

Gender equity in olympic sport

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Abstract 45**

A key cultural myth and official ideology concerning New Zealand and the United States of America is that society is, was, and should be egalitarian where everybody is entitled to a "fair go" irrespective of race, gender, or social class. This ideology appears supported by evidence that key positions in government and business have been or are held by women in both countries, such as Prime Minister in New Zealand and Secretary of State in the United States. As an institutionalized, privileged cultural practice in both countries, sport has the potential to mirror this fair go ideology. Deeper investigation, however, indicates that sport more often than not, does not represent this ideology, especially in leadership. Despite advances in gender equity over the past 20 years, researchers suggest that masculine traits remain the defining factors of competent managers and leaders (Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002) and socio-cultural bias toward masculinity remains the major reason why women are not attaining executive leadership positions (Wirth, 1998). Wood (2003) argued that even though feminine leadership qualities, such as support and collaboration tend to enhance staff moral and productivity, these qualities are often marginalized or even dismissed in favor of masculine characteristics. Sport leadership mirrors business and is primarily the domain of men in New Zealand and internationally (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006; Cameron, 1996; McKay, Messner, & Sabo, 2000; Thompson, 1990). Few women world-wide hold national or international level appointments in sport management due to "assumptions about appropriate leadership characteristics, the organizational environment, and reward practices" (Shaw & Hoerber, 2003, p.348). Research would suggest that gender suppression is still evident in sport organizations (Hoerber, 2007; Moore, Parkhouse, & Konrad, 2001; Shaw, 2006; Shaw & Hoerber, 2003). International research also shows fewer female than male sport coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006; Blake & McKelvey, 1999; West, Green, Brackenridge, & Woodward, 2001). This situation is exacerbated at the elite level. Having women actively involved in sport management and represented in decision-making within sporting organizations goes beyond any issue of gender balance or quota setting. Rather, it is a matter of increasing diversity and, thereby, the quality of considerations and decision-making (Singh, Vinnicombe, & Terjesen, 2007). Research (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2007) and practice suggest that, on the whole, women are credited with bringing styles more weighted towards collegiality, compassion and relationship building and less towards hierarchy, roles and power and as such this can assist with overall organizational climate and culture and aid in the quality of considerations and outcomes.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has, as one of its core objectives, the issue of gender balance in Olympic sports. The IOC has for some time expressed concern at the level of women's involvement in decision-making roles within member sports organizations and has a commitment to achieve a 20% participation rate of women in decision-making positions in national and international sports organizations. The IOC is committed to a gender equity program that advocates "equal opportunities for men and women through sport by encouraging women to have roles at all levels and in all structures, especially in the executive bodies of national sports-oriented organizations" (New Zealand Olympic Committee, 2007). The IOC believes that unless women are in leadership positions at a national level, there is little chance that they will contribute at an international level.

The research objective was to ascertain the extent of involvement of women in leadership and decision-making positions in Olympic sport in New Zealand and the United States, including policy-making, management and national coaching roles. The New Zealand findings were compared to research conducted in 1994. A web search and a telephone survey, based on the 1994 questionnaire and a review of the literature, of 47 Olympic and Commonwealth sports was carried out between March - June 2007 in New Zealand. The survey is also being conducted during October- December 2007 in the United States.

The key findings from the New Zealand phase of the research are as follows. There has been no change in the gender balance of national sports boards since 1994. Of the organizations surveyed, 38 (83%) have fewer than half of their board members who are women, a slight improvement on 1994 (89%). About half (22) of all the organizations surveyed meet the IOC guideline of 20% of national organization's board members being women. Few boards (9) reflect the gender composition of the sports' participants, with most boards having proportionally fewer women board members compared with participants. There are 10 boards (22%) with no women, an increase from 17% in 1994. Of the 47 organizations surveyed, four (9%) have written policies or strategies relating to gender balance. This has dropped from 23% in 1994. Only three organizations (6%) have national development programs for women. This has decreased from 56% in 1994. Four (9%) organizations have sub-committees or special groups that focus specifically on women's policies. Two thirds of all staff working with women's teams are men. Men are more likely than women to be paid to coach and manage both men's and women's teams. Across all coaching categories, women comprise 29% of women's team coaches and 8% of men's teams. The New Zealand Olympic Committee teams have 15% more female athletes than female officials. One quarter (26%) of respondents perceived that there were barriers to women.

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Proportionally more men thought this was the case. Specific questions about barriers identified that the following are still preventing women from participating in senior roles - lack of women mentors (57%); career breaks for domestic reasons (49%); lack of women role models/peers (34%); confidence in own ability (34%); lack of childcare (30%); and unconscious discrimination from both males and females (23%). The findings from the United States phase will also be presented at the conference.

In summary, about half of all Olympic, Commonwealth and associate sports in New Zealand are meeting the IOC targets. In line with the IOC recommendations, the NZOC is working to develop a plan of action to address these gaps. Interventions to encourage women into leadership roles need to target - mentoring and role modeling programs; strategies to build the confidence of capable women candidates; and social marketing that promotes the benefits of balanced decision-making and leadership. These interventions need to be promoted at all levels starting at club and running through to national level, so that suitably experienced women can apply for decision-making positions at the international IOC level in future.

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