agency is more based on the natural continuation of their sports past, not, for instance, in terms of aspiring for a career in sports leadership. In previous studies, particularly those considering the sports sector, women informants have not been identified as representing the Mission Enthusiast path with strong, strategic, and value-based agency (see, e.g., Laakso et al. 2016). While in this study, this career type was represented by only two respondents, it shows that women may also exhibit strong agency and determination in pursuing a leadership career in sports.

The unique career path identified in this study, the Chance-Driven Growth Career, differs from types previously identified (Einolf 2022; Harrow and Mole 2005; Laakso et al. 2016; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018; Stewart and Kuenzi 2018) in the sense that regardless of an incremental career path that may seem natural or even inevitable to an outsider, the women themselves considered and described their careers or current positions as “chance” or “a sum of coincidences.” There was a turn of events or something unanticipated that impacted and enhanced the interviewees’ leadership careers in the sector. While it may be that without chance playing its role, the women would not have ended up in their careers or current positions, previous studies

TABLE 3 | Identified career types.

Career type	Background and motivation	Agency	Career path dynamics	Key patterns	Distinctive features	<i>n</i>^{a,b}	Supporting references
Progressive growth career	Strong sports background, career as continuation of a hobby	Natural, incremental	Progressive, built from within the sector	Incremental growth, diverse roles, internal legitimacy within sports	No external catalyst, not mission-driven or strategic	Gov.: 6 Mgmt.: 6	Einolf (2022); Norris-Tirrell et al. (2018); Laakso et al. (2016); Harrow and Mole (2005); Stewart and Kuenzi (2018)
Mission enthusiast	Strong mission and value-based motivation, often with a sports background	Strategic, conscious, value-based	Planned, mission-driven	Value-based career choices, strategic advancement, desire to influence the sector	Mission and strategy are central, no external catalyst	Gov.: 0 Mgmt.: 2	Laakso et al. (2016); Norris-Tirrell et al. (2018); Einolf (2022); Harrow and Mole (2005); Suarez (2010)
Externally catalyzed career	Weak/superficial sports background, management skills, external catalyst (invitation/encouragement)	Activated by external catalyst	Entry from outside the sector, seizing opportunity	External catalyst decisive, legitimacy through management skills, sector-neutral motivation	Career not built from within sports, external catalyst is decisive	Gov.: 4 Mgmt.: 1	Harrow and Mole (2005); Laakso et al. (2016); Einolf (2022)
Chance-driven growth career	Strong sports background, progressive growth, significant coincidence or external push	Natural, but strengthened by chance/coincidence	Progressive, but path altered by chance	Incremental growth, chance/coincidence enables advancement, internal legitimacy within sports	Similar background as the Progressive Growth Career type, but a decisive coincidence distinguishes this path	Gov.: 4 Mgmt.: 3	Inductive reasoning

^aSome interviewees held both management and governance positions.

^bGov. = management position; mgmt. = management position.

have suggested that giving credit to luck may be something more common to women compared to men. For instance, Harrow and Mole (2005) found that one fifth of their women respondents and none of their men respondents accredited their careers partly to chance or being in the right place at the right time. In Laakso et al. (2016), all four of the interviewed women also mentioned that their careers had been formed by chance or by drifting. However, these previous studies did not identify a common pattern in the form of a distinct career type for women or alternative options as to why this may occur.

The gender literature provides at least two plausible explanations for this finding. Some studies have concluded that women may be more nonassertive and modest in relation to their skills and capabilities compared to men (e.g., Cook and Glass 2014; Exley and Kessler 2022). Therefore, the women may have framed their careers as dependent on a chance or a coincidence instead of taking full credit for their career development. This is plausible, especially in the Chance-Driven Growth Career, because the careers already showed incremental growth and the women had a robust background in sports, which is often a prerequisite for a leadership career. Another line of argument suggests that women may be less likely to apply for high-level jobs, especially in typically masculine fields (e.g., Coffman et al. 2024) such as sports, because of self-limiting behaviors (Sartore and Cunningham 2007). Therefore, even if the women representing this career type had all the prerequisites to succeed in a leadership career, they needed an external push from someone or a meaningful coincidence to push them forward.

The women representing the Externally Catalyzed Career type did not have a strong background in sports. Instead, there was an external factor pushing them toward sports leadership. Someone had asked them to apply for a role or stand for election, or there was some other external coincidence or push that opened up an opportunity and steered them onto their career path. In this career type, the motivations of women were varied; they were in the position strictly because of a professional interest in the job (regardless of the sector) or because personal interests in the sport developed later in life as they or their children played it. Regardless of the external push central for the women representing the Externally Catalyzed Career type, almost all of them showed strong agency in terms of being in control of their careers and making considered decisions based on what they, themselves, wanted. These contrasts from previous studies, such as Laakso et al. (2016), in which agency and pursuit of a leadership career were nearly entirely missing, as chance played more of a role.

5.1 | Limitations and Future Research

The findings highlight the need for gendered analyses in career studies. With a sample only of women, we were able to problematize the prior body of knowledge suggesting that women have a tendency to represent specific career types in nonprofit leadership (see Harrow and Mole 2005; Laakso et al. 2016; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018), identify a new career type for women's leadership careers in the nonprofit sector, and highlight the strong agency women exhibited across four career types. However, a natural limitation of the research approach is the

absence of male respondents. It may be that the newly identified career type may also be identifiable among subsets of male informants. Not all women (or men) are the same, nor are their careers. Therefore, we call for more research on the identified career types that considers gender and other background factors, such as age, country context, and professional background, which may further explain differences in career choices and behaviors (Mikkonen et al. 2025). Einolf (2022) and Stewart and Kuenzi (2018) suggested that unplanned events and chance may be a general feature influencing different career types. However, we argue that chance or an external influence may also characterize certain career paths (or be a gendered feature on certain career paths), not a general feature influencing different career types.

Other limitations of this study relate to methodological decisions, the research setting, and the interviewee sample. The sample represents a rather homogenous group of middle- to upper-middle class women with a higher education degree. In addition, Finland represents a relatively egalitarian society. Therefore, the findings offer a starting point for interpretations in other contexts. Furthermore, nonprofit organizations cover a broad spectrum, including sports organizations, charities, foundations, and social welfare organizations. Each is unique within the larger nonprofit landscape. This study focused on sports organizations; thus, additional research is required to assess the proposed career typology, particularly to clarify which career paths are specific to sports organizations and which contribute to a more general theory of leadership careers in the wider nonprofit sector. Thus, we call for research in different countries and nonprofit contexts to set the boundary conditions and refine the general theory on career types in the nonprofit sector through replicative or comparative studies in different sectors or cultural contexts, or within similar sports settings in other countries. Finally, another natural extension of this study would be to use its career typology as a basis for further research to identify and classify barriers and support mechanisms for women aiming for leadership positions in order to create a more defined context for the well-explored field of barriers for women in (sports) leadership (see Hartzell and Dixon 2019).

6 | Conclusions

This study examined women's leadership careers in nonprofit sports organizations and advanced nonprofit leadership theory by refining how leadership career pathways are conceptualized in gendered contexts. We confirmed three career types derived from prior research (the Progressive Growth Career, Mission Enthusiast, and Externally Catalyzed Career) and introduced a fourth, previously unrecognized type, the Chance-Driven Growth Career. The findings show that women's leadership careers are more varied than earlier accounts suggest and that women exercise clear agency in all paths, including where an external nudge initiates movement. In contrast to studies that have emphasized women's drift into leadership or clustered women into a narrow set of pathways, our analysis demonstrates purposeful career crafting even alongside the catalytic role of invitations and chance (Einolf 2022; Harrow and Mole 2005; Laakso et al. 2016; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018; Stewart and Kuenzi 2018).

The study also clarifies how women's pathways differ from patterns described in research that has focused mainly on men. Earlier work often portrayed women as having “drift” or “co-incident” stories or described mission-driven careers without detailing the strategic agency underlying them (Harrow and Mole 2005; Laakso et al. 2016). Our findings show that women appear as all established types and that externally catalyzed moves commonly lead to deliberate choices and consolidation of legitimacy, rather than passive tenures. We also specified a distinct Chance-Driven Growth path in which a meaningful co-incident or prompt acts as a hinge on top of steady sectoral accumulation: an arrangement that has been previously noted but not fully conceptualized as a distinct career type in nonprofit leadership research (Einolf 2022; Norris-Tirrell et al. 2018; Stewart and Kuenzi 2018).

In addition, the study refined the mechanisms of legitimacy in sports nonprofits by demonstrating that, depending on the pathway, leadership credibility may derive either from deep sport-specific experience or from transferable managerial expertise, which helps reconcile professionalization with volunteer traditions in the field (Laakso et al. 2016; Selznick 1957; Stewart and Kuenzi 2018). Overall, the analysis highlights nuanced differences in women's leadership careers and the nonprofit leadership discussion toward a more dynamic, gender-sensitive theorization of leadership careers.

From a practical perspective, our findings indicate that women leaders in sports organizations enter leadership from diverse backgrounds, both within and outside sports. This highlights the importance of transparent selection processes based on clearly identified organizational needs rather than informal judgments or hunches (see Mikkonen 2023b), as well as broad and inclusive recruitment practices for open positions. Second, as several careers advanced through meaningful opportunities or catalytic moments, there is value in proactive identification of potential candidates and deliberate encouragement of women, including those without extensive sports backgrounds, to apply for leadership roles. Third, because women's leadership careers may also develop incrementally within sports, organizational structures that support step-by-step progression in the multi-level sports system are essential for advancing gender equity and strengthening women's inclusion in leadership.

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