Inclusion and accessibility are prominently stated values within the Canadian Sport Policy (CSP), alongside: fun; safety; excellence; commitment; personal development; respect, fair play, and ethical behaviour (CSP, 2012). However, women’s underrepresentation in sport (Fink, 2008), in positions of leadership (Burton, 2015; Cosentino, 2017), and in coaching (LaVoi, 2016; Reade, Rodgers, & Norman, 2009), indicate that national and provincial/territorial sport organizations have considerable work ahead towards achieving the goals of the CSP and Canadian Sport for Life’s (CS4L) Actively Engaging Women and Girls (2012) supplement.

Research suggests women’s underrepresentation in sport (coaching) is exacerbated by external barriers such as unequal assumptions of competence, biased hiring practices (i.e. homologous reproduction), homophobia, and a lack of mentors and role models (Kilty, 2006). Further identified barriers include: opportunity and power (Knoppers, 1994), limited (low level) opportunities (Kay, 2003), and institutional barriers (e.g. ‘the old boy’s network’) (Lovett & Lowry, 1994). According to Reade et al. (2009), “the majority of women coaches are at the lowest levels of competition and in traditionally “feminine” sports” (p. 517).

Thus, the sport of football (American/Canadian tackle football) may be especially challenged to achieve gender equity, where equity refers to “consideration of the unique needs, interests and experiences of a target group when developing and delivering services and allocating resources” (Actively Engaging Women and Girls, 2012, p. 2). In Canada, tackle football remains overwhelmingly male-dominated across all levels of sport participation, and few to no opportunities exist for women’s involvement as participants or coaches. At the inter-university (U Sports) level, for example, 11 Ontario University Athletics football teams list 154 coaches on their respective websites, of which none are women. At the community level, women’s underrepresentation is similarly concerning. In Ontario, for example, one 12-team league lists 120 coaches from its premier varsity division on its website, including zero women.

Yet, despite such figures, the provincial governing body in Ontario is in the early stages of implementing initiatives to address the lack of women involved in football. Notably, the intent of these initiatives is to change the perception that football is a sport for men, and to offer programs targeted specifically to prospective female coaches and participants. Once such initiative is the Women in Football Symposium that encourages women to pursue coaching through the national coaching certification system. These initiatives, and the intended subsequent programs, demonstrate a radical change, as this would be a major shift in organizational practices (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996) in the delivery of football in Ontario. As such, the purpose of this study is to examine the change in perception and programming towards women’s involvement in football that is occurring in one provincial governing body.

To analyze the radical organizational change, this study utilizes Cunningham’s (2002) integrative model of organizational change. This model recognizes the factors influencing the process and success of change within the organizational context (Cunningham, 2002). Cunningham’s model considers institutional theory, population ecology, strategic choice, and resource dependence as theoretical perspectives to capture a holistic view of change. Notably, this model allows for consideration of the political, functional, and social pressures involved in a change process. Further, the applicability of this approach to understanding change in the community sport context has been demonstrated (e.g., Danylchuk et al., 2015; Legg et al., 2016).

Three research questions were advanced: (1) What pressures led to the introduction of female-focused initiatives?; (2) What were the responses of the various stakeholders (key organizational members at the provincial level, women coaches); and, (3) What factors affected the transition to a new approach to women’s involvement in football?
serve the purpose of this study, an exploratory case study (Yin, 1996) will be employed. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key organizational members of the provincial governing body, as well as the key stakeholders involved in the Women in Football Symposium (e.g., future female coaches, current female administrators). Participants will be asked about their perceptions of women in football, their experiences with the organizational change, factors that influenced the change, and their perceptions around the process and success of the change. Following data collection, a priori coding according to Cunningham’s (2002) model will be conducted. Subsequent emergent coding will be performed to identify any further themes relevant to the change process (Patton, 2015).

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to theoretical understanding of change in sport organizations. Additionally, the findings will inform sport leaders, across a variety of levels (e.g., national, provincial, community) that are considering pursuing gender equity policies in their organizations. Football may provide a unique context due to its (current) male-dominated participation, but the findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insight into recruitment, acceptance, and inclusion of women in coaching and leadership positions across the sport system.