Capacity for Gender Equity in the National Sport Organization Environment

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A growing body of research has investigated the capacity of non-profit sport organizations to address organizational problems, perform effectively, and meet their goals and objectives (e.g., Doherty et al., 2014; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006; Swierzy et al., 2018; Wicker & Breuer, 2013, 2014). Much of this research follows Hall et al.’s (2003) multidimensional framework of non-profit organizational capacity; however, there has been very little consideration of external factors that are indicated as important determinants of capacity. The fuller model proposes that environmental constraints and facilitators, access to resources, and historical factors may shape the dimensions of human resources, finances, infrastructure/processes, relationships/network, and planning/development capacity of organizations.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the critical elements of capacity of national sport organizations (NSOs) to implement gender equity initiatives, and the external factors which influence that capacity. The purpose was achieved with case studies of three Canadian NSOs engaged in addressing gender equity in their sport through initiatives designed to increase the participation of women in sport as athletes, coaches, and officials. Semi-structured interviews (n = 15) were conducted with board members and staff across the three NSOs. Participants were probed about the capacity strengths and challenges, and external factors influencing their NSO’s capacity to implement its gender equity initiative. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and member-checked, and the data were subject to open and emergent coding following standard practices (Patton, 2015).

The findings highlight several common capacity strengths (e.g., knowledgeable and experienced staff, financial and non-financial resources procured from external partners, and inclusion of the initiative in the NSOs’ strategic plans) and challenges (e.g., limited staff, insufficient funding, and constraints in external communication) across the NSOs. External factors influencing the NSOs’ capacity to implement their gender equity initiatives included the political climate, the hierarchical and geographically dispersed Canadian sport system, access to volunteers, and bias/social pressures against women in sport. These external influences further highlighted the connections among the capacity dimensions (Hall et al., 2003) as, for example, the lack of avenues for additional financial support was described as impacting the NSOs’ financial capacity that allows it to strengthen its human resources through hiring dedicated staff for the gender equity initiative.

The findings extend the application of, and provide further insight to, the multidimensional framework of organizational capacity by uncovering the nature and perceived influence of external factors, and specifically in the context of NSOs pursuing gender equity initiatives. This more comprehensive examination highlights implications for practice and directions for future research. The findings have implications for building and strengthening capacity for gender equity within an external environment that presents a range of critical factors which may influence that capacity. Future research utilizing the fuller Hall et al. (2003) model may examine a larger sample of NSOs, or other sport organizations, engaged in gender equity initiatives, or the critical capacity elements and external factors associated with initiatives targeting other underrepresented groups, such as Indigenous or Aboriginal youth and people with a disability.