

Women and Mothers in Canadian High Performance Sport

A brief to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

**House of Commons
Parliament of Canada**

Submitted by Lisa Ross

June 19, 2023

As the Committee continues the critical work of considering how to create a truly safe sport system in Canada, I write to highlight a key imbalance which plays an important role in the challenges currently facing our system. Specifically, we need to have a candid conversation about women and mothers in Canadian high-performance sport.

While I have a professional interest in improving the sport system in Canada, for me, addressing the persistent barriers facing women in high performance sport is also a deeply personal one. As a two time Olympian and national team athlete for more than 10 years, I came up through the Canadian sport system. I am a better person, leader and mother because of my experience in sport. I believe in the power of sport to help shape our youth, communities and culture. I want to be a part of creating a safer and better sport system for everyone, including my own children.

Since the [1998 Report](#) by the Sub-Committee on the Study of Sport in Canada, the number of leadership roles held by women in our high-performance programs has been recognized as an issue for both increasing general participation and the safety of women and girls in sport.

Our current system does not adequately consider the realities of female athletes and coaches, especially those who wish to have children while competing or while working in high performance roles. It is not our female leaders who are unable and unqualified to fill positions within our high-performance programs; it is the system that is failing us.

We need equity and diversity within sport leadership and coaches. We cannot expect to have an equitable, healthy and sustainable sport environment when the vast majority of our sport leadership, in every position and at every level for the past 30 years has been male. The entrenched bias against mothers, lack of appropriate support and the resulting drain of talent and experience from our system is a significant barrier to achieving gender equity and creating a Safe Sport environment.

As recognized in 1998 and [again in 2017](#) by this Committee, funding should only be provided to sport organizations that “deliver equitable services and equitable leadership opportunities”. It is time to mandate gender balanced high-performance programs across all federally funded sport organizations as a core requirement to be eligible for funding, not simply as an additional financial incentive.

Understanding of the effects of Pregnancy and Motherhood on Athletes, Coaches and Sport Leaders

Gender inequity in the Canadian sport system, including coaches in our high performance ranks, has remained a prevalent and persistent issue. In 2018, the [government announced](#) that it would achieve gender equity in Canadian sport at every level by 2035, with a commitment to

“provide support to national sports organizations to promote the greater inclusion of women and girls in all facets of sport.”

Yet since that announcement, there has been little positive movement towards the goal of gender equity.

This imbalance starts with the treatment of athletes within our system, especially at the highest level. [Motherhood and pregnancy](#) during an athlete’s career “remains taboo and many governing bodies remain unsupportive of women taking breaks from training during the ‘peak’ of their career.” As recently as 2016, pregnancy was considered an ‘injury’ by Canadian National Sport Organizations (NSOs).

Injuries and pregnancy are not comparable; pregnancy is not an injury.

Consider the case of Hilary Stellingwerff, a Canadian runner who competed in the 2012 Olympics. Shortly after giving birth to her son, she injured her foot and requested an injury card. This request was denied on the basis that an athlete can only receive an injury card once, and Hilary had used an injury card, as required, for her pregnancy the year prior.

Though the NSO argued in support of characterizing pregnancies as injuries, this practice [was found to be discriminatory](#) by the SDRCC.

There remains no system-wide, evidence based pregnancy and postpartum policies for athletes and coaches. This is a major gap in our system for support of women in high performance sport.

In 2021, Olympian [Mandy Bujold](#) - an 11-time national champion, two-time Pan American Games gold medalist and a Rio 2016 Olympian - was disqualified from competing at the Tokyo Olympics after the IOC retroactively decided to use only three events held in 2018-2019 to qualify female boxers, a period during which Mandy was pregnant or postpartum. Mandy was forced to take her case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which eventually granted her appeal and ordered the IOC to amend its qualification criteria to include an accommodation for women who were pregnant or postpartum during a qualifying period.

In March 2023, [Project Juno was published by the World Sailing Trust](#), a charitable arm of World Sailing, promoting equity, inclusion and diversity across the globe. Project Juno was created in response to Clarisse Cremer, a successful round the world ocean racer, who was fired by her sponsors after returning from her recent pregnancy for being a “risk” of not qualifying for the upcoming Ocean Race in 2024.

Project Juno outlines clear steps organizations must take to support athletes and mothers including “Rethinking Attitudes, Duty of Care and Return Postpartum”.

There is growing research into the barriers facing athletes who chose to become mothers during their athletic careers, but there is little study into the effects of motherhood and pregnancy on the careers of female coaches and high-performance

leadership. Dr. Tara-Leigh McHugh and Dr. Margie recently submitted a research report to Sport Canada, focused on policies and practices for high performance athletes. They recommended that Sport Canada consider:

...pregnancy, postpartum, and parenting supports that could be provided to staff at NSOs, so as to not create inequities between the support provided to athletes and the support provided to staff.¹

It is essential that the effect and scope of bias, barriers and discrimination of female coaches - specifically coaches who are mothers - be documented within our system so we can effectively ensure these issues are understood and appropriately addressed. We can become a leader in this space by adopting comprehensive, system-wide evidence-based policy and support for pregnancy and motherhood.

The statistics for Canadian female coaches at the last two Summer Olympics are shockingly low: 20% at Rio and 16% for Tokyo. The numbers for the Winter Olympics is even worse, as just 11% of the Canadian coaches at the 2018 Winter Games were women and 13% at the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi.

The [2017 Report of this Committee](#) acknowledged that the number of female coaches had only nominally increased since the 1998 Report, repeating the earlier finding that there was a distinct need to increase the number of female coaches, to improve the sport development structure and to make sport safer for girls and women.

The current model of apprenticeship, mentorship and gender equity funding, while creating some opportunities for growth, learning and funding-tied employment for female coaches, has not significantly increased the number of female leaders. We need to better understand where the system is failing our female coaches and leaders and how we can ensure their talent, experience and perspective is not lost to our athletes.

Leaders, coaches and athletes should not have to choose between their role in elite sport or being a present and engaged parent. Family should not be seen as a limitation or a barrier to success but in our current system, they are.

Women with children face the '[motherhood penalty](#)' - the persistent and systemic bias that underlies disadvantages in pay, salary, and promotion, lower perceived competence,

¹ "Sport Policy and Practice Recommendations for Pregnant, Postpartum, and Parenting Canadian High-Performance Athletes: Consultation and Engagement Summary Report.", McHugh, Davenport, 2023

and higher expectations for mothers relative to men or childless women. Combine that with the lack of support in our high performance programs as women try to navigate the family work balance, and we have a professional and sporting world where mothers go missing.

In 2021, I was a National Team coach with Sail Canada and the only female on their High Performance coaching staff. I am a mother of two, a two-time Olympian and Olympic coach in Rio 2016. After returning from my first pregnancy leave with Sail Canada, my position was minimized when I was moved from coaching current Olympic qualification athletes to Next Gen athletes aiming for qualification for the 2028 Games. In 2023, nine days after announcing my pregnancy with my third child to Sail Canada, I was fired, [purportedly for funding reasons](#).

Another example is Jenny Trew. A mother of two, Jenny was one of two female coaches let go by Cycling Canada, [allegedly for funding reasons in April 2023](#). This removal of two women from the coaching staff dropped the percentage of female coaches from 29% of total to 18% (2 of 11 coaches). Trew was hired in 2017 as the Women's NextGen Development Track Endurance Coach, and was the only female coach employee with the organization until late 2021. During her hiring process, she was formally asked "How do you see yourself managing the rigors of what is required around the coaching position all the while managing your family obligations?" This was in reference to her young children, 10 months and 3.5 years old at the time. Trew went on to earn two consecutive promotions, becoming the Lead Coach for Track Endurance in late 2021. In early 2023, she went on mental health leave for seven weeks. A month after her return, her employment was terminated.

These are just two recent examples of what happens to our experienced and qualified female coaches, especially mothers, within the Canadian high-performance system. Female coaches are marginalized, overlooked and removed from the system for 'lack of funding,' regardless of experience or qualification.

Our systems need to be designed to specifically support gender equity and diversity. One study states:

It has been long documented that organizational policies and professional practices have systematically influenced the low percentage of women in coaching.²

We cannot expect to have a healthy and balanced system with the appropriate supports in place that work for everyone, when eight out of every ten coaches are male.

² [Lavoie, Dutove. 2012](#)

If we do not examine and change the inequitable treatment of female coaches and mothers within our system and move to make gender equity a core principle of our structures, we will not create a truly safe Canadian Sport System.

Entrenched Systematic Bias and the Importance of Key Decision-making Roles

Outside of the gender equity statistics from the Canadian Olympic coaching staff, the pattern of imbalance continues, with estimates placing the proportion of women in high-performance coaching positions [in Canada in the range of 8.4 to 20%](#).

The IOC has [recognized this imbalance](#), recently stating:

Although Paris 2024 will break new ground, a real gender gap still exists today in the athletes' entourage, where the number of women holding leadership roles such as that of Chef de Mission, Technical Official and coach remains remarkably low. At Tokyo 2020, only 13 percent of coaches were women.

The reality is that women are continually viewed as lesser than within high performance, dependent on special funding for their roles, rather than their experience or qualifications. For high performance coaches, the pervasive assumption that mothers are less committed to their work means that they are marginalized from their roles as a norm. Barriers are erected that effectively prevent them from being able to continue or advance in their roles.

Having a minority of female coaches within a sport organization leads women to feelings of:

...alienation, feeling highly visible and subjected to scrutiny, having to over-perform to gain credibility, feeling pressure to conform to organizational norms, and enduring increased risk for gender discrimination in the forms of sexual harassment, wage inequities, and limited opportunities for promotion.³

While we have long touted gender equity as a core value of Canadian sport, the evidence undercuts this narrative. One study notes that:

Canadian sport has suffered a misalignment of having gender equity and diversity at the forefront of its vision and values for years while being unable to operationalize gender equity within its organizations. [Leadership] should critique all organizational activities and practices, including the informal practices, how

³ [Lavoie, Dutove. 2012](#)

*success is defined, and the formal values, policies, and practices communicated to the public at large.*⁴

With deeply ingrained practices in our system, we need to take a step back to recognize what is working, and where we have failed, especially from a gender participation perspective:

*In providing such a critique through a gendered lens, [leadership] will uncover practices and procedures that, although they may seem benign, are highly gendered and serve to advantage men over women. Without providing such a critique—especially with a focus on the gendering of activities and practices—the stamping out of gender inequality is unlikely to materialize.*⁵

It is essential that as we strive to have a safe sport system for all, we address the gender inequity within our leadership roles and address the reasons for these continuing inequities. We identified the issue over thirty years ago, but we have failed to ensure that there is a female voice at key decision-making moments within our NSOs.

Not only will this ensure that we have a voice at the table who will push for continuity and alignment between our NSO operations and training environments and the values and policies addressing gender issues, but it will make our high performance programs more adaptable, resilient and successful:

*There is substantial emerging evidence that companies with gender-diverse leadership perform better than their male-dominated counterparts in nearly all aspects of performance. These organizations have been shown to be more innovative, generate more revenue and profits, have a broader customer base, occupy a greater market share, and have more people vying for positions with their organization.*⁶

Our NSO structures need to have diverse voices at the decision-making table at all levels. Not only is it the right thing to do, it is proven to be the best thing to do. Ensuring that there is gender equity at every funded NSO in the development of OTP and Sport Canada submissions, team selection criteria, Pathway documents and programs such as Gold Medal Pathways/Profiles, Long Term Athlete Development Plans and Talent Identification is essential for creating an environment where we can have true equity.

⁴ [Cunningham. 2007](#)

⁵ [Cunningham. 2007](#)

⁶ [Roberts et. al.. 2022](#)

Public Funding Must be Tied to Gender Equity

The common thread for the elimination of women with children from their coaching or professional roles is inevitably "funding". Women are constantly left on the bubble of diversity funding, set aside when it is convenient, and not given a significant voice at the strategic and decision-making table in high-performance sport.

Unless we take concrete action on gender equity, the status quo will persist. Intentions and targets are necessary, but we do not rise to the level of our goals; we fall to the level of our systems.

Last month, the government announced that all NSOs must fully adopt the [Canadian Sport Governance Code](#) by April 2025. The Code sets precise requirements for diversity on NSO boards, including maintaining gender balance in the leadership of NSOs with no more than 60% of an NSO's directors being of the same gender.

Given thirty years of a failing record on gender equity, we must entrench the requirement for gender balanced high-performance programs across all federally funded NSOs.

It is not enough to provide diversity funding - gender equity within our high performance coaching and support staff must be the rule, not the exception. In 2018, Allison Sandmeyer-Graves from what was then the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity, [advocated for tying federal funds to equity measures](#), a concrete step to motivate sport organizations to take intentional action to close the gender gap, stating that "...what's clear is that good intentions and time just aren't enough."

Absent financial motivations, sport organizations have failed to make any meaningful gains on addressing this issue. Continued financial support for NSOs without clear requirements for gender equity means that the government is supporting an imbalanced system with a demonstrated lack of essential support for female coaches and staff.

The goal moving forward should not be that we have equity in the coaches coaching women. The goal should be that an equal number of the coaches coaching everyone, at every level, be female.

What impact would this one shift have on our sport culture in our locker rooms, rinks, pools and boat parks?

Unfortunately, our funding model perpetuates a cycle of tokenism, where we directly link many employment opportunities for our female leaders with gender equity or other specific funding. This has the unintended consequence of undermining the perception of their abilities and making their position vulnerable to funding shifts.

Our sport funding structures need to be squarely tied to meeting gender equity targets. Both the 1998 Report and the 2017 Report included significant evidence on the issue of increasing the gender balance within Canadian sport. Given the lack of movement in the gender equity numbers in high performance coaching over the last thirty years, immediate action is needed. This funding cannot be tied directly with individual positions or specific diversity programs, but must be entrenched as a core requirement to be eligible for funding.

Addressing the imbalance in our coaching ranks and sport leadership within high performance sport and moving towards gender equity, with coaches working with both genders, at all levels, is an essential piece of moving our sport culture to one that is safe and sustainable for everyone.

Conclusion

As the Committee looks at the entrenched challenges in the Canadian sport system, we must confront the underlying reasons for the lack of female coaches and leadership at all levels of sport, including in high-performance programs.

Mothers - athletes or coaches - are not sacrificing their pursuit of excellence because of their children or family. Their abilities are often increased by the perspective and balance brought by motherhood. With experience, passion, empathy and values, we strive to develop programs that will allow athletes to rise to their potential. Immense experience and value has been lost from within the Canadian sport system because of outdated and inflexible perspectives on female leadership and motherhood in sport.

Increasing gender diversity within our high-performance leadership will not only help create a safer environment for everyone, but will make our programs more successful, sustainable and adaptable. We must include an equitable voice in the development of key programming and leadership decisions to ensure alignment of our often stated values and vision of gender equity and the actual operations of our NSOs and training environments.

We must end the practice of leaving female coaches dependent on 'diversity funding' for their positions, exposed to funding shifts and undermining the perception of their qualifications within the organization.

Gender equity must become a core principle of our system. To ensure meaningful and immediate action, this principle must be a central criterion for funding. Similar to the requirements of the Code, a high performance program who fails to maintain an equitable gender balance within their high performance directors and coaches must face funding restrictions.

Changing the culture in sport and creating a truly safe sport environment for all is not as simple as shifting one element. Having gender parity within our coaching ranks is an essential piece of this puzzle.

Recommendations:

Understanding of the effects of Pregnancy and Motherhood on Athletes, Coaches and Sport Leaders

- 1) Any inquiry into the status of sport in Canada must include an study into the effects, barriers, biases and organizational supports needed for pregnancy, postpartum and motherhood for athletes and coaches within our high performance programs and broader sport sector.
- 2) Following this study, we need to develop and implement clear requirements for policies, programs, hiring practices and organizational support. These must be enacted system-wide and be based on clear, evidence-based research and be specifically focused on addressing identified gaps, barriers and biases.

Entrenched Systematic Bias and the Importance of Key Decision-making Roles

- 3) Sport Canada mandates that NSOs and national multisport organizations have equitable representation in key decision-making processes within high-performance programming, such as: team selection criteria, Own The Podium and Sport Canada reports and submissions, development of Gold Medal Pathways and Profiles, Youth Pathways and LTAD pathways and programs.

Public Funding Must be Tied to Gender Equity

- 4) The Government of Canada and Own the Podium, as a major funders of Canadian High Performance sport, enact the following criteria for funding:
 - a) NSOs have no more than 60% of their coaching staff and leadership positions at all levels (Olympic/Paralympic, National Team and Next Gen), serving all genders in their high-performance programs, be of one gender.