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Understanding female participation in golf across Ontario

The benefits for female participants of sport are well documented (e.g., Oja et al., 2015; Schulenkorf et al., 2014). However, 41% of girls between the ages of 3-17 and 84% of adult women in Canada do not participate in sport (CAAWS, 2016) which indicates a gross underrepresentation of females in our sport system. Although the COVID-19 pandemic introduced new challenges, it also presented potential opportunities for sport participation (Doherty et al., 2020), with golf witnessing almost record levels of participation throughout the summer of 2020 (Zochodne, 2020). However, little is known about whether this increase in participation included women and girls and the extent to which courses were able to attract and retain female participants. As such, the purpose of this quantitative study was to gain an understanding of female golf participation across Ontario, with a particular focus on identifying participation levels and the capacity of golf courses to offer programming for women and girls.

A survey was distributed to Golf Ontario's existing network golf courses and included (1) membership information (e.g., number of members, program/league membership) for the past 5 years; and (2) club capacity (e.g., human resources, financial, infrastructure, planning, external networks) to implement programming for women and girls. Descriptive, correlation, and regression analyses were conducted using SPSS to analyze participation trends, capacity needs and strengths, to examine the relationship between club capacity and female participation in golf.

Results indicate significantly lower membership rates among women and girls compared to men ($t=5.12, p<.001$) and boys ($t=6.00, p<.001$). Membership among men and boys is growing year over year, whereas membership among women and girls is remaining low with insignificant growth. Results also reveal a significant disparity in gender representation among course employees, where significantly more men are employed in all positions compared to their female counterparts. On average, there were two male PGA Professionals ($t=4.00, p<.001$) and 8 male Starters/Marshals ($t=4.80, p<.001$) compared to zero women in those same roles; and there were significantly more male Staff than female Staff ($t=2.00, p<.05$). This presents a significant concern regarding representation around the sport of golf and has important implications for growing participation among women and girls (cf. Syngenta, 2014). Results also reveal that greater club capacity was found to significantly predict their ability to offer programming for women and girls ($R^2=.54, F=7.29, p<.001$), meaning that the greater human resources, financial, infrastructure, planning and development, and external relations capacity a club possesses, the more likely they are to achieve programming goals for women and girls.

Further, when courses have passionate, committed, and knowledgeable individuals with a succession plan in place, they are more able to provide programs targeting women and girls' participation ($t=3.11, p<.01$). Results also reveal that greater planning and development capacity and infrastructure capacity were associated with increased membership of women ($r=.58, r=.52$) and girls ($r=.51, r=.52$), and greater human resources capacity was associated with increased membership among women ($r=.52$). Golf courses that have a strategy and vision in place, identify new ways of doing things, have access to quality facilities, clear policies and procedures, and open communication with their community experience greater participation from women and girls. Relatedly, those courses with passionate, committed, and knowledgeable individuals tend to have more women participating in golf at their club. The results of this study present important implications for future capacity building efforts aimed at increasing participation opportunities among women and girls, while also highlighting potential barriers to participation relating to deeply embedded norms (i.e., white, male-dominated) of a specific sport culture. Implications for research and practice will be presented.