



**Submission to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage
Study on the Participation of Canadian Girls and Women in Sport**

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Introduction

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) commends the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage for its decision to undertake a study of Canadian women and girls in sport, and specifically how the Department of Heritage can help to increase female participation and leadership in both amateur and professional sport. As the premise of the Committee's study suggests, more work remains to bring about a truly equitable sport system in Canada so that everyone may benefit from and contribute to it to the best of their abilities.

This brief responds to the Committee's interest in gaining insight and perspective on this question. It expands upon the CAAWS presentation delivered by Allison Sandmeyer-Graves (CEO) and Karin Lofstrom (former Executive Director) to the Committee on September 4, 2016. It furthermore references the 2016 report on the status of female sport participation in Canada, entitled *Women and Sport: Fueling a Lifetime of Participation*,¹ which was provided to the Standing Committee as part of that in-person presentation.

CAAWS is pleased to have the opportunity to provide input to the Government of Canada on this important topic. As the leading authority on women and sport in Canada, we are committed to providing leadership and working in partnership with others to produce real, lasting change. For each of the recommendations made through this process and in whatever manner Canadian Heritage decides to proceed, CAAWS is ready to support, contributing expertise, insight and hands-on effort to help bring it to life.

The Case for Change

It bears underscoring why equity for women and sport matters, and thus why this issue demands attention and action.

Sport has the potential to directly impact every Canadian, and connects Canadians to one another and to our global community through a common language and shared experience. With quality sport capable of producing benefits simultaneously across an array of national priorities, from health promotion to integration of newcomers to community building, and more, the potential social return on investment in sport is significant. But as the recent Community Foundations of Canada report focused on sport and belonging stresses, "To realize these benefits...good sport must reflect our best values. Every game we play, every match we organize, every race we run—large or small—can help build a stronger Canada for the future—a Canada where everyone belongs."²

Women—who make up more than 50% of the Canadian population, including half of all other underrepresented groups—have the most to gain from sport participation. Girls and women participating in sport experience extensive health, psychological, socio-cultural and physical benefits that increase their personal capacity while reducing their susceptibility to adverse health and other negative factors. But they also benefit further because sport is a powerful tool for changing norms and building capacity for women to expand their participation in society more broadly—moving our society to become a more equitable and inclusive one.³

Positive sport experiences can contribute to the full inclusion of girls and women by enhancing their health and well-being; fostering their self-esteem and empowerment; facilitating their social inclusion and integration; changing gender norms; and providing opportunities for female leadership and achievement.⁴

Investing in women in sport also produces great returns. As one indication of this, mothers who participate in sport in any way have children who participate in sport at a rate of 71%, compared to participation rates of only 29% amongst children whose mothers are uninvolved in sport.⁵

In presenting this case, it would be dangerous to imply that women need to *merit* equity for any reason other than the fact that, as citizens of Canada, they deserve to engage in sport in equal measures as any other Canadian. It is not only consistent with our values as Canadians, it is also enshrined in Canada's human rights legislation.⁶ However, we see great advantages to viewing this not only from a moral and legal obligation, but also from a point of sound and strategic investment.

By providing decisive leadership on this issue, the Government of Canada has the potential to create a legacy that will benefit *all* Canadians—especially girls and women—permanently, strengthening our social fabric and expanding our individual and collective potential.

Current Situation

The current situation is far from equitable. In many aspects, gender inequity in sport is a highly normalized experience for Canadians. This is no excuse for complacency. The pace of change to date is slow, halting, and even regressive in some instances. If we do not take collective action to advance measurable, systemic change on this issue, many more generations will pass before girls and women will experience the full benefit of sport.

The way in which Canada's female athletes dominated the country's medal count and the media's attention at the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 left a powerful impression on Canadians. Their accomplishments are worthy of celebration and represent progress in seeing women achieve in high performance sport and particularly in non-traditional sports. Looking at the broader sport system, however, the picture is significantly less encouraging. The 2016 *Women and Sport: Fueling a Lifetime of Participation* report produced by the Dairy Farmers of Canada with CAAWS looked quite comprehensively at the Canadian sport system and concluded that "a considerable amount of work remains to be done for girls and women to realize all the benefits that participation in sport offers."⁷

We encourage the Standing Committee to review the *Women and Sport* report for a thorough presentation of the current landscape. For the purposes of this brief, we will simply highlight a few of the key findings that serve to illustrate the current state of participation by women and girls in sport in Canada. In particular:

- Female sport participation has been falling since the 1990s, with less than 1 in 5 adult women now active;
- Adolescent girls drop out of sport at a particularly high rate, which is a pressing issue given that sport participation at that age is a key determinant of life-long participation;
- Female representation on boards of directors, in paid leadership roles, and in technical roles remains stubbornly low.⁸

It bears noting that producing a report of this nature was challenging due to the dearth of current and reliable data on broad-based participation and leadership. Upon its release, this report quickly became a leading source of insight on women and girls in sport for those working in the sector. We believe this is

problematic in that it suggests that the sector is not operating with sufficient insight to make evidence-based decisions that advance women and sport in Canada.

In reviewing the 1998 recommendations of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage on the topic of women and girls in sport,⁹ it is apparent that many of the same scenarios and solutions being discussed today were being explored almost 20 years ago. The fact that the conversation remains substantially similar is discouraging. While there have certainly been broad social advances that have impacted the sport system and targeted efforts to advance women within the system, there have also been missed opportunities to implement stronger accountability measures that would produce the *systemic* change required in order to realize real and lasting equity.

The evidence and CAAWS' experience lead us to three conclusions:

- Despite attention, funding, leadership and action towards the inclusion of girls and women in sport, meaningful change on a broad scale is slow in materializing, necessitating changes to the approach;
- Without having yet achieved a critical mass in leadership, coaching, officiating, etc., a failure to maintain gender equity as an active priority means gains can quickly be lost;
- Gender equity continues to be a low priority for the myriad sport organizations in Canada who provide sport experiences for Canadians.

Nature of the Challenge

As discussed exhaustively in our resource *Actively Engaging Women and Girls: Addressing the Psycho-Social Factors*, women face complex barriers to sport participation in Canada. This manifests both as outright discrimination (e.g. harassment, unequal resource allocation, etc.) and, more pervasively, as structural and cultural conditions that fail to account for the unique needs and interests of girls and women.¹⁰ In short, women are typically expected to assimilate into a system that was designed for men, within a broader society that does not value sport participation for women in the way it does for men.

The barriers present for women vary depending on their role(s) within the system and stage of life; athletes, coaches, officials, administrators, board members—all encounter unique obstacles that impact their interest and ability to continue. For a female athlete entering adolescence, it may be that they are struggling with self-esteem and their team is not a safe space. For a female coach, it may be that they are unable to maintain the commonly expected number of evenings and weekends of commitments while also being the primary caregiver for their children.

These barriers are magnified within underrepresented groups. For instance, gender and sexual minorities (LGBT, intersex and others) face further stigma and obstacles to participation and leadership. In fact, LGBTphobia is a barrier for all women, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identify, as it is frequently used to denigrate athletic females (i.e. if you are female and good at sports, you must be a lesbian).¹¹

Given the wide array of potential barriers present in any given scenario, it is reasonable to say that women who achieve and remain within sport are doing so *despite* the barriers that exist.¹²

There is no single solution. Rather, it will require a holistic view and a commitment by all players in the system to pursue inclusion of women as a persistent, multi-faceted priority. The goal is for inclusion of women to ultimately no longer be “niche” or “special interest” to layer on top of “normal” sport, but rather to redefine “normal” with quality sport for women embedded in the very fabric of sport. Indeed, “Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone.” (Dr. George Dei)¹³

There a solid foundation of existing expertise within the Canadian system on these barriers and solutions. This should be maintained and expanded, but this is not the impediment to change. Rather, the challenge is in creating engagement and uptake within the sport system, particularly in a systemic fashion.

In a world of scarce resources—dollars, ice time, paid coaching positions—competition can naturally arise. For many, it is easiest or preferable to maintain the status quo. Or to pursue inclusivity only if and as dedicated resources are made available by funders. The social normalization of gender inequality can make that seem like a feasible option. Without external pressure to change the decision-making matrices within organizations, we are left relying on the organic emergence of personal leadership across dozens of organizations at the national level and thousands at the provincial/territorial and local levels. And still, limited resources quickly undermine good intentions. It does not inspire confidence to imagine this as the way we will achieve gender equality in Canadian sport.

Where initiatives do exist, they are often short-term due to time-bound project funding. They contribute to the body of promising practice and help to build capacity within organizations, but by their temporary nature do not produce the kind of sustained and entrenched activity required to produce lasting cultural and structural change.

Canada has the benefit of decades of research and efforts at producing change on this topic to draw from as we look to the future. What are the key lessons we should learn from to as we move forward?

Conditions for Success

CAAWS believes that in order for change to occur, solutions must be based on *equity*, as opposed to *equality*. The difference is material:

Equality focuses on creating the same starting line for everyone. Equity has the goal of providing everyone with a full range of opportunities and benefits...the same finish line.¹⁴

To further the definition:

The concept of “equality” often results in programs and services for one group simply being made available to another. In contrast, “equity” requires consideration of the unique needs, interests and experiences of a target group when developing and delivering services and allocating resources. Therefore, some services may be the same, while others may be completely different.¹⁵

It is clear that taking sport that has been designed by and for men and opening it up to women has not been sufficient to produce the desired outcomes. In embracing equity, we shift the paradigm. But this is relatively more difficult and time-consuming work. It involves looking at every aspect of the individual and collective work of organizations, typically requiring both structural and cultural change.

There is tremendous room for creativity in bringing equity to life within the sport system; however, CAAWS believes the following conditions will be essential to doing so successfully:

- ***Visionary leadership*** – This is a long game that requires leaders who are willing to invest now in results that will take time to materialize. How do we cultivate and reward this kind of leadership, amongst not only women but also men?
- ***New rules to the game*** – Fairness and respect are Canadian values, but the existing sport paradigm is anything but for women. If organizational decision-making matrices are not conducive to creating equitable inclusion of girls and women, then what measures can be put in place so the same equations produce new conclusions?
- ***Intentionality and constancy*** – Not until we reach the tipping point where the participation of women is self-sustaining—and perhaps not even then—can it be left to chance or circumstance. If women are not explicitly identified and accounted for in any given activity within an organization, the risk that they will not be adequately accounted for is high. What measures promote a culture of intentionality and the structural changes to entrench it?
- ***Capacity to implement*** – The amount of gender awareness and expertise within any given sport organization varies widely, and few if any would have expertise in how to create equity in all facets of an organization’s work. How can we support organizations to be equitable?

Recommendations for Action

The Government of Canada may be but one of many actors in the sport system, but it wields significant influence and has unique measures at its disposal. The experiences of women in sport in Canada are defined by the thousands of organizations delivering or influencing sport experiences at local, provincial/territorial, national and even international levels. While the Department of Heritage cannot directly influence all of these organizations, it can demonstrate clear leadership from the top to move the system in the direction of gender equity.

In the context of the study of by the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, CAAWS asks that the Committee consider making three recommendations to bring about a sport system that is more fair and respectful of women in sport, and drives greater participation therein. These recommendations are informed by the dual goals of creating a supportive framework for action irrespective of specialization—i.e. coaching, officiating, high performance, mass participation, etc.—and producing strong return on investment.

Recommendation 1: For sports organizations funded by Canadian Heritage, establish clear criteria for them to meet, and then hold them accountable.

CAAWS recommends that Sport Canada utilize its existing accountability mechanisms to increase action by sports organizations to improve participation and leadership by women in sport. Canadian Heritage expressed a commitment to gender equity through the 2009 Women and Sport Policy¹⁶ and has invested in various initiatives designed remove barriers for women in sport (including through the work of CAAWS), but it has yet to set out clear criteria for gender equity for the sports organizations it funds.

Introducing specific expectations and consequences for those that fail to address persisting inequities would send a clear signal to the sector that the Government of Canada is serious about gender equity and to producing measurable change.

We propose this measure based on the belief that sport organizations need a business case for change. If asked, it is unlikely that any leader in Canadian sport would argue that women should not be included; however, the limited improvements in female participation and leadership suggest that gender equity is not being pursued as an explicit priority. Introducing a requirement that organizations demonstrate meaningful activity and measurable progress on gender equity in order to receive funding from Sport Canada would produce an effective motivation to finally take action.

There is established precedence through the Sport Funding Accountability Framework (SFAF) for Sport Canada to advance certain agendas that it feels are important for producing value for taxpayer dollars and results against its priorities. Much as it has recently required and supported the professionalization of sport organizations, with emphasis on instituting good governance practices, Sport Canada has the potential to make a similarly major contribution to participation by women in sport.

We recommend that particular attention be paid to equity in leadership and technical roles. While not a panacea, increased representation by women in decision-making/influencer roles helps to diversify perspective, is linked to improved organizational performance,¹⁷ and can open dialogue and pathways for greater engagement of girls and women in the activities of the organizations. As an example of the returns of this effort, for the current pilot phase of CAAWS' Female Coach Mentorship project (funded through Status of Women Canada), most of the National Sport Organizations who volunteered to participate are headed by women.

Sport England and UK Sport recently acknowledged the importance of gender diversity in governance, instituting a minimum requirement of 30% representation of each gender on sport organizations' boards.¹⁸ CAAWS believes that this is the baseline target, with a better target of gender parity on sport boards to reflect the demographic makeup of our country served by national sport organizations.

CAAWS is well-positioned to provide guidance on the design of these accountability measures, supporting Sport Canada to identify the equity measures that will produce the greatest results and most lasting benefit.

Recommendation 2: Track, evaluate and publicly report on the status of women and sport

Measurement and evaluation are essential for making evidence-based decisions that produce strong return on investment. Unfortunately, the absence of current and reliable data from across the Canadian sport landscape on women and sport poses a real obstacle to the ability to design for specific outcomes.

Sport Canada captures a great deal of data in any given year, including some based on gender. We recommend that it require that all data from funded organizations be provided on a gender-disaggregated basis going forward. This could be used to establish a baseline and thereafter measure progress (or lack thereof). It would also enable Sport Canada to assess each organization's efforts and progress in advancing equity for women, and to take action accordingly to hold organizations accountable.

We furthermore recommend that a recurring report on the status of women and sport in Canada be generated. This would provide vital insight to the sector and the public. A moderate investment in this

activity would pay dividends in several respects: the data and analysis generated would feed research and practice, directly inform decision-making, support awareness raising, and reward active leadership while challenging others to elevate their practice.

As part of this measurement and evaluation, we recommend that the 2009 Women and Sport Policy be monitored and evaluated, ideally as part of Canadian Heritage's plan in response to the new Policy on Results.¹⁹ Initiating a rapid impact assessment evaluation in the near term and maintaining this as a standing requirement for the policy going forward would generate great insight into the effectiveness of the policy and the potential for updates. In taking these steps, Canadian Heritage would strengthen the Women and Sport Policy as the foundation for the department's efforts to advance women and sport in Canada.

These proposed accountability and measurement activities align well with the Government of Canada's commitment to Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+).²⁰ We encourage the Standing Committee to consider how Sport Canada could work with expert organizations to develop a Gender-Based Analysis action plan for sport, translating insight gained through measurement and evaluation into a clear plan for investment.

Recommendation 3: Support sport organizations system-wide to successfully implement gender equity measures

Gender equity will not be realized without action by the myriad organizations that provide Canadians with sport experiences. It is therefore imperative that these organizations are supported in developing capacity to provide quality sport experiences for girls and women, and to create and sustain opportunities for women to participate in all facets of the sport—from the playing field to the boardroom. This includes further underrepresented groups, such as Aboriginal, newcomer, LGBT and older adult women.

CAAWS recommends that Canadian Heritage complement the proposed accountability measures above with additional support to funded organizations for education, training and guidance on gender equity. This would likely require targeted funding for organizational assessments, action plan development, education and training, and implementation, in addition to funding for equity-oriented program development and delivery to address gaps requiring particular effort. Done well, capacity built by national and multi-sport organizations would be shared with their associated provincial/territorial and local sport organizations.

The goal as much as possible is to avoid a situation where women advance with the support of equity measures only to find a “chilly” climate (i.e. we'll let you in but we won't accept you). Supporting organizations to meet rising expectations would help to create a constructive/positive dynamic around gender equity and inclusion. To do the former without the latter would undercut the intended benefits of the accountability measures, and could also foster a negative or unwelcoming environment for women.

We have the benefit in Canada of a strong body of knowledge and expertise on the barriers to women's participation and leadership in sport, as well as on their solutions. Indeed, Canada is recognized internationally for its expertise on this topic (as evidenced anecdotally by numerous occasions where CAAWS and associated organizations/colleagues have been invited to present at international gatherings). To date, this supply of expertise has not met with equal demand from sport organizations. Through this set of recommendations, however, the marketplace for this expertise would be significantly expanded. This would better capitalize on the investments made to date in research and expertise development, as well as grow the community of people and organizations working collaboratively on this issue.

Summary of recommendations

In summary, the recommendations put forward include:

1. Use the SFAF and related accountability mechanisms to generate greater focus, priority and measurable action on gender equity by Sport Canada-funded organizations.
2. Expand gender-based data collection and analysis to produce insight for evidence-based decision-making. Furthermore:
 - a. Report regularly on the baseline and progress (positive or negative);
 - b. Evaluate the 2009 Women and Sport Policy, with the goal of updating it;
 - c. Develop a GBA+ action plan for women and sport.
3. Provide support to funded organizations (and the sector at large) to build capacity for gender equity in all regards.

Conclusion

The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage's decision to study the participation of Canadian women and girls in sport is timely; expressions of equity, such as the decision to create a gender-balanced cabinet in Parliament, have been well received by the public. This offers fertile ground for adopting measures that represent definitive and progressive steps towards rectifying the persistent gender gap present at all levels and in all aspects of sport. Grounded in strategy and designed to improve the social return on investment in sport, change of this nature would create value for all of Canada—not only for girls and women.

Description of CAAWS

CAAWS is the leading authority on girls and women and sport in Canada. Dedicated to creating equity for women in the sport system for the past 35 years as the sole national organization with this mandate, CAAWS maintains extensive expertise on the subject and works throughout the sport system—both nationally and provincially/territorially—in partnership with others to educate and build capacity for change. Our work spans from playground to podium, from sport to physical activity, and encompasses many of the intersecting identities within the category of women. More information on the organization is available at www.caaws.ca.

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