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Women's Presence and Equality in Canadian Sport Organizations: Overview, Practices and Intervention Model

Project summary

Our research project aims to better understand the barriers that prevent women and people from historically marginalized groups from participating in sport activities within the various Quebec sport associations and from reaching leadership positions within these same organizations. In addition, we want to provide solutions to sport organizations that want to improve the situation by providing them with a guide to best practices in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), practices that are adapted to the realities of sport.

Research methods

In order to carry out our research objectives, we conducted semi-structured individual and small group (2 to 4 people) interviews with 114 individuals. These individuals came from 18 different Quebec sport federations and 8 multi-sport organizations. In all, we interviewed 81 women and 33 men whose positions within the organizations ranged from general manager to coaches and referees, to those responsible for communications and/or coordination of activities. The interview transcripts were then analyzed using MAC QDA qualitative analysis software. This step made it possible to group together the main barriers encountered by women and people from historically marginalized groups, to identify the needs in terms of good EDI practises to rectify the situation, and finally, to identify the existing best practices in the organizations, which are then relevant references for the other organizations.

Research findings

Our research has identified the needs and practices to be implemented in Quebec sport federations. Among these needs and practices, it is important to take stock of the presence of women and people from marginalized groups in each organization, and the positions held by

these individuals. Most organizations do not have this quantitative data, making it more difficult to target recruitment and retention goals. Some of the practices highlighted by our research include being aware of the biases in discourse and practice, creating mentoring programs for people from historically marginalized groups, implementing measures to ensure women's representation on boards of directors, and creating recruitment programs that target women and girls. In addition, our results show the importance for federations to adopt an EDI plan that reflects their reality and involves the various stakeholders. While everyone has a role to play in improving the situation and breaking down barriers, not everyone has the same responsibilities within the organization.

Although we have tried to make our research as exhaustive as possible and to cover a large part of the Quebec sport sector, it is not without limits. It is possible that some sports organizations with different conditions of existence from those we interviewed do not recognize their own identity in this overview, or that they encounter barriers that we have missed. Furthermore, certain historically marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities, are only slightly present in our study.

Policy and program implications

This research shows that there is a willingness to improve the presence of women and people from historically marginalized groups in sport organizations, but that this willingness still faces many practical barriers on the ground. Whether it is unconscious biases that impede the advancement of women into leadership positions, hiring processes that miss the mark because of their lack of transparency, or persistent prejudices, sport organizations need tangible support to improve their practices. If the will is there, they need to be helped to implement practices that will break long-standing patterns to allow for real change in organizational culture. This is what motivates the second part of our research: to create an accessible guide of best practices, with concrete solutions to make things happen, in order to move from will to action.

Next steps

As a next step, it may be appropriate to measure the impact of implementing an EDI approach in a sport organization, both quantitatively (increase and retention of women and people from historically marginalized groups in the organization and in leadership positions) and qualitatively (awareness of bias, gender-neutral communication, program to combat sexual violence, etc.). What is the outcome of this approach after one, three and five years? Which practices have been adopted, by whom, and with what impact? Which barriers remain in sport organizations and which have been eliminated? Are there new barriers that have been overlooked, hidden behind more visible barriers?

In the same vein, it would be interesting to see if some sport settings are more inclined to adopt inclusive practices than others, whether it be in relation to the sport discipline, the gendered traditions of the sport, the socio-demographic profile of the participants, etc.

Knowledge translation

The primary strategy for sharing knowledge with stakeholders in the Canadian sport sector will be the publication of a book for the general public to guide sport organizations towards better practices in equality, diversity and inclusion. This book will be available to everyone and we hope to produce both French and English versions to ensure distribution across the country. The book will not only be aimed at general managers, but at all those who work in the field of sport. As mentioned above, equality is everyone's business, but the actions to be taken differ depending on the position held. With this approach in mind, the practices to be developed in sport organizations will target the various stakeholders. In other words, this book, which is currently being written, is intended for all Canadian sport federations and associations.

A second knowledge sharing strategy will be to write a scientific article on developing an EDI policy in a sport organization. This second publication will be aimed mainly at researchers in sport and sport management.
