

## Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching Online

### **The Canadian Gender+ Equity in Sport Research Hub: One Step Closer to Achieving Gender Equity in Sport by 2035**

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As this difficult year closed came the announcement of an ambitious initiative that bodes well for girls and women who participate in sport. The Gender+Equity in Sport Research Hub, launched by Sport Canada on December 1<sup>st</sup>, is one of a series of measures arising from Budget 2018, in which the Government of Canada committed to achieving gender equity at every level of sport by 2035. An initial \$30 million over three years was allocated to support data, research, and innovation, with the Hub being the latest government action to rectify the inequalities.

Led by co-directors Dr. Gretchen Kerr and Dr. Guylaine Demers, both of whom have a long history with the *Journal*, and Dr. Ann Pegoraro, the Hub will address several key questions:

- What are the barriers that stand between the current reality and this future?
- What interventions can facilitate the change necessary to reach this goal?
- How can research evidence be used to transform the Canadian sport landscape?

A first for Canada, the Hub is sure to play a major role in advancing participation and leadership while closing the gender gap in Canadian sport. It is uplifting news in troubling times. - Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor

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## Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching The Canadian Gender Equity in Sport Research Hub: One Step Closer to Achieving Gender Equity in Sport by 2035

Online

January 2021, Vol. 21, No. 1

**By Gretchen Kerr, Guylaine Demers, Ann Pegoraro, Debra Kriger, and Amélie Keyser-Verreault**

### **Introduction**

The struggle to achieve gender equity in Canadian sport persists. While participation rates have increased for girls and women, this progress has not been matched by

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similar growth in sport leadership or media representation. Gender-based violence continues to be disproportionately experienced by participants and leaders who identify as girls and women. Recent initiatives led by the Government of Canada to promote gender equity in sport include the establishment of a Gender + Equity in Sport Research Hub. This article describes the mandate, vision, and principles of the Hub and highlights the research priorities and plans to promote research and translate research to practice. The Hub is seen as a critical piece of the plan to achieve the Government's goal of reaching gender equity in sport by 2035.

## **Background**

Research has long contributed to more opportunities and higher quality participation of girls and women in Canadian sports. In the early days of second-wave feminism, research helped demolish the myths that discouraged girls and women from participating in sport, such as the ridiculous idea that running long distances and competing in the triple jump would render women infertile. Subsequent research into other issues, such as facility usage and budget allocations, informed successful court challenges to unfair policies and practices around women's sport. Gender equity policies in many institutions were altered to reflect research-based evidence and advocacy bodies were created. To the extent that girls and women have made considerable gains in Canadian sport over the past 60 years, research has played a decisive role.

However, recent research indicates that progress towards gender equity in Canadian sport has stalled and extensive survey data and that gender inequities in sport remain persistent and pervasive. Moreover, indications are that sport is falling behind other sectors such as business, medicine, law, academics, and politics, which have seen significant advancements in gender equity.

In 2019, after two years of data collection and consultation, the Federal-Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Women and Girls in Sport reported to sport ministers that significant gender inequities did indeed exist in sport. In response, Kirsty Duncan, the federal minister of sport at the time, allocated \$1.65 million to establish a research hub on gender equity in sport. This hub was envisioned as a vehicle to bring the scientific and sport communities together to coordinate efforts and work together to have greater impact on advancing gender equity.

## **Mandate, Principles, Vision and Commitments of the Hub**

The mandate of the Hub, as articulated by Sport Canada, is to provide credible thought leadership and generate an evidence base to support gender equity in sport through innovative, transparent, and sustainable research activities, data curation, network building and partnerships to effect pan-Canadian behaviour change.

Sport Canada also defined core streams of activity to be undertaken by the Hub. Led by the authors, a key priority of the Hub will be to generate new knowledge through the engagement of researchers across the country in original projects. The curation and consolidation of data and the synthesis of existing research will be conducted and

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shared widely within the scientific and sport communities. In partnership with the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, tracking and monitoring longitudinal data on population and system changes will occur. Another stream of activity will address evaluation and impact analyses, including the assessment of initiatives to promote gender equity with questions such as what works, what doesn't work, and why? Finally, and importantly, the Hub will engage in knowledge transfer and exchange by working closely with key partners in the sport community.

### ***Principles***

The principles identified by Sport Canada to guide the work of the Hub are to

- add value to the existing gender equity in sport landscape by partnering with and leveraging existing stakeholders.
- draw on the unique strengths, expertise, and resources of its university-based setting.
- identify a research agenda that prioritizes research that fills knowledge gaps and aims to contribute to behaviour change via stakeholders and knowledge-mobilizing partners.
- build sustainable collaborative relationships with partners and seek opportunities to leverage resources where appropriate.
- strive to provide science-based and credible thought leadership to stakeholders and partners.
- be open to multi-disciplinary research and approaches.
- commission, initiate, and advocate for research in identified priority areas, including underserved/underrepresented groups.
- document the processes and deliverables of the Hub in a transparent and accessible manner.
- provide advice and support to knowledge mobilizers.
- ensure that the knowledge resulting from the Hub is widely and freely accessible, both serving as a basis for new research and by helping to avoid potential research duplication.

### ***Vision***

Our vision for the Hub is to develop an internationally recognized research and innovation centre for the collation, generation, and dissemination of research on gender equity and sport. The Hub will consist of an inclusive network of scholars and practitioners from across the country who are engaged in the advancement of an egalitarian and equitable Canadian sport system.

### ***Commitments of the Hub***

The Hub will exemplify the following commitments in its structure and functions:

**Intersectionality.** Originating from Black feminist scholarship, the concept of 'intersectionality', here defined as "intersectional oppression [that] arises out of the combination of various oppressions which, together, produce something unique and distinct from any one form of discrimination standing alone...", will form the foundation of the Hub's work. An intersectional approach considers the historical, social, and political context and recognizes the unique experience of the individual based on the

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intersection of all relevant grounds such as race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and ethnicity. This approach allows the naming of overlapping systems of oppression, and the particular experience of discrimination, based on the confluence of grounds involved, to be acknowledged and remedied. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society.

Given the core value of intersectionality, the Hub uses the nomenclature of Gender+ Equity to represent the Hub, with the «+» signaling the focus on gender plus other social identities.

**Partnerships with Research Collaborators across Canada.** To fully realize the potential of the Hub, numerous researchers across Canada, within and outside of sport, will be engaged. Further, to ensure the sustainability of the Hub, special initiatives to engage and support emerging scholars will be prioritized.

**Commitment to Engagement by Members of the Sport Community.** Achieving the priorities identified by Sport Canada for the Hub requires members of the sport community to be embedded in the structures and functions of the Hub, from the development of the research agenda to the determination of research questions and the dissemination of research findings.

**Commitment to Partnerships with Key Stakeholders.** Given the significant contributions to gender equity of several existing sport organizations, in terms of monitoring, education, research, mentoring, and knowledge dissemination, the Hub will engage with key stakeholders in the sport community.

**Commitment to Innovation.** A key focus of the Hub will be innovative responses to research questions and persistent problems. Through the establishment of Innovation Labs housed across Canada, researchers and practitioners in the sport sector will come together to engage a wide range of stakeholders in problem-solving activities. The Labs aim to create breakthrough, out-of-the-box solutions to major challenges of the present and the future, addressing problems too big for any one organization to solve on its own. Such Labs intend to develop tangible solutions, not just ideas, so they are “application-oriented” and “dedicated to the development of real solutions.”

**Commitment to the Systematic Use and Application of the Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) framework.** All of the projects we initiate, lead, or support will be required to integrate a GBA+ framework. As such, the GBA+ framework will be applied to each step in the data production, analysis, and dissemination process.

**Commitment to Bilingual Operations and Products.** All of the work of the Hub will be available in both official languages.

### **Conceptual Framework of the Research Hub**

The Hub is organized conceptually into two themes: participation and leadership.

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Participation refers to the engagement of girls and women and gender-diverse individuals as participants in high quality programs at all levels of sport, from the recreational or local club levels to provincial and national sport.

Leadership refers to women in positions such as coaching, officiating, and sports administration at local, provincial, and national levels. These two main themes address two of the four priorities of the FPT Working Group on Girls and Women in Sport: addressing the gaps in participation and leadership. The other two priorities of the Working Group – inadequate media coverage and gender-based violence - will be examined as barriers under the two main themes. For example, extensive research has shown that continual underrepresentation and often demeaning representation of women in the sport media may be a barrier to sport participation and leadership. Moreover, gender-based violence, particularly discrimination, homophobia, sexual harassment, and psychological violence has been shown to negatively affect girls and women’s participation and leadership in sport and the quality of their experiences.

The Hub will build databases of research associated with these two main themes and commission, carry out, and/or support research projects that attempt to answer the perplexing questions associated with these themes. A key role of the Hub will be to summarize the best-available research evidence on measures to reduce gender inequality in Canada.

## **RESEARCH THEMES**

### **Girls’, Women, and Gender-Diverse Individuals’ Sport Participation**

There are no population data on the participation of genders beyond the binary in sport. Current data consistently show lower rates of participation in sport by girls and women, and a much higher and earlier drop-out rate from sport participation by girls, particularly those of intersecting identities. Together, the findings from various surveys indicate that during childhood, girls participate in sport at equal or lesser rates compared with boys. Participation rates for girls in childhood vary from 59% to 77%. Childhood sport participation is important for several health-related benefits and for predicting adult sport participation; if a girl does not participate in sport by the age of 10, there is only a 10% likelihood that she will be physically active as an adult.

Binary gender differences in participation rates become especially apparent in adolescence. As girls enter adolescence, their overall participation rates drop by 22% and school sport participation drops by almost 26%. The 2020 Rally Report indicated that while 1/10 boys drop out of sport by late adolescence, 1/3 girls drop out in the same life stage.

In 2018, only 25% of Canadians 18 years of age and older reported participating in sport – higher participation rates were found for men and those with higher household incomes. Furthermore, the overall trend in participation rates in organized sports by

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those 15 years of age and older has been decreasing from 45% of the population in 1992, to 34% in 1998, to 28% in 2005, to 26% in 2010, to 27% in 2016.

Currently, there is a glaring absence of data on the participation rates of gender-diverse people, girls, and women who identify as racialized or Indigenous. We commit to remedying these omissions through the work of the Hub.

### **Women's Participation in Sport Leadership**

There are no data on sport leadership of genders beyond the binary.

Current data consistently show lower percentages of women in leadership positions in sport coaching, officiating, management, and administration. In Canada's post-secondary educational institutions, the majority of athletic directors and presidents within U Sport and their respective affiliate organizations are men, with only 21% of these positions occupied by women. Among the active athletic directors of all member colleges within the Canadian Collegiate Athletics Association, only 27% of these positions are held by women. While there is a stronger presence of women administrative leaders (but not coaches) at both national sport organizations and multisport organizations, it is troubling that the percentages are so low within universities and colleges given that they constitute influential components of the sport system and are leaders in achieving equity in many other areas.

It is even more discouraging with respect to coaches. According to data collected by the Government of Canada in 2015, women coaches comprise no more than 25% of coaches at all levels of sport. At the U Sport level in 2017, the 1,021 varsity sport teams were equally divided between men's and women's teams (511 women's teams and 510 men's teams). However, of these 1,021 teams, there were only 122 women head coaches. The percentage of women coaches in U Sport is decreasing, from 19% reported in 2011 to 17% in 2013 to 16% in 2015 and 2017. At higher competitive levels, these figures are just as, if not more, concerning. According to data collected by Sport Canada, across 54 Canadian national teams, both men's and women's teams, only 16% of all head coaches are women. At the international level, only 11% of coaches representing Canada at the most recent 2018 Olympic Winter Games were women, while 17% of coaches at the 2016 Olympic Games were women. This is despite the fact that Canada's Olympic teams are closely balanced in terms of the numbers of men and women athletes.

Within sport organization boards, 39% of the membership and 28% of the leadership positions are held by women; 42% of national level sport organizations have women as CEOs, but 1 in 5 organizations has no women in senior staff roles. Again, data are lacking regarding intersecting systems of oppression with regards to gender+ identities in sport leadership.

### **Influence of the Pandemic on Gender Equity in Canadian Sport**

Although the Hub's mandate was established before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, its effects of are such that the Hub's work on gender+ equity must consider pandemic-

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related implications. The occurrence of the pandemic has exacerbated gender+ inequities within and outside of sport. The gendered nature of its impacts in Canada include, for example, the fact that among the binary genders, women are more likely than men to have lost their jobs since the start of the crisis; quarantines have had additional consequences in care and domestic responsibilities with a higher likelihood of women being the sole providers of childcare; women report substantially higher rates of domestic violence and poorer mental health during the pandemic than men. Further, the financial impact of the pandemic has been most profound for women and gender-expansive people and on Indigenous, recently immigrated, and racialized women in particular. Gender-diverse people were more likely (14.6%) to have reported losing their job as a result of the pandemic than women (8.6%) or men (7.7%), and a higher proportion of gender-diverse people (39.5% versus 23.5% female and 23.8% male) reported a 'moderate' or 'major' impact on their abilities to meet financial obligations or essential needs. Additionally, gender-diverse people reported the poorest mental health of all gender groups with close to 70% describing their mental health as 'fair' or 'poor'.

Significant concerns exist about gender+ equity being lost as a priority as sport returns post-pandemic in a financially constrained context. Champions of gender+ equity in Canadian sport and worldwide fear that opportunities to 'build [sport] back better' will be missed in favour of economic gains.

## **RESEARCH PRIORITIES**

Longitudinal Data. The Hub will collect annual data on gender+ participation and leadership across the Canadian sport system. These datasets will be made available to researchers and sport organizations.

Understanding the Nature of Experiences. The Hub's research will seek to understand and address the nature of the experiences of women and girls and gender diverse individuals in different sporting roles, including athletes, parents, coaches, referees, administrators, spectators and/or sport journalists and in different levels/forms of sport participation such as recreation, dance, competition, and high-performance.

Evaluation of Programs/Interventions. Despite Canada's long history of designing and implementing a variety of initiatives to advance gender equity in sport, we lack a confident sense of the impact and effectiveness of these efforts. The Hub will seek to fill the gap in our knowledge about which do and do not work and why.

Transforming to a Gender+ Inclusive Sport System. The Hub will engage in and solicit research that transforms the current sport system in order to achieve the goal of gender equity in sport by 2035.

### **Knowledge Transfer**

The Hub is committed to Knowledge Transfer (KTE) as one of its key deliverables. To publish research alone is not enough to have an impact on the issue of gender equity in

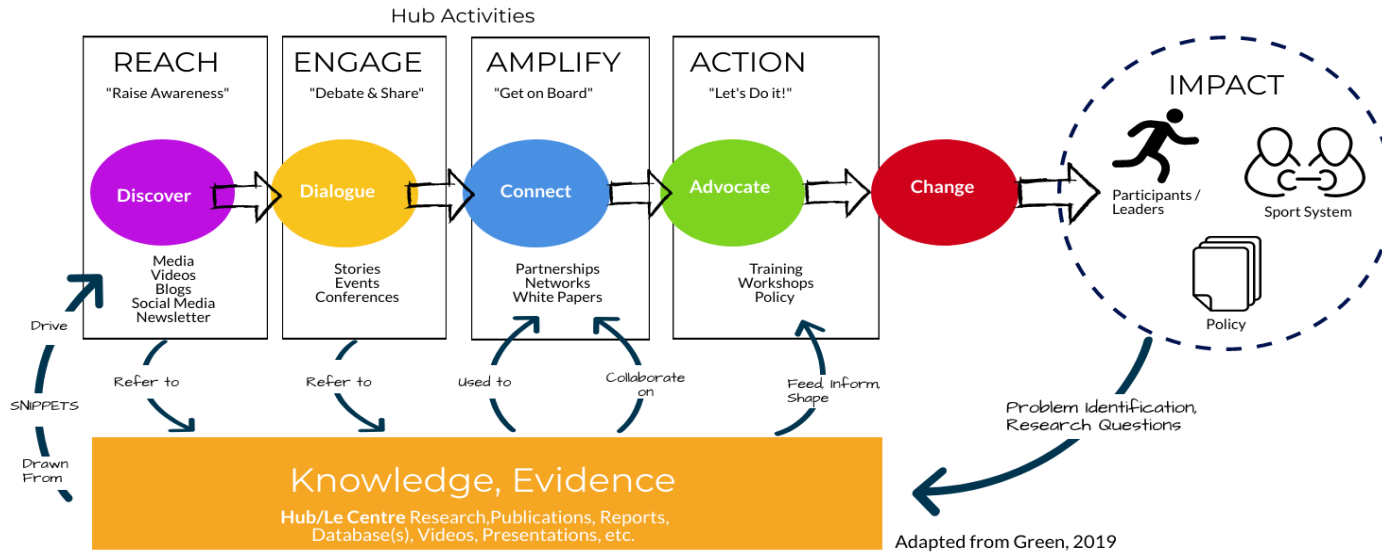
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Canadian sport. In the Hub, we will use the process outlined in the diagram below to guide our KTE activities ensure maximum impact of our activities. The ultimate outcome of these activities will be to transfer research outcomes to affect change in the system itself and for participants, leaders and policy makers within the system. This process to generate impact will be used as the framework for developing the Hub Communication and KTE plan.



**Framework for developing the Hub Communication and KTE plan**

# Hub/ Le Centre Generating Impact



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## Conclusion

Sport Canada's initiative to establish the Gender+ Equity in Sport Research Hub presents an important and unique opportunity for researchers and practitioners to work together to advance gender+ equity in sport participation and leadership. Through the generation, curation, and dissemination of knowledge throughout the Canadian scientific and sport communities, the Hub will make significant contributions to achieving the goal of gender+ equity by 2035.

References available upon request.

## About the Authors

**Gretchen Kerr**, PhD is a full professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education and Vice-Dean of Programs and Innovation, School of Graduate Studies, at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on gender-based violence and advancing gender equity in Canadian sport. Gretchen was the senior author of Canada's first national prevalence study of maltreatment among current and former national team members and was the subject matter expert in the development of the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment. For over 30 years, she has served as a volunteer athlete welfare officer for sport organizations. Recently she was awarded the first Canadian Gender+ Equity in Sport Research Hub where she serves as a co-director.

**Guylaine Demers**, a full professor at Laval University, has promoted gender equality in sport for most of her life. Over the years, she has become the go-to leader, researcher, and advocate for issues of women's education and gender equity in Quebec and Canadian sport. Dr. Demers is a recipient of the IOC women and sport award for the Americas that acknowledges her tremendous contribution to the advancement of women in sport. She continues to facilitate pan-Canadian solutions for building a more inclusive sport culture. A recent achievement was being awarded the first Canadian Gender+ Equity in Sport Research Hub following a national competition. She is now one of the Hub's co-directors.

**Ann Pegoraro** is the Lang Chair in Sport Management and is currently a full professor in the School of Hospitality, Food, and Tourism, at the University of Guelph. She is also a co-director of the Canadian Gender Equity in Sport Research Hub. A strong professional skilled in Applied Research, Partnership Development, Digital Media, Gender Equity, Non-profit Organizations, and Sport Consumer Behavior. Dr. Pegoraro's research focuses mainly on sport consumers, marketing, and communication, including how different forms of media are used to establish connections with consumers of sport at all levels from amateur to professional. Her recent work in digital media and innovation is focused on analytics, gender, and diversity.

**Debra Kriger** (she/her; MPH, PhD) is a Research Associate at the Gender+ Equity in Sport in Canada Research Hub. Much of her current work involves advising on the

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operationalization of the concept of intersectionality in research. She originated life-sculpting methods through her CIHR-funded doctoral research on embodied health risk and is interested in developing understandings of embodiment over time. Debra believes strongly in grassroots sports and plays recreationally with several queer leagues.

**Amélie Keyser-Verreault** (she/her; Ph.D.) is a Research Associate at the Gender+ Equity in Sport in Canada Research Hub. Her current work for the Hub includes advising on the operationalization of the concept of intersectionality in research and also on gender-inclusive writing practices in French. She conducts research on body politics and gender with a focus on body beautification and body size discrimination, neoliberalism, resistance, and sports participation. Her research has been acknowledged by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Joseph-Armand Bombardier Ph.D. Scholarship and other national and international funding organizations.