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Commonwealth Games Federation: Far-reaching Gender Equality Strategy a First for Sport

By Sheila Robertson

At the higher levels of international sport, much has been written (and some lip service paid) about the importance of gender equality. But words without action are worthless, and sport remains far from a level playing field for millions of girls and women around the world. The *Journal* is therefore encouraged by the actions of the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) for its recently launched Gender Equality Strategy (GES), which covers many areas of relevance to girls and women throughout the Commonwealth. Particularly interesting to *Journal* readers will be the prominence given to initiatives intended to benefit women coaches, from aspirants to experienced, through an innovative coaching internship program coinciding with the 2018 Commonwealth Games. We will monitor the progress of this bold undertaking, hoping for its success and hoping also that other world sporting bodies take notice and emulate the CGF. (Disclosure, CGF Vice-President Bruce Robertson, the author of the GES, and I are married). – Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.

The Commonwealth Games Federation’s “Transformation 2022 Strategic Plan outlines its vision, mission, values, and strategic priorities. The Plan states: “As a cornerstone of the Commonwealth itself, our dynamic sporting movement – driven by its values of Humanity, Equality, and Destiny – has a key role to play in an energised, engaged, and active Commonwealth of Nations and Territories.”

Even before Transformation 2022, CGF initiatives in support of gender equality were underway. The CGF constitution guarantees representation of both women and men in the three vice-presidential positions and a minimum representation of 20 per cent women on all committees. Work was underway on a goal for gender equality in technical officials at the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games, establishing a Women Coach Internship Program for the 2018, 2022, and future Games, and ensuring equality in athlete participation that will be guaranteed through the allocation of non-transferable quotas and travel grants.

“More was needed,” says CGF Vice-President Bruce Robertson, CM, CIP, CITP. “These individual initiatives, while good steps toward greater gender equality, did not in themselves form a comprehensive and integrated strategy across all aspects of the Commonwealth Sport Movement.

“The genesis of the Gender Equality Strategy (GES) can be traced to frustrations experienced in athlete representation within the Commonwealth Sport Movement,” explains Robertson, the author of the strategy. “Although athlete representation in CGF governance is guaranteed, representation alone lacked the breadth of engagement required to realize the Transformation 2022 goals. The CGF is determined to instil meaning in being a Commonwealth athlete by encouraging and enabling athletes to give back – to their communities, their sport systems, their countries, but mostly to the youth following in their footsteps. Representation is not enough; broad-based engagement is critical.”

He adds: “Regarding gender equality, it was clear that representation in governance alone was too limiting, was often emotionally charged, and was occasionally used as an excuse that enough was being done. Gender equality had to be universal in every aspect of the Commonwealth Sport Movement, and that is what we have done with the GES.”

In June 2016, following endorsement by the CGF Sport Committee and approval by the Executive Board, a Gender Equality Task Force (GETF) was struck to guide implementation of the GES and its numerous initiatives. The GETF is chaired by Robertson. CGF Vice-President Kereyn Smith MNZM, who is CEO and Secretary-General of the New Zealand Olympic Committee and Commonwealth Games Association, is co-chair and members are Sandra Osborne SCM QC of Barbados, Miriam Moyo of Zambia, and Dr. Manikavasagam Jegathesan of Malaysia.

The Gender Equality Strategy

“Across the Commonwealth Sport Movement, there is important responsibility and opportunity to redress imbalances that see girls and women as under-represented, under-recognized, and under-served, and positive action is required on many fronts,” says Kereyn Smith. “The GES addresses these imbalances.”

Specific GES initiatives target all areas within the realm of the Commonwealth Sport Movement. The strategy describes how these initiatives will be implemented, some with key partners, so that the process is efficient and the results are effective.

Achieving GES goals

GES goals focus on organizing committees (OCs); women coaches; broadcasters and media; athlete participation; officiating; Commonwealth development; governance; leadership development; mission staff; and outreach. The strategy is quickly bearing fruit in a number of key areas.

Gender equality in all aspects of OCs. This initiative begins with the Gold Coast 2018 Organizing Committee (GOLDOC), which Robertson describes as “a wonderful partner. When we shared the GES with them and discussed areas they could practically implement, they really stepped up.”

The CGF and GOLDOC have already added seven additional events for women to ensure equality of medal opportunities for women and men. The two organizations are cooperating on a range of other shared goals. The CGF, for example, is working with International Federations (IFs) on the gender equitable appointment of international technical officials to the 2018 Games while GOLDOC’s focus is national sport organizations (NSOs) in Australia on the appointment of national technical officials.

GOLDOC is leading the way in gender equality across the total pool of medal and gift presenters, in its volunteer program, the selection of domestic baton bearers for the Queen’s Baton Relay, and in ensuring gender equality in all OC communication materials and images chosen for digital campaigns, social media, and its website. Policies are being established to ensure no sexist language or sexist portrayals are present on the OC website. GOLDOC has also implemented recruitment processes that support and encourage the principles of equal opportunity employment and have established mechanisms, policies, and practices to ensure a gender equitable and harassment-free office environment and pay equity for equal work across genders.

Festival 2018, which is GOLDOC’s arts and culture program, the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, and spectator and community experience are not exempt. GOLDOC is working to ensure gender equality in the roles and opportunities available to workforce, volunteers, and professional and volunteer casts for both Ceremonies. Gender balance is being assessed when creating the narrative, themes, and images for the Ceremonies, and ensuring the results will appeal equally to women and men. Work is underway to ensure that Festival 2018 is equitable in appeal, performers, and artists.

In future, the CGF will embed gender equality requirements for OCs of the Commonwealth Games (CG) and Youth Commonwealth Games (YCG) through the Host City Contract. In addition to the 2018 initiatives, there will be requirements for gender equality at all levels of governance and management, ensuring representation, at a minimum, of women and men of between 40% and 60%. Gender equality will be a guiding principle for all venue and equipment decisions, including, for example, the use of natural turf.

Women’s Coaching a vital component of the GES. To achieve gender equality in Team Coaching Staff at the CG and CYG, “women coaches must be provided with opportunities to coach and gain international experience,” says Robertson. Therefore, the CGF is working to develop and implement a Women Coach Internship Program (WCIP) for Gold Coast 2018 consisting of 20 quota positions earmarked specifically for coach interns that Commonwealth Games Associations (CGAs) could apply for over and above their allocation for team officials. “We have to start now if we want to achieve gender equality in coaching at the 2022 or 2026 and future Games,” says Smith. “The WCIP will allow us to support a group of women in the Commonwealth interested in pursuing a career in coaching.”

Broadcasters and media playing their part. The CGF recognizes that broadcaster and media coverage will follow the successes of their respective teams and respects editorial independence. “However,” Robertson says, “when women are covered, we hope their portrayal will be equivalent to men in placement, prominence, language and tone, narratives, and imagery.”

Consequently, the CGF and GOLDOC are working with an Advisory Group, including Rights Holding Broadcasters, the Host Broadcaster, and representatives from major media outlets planning to cover the Games, to create a *Gender Equality Style Guide* that could be referenced by broadcast commentators and media. The 2018 Host Broadcast team has already committed to incorporating the style guide into its commentator protocol. “Although a challenge, the CGF is investigating ways we can track the coverage of women’s and men’s sport during the Games,” says Robertson.

For future CGs, broadcasters will be encouraged to have a 50-50 female/male on-air presence and, for both broadcasters and media outlets, gender equality in staff attending the Games. The Games competition schedule will also be structured to promote equality of profile across genders.

For the 2022 and future CGs and CYGs, the GES is equally ambitious.

Athlete participation a prime target. The CGF’s goal is gender equality in both opportunity and participation at the CG and CYG. Already achieved for 2018, all future Games will be required to provide equal opportunity for men and women, defined as the number of medal events available to each. Equality of participation will be guaranteed by allocating, on a non-transferable basis, 50% of the quota positions / travel grants, to women.

Women in coaching continues as a key focal point. The CGF intends to work with partners to develop, promote, and deliver a coaching certification program for women coaches in the Commonwealth through the Commonwealth Sport Foundation; work with interested IFs to develop a national and international pathway for retiring Commonwealth Games women athletes into the coaching profession; encourage CGAs to work with their NSOs to appoint as team coaches women who are qualified international coaches; and allocate Commonwealth Sport Foundation funding to CGA proposals that specifically target the development of women coaches. When CGAs apply for quota positions allocated through WCIP, those that have initiated development programs will be given preference.

Officiating an important pathway for women. The CGF, through MOUs to be signed with each IF, is looking to establish a guarantee of gender equality in technical officials at the 2022 and future CGs. The CGF will work with IFs to create programs to develop technical officials within the Commonwealth, particularly from smaller CGAs in developing regions. Developing national and international pathways for retiring Commonwealth athletes, particularly women, to become technical officials in their countries is also critical.

Commonwealth development stressed. The Commonwealth Sport Foundation (CSF), recently created by the CGF, will seek to earmark a certain amount or percentage of funding for programs targeting development through and of sport for girls and women across the Commonwealth.

“This means developing initiatives for girls and women who aspire to be coaches, technical officials, and leaders in sport,” says Robertson, who places a high priority to internships.

For any internship program established through the CGF or CSF, between 40% and 60% representation of both women and men will be a condition of approval. In the future, and subject to other sources of funds, programs will be developed and delivered through UNICEF and NGOs that use sport as a development tool for girls and women. Also to be addressed is emerging anecdotal evidence suggesting that in certain areas, boys and young men, particularly youth at risk, are falling behind in active participation in sport in certain regions and countries.

Governance underpins goals. Given the importance of governance in achieving the GES goals, the CGF aims to establish gender equality across all levels of governance under its jurisdiction, including itself and member CGAs. It is important to keep in mind that the desired gender equitable end-state will vary widely. Each CGA will be asked to set reasonable transition targets and to track progress against those targets. Implementation of targets will be tied in large measure to the CGF and CGA election cycles.

In future, if CGAs establish the roles of chef and deputy chef, both genders must be represented. Each CGA will be encouraged to identify, recruit, and mentor woman leaders in their organization in order to meet the targets they set for themselves. Under consideration is a requirement for CGAs to develop and implement mechanisms, policies, and practices to ensure that gender equality and harassment-free environments exist within their organizations.

For its part, the CGF will review all bylaws and supporting governing documents to ensure gender equality principles are embedded in principle and in policy. For elected CGF boards and committees, representation of both women and men of between 40% and 60%, through appointments if necessary, will be legislated by the 2019 elections.

Leadership development to the forefront. Acknowledging the importance of developing the next generation of leaders, the CGF is seeking a partner to train Commonwealth women leaders in sport through a Women's Commonwealth Sport Leadership Network. CGAs would identify and propose candidates, including retiring athletes, for the network. Ideally, a session of the network will be held in conjunction with each CGF General Assembly and/or CG or CYG. Best practices in leadership and gender equality from around the Commonwealth would be identified, compiled, and promoted through the Foundation.

Mission staff in the mix. Mission staff attending the CG and CYG will be expected to reflect gender equality. To achieve this goal, CGAs will be asked to establish progressive targets in the make-up of their mission staff for future Games with progress monitored through a Gender Equality Report Card.

Reaching beyond the Commonwealth. The GES addresses gender imbalances in other areas of concern to the CGF. CGAs and their governments will be encouraged to establish a policy that mandates gender equitable representation on all overseas delegations; advocacy for women's issues will be designed to break down barriers for girls and women generally, and particularly, for girls and women participating in sport across the Commonwealth; and partnerships will be formed with select organizations that have an international, regional, national, or state/provincial mandate to promote women and gender equality in sport and/or have an interest in women's issues in sport and/or the Commonwealth.

"The GES is ambitious, and we need to know how we are doing, what is working, and what is not so we can adapt over time," says Robertson. "To this end, the CGF will publish a Gender Equality Report Card every four years covering all GES initiatives. We are in the process of compiling a current status report based on data from the 2014 CG. For the 2018 CG, we hope to show measurable progress in a wide range of areas."

About the author

Sheila Robertson is the founding editor and an author for the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*; the author of *Shattered Hopes: Canada's Boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games*; the editor and an author for *Taking the Lead: Strategies and Solutions from Female Coaches*; a contributing author to *Playing It Forward: 50 Years of Women and Sport in Canada* and *Women in Sports Coaching* (Routledge 2016), and the founding editor and lead writer of *Champion* magazine and *Coaches Report* magazine. The Sheila Robertson Award, presented annually by the Coaching Association of Canada, recognizes a national sport or multi-sport organization that demonstrates a consistent approach in valuing the recognizing the role of the coach internationally and to the media and the public.