

Brighton Declaration: Its Impact on Irish Sport, 10 years on

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Introduction

An international conference entitled 'Women, Sport and the Challenge of Change', was held in Brighton, England during May 1994. This conference led to The Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport and was subsequently followed by conferences in Windhoek (1998) and Montreal (2002). The Brighton conference specifically focused on the issue of how to accelerate a process of change to rectify the imbalances faced by women in their involvement in sport and their under-representation in sports leadership, particularly at the higher levels. The main aim arising from this conference was to develop a sporting culture that would both enable and value the full involvement of women in every aspect of sport. Those responsible for decision and policy making within sporting organisations were encouraged to develop policies and programmes and also design structures aimed at increasing the number of females involved in sports leadership. The Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport was adopted by participating governmental and non-governmental organisations including an Irish representation. The Sports Council for Wales has had since 1998 a Women and Girls Action Plan in effect. Sport England (the English Sports Council) in conjunction with the Women's Sports Foundation developed a formal National Action Plan based on the principles of the Brighton Declaration. Gender targets are inbuilt into all programmes with grants conditional on equity targets being set and met. The Australian Sports Commission has developed two extensive Federal Government policies focusing on National Policy and Strategies for increasing female activity levels and participation in sport, as well as a Management and Leadership Programme, resulting in the implementation of a mentor programme for women in sport. The Hungarian Parliament enacted a Law of Sport in Dec 2000, which required decision-making and controlling committees to raise the participation of women to 30% by 2003 and 35% by 2004. The question posed in this paper is, what has happened in Irish Sport?

The purpose of this research was to assess the impact of the Brighton Declaration on Irish National Governing Bodies of Sport.

The research set out to contrast the two sample years (1994 and 2004) and to examine (i) membership levels per gender (ii) gender representation on Executive Committees and in the top three positions on Executive Committees (iii) policy and programme provision for increasing female participation in sport and in leadership roles (2004) (iv) the level of direction/guidance given by (a) the Irish Government and (b) the Irish Sports Council to National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) on the issue of increasing female involvement in leadership positions in Irish sport.

Project / Methodology

The research was conducted on National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of Irish Sport, which were affiliated to the Federation of Irish Sport. The data were collected by means of a questionnaire. The questionnaire sought information on male and female membership levels, gender composition of the executive committees, voluntary / professional composition of the executive committees, presence of a strategy document, and the presence of policy and programmes for increasing female participation. The completed questionnaire also provided useful data regarding policy and programme development for increasing female participation in leadership roles in Irish Sport.

The contents Government and ISC sports strategy were reviewed, to assess the level of guidance given to National Governing Bodies of Sport, in relation to increasing female participation in leadership roles in Irish Sport.

Results

Preliminary results indicated the following

- While a sizable number of NGBs have opened their sport up to female membership, since 1994, approximately 50% of NGBs still have a predominantly male membership (male membership >75% of total membership).
- Amalgamation has occurred of some single sex NGBs, into a consolidated NGB representing a sport.
- In general female representation at Executive Committee level of the NGBs or within the top three positions within the NGBs has not changed.
- All NGBs either have or were in the process of developing a strategy document.
- Approximately 50% of the NGBs have a *policy* for increasing female participation, but fewer organisations actually have programmes for doing so.
- Approximately 25% of the NGBs have a policy for increasing female involvement in leadership, with some having implemented programmes for doing so.
- A Government strategic document published in 1996 (Targeting Sporting Change in Ireland) acknowledged a marked absence of women at decision-making levels in Irish Sport and included recommendations to address the issue. However subsequent Government Strategy does not seem to have made provision for the development of policy and programmes for increasing female participation in leadership roles.

Discussion

Female participation levels in sport have increased nearly two-fold in Ireland since 1994. This could in part have been influenced by the fact that approximately 50% of NGBs have policy designed to increase female participation. However no noticeable change has occurred in female representation at Executive Committee level or in the top three positions within NGBs. This may reflect the fact that approximately only 25% of NGBs have policy relating to increasing female participation in decision-making positions. Substantial changes have occurred in Irish Sport since the 1996 Government Strategy Document 'Targeting Sporting Change in Ireland'. A Government Department with a central brief for sport was established in 1997. The Irish Sports Council (ISC) was established in 1999 as a statutory body with the mission to 'plan, lead and coordinate the sustainable development of competitive and recreational sport in Ireland' (ISC Sport for Life, 2003). The ISC controls much of the Irish Governmental funding allocations to NGBs through core funding (mainstream) and challenge funding (additional funding for specific incentives). The ISC has the power to suspend funding, if there are governance / financial or other irregularities apparent within an NGB. The ISC acknowledges the increasing challenge for sports organisations to attract, train and retain volunteers and has among its values, that sport should be all-inclusive. However it does not seem to have a current policy on promoting female participation in the decision-making levels of Irish sport, hence providing little incentive for change within NGBs. The ISC has in its current strategy included provision for research to assess the level of voluntarism in sport and to identify the factors impacting on voluntary behaviour. By combining this research, with an organisational analysis as suggested by Hall (1996) and Hargreaves (1994), of how NGBs operate, how they make policy and how national and international policy processes influence or are influenced by them, then action can be taken to make sport more accessible to women. This should clarify some of the challenges facing the various NGBs and help inform and guide future policy-making. Leaders of these organisations commonly fail to recognise or acknowledge that their own long established procedures and practices, created in the main by all-male groups for all-male sport, actually prevent women from making the contribution which their sports participation merits, (Hargreaves, 1994).

All NGBs indicated that they either had or were in the process of developing a strategic plan. While this is progress, it may also restrain increasing female participation as it instigates some level of organisational change. Where existing stakeholders do their best to protect, defend and secure their positions of power they may resist change, and hence leaders of organisations may effectively marginalize considerations of gender equity, (Abrams and Talbot, 1995; Talbot, 2001). Macintosh and Whitson (1990) give examples of gender dynamics, of sports organisations and warn that rational planning approaches tend to render

invisible commitment to sports equity. Slack and Hinings (1987) stated that moving away from gentlemen's clubs and kitchen table organisations, towards rationally planned organisations, can further restrict women's opportunities and reduce awareness of gender equity requirements. It has been acknowledged that traditional patriarchal practices are slow to change (Bramham, 1991). Change is unlikely to happen unless national level policy makers within Irish sport specifically address the issue of female representation at decision-making levels of Irish Sport. The Australian experience has indicated that unless such policy change is also tied into government funding, it is even more difficult to implement such strategies. Therefore direction is needed from national level sport policy makers to NGBs with reference to increasing female participation at decision-making level in Irish sport and this should be supported by appropriate funding incentives.

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