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Lifelong Female Engagement in Sport

A Framework for Advancing Girls' and Women's Participation

Norm O'Reilly

Michelle Brunette

Cheri Bradish

Abstract

In a collaborative and nationwide project, the authors examined the status and challenges of girls' and women's participation in sport in Canada through a comprehensive literature review, extensive secondary research, a representative survey with Canadian females, and a survey and consultations with leading female sport experts. This multi-level analysis led to the development of a framework for advancing girls' and women's participation in sport to guide stakeholders' actions at the system, organization, and individual levels to improve the state of girls' and women's lifelong engagement in sport.

Keywords: *Barriers, female athletes, physical activity, sport participation, women*

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Canadian women play leading roles in work and family life, but fewer and fewer are maintaining lifelong roles as engaged sport participants (Asztalos et al., 2013; CAAWS, 2016; Dwyer et al., 2006; Donnelly, Norman, & Kidd, 2013). In this collaborative project, we situate the status and challenges of Canadian girls' and women's participation in sport and identify actions to increase lifelong participation, through consultations with the Dairy Farmers of Canada (DFC)¹, DFC's agency–The T1 Agency (T1), the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS), and a sport leader advisory group (see Appendix A). We begin by describing the landscape, then provide an action-oriented framework for sport organizations and stakeholders to inspire girls and women, regardless of age or ability, in local communities across Canada for lifetime engagement in sport.

Girls and women who participate regularly in sport are defined as those who participate in sport at least once a week during a sport season or throughout the year (Statistics Canada, 2013). Participation in any of the many types of sports, from individual sport pursuits, recreational team sports, and physical activity pursued for pleasure, can contribute to building and maintaining healthy and active lifestyles. The top sports played by girls and women is available in Table 1.

Table 1

The Top Organized Sports for Canadian Females (Statistics Canada, 2013)

<u>Girls</u>	<u>Women</u>
Swimming (20%)	Golf (15%)
Dance (17%)	Soccer (12%)
Ballet (9%)	Volleyball (9%)
Gymnastics (9%)	

Previous research points to three main benefits of sport participation: physical (e.g., improved bone mass density), psychological (e.g., decreased risk of depression and anxiety, improved mood, greater sense of identity, self-esteem, etc.), and social (e.g., opportunities for leadership development, undermining traditional gender norms, higher success in other areas, etc.) (Auld, Cuskelly, & Hooper, 2009; Colley et al., 2011; Dwyer et al., 2006; Fenton, Kopelow, & Lawrence, 2009; Kerr, 2009; Mulholland, 2008; Norman, 2010; Women's Sport Foundation, 2015). Given these benefits, maintaining lifelong female engagement in sport remains a paramount concern for the health and well-being of the field and its stakeholders (Auld, CAAWS, 2016; Cuskelly & Hooper, 2009; Colley et al., 2011; Dwyer et al., 2006).

¹DFC supported the study in partnership with CAAWS due to their interest in health, wellness, and the female marketplace in Canada. Although DFC provided resources and secondary data, they were not involved in the analysis or the writing of this paper. DFC is also very involved in the Champion's Fund, which aims to support and empower Canadian female athletes.

Method

To describe the landscape of Canadian girls and women in sport, the researchers used secondary and primary sources to situate the numerous barriers to sport participation. Following an extensive search by the authors, partners, and advisory board, it is important to note that there is limited data available post-2010 on the landscape. As such, multiple methods were employed. For the secondary research, although only the previous work expressly referred to in this paper is included as references, the sources reviewed included over 75 academic articles and 25 industry studies.² Further data was received via an analysis of media data (i.e., an annual study of National Sport Organizations, sport stakeholder surveys, and Census data. A review of traditional and new media, including television, national print media, and event viewership/attendance added context about the exposure of women's sport in Canada.

The primary research component of the study was a survey of leaders in Canadian sport to gather their insights and views on the barriers, media implications, and potential solutions to low physical activity levels. The survey was administered online and was distributed, using a snowball sampling technique via the contacts of the authors, CAAWS, the advisory board, and other sport organizations, such as National Sport Organizations (NSOs) and Multi-Sport Organizations (MSOs). The snowball sampling technique used personal contacts (email) and social media (organization sites and individual sites) to recruit participants. A series of demographic questions was asked to screen out those who were not qualified for the sample, based on a definition of leader developed by the authors and the advisory group. Examples of leaders include senior administrator, head coach, athletic director, board chair, and general manager. The survey was offered in a bilingual format (English and French). Responses were received from 657 female sport leaders (55% English, 45% French) with wide-ranging experience in contact and noncontact sports across Canada. Participants included athletes (33%), coaches (20%), managers/administrators (18%), and other (officials, board members and academics) (18%), with an average age of 40.5 years and average of 17 years of sport experience.

Quantitative analysis of the survey responses and qualitative analysis of open-ended questions identified trends and core themes and added depth to the findings, based on the female sport leaders' perceptions of the major challenges that girls and women face in participating and maintaining sport participation and leadership roles in Canada. CAAWS and the advisory group helped clarify and contextualize the findings, with attention toward identifying and prioritizing action plans at the system-wide, community and individual levels.

²Contact the authors if you would like any of the reference information for the studies and reports not included specifically in this paper.

Study Outcomes: State of Girls and Women's Sport Participation

Research pointed to a consistent pattern: across all demographics, Canadian females consistently participate in sport at lower rates than males, with a continual decline observed generation over generation (Allison, Dwyer, & Makin, 1999; Dwyer et al., 2006; Greenhill, Auld, Cuskelly, & Hooper, 2009).

Sport from Child to Adulthood

In Canada, Statistics Canada (2013) reported that 59% of girls aged 3–17 years participated in sport, with girls three times more likely than boys to prefer individual and creative forms of sport, such as dance, ballet, gymnastics and trampoline. Girls who play sports were more likely to continue to be physically active as adults, with only 10% of those who are inactive as girls being active as adult women (Colley et al., 2010; Kjønniksen, Anderssen, & Wold, 2009). However, there are significant declines in sport participation in the transition to adolescence, with a sharper decline in teen girls' participation rates than boys (Allison & Makin, 1999; Statistics Canada, 2013). As girls enter adolescence, their overall participation rate drops by 22% (Solutions Research Group, 2014), and school sport participation drops by almost 26% (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2010). Girls are often discouraged when they feel they lack competence or fundamental skills in sport, or when they do not find value in the sport (Guillet, Sarrazin, Fontayne, & Brustad, 2006). At the adult level, female participation continues to decline, with only 16% of adult women participating in sport in 2010, compared to 35% of males, a significant decline from 1992 when 40% of women reported sport participation (Statistics Canada, 2013).

Social Influences

Despite the wide-ranging evidence of the benefits of sport, survey respondents reported that the decision for girls to play sport, and continue playing, is frequently influenced by social pressures from parents, guardians, and peers. Specifically, sport leaders reported peer influence, and a lack of social support, encouragement, positive role models, self-confidence, and money as the top reasons why adolescent girls stop participating. These findings align with female sport barriers identified in the literature (see Dwyer et al., 2006). Industry studies also note the social pressure to drop out of sports can outweigh the encouragement many girls are getting (Women's Sport Foundation, 2015). One respondent noted, "There are old-fashioned attitudes of established sports organizations that favor boys over girls, and perceptions of certain sports not being 'feminine,'" while another stated, "Girls still believe sports are for boys. Coaches pay way more attention to boys than girls."

Study Outcomes: Barriers to Girls and Women's Sport Participation

Increased support is imperative in getting girls to play (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2010; Women's Sport Foundation, 2015), as girls and women face competing priorities, a lack of positive role models and media attention.

Competing Priorities

Although this research is specific to the Canadian context, it is important to note that a body of literature exists of social-cultural studies that demonstrate the challenge that competing priorities create in a variety of life (e.g., career) and sport (e.g., coaching) contexts, including when gender (e.g., role as a mother) is a variable of interest (Bruening & Dixon, 2008). Some important aspect of this body of literature that are relevant to this research include (i) that any person's priorities shift throughout their life/career (Cabrera, 2007), and (ii) that these priorities often differ by gender (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). Specific to sport, scholars suggest that socially defined gender roles influence women's career trajectories (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Further, a few studies have focused on samples of successful female sport administrators (i.e., CEO, Athletic Administration) finding that there are many historical, cultural, and nuanced impacts on women in these roles (Shaw & Leberman, 2015), such as the finding that prior to Title IX and its anti-discrimination policies, women in senior positions had lower career ambitions (Dabbs, Graham, & Dixon, 2016).

The leader survey pointed to insights into why rates are in decline, with the most common barriers being lack of time (29%), lack of interest (28%), and other uncertain barriers (17%). One participant put it this way: "Even as a former athlete with strong beliefs about the importance of sport, I have to say I struggle just to find the time, more than my husband...This goes deeper than sport. It's about women's roles and responsibilities needing change." Another respondent noted that "sport means balancing a career with sport, family life, having kids, the time commitment, giving up a social life."

Role Models

Survey respondents suggested that role models, such as female athletes, are important to demonstrate that success in sports is attainable, and can provide girls the confidence they need to overcome the many challenges of lifelong participation, yet inspirational role models are not well positioned through media and an overall lack of social acceptance of female sport still exists. The media study showed that only 4% of sport television programming in Canada was focused on female sport, with another 11% dedicated to sport that included both males and females.

In terms of practical action, respondents noted that although female role models are important, the encouragement of girls in sport needs to come from both female and male role models (e.g., coaches, teachers, and elite athletes) who understand the emotional, psychosocial, and physical changes that girls

experience and the many challenges they face in their continued participation. One female sport leader emphasized, “My biggest concern is the lack of attention on male coaches” while many others stressed a systemic lack of encouragement from family, peers, and schools.

Media Exposure and Attendance

Female sport continues to draw much lower levels of media interest and exposure than male sport. An analysis of 35,000 hours of sports programming in Canada’s primary national sport networks, in both French and English, dedicated only 4% of coverage to women’s sports and only 11% to sport that featured both genders. Similarly, a review of front pages of the Saturday Sport section in two of Canada’s highest-circulation national newspapers, found low media attention to women in sport. From June 2008 to May 2010, and June 2013 to May 2015, there were infrequent instances of coverage of women’s sport (24%) and an overall small portion of total coverage dedicated to women’s sport (5.1%).

Sport leaders emphasized (96%) that it is the quality of media exposure that should be stressed, which does not trivialize the athletic achievement of women or perpetuate existing, and harmful, stereotypes. Quality exposure can lead to increased participation rates and also help female athletes attract corporate sponsorship. One respondent noted that “highlights are always about men, reinforcing the thinking that girls can’t be active.” Another summarized that “there is not enough celebrating great [female] athletics to the masses. I have to go looking for it.”

Female sporting competitions in Canada also attract lower attendance relative to venue capacity. In Canadian-held events from 2007-2015, male competitions consistently attracted higher rates of attendance, with one exception being Canada’s national women’s curling event, the 2015 Scotties Tournament of Hearts, which surpassed attendance at the men’s Tim Horton’s Brier. In terms of viewership, however, female events can attract large audiences such as the 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup Quarter Final Match (3,200,000 viewers) and Sochi Women’s Hockey Final (3,079,700 viewers).

Sport Leaders Perspectives and the Realities Facing Canadian Women

Through open-ended questions, sport leaders were able to provide deeper insight into the challenges to female sport participation, with the leading themes being the predominant culture of sport (23.1%), financial implications (20.4%), access to sport (18.1%), alternate demands on time (14.3%), and sharing the sport experience (i.e., limited female coaches and role models) (11.6%). Of note, peer/parental influence (3.8%) and the media (2.9%) were reported as lower barriers to participation which differs from previous studies (Dwyer et al., 2006; Women’s Sport Foundation, 2015).

Since the experiences of female sport leaders may be different than average Canadian females, their response were compared to data from an online survey of

a representative sample of regionally diverse Canadian 25- to 54-year-old women commissioned by DFC in April 2015. The women in the latter group responded yes or no when asked if they perceived the barriers listed in Table 2 as impactful to the participation of females in sport.

Table 2*Barriers to Girls and Women's Sport Participation*

<u>Hurdle</u>	<u>Identify One Area to Focus</u>		<u>Average Reponse (1-5 Scale)</u>	
	<u>Score (%)</u>	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Score (%)</u>	<u>Rank</u>
Insufficient funding	19.7	1	3.47	3
Lack of female-led instruction	10.6	2	3.16	8
Lack of media interest/coverage	9.1	3	3.48	2
Lack of exposure to women's/girls' sport	7.8	4	3.44	4
Lack of awareness among the public	7.6	5	-	-
Not enough quality facilities for staging events	6.2	6	2.83	13
Other	6	7	-	-
Lack of opportunity to participate	6	8	3.05	9
Lack of knowledge of how to get involved	6	9	3.25	6
Lack of social acceptance of women/girls in sport	5.7	10	2.84	12
Lack of financial incentive to pursue a career in sport	4	11	3.69	1
Lack of interest among the public	3.2	12	3.24	7
Lack of interest among the public	3	13	2.82	14
Fear of social criticism	2.8	14	2.98	11
Lack of inspirational role models	2.3	15	2.65	15
Sexism/discrimination against women	-		3.32	5
Friends do not participate in sport	-		2.16	16
It is not fun	-		3.02	10
There are many sedentary alternatives				

The comparative results add to the barriers facing female sport participation. The perceptions of female sport leaders and the perceptions of the female public each positioned insufficient funding among the top challenge to female sport participation, with funding ranked as the number-one priority area.

Discussion

Overcoming the challenges that girls and women face in sport relies on action from all stakeholders, at the (i) system, (ii) organization, and (iii) individual level. System-wide challenges are the structural or cultural barriers that exist across the country, including a male-dominated sport culture, lack of role models/media interest, and negative perceptions about female sport. Second, challenges at the organization level include responsibility residing locally with teams, leagues, and

communities which directly connect with sport participants. Organization barriers included, declining participation in leagues and teams, limited access, and lack of sports that fit with girls' and women's interests and abilities. Third, individual challenges are unique to girls and women in Canada including competing demands on time, lack of interest and parent/peer support, and financial limitations. The three challenges are interrelated, with structural challenges impacting teams, local initiatives, and decisions to participate in sport.

A Framework for Advancing Girls and Women's Participation in Sport

By examining the landscape of Canadian female sport participation, including barriers, and consulting broadly, the authors are able to propose a framework with specific recommendations by stakeholder to increase lifelong female engagement. All stakeholders need to engage in this agenda to support a sport environment that is diverse, welcoming and fun. In the framework (Table 3), actions are identified at the System-wide level to inspire a positive culture for girls and women in sport, and at the Organization level and Individual level to facilitate and encourage girls and women to prioritize sport in their own lives.

Table 3 was developed based on the input of the interviews on the solutions questions, as well as learning from the secondary research and the literature review. Only specific tactics that could be implemented were considered. These actions were grouped and themed based on their scope as system-wide (i.e., across the country, for all stakeholders), organization level (i.e., within a given organization), or individual (i.e., things that any individual could do). For example, the system-wide action "Advocate for media guidelines that increase the percentage of women's sport in the media" is included based largely on three results. First, the lack of media interest in women's sport was identified as a barrier (mean: 3.48 on scale of 5). Second, when asked if the current media coverage of women's sport impacts the participation of women and girls in sport, 43% think it would hinder, 44% believe it helps, and 13% think no impact, suggesting a bimodal distribution. Finally, in the open-ended question asking for suggested solutions, there were 51 mentions of media.

Moving Forward: Lifelong Participation

Girls and women of all ages and backgrounds face structural and behavioural challenges to maintaining roles in sport (Asztalos et al., 2013; Donnelly, Norman, & Kidd, 2013; Dwyer et al., 2006). From a sport participation point of view, we are nearing crisis mode. This was the impetus for this multi-level study, aiming to identify the challenges and, most importantly, provide a roadmap in the form of recommendations for future action by stakeholders. The framework is developed based on our results and consultations to overcome identified barriers.

We advocate that responsibility for advancing female sport in Canada resides with all of us, whether our influence extends to the broader system, communities,

Table 3

The Framework for Advancing Girls and Women's Participation in Sport

<i>System-wide Actions</i>	<i>Organization Actions</i>	<i>Individual Actions</i>
<p>Champion female elite athletes as spokespersons and ambassadors in corporate Canada.</p> <p>Advocate for media guidelines that increase the percentage of women's sport in the media.</p> <p>Create incentives for sport clubs/facilities to balance time allocations for boys' and girls' sports.</p> <p>Re-assess government funding for women-specific sport targeted to underserved and high-need populations.</p> <p>Establish a recognition platform to incentivize corporate Canada's long-term support of women in sport with financial contributions, promotion and in-kind donations.</p> <p>Advance women's equal participation as decision makers by encouraging diversity in Board of Directors and other sport leadership roles, aiming for 50/50 gender parity.</p> <p>Support women in transitions to coaching and officiating roles through female-specific training opportunities and inclusive interviewing processes.</p>	<p>Embrace diversity by seeking an understanding of local realities that may hinder female participation and to develop programming that fits needs, interests and experiences.</p> <p>Provide training and mentorship opportunities for women to advance in leadership roles.</p> <p>Promote diversity as an asset in the selection of coaches for representative teams, professional positions and related roles.</p> <p>Support quality coaching of female athletes by both women and men with attention to creating safe and inclusive spaces and reducing bullying.</p> <p>Launch and promote free and low-cost community female-only sport opportunities such as open houses or try-it-days to expose diverse females to new sports in a safe and supportive environment.</p> <p>Implement equitable rules for female and male sports (e.g., distances, duration, depth of field, prize money, etc.).</p> <p>Focus on fun, pleasure and challenge of participation, considering the age and abilities of participants.</p>	<p>Schedule time for sport, recognizing the importance of sport participation for physical, mental and social health.</p> <p>Help build girls' confidence in sport by focusing on fundamental movement skills such as kicking, running, jumping, catching and throwing, before sport-specific skills.</p> <p>Prioritize financial resources to start and continue personal and family commitment to sport, taking advantage of free and low-cost community sport opportunities and national fitness tax credits.</p> <p>Encourage girls to join and continue to play, coach and officiate a variety of sports from youth into their teens and adulthood.</p> <p>Support elite female athletes by attending and watching events, and following female athletes on social media.</p> <p>Promote and share female sport news stories that focus on athletic skills, healthy living champions, accomplishments and profiles of positive role models.</p>

teams, or can support individual girls and women in their own pursuits. We all have roles to play in recognizing and celebrating the diversity and uniqueness of girls and women in sport. Finally, this research supports the important role that academics can play in this important area to establish national reports based on reliable research to assist the advocacy and advancement of women in sport and women in leadership positions in sport.

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Appendix A: Advisory Group to the Authors

Name	Role and Organization at Time of the Research
Brenda Address	Founder/Commissioner, Canadian Women's Hockey League
Jennifer Fenton	Consultant, Physical Activity Sector & Past Chair, CAAWS
Rochelle Grayson	Professor, Digital Marketer and Entrepreneur
Karin Lofstrom	Executive Director, CAAWS
Rachel Micay	Research Associate, The T1 Agency
Leanne Nicolle	Executive Director, Canadian Olympic Foundation
Chantal Petitcherc	Chef de Mission for 2016 Rio Paralympics, Public Speaker, Entrepreneur
Tanya Scarrapicchia	PhD Student, University of Toronto, CIHR Fellow
Mitch Thompson	Consultant, The T1 Agency
Adam Ward	Associate Consultant, The T1 Agency

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Demographic Section

1. What is your age?
 - a) 18-24
 - b) 25-34
 - c) 35-49
 - d) 50-64
 - e) 65 plus
2. What gender do you identify as?
 - a) Male
 - b) Female
 - c) Other
3. What type of sport(s) are you involved in?
 - a) Contact, individual
 - b) Contact, team
 - c) Non-contact, individual
 - d) Non-contact, team

- e) Multiple sports of different types
- f) Other

4. What best describes your role in Canadian sport?

- a) Manager/Administrator
- b) Academic
- c) Board Member
- d) Coach
- e) Assistant or Associate Coach
- f) Official
- g) Athlete
- h) Other

5. What level of Canadian sport are you involved in (check all that apply)?

- a) Grassroots (youth)
- b) Grassroots (adult)
- c) Development
- d) High Performance – Amateur/Olympic Sport
- e) High Performance – Professional Sport
- f) Other: _____
- g) Other: _____

6. How long have you been involved in sport, at any level?

- a) Less than 5 years
- b) 5-10 years
- c) 11-20 years
- d) More than 20 years

Barriers Section

- 1. What do you perceive to be the three (3) greatest hurdles that hinder girls and women's participation in your sport(s)?

Short Answer

- 2. Please rank the following barriers to your participation in sport on a scale of 1-5 (1- little/no impact on participation, 5 – Extreme hindrance on participation)

 - a) Insufficient funding
 - b) Not enough quality facilities for staging events
 - c) Lack of media interest/coverage
 - d) Lack of interest among the public
 - e) Lack of awareness among the public

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- f) Lack of opportunity to participate
- g) Lack of exposure to women's/girls' sport
- h) Lack of female-led instruction and refereeing
- i) Lack of knowledge of how to get involved
- j) Lack of social acceptance of women/girls in sport
- k) Lack of inspirational role models
- l) Fear of social criticism
- m) Lack of financial incentive to pursue a career in sport
- n) Their friends do not participate in sport
- o) It is not fun
- p) There are many alternative sedentary competing activities (e.g., screens)
- q) Sexism/Discrimination against women
- r) Other: _____

Explain your choices above: (open ended)

3. Looking back you when started your involvement in sport, with respect to these barriers, how has the situation for women and girls in sport changed?
- a) The situation is now worse
 - b) Little to no change
 - c) Things are getting better
 - d) Remarkable improvement
 - e) Other

Explain (open ended):

4. If you could recommend one area to focus the energy of sport stakeholders on removing one significant hurdle, what would it be?
- a) Insufficient funding
 - b) Not enough quality facilities for staging events
 - c) Lack of media interest/coverage
 - d) Lack of interest among the public
 - e) Lack of awareness among the public
 - f) Lack of opportunity to participate
 - g) Lack of exposure to women's/girls' sport
 - h) Lack of female-led instruction and refereeing
 - i) Lack of knowledge of how to get involved
 - j) Lack of social acceptance of women/girls in sport
 - k) Lack of inspirational role models
 - l) Fear of social criticism
 - m) Lack of financial incentive to pursue a career in sport
 - n) Their friends do not participate in sport

- o) It is not fun
- p) There are many alternative sedentary competing activities (e.g., screens)
- q) Sexism/Discrimination against women
- r) Other: _____

Media Section

1. How would you classify the coverage of women's sport in traditional popular media (TV, Print, Radio)? Explain (open-ended).
 1. Limited
 2. Insufficient
 3. Adequate
 4. Very good
 5. Exceptional

Explain (open ended):

2. How would you classify the coverage of women's sport in alternate forms of media (Online Streaming, Social Media, Podcasts)? Explain (open-ended).
 1. Limited
 2. Insufficient
 3. Adequate
 4. Very good
 5. Exceptional
3. How does the coverage of women's sport in all types media mentioned in previous questions impact the participation of women and girls in sport? Explain (open-ended).
 1. It hinders participation
 2. It has no impact on participation
 3. It supports women and girls being more active sport
4. How would an increase in media exposure for women and girls in your sport contribute to participation levels of women and girls? Explain (open-ended).
 1. Decrease in participation
 2. No impact
 3. Some increase in participation
 4. Significant increase in participation

Solutions

1. Should corporate brands support the movement to advance women and girls in sport?
 - i. No
 - ii. Yes
 - iii. I'm not sure
 - b. If Yes, how? Short Answer

2. Please list as many specific solutions as you can to increase the participation levels of woman and girls in sport. Please be as specific as you can with respect to who could implement and where resources could come from.