

Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching
Online

Promising Initiatives Could bring Real Change for Women in Coaching

© 2018 Coaching Association of Canada, ISSN 1496-1539
October 2018, Vol. 18, No. 4

Is it baby steps or a swelling tide? I refer to several initiatives over the past several years that address growing concern over the persistently diminishing numbers of women in the coaching profession in Canada. Optimistically, I sense a swelling tide, believing these initiatives may, at last, mark a reversal of this dismal and worrying trend.

I refer first to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, launched in 2016, whose work is reported in this timely article.

Then, several months ago came the announcement of Science and Sport Minister Kirsty Duncan's establishment of a Women in Sport Working Group, charged with developing [strategies to better understand and serve the specific needs of women and girls in sport](#). It is encouraging that many of the Group's members have deep knowledge of coaching in this country.

Now the authors of this article tell us of *Conversation 2020*, to be held in Quebec City, June 10-12, 2020 to [design action plans based on the various recommendations to increase the participation of women in all capacities within our Canadian sport system](#). This Conversation will build on *Conversation 2015*, where the plight of women coaches was a dominant concern.

In order to contribute effectively to sport in Canada, our women coaches need solid, sustainable outcomes – sooner rather than later. And so, we will be watching. - Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

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By Guylaine Demers and Gretchen Kerr

A Challenging Scenario

The lack of women in sport coaching has been and remains a significant concern in Canadian society. Not only are there proportionately few women in coaching, but these numbers have decreased rather than increased over the past two decades. At the university level, in 2013, 17% of coaches were women, compared to 19% in 2011, and 20% in 2005. Current Canadian national-level data show that out of 54 national teams, there are only nine women head coaches (16%). At the Olympic level, the situation is no better. Table 1 shows the percentage of Canadian women head coaches from 2000 to 2016.

Table 1

Percentage of Canadian women head coaches at the Olympic Games

Olympics	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016
Women	13	21	7	15	9	13	19	10	6
Men	87	79	93	85	91	87	81	90	94

[The Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport](#), based at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis recently reported that women held 41.7% of head coaching positions for Division I women’s teams, but that the numbers for swimming (17.9%), diving (22.9%), and water polo (21.9%) are much lower than the general population. Similarly, in Division III, women held 45.7% of women’s team head coaching positions with significantly lower percentages for swimming (26.1%), diving (28.7%), and water polo (22.2%).

The paucity of women in coaching becomes even more significant and problematic when considered relative to other industries. Canadians have observed increasing numbers of women in professions such as law, medicine, higher education, engineering, business, and politics. In 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau set a strong example in establishing the membership of his cabinet at 50% women. In 2017, Catalyst* set a target of achieving a minimum of 30% women on all boards of directors within the next three to five years. In Quebec, the Gender Equality Policy on the Boards of Crown Corporations has been in place since 2007. At the international level, some countries have embedded the principle of equality in the law. Iceland, for example, is the first country to enforce equal pay. Sport should be inspired by these initiatives and set specific targets and timelines for achieving similar outcomes.

The Standing Committee Report

In June 2016, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage adopted the following motion:

“That the Committee undertake a study of four meetings on Canadian women and girls in sport, and how the Department of Heritage can increase participation and involvement in both amateur and professional sport.”

Six themes emerged from these meetings, including recommendations that relate to women leaders with an emphasis on coaches. Relevant research, recommendations presented by the Standing Committee, successful practices for advancing women in other industries, and successful international initiatives for increasing women coaches, together point to future directions for Canadian sport. These recommendations are organized into four pillars: research, education and mentoring, policy, and advocacy.

Research

In spite of the existing data with respect to the percentage of women coaches at some levels of sport, such as at the Olympic Games and in the USport system, several data gaps need to be filled:

- Most researchers have studied high-level women coaches. Almost no data are available at the youth and interscholastic levels.
- Most of the work on women coaches has not employed a framework of intersectionality.
- Researchers tend to focus more on barriers than on supports for women in coaching. As such, there is an urgent need for more targeted research that addresses these gaps.

Further, if new initiatives are to be implemented to advance women in coaching, data to assess potential changes will be needed. In response to these needs, the Standing Committee recommended the creation of a research observatory to develop, fund, and publish research that monitors the progress of women in sport leadership positions.

As Canadian sport moves towards gender equity, it will be critical to base decisions and planning on existing evidence. One of the benefits of lagging behind advancements seen in other disciplines is that there are many documented examples of educational initiatives, policy directives, and advocacy campaigns that have had a positive impact; sport coaching should rely heavily upon these examples. One of those examples specific to women in sport is the Tucker Center, which regularly provides statistics on the status of women coaches in the United States. Such a centre in Canada would be invaluable for providing data to sport leaders to inform planning, decision-making, and resource allocation.

* Catalyst is a global non-profit working with some of the world's most powerful CEOs and leading companies to build workplaces that work for women.

Education and Mentoring

The Standing Committee posed several recommendations to use mentoring as a vehicle for educating and advancing women in coaching. Such mentoring could be provided for teens as a way to encourage young people to become involved as leaders and introduce them to coaching at the grassroots level. Mentoring is also important to retain retiring women athletes in sport through coaching. Also recommended was the provision of a stipend to mentees as a way of encouraging the acceptance of mentorship opportunities.

A vast body of literature exists on the benefits of mentoring for advancing women in other domains. Key features of effective mentorship include clarifying expectations, boundaries, roles and responsibilities of the mentee and the mentor; providing education for mentors; establishing a mutually agreed upon learning plan; ensuring regular communication; and evaluating progress and celebrating successes. Importantly, effective mentorship must consider the inclusion of both female and male mentors who are educated about how to best mentor, as well as various modalities of mentorship such as in-person and on-line. [Three guide books for advancing women in coaching](#) — mentors, mentees, and sport administrators — have been published by the Coaching Association of Canada and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS).

Interestingly, the non-sport mentoring literature recommends the adoption of a shift from mentoring to sponsorship. Sponsorship differs from mentorship in that it tends to be more proactive. Sponsors actively advance their mentee through their connections and networks. While mentorship involves showing mentees the various doors to successful advancement, sponsorship involves finding ways to open those doors and helping the mentee walk through them in a confident and supported manner. One potential avenue for the Canadian sport system to advance women in coaching is to educate and systematically establish opportunities for established male and female leaders in sport to sponsor less experienced women coaches.

In addition to mentorship and sponsorship, and in order to recruit, retain, and advance women in coaching, sport must be experienced by girls and women as a safe environment. The sport coaching literature is replete with examples of women choosing not to enter coaching or leaving coaching because of harassment, discrimination, and exclusionary practices. While the recent 'Safe Sport' initiatives are to be commended for their much-needed attention to providing safe environments for athletes, we propose that similar attention is needed to protect women coaches from harmful experiences.

Policy

The Standing Committee set forth numerous policy-related recommendations for advancing women in coaching. For example, it recommends that the Government of Canada, as a major funder of sports, enact criteria for ongoing funding, including

- programming that serves the unique needs of women and other underrepresented groups.
- higher numbers of apprenticeship and employment opportunities for women coaches.

Further, it recommends that Sport Canada's mandate calls for at least one male and one female coach leading women's teams at all times and that funding for National Sport Organizations (NSOs) be contingent upon gender equity in coaching at all international events. To help ensure adherence to policy initiatives, funding should be tied to gender equity. NSOs would face penalties if gender equity expectations were not met and NSOs that demonstrated evidence of progress towards gender equity in coaching would benefit from increased funding.

The Tucker Center presents a number of recommendations for the hiring and retention of women coaches. With respect to hiring, sport administrators and members of the hiring committee must value diversity and gender equity authentically, acknowledge that female and male athletes benefit from having female role models, develop awareness of personal, implicit biases, acknowledge that competent women are out there, reject homogeneous candidate pools,

and challenge existing narratives that blame women for the lack of women in coaching. For example, “Women aren’t confident, athletes prefer male coaches, and women don’t apply unless they feel 100% qualified.”

The retention of women coaches involves providing supportive environments and clear demonstrations of sport leaders having “the female coach’s back.” The development of a supportive environment relies upon providing resources to facilitate competence through investment and professional development, allowing for autonomy, and demonstrating caring through the building of authentic relationships with ongoing and effective communication. Also vital are the valuing and welcoming of family such as transition plans for pregnancy and maternity leaves and work-life balance with flexible schedules.

Advocacy

To advance women in coaching, the culture of Canadian sport needs to change. Valuing women in coaching and structuring specific plans for recruiting, mentoring, supporting, sponsoring, and advancing women coaches must be a key priority that is planned, monitored, and evaluated. Changing the cultural values and norms in Canadian sport will require advocacy for gender equity at all levels. At the individual level, sport policy makers, decision-makers, and particularly males in leadership positions need to acknowledge the necessity and benefits of advancing women in coaching. Sport leaders need to commit publicly to advancing women. At the organizational level, local clubs, Provincial Sport Organizations, NSOs, and Sport Canada can affect their cultures with public declarations of commitments to gender equity that include policy initiatives and concrete, observable programs to advance women. Finally, progress towards gender equity should be recognized and celebrated in very public ways.

The International Olympic Committee Gender Equality Review Project: An Example from the Top

The IOC recently launched the [IOC Gender Equality Review Project](#) which presents 25 recommendations to reach equality in sport. Recommendation 6 relates to coaching specifically and states: ‘Balanced gender representation for coaches selected to participate at the Games.’ To achieve this recommendation, the IOC will “coordinate the development of an action plan in collaboration with its Olympic Movement stakeholders for more women to be eligible and selected to participate at Olympic Games level.” The action plan is expected to be reported to the IOC by November 2018. Ideally, this pressure and prescription from the top level of sport will influence Canadian NSOs to embrace the IOC’s recommendation and action plan.

Call to Action

Gender equity in sport coaching eludes the Canadian sport context today. The recently established Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage represents a significant step forward in acknowledging the problem and tackling solutions to advancing women in sport, including in coaching positions. Based upon these recommended solutions, as well as existing literature in coaching and disciplines that have facilitated gender equity, we suggest that the way forward to advance women in coaching is multi-faceted. Specific and varied strategies in research, education and mentoring, policy, and advocacy present promising avenues for advancing women in coaching.

One key strategy to move the gender equity agenda forward is to form communities of practice and to connect with advocates in your area. This could be done through digital meet-up groups or people in your region interested in supporting this movement. [Visit our Canadian website](#) to look for solutions that were identified by key leaders from across the country during the last national women and sport conference, [Conversation 2015](#).

As a follow-up to *Conversation 2015*, Égale Action and CAAWS have decided to organize another women and sport conference: *Conversation 2020*, to be held in Quebec City, June 10 to 12, 2020. The intent is to bring together champions of gender equity to design action plans based on the various recommendations to increase the participation of women in all capacities within our Canadian sport system.

We encourage you to come to Quebec City in 2020. In the meantime, don’t hesitate to contact our women and sport organizations (see Important Links) or the person in charge of the gender equity dossier at your provincial government.

Let’s be bold and maintain the pressure on all stakeholders in Canadian sport to achieve gender equity.

Important Links

- [Coaching Association of Canada – Women in Coaching](#)
- [Women and Girls in Sport: Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage](#)
- [CAAWS](#)
- [Égale Action](#)
- [WomenActive-NS](#)
- [ProMOTION Plus](#)
- [Coaching Association of Canada – Women in Coaching](#)
- [Working Group on Gender Equity in Sport of the Minister of Science and Sport:](#)
- [Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport](#)

About the Authors

Guylaine Demers, a professor at Laval University, is the women's studies research chair. The chair of Égale Action, she takes particular interest in issues of women in sport and LGBT-phobia in sport. Guylaine made the CAAWS list of Most Influential Women in 2007, 2010, and 2015. She is the chair of the new Women and Sport Working Group set up by Kirsty Duncan, Minister of Science and Sport. One of her achievement was the organization of [Conversation 2015](#) dedicated to fostering solutions to bettering the experiences of women in the Canadian sport system. She is organizing another Conversation in June 2020.

Gretchen Kerr is a Professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education and Vice-Dean of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Toronto. Her research expertise is in the areas of advancing women in coaching and the promotion of athlete welfare in sport. Gretchen also serves as the volunteer Harassment Officer for several Canadian sport organizations.

References Available Upon Request