

## **Women, Sport, Participation And Leadership: Establishing A Canadian Call To Action**

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In this collaborative, nation-wide study, the researchers examined the status and challenges of girls and women's participation in sport in Canada including linkages to leadership, and identified actions to support lifelong participation in sport. This work was informed through analysis of extensive academic work, media data, national organization reports, industry studies, sport stakeholder surveys, census data, and consultations with leading female sport experts in the field. A primary survey of sport leaders added important context, and helped to define implications to improve the state of girls and women's participation and influence in sport.

Much has been written over the past twenty-five years about the important linkages in sport between girls and women and leadership — and the consequential management impact of this synergy on the industry (EY, 2014; Greenhill, Auld, Cuskelly, & Hooper, 2009; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Kotschwar & Moran, 2015; and WSF, 2015) — but yet, for a number of socio-managerial factors, maintaining female engagement and influence in sport is still of paramount concern for the health and well-being of the field. Thus, the purpose of this work was to broadly examine the challenges and opportunities for girls and women to remain engaged in sport. Further, this work provides sustainable implications and a 'call for action' for lifelong female sport leadership in the field, including in senior management positions.

The researchers used secondary and primary sources to identify and articulate the numerous hurdles that girls and women face in sport participation and leadership. Secondary research included a review of over 75 academic articles, and 25 industry reports, as well as an analysis of media data, national sport organizations, annual reports, sport stakeholder surveys and census data. A review of traditional and new media, including television, national print media and event viewership/attendance added data about the attention and exposure of women's sport in Canada.

To add to the secondary analysis, the researchers initiated a bilingual online survey that was broadly distributed to a network of female sport leaders. Responses, in English and French, were received from 657 female sport leaders with wide-ranging experience in contact and non-contact sports across Canada, in roles as athletes, officials, coaches and administrators from the grassroots, high-performance and professional sport world. Analysis of the survey results, via SPSS, helped the researchers identify trends, relationships and comparisons among variables. A qualitative analysis of open-ended questions added depth to the findings and identified core themes based on the female sport leaders' perceptions of the major challenges that girls and women face in initiating and maintaining sport participation and leadership roles. A particular focus on the related influences related toward identifying and prioritizing action plans at the system-wide, community and individual levels was also examined and presented.

Despite the wide-ranging evidence of the benefits of sport, the decision for girls to play sport and continue playing is frequently influenced by social pressures from parents, guardians and peers. Over the past 20 years in Canada, female participation in sport has continued to decline. As girls reach adulthood, more and more stop playing sports with only 16% of adult women reporting sport participation. Further, the proportion of female leaders in sport in Canadian is very low — at a national average ranging from ten to twelve percent — in line with international statistics (EY Report/ESPNW, 2014) and this small presence in relation to males in comparable roles may impact girls and women's sport participation. A number of previous studies have addressed the drivers of this gender imbalance in sport leadership, reporting that it is influenced largely by social factors with women facing gender discrimination as they progress in leadership and coaching roles. From our study, we will reveal that despite many advances in recent decades, a number of structural factors still exist in sport, such as equal opportunity for female sport participation in a school setting, gender bias, and the lack of transparent sport policies for inclusivity; and we further explore how this sport participation translates to sport leadership in the senior ranks. This work progresses the understanding of the challenges of retention for girls and women in sport and further provides an analysis of the implications of the influence of females who stay engaged and involved in the sport system as leaders in their field. Future directions of this study include a greater understanding of the gap between early opportunities for girls in sport and socio-managerial factors which support leadership; as well as broad 'knowledge transfer' insights with regard to the importance of female leadership for the 'next generation' sport management industry.

## References

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