

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN IN SPORT

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The 1990's are often referred to as the Golden Age for women in sport and the current decade is already living up to high expectations of even greater success. Many examples of this Golden Age exist. The number of female athletes competing in the Olympics has been steadily climbing over the years and reached an all time high at the Sydney 2000 Olympics. One of track and field's hottest new events is the women's pole vault featuring American sensation Stacy Dragila. This event combines speed, strength and the very real threat of serious injury and only a few years ago people were saying that women couldn't and shouldn't even try this sport. Last month another milestone in women's sport was achieved when the 2 hour and 20 minute barrier was finally broken in the marathon and that record was surpassed a week later by a young Kenyan woman who ran the Chicago Marathon in 2 hours 18 minutes and 47 seconds! And then there is the soaring popularity of women's tennis whose stars have become household names – Anna Kournikova, Venus and Serena Williams, Martina Hingis and Lindsay Davenport.

So, why is it, in this Golden Age for women in sport, that women's participation in sport at all levels, still lags far behind that of men? Some argue that the lower women's participation rate is the result of choice. Others claim that women are simply less interested in sport than men, that they don't want to participate in certain sports or even that they don't want positions of responsibility in sport. But in reality, women frequently don't have a real choice and are hindered by factors which are numerous and complex. The issue of interest of women in sport is a critical one because **opportunity** drives interest and ability and it is the issue of **equal opportunity** that will be the focus of my presentation today.

Let me tell you a story. Captain Sharon Donnelly is a female Canadian Forces soldier and athlete who has competed and won medals in CISM World Championships. She also competed in the triathlon at the Sydney 2000 Olympics. (triathlon: a 3 sport event consisting of a 1.5 km swim, 40 km cycle and 10 km road running race) On the day of the race, September 16th 2000, Sharon was in peak condition for the big day. She normally was among the first few athletes out of the water but on this day she had drawn a poor start position so was a little further behind than planned. However she was in the second bike pack only 30 seconds behind the leaders so a medal was still a possibility. Approximately 10 km into the cycle portion she was involved in a crash in which she was injured and the rear wheel of her bike was destroyed as was her dream of an Olympic medal. By the time she had picked up her bike and run to the closest aid station to get a spare wheel and was finally back on the course she was more than 6 minutes behind the leaders. Now her goal was just to finish the race and this meant staying ahead of the lead pack since being lapped would mean immediate disqualification. She finally crossed the finish line - in 38th place, covered in blood, carrying the Canadian Flag and with tears pouring down her face. When the reporters came over to interview her she didn't complain about her bad luck; she told them that despite everything she was proud of her performance because there was no way she had prepared for four long years for this one

day only to not to even cross the finish line. Sharon instantly became a hero and role model to thousands of young Canadian children, boys and girls, who were impressed by her courage and determination.

How did Sharon get to where she is in sport and what makes her different from the thousands of other women worldwide, many whom may have equal or greater talent but who never even reach the starting line? Sharon’s success did not come overnight – but there were a number of key factors that allowed her to pursue her dream and these factors are the very things that are not available to women in many countries around the world including many CISM member nations.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Sharon grew up in a country where women have **equal opportunity** to participate in sport. Canadian legislation called the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that “every individual is **equal** under the law and has the right to **equal** protection and benefit without discrimination” and this applies to all facets of Canadian society including amateur sports. Equal or equality refers to treatment that is the same for any two or more groups of people. Within the context of the Canadian sport system, equality refers to girls and women at all levels of the system having the same **opportunity** as boys and men to participate in the system. “Equality focuses on creating the same starting line for everyone”. Interestingly however, equality doesn’t mean that all persons must be treated exactly the same. In some cases, people may need to be treated differently in order to be treated fairly and to achieve equal results. Equal opportunity means that people are treated as individuals and provided with access to opportunity on the basis of their skills, talents and qualifications and are neither disadvantaged or denied access on the grounds of their gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnic background, religion or disability. Equal opportunity includes the principle of fair and equitable allocation of resources, programs and decision-making to both men and women. “Equal opportunity has the goal of providing everyone with the same finish line.

We have a very recent example of this concept within CISM. For several years our regulations have stated that in order for a CISM competition to be accorded the title of CISM Tournament, Regional Championship, Continental Championship or World Championship, the event must have a minimum number of nations participating. As you can see from this table (Figure 1), in each case the number of nations required for women’s events is lower than the men’s. The reason for this was because many countries have no or very few women in their military and in other countries women only make up a small percentage of the overall military.

Event	Participating Nations	
	Women	Men
World	4	8
Continental	3	6
Regional	2	4
Tournament	2	3

Figure 1: Old Regulations. Required number of participating nations.

The new regulations that were adopted at the recent 2001 General Assembly, increased the numbers for women’s participation. Of particular note is that the numbers at the Regional and Tournament championships level, which are the developmental levels, have been changed to equal that of men even though many nations still have few or no women in their militaries (Figure 2).

Event	Participating Nations	
	Women	Men
World	6	8
Continental	5	6
Regional	4	4
Tournament	3	3

Figure 2: New Regulations. Required number of participating nations.

This means that it will be difficult if not impossible to develop women’s participation in certain sports as the numbers will not be achievable. Furthermore, if an event does not count as a “CISM” championship, you can be sure that most nations will not finance their women’s teams to participate. This contravenes the concept of equality and equal opportunity and is being challenged on the basis that it is a form of discrimination and is a barrier to the development of women in CISM sport.

ROLE MODELS

Sharon was exposed to female role models at an early age. She grew up in a single parent family so life was not always easy but her mother recognized the benefits of sport for children. Sharon and her older brother participated in gymnastics, swimming and other fitness activities at a young age and when it became obvious that Sharon had talent in swimming, her mother was her biggest helper and supporter. Sacrifices were made to send her to a special school for children with athletic, academic or musical gifts and here she was exposed to many more role models, both male and female. We know that boys naturally identify with their fathers while girls identify with their mothers and this fact underlines the importance of having both male and female role models. (Figure 3)

Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS)
A mother’s participation in sport increased participation rates of her daughter by 22%
A father’s participation in sport increased participation rates of his daughter by 11%

Figure 3: Role model correlation (CAAWS 1998)

But in many societies female role models in sport are hard to find. The cultural, religious, economic and traditional norms and conditions of many societies prevent or at least do not support women’s participation in sport and thus role models do not exist. They do not exist because the opportunity for their development does not exist.

OPPORTUNITY, ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

When Sharon just missed making the 1988 Canadian Olympic team in swimming, her focus turned to education and she applied for entry into the Royal Military Academy. During her four years at the academy she ran on the cross-country team and was exposed to CISM for the first time. With her strong swimming background and her obvious ability in running, it didn't take long for her to adopt the sport of triathlon, which was just beginning to become popular. Her timing was perfect because the Canadian military sport system had just adopted a "gender equity" program in order to increase the participation rate of military women in sport and physical activity. In the military Sharon found coaches, training camps, competitions and CISM. And when Sharon left the academy, she had the fortune to work with a women's running coach (male) who was a passionate supporter of women's sport and his company became her prime sponsor in the very early stages of her bid for the Olympic triathlon team. Sharon's success was not just about talent and medals – it was about opportunity and encouragement and attitudes.

PRIMARY BARRIER

Sharon did not have to combat the primary barrier to women's participation in sport which is that of being the prime caregiver of children and elderly parents. Although she is now married, her husband plays an active and supportive role in her training. The barrier of primary caregiver exists even in the so-called most advanced societies. Women are still more likely than men to withdraw from sport once they have children and they often do not have the income, the job flexibility, the time and the family support that they require in order to participate in a sports program. Many successful female athletes are not married, or they are married but have no children or if they are married with children, their husbands are an integral part of their sport often as a coach and are willing to share or take on the caregiver role in support of their wife's athletic career.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

And lastly, Sharon belongs to an organization, the Canadian Forces, that is committed to the principles of gender equity. The following statement is made in a document published by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport:

“ The fact that an organization is seen to be committed to principles of equal opportunity in itself can encourage women to associate with the organization because they recognize this organization as progressive and responsive to social change. This may also improve the image of the organization in the eyes of spectators, the media, potential sponsors and other associates.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When you take into account all of the reasons, other than sheer talent and desire, that contributed to Sharon's success in her sport, you can see that the common denominator is equal opportunity.

She lives in a country that legislates equality. She belongs to an organization, the Canadian Forces, that promotes gender equity. She was exposed to female role models from a very young age. She had encouragement and support from family, friends, coaches and athletes. She was able to find sufficient sponsorship to support her equipment and training needs. She has a husband who fully supports her athletic career and shares the burden of domestic responsibilities in the home. And most of all, it never, ever occurred to her that she wouldn't succeed in her dream because she was a woman.

“If they are not present, women cannot speak. And if their voices are not heard, their concerns cannot be addressed”