

Two Gender Equity Initiatives Support Women in High-Performance Coaching

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Introduction

SwimCAN chose to be proactive in creating opportunities for women coaches to succeed at the highest levels of the sport. Of interest to authors Siobhan Rourke, Carol Cárdenas-Castro, and Diane Culver was the impact of two of its initiatives – the Budapest Experience and the ongoing Select Coaches program, launched in 2013 – in transforming an environment that has long been male dominated.

The Budapest Experience “aimed to enhance the coaches’ experience by exposing them to top-level international swimming ... in alignment with the Own The Podium High Performance Plan.”

Designed to “elevate Canadian coaches who will support the next generation of Canadian swimmers,” the Select Coaches program offers individualized support and collaborative programming that develops confident, proficient coaches who are ready to lead teams at international levels.

The authors give the programs top marks, noting the inclusion of such fundamental mechanisms of support as confidence-building, mentorship, and access to high-performance environments, the essential elements of successful gender equity initiatives. It is encouraging that both will continue, with four coaches selected for the 2026 Pan Pacific Swimming Championships in a program modelled on the Budapest Experience.

As always, the Journal encourages other national sport organizations to emulate initiatives such as these, recognizing both the vital role accomplished women coaches can play in achieving Canada’s high-performance goals on the world stage and their own responsibility in creating the best possible environment for the success of their women coaches. – Sheila Robertson, *Journal* Editor.

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Two Gender Equity Initiatives Support Women in High-Performance Coaching

National sport organizations (NSOs) play a critical role in advancing gender equity within the Canadian sport system, particularly in the context of coaching. As the primary gatekeepers of high-performance pathways, NSOs influence who is recruited, developed, and retained within their coach networks. By creating and investing in equity-focused coaching programs, mentorship opportunities, and leadership development initiatives, NSOs can help break down gender barriers and build clearer, more sustainable pathways for women in coaching.

Swimming Canada (SwimCAN) is one such NSO leading the charge, focusing on increasing the number of women coaches, particularly in leadership and high-performance roles through two gender equity initiatives: the Budapest Experience and the Select Coaches Program.

The Budapest Experience was aimed at enhancing women coaches' capabilities by exposing them to top-level international swimming at the 2024 World Aquatics Swimming Championships (25m) in Budapest, Hungary, and elevating Canadian coaching strategies through mentorship, race analysis, and immersive learning. The aim was to develop world-leading coaches through group and individualized programming on a yearly basis. While both programs were application-based, SwimCAN purposefully encouraged certain women to put their names forward for consideration and five women coaches were selected for the Budapest Experience.

While the Select Coaches program dates back to 2013, the program was significantly revamped in 2023, shifting from providing resources to focusing on immersing coaches in practical settings. Since that time, 25 coaches have participated; of these coaches, 13 have been women, including seven in 2024-2025 and four in 2025-2026. Using semi-structured interview data from seven women coaches who participated in one or both programs, we asked:

How have SwimCAN's women in coaching programs impacted the development of women coaches on a community and international level?

This article aims to answer our question by exploring key outcomes and learnings from both a personal and professional standpoint. As well, we offer suggestions for NSOs to support the advancement of women coaches at the individual, community, and national levels within Canada.

We examine how SwimCAN's pioneering gender equity initiatives have shaped women coaches' professional identity development. Many of the women coaches we spoke to discussed feelings of impostor syndrome (that is, the experience of feeling not ready to fulfill a role), particularly as they navigate high-performance (HP) environments.

Drawing on our discussions with the women coaches in the two initiatives, we examine how access to supportive learning environments, peer and mentor networks, and exposure to HP contexts influence women coaches' personal and professional growth. We dive into how these initiatives contributed to shifts in women coaches' self-perceptions, from uncertainty and self-doubt to increased confidence in their knowledge, decision-making, and readiness to occupy HP

coaching roles. We organize our discussion around three key areas: access to high-performance networks and opportunities traditionally unavailable to women, the relationship between confidence development and career progression, and promising strategies for NSOs centred around broadening the definition of professional coaching knowledge and allyship.

Accessing High-Performance Spaces and Networks Often Unavailable to Women Coaches

Coaches learn across a range of contexts, and that learning should not be confined to formal, classroom-based setting. Informal and unstructured learning environments have been shown to facilitate reflection, knowledge exchange, and professional identity development.

These forms of learning were thoughtfully embedded through monthly virtual Select Coaches meetings, online group communication spaces, and informal debriefing sessions during the Budapest Experience. One coach stressed that the Select Coaches meetings especially felt safe, a place for asking and answering questions in a non-judgmental, collaborative way. This reinforces the importance of having supportive learning environments for the holistic development of coaches, including not only the professional side, such as how to program a workout, but also for interpersonal or psychological development. The coaches also spoke about the value of connecting with other women coaches and expanding their professional networks, particularly through interactions with HP coaches from Canadian and international contexts, inside and outside competitive environments.

Collectively, these experiences supported the coaches' understanding of HP sport environments and their perceived capacity to guide athletes to perform. For coaches in both programs, having access to other women coaches on the pool deck and in other HP spaces created significant value. Moreover, the coaches mentioned that, unlike talking with male coaches, they felt more open to discussing topics related to general coaching experiences as a woman coach with other women.

While these learning opportunities were largely viewed as beneficial, coaches also identified potential unintended consequences. In contexts where women coaches remain underrepresented, limited access to HP opportunities may inadvertently foster competition among women for a small number of available positions. As one coach noted:

“Team Canada does do different travel experiences, but it’s often which athletes get to go that dictates which coaches [go] and you do have to have a female coach, but often times we are competing with each other for that one spot. And maybe we shouldn’t be viewing it that way. But it does tend to be that they take one female coach or a female team manager on a lot of these teams. It would be nice for women to get a little bit more opportunity.”

Despite initiatives that expose women coaches to HP environments, the coaches emphasized a persistent gap between observing HP sport and occupying coaching roles at the international level. This gap was further reflected in accounts of prolonged tenure in assistant coaching or age group roles:

“... a lot of the female coaches can get... stuck on the age group side of things and not know how to move over to the senior high-performance side”.

Also mentioned were challenges in progressing through advanced certification pathways, with very few women progressing to the higher NCCP certifications. As such, the findings underscore the need for developmental pathways that not only provide exposure and connection but also address structural barriers that limit women coaches' access to HP leadership roles.

The Relationship Between Increased Coaching Confidence and Career Advancement

Observation has the potential to be a critical tool in advancing women coaches as it can help to demystify HP sport and bridge the gap between the coaches' current level and HP. Observation provides coaches with the opportunity to better understand where their athletes stand and how they may be able to reach benchmarks required of elite-level swimmers. Thus, SwimCAN chose to counter the traditional approach where:

“The big thing in Canada [is we wait] until we have an athlete at the [elite] level to start to educate the coach.”

This, coupled with the tangible, technical learning sessions seen in both programs, aided in building the coaches' coaching confidence, which in turn could positively impact their career advancement. While observation has demonstrated successful learning, there remain many internalized relational challenges that influence women coaches and their professional growth. A next step to further enhance these learning opportunities would be to assist women coaches in developing more confidence to apply the knowledge they gain in their practice, and potentially to move on to higher levels of coaching.

We spoke to some women coaches who felt there was a mismatch between their competence and confidence in coaching at a higher level. Several spoke of knowing how to coach technically and tactically but struggling to trust that knowledge beyond familiar spaces and people. A few coaches spoke of their fears in applying for jobs without the necessary credentials with one stating:

“I think we get stuck as a female coach, in you stay in your lane, you stay in your space, you do what you're told, and again, if I don't have all 9 of the qualifications, I'm not gonna put myself forward and so what this [program] really has done is change my perspective on that, and just to put myself out there for everything”.

The Budapest Experience, specifically, pushed this coach past this tendency. Furthermore, it provided women coaches with the opportunity to observe an international swimming event and engage with other HP coaches, which many found valuable for reaffirming confidence in their coaching. This, in turn, served as a validation of their knowledge and expertise.

Learning that their practices are similar to those used in high-performance environments, the coaches discussed feeling more confident in their approach with their athletes back home. For instance, one of the coaches in the Budapest Experience said:

“I keep a coaching philosophy as a living document and make sure that I'm still aligned with the values and such on there, but the trip [provided] reassurance and reaffirming that these are the things that I care about as a coach, and they do translate to a world level [also it helped me to] gain clarity on how I want to interact with the athletes and make sure that I am coaching by my philosophy.”

This validation and increased confidence also influenced the intentionality and accountability the coaches brought to training design and to their overall coaching approach.

Additionally, transitioning between coaching roles such as moving from clubs or competition levels can often carry a specific form of emotional labour for women coaches. Beyond the technical demands of adapting to new athletes, environments, and role expectations, our coaches frequently described the added burden of needing to prove their competence and legitimacy in each new place. Research suggests that women in male-dominated sport contexts are more likely to experience heightened self-monitoring, doubt, and feelings of imposter syndrome during periods of change, particularly when entering visible or HP roles.

All the women coaches we interviewed highlighted such experiences. Thus, transitions that might create opportunities for professional growth can be emotionally taxing, requiring women coaches to expend cognitive and affective resources to maintain their standing within their coaching context. People in high-powered positions, especially men, may not always realize that the emotional labour women take on in sport can look and feel quite different from their experiences. While it can be helpful to learn from those who have successfully navigated HP sport, advice grounded solely in men's personal career journeys may not fully reflect the gendered realities women coaches face. Because sport systems have historically afforded men greater authority and credibility, their pathways through career transitions may not mirror the barriers and expectations women encounter, and this should be taken into consideration when supporting women coaches through career transitions.

Promising Strategies for Developing and Retaining Women in Coaching Leadership Pathways within NSOs

As evidenced through SwimCAN's gender equity initiatives, efforts to develop and retain women in coaching leadership pathways are most effective when they move beyond narrowly focusing on technical and tactical experience and instead broaden what is recognized as professional coaching knowledge. Senior coaching and leadership roles (which women do not frequently hold in swimming and many other sports) require a wide range of competencies beyond athlete training, including skills for communicating with boards and staff, decision-making, and organizational management, to name a few. When these “softer skills” are left unspoken or learned informally, advancement often benefits those who are already connected to existing power networks. Making these skills intentionally part of coach education programs could help position relational and organizational abilities as essential parts of coaching, rather than optional extras. This approach could also reduce reliance on “insider knowledge” that has historically favoured men. Creating clearer and more intentional leadership pathways, including outlining the training, experiences, and supports needed at each stage of a coaching career, could make

advancement more transparent. Framing women's leadership development as long-term workforce planning, rather than a short-term equity effort, reinforces its importance to the future of sport and may help address the low number of women pursuing HP coaching roles.

The opportunities afforded to women coaches in the SwimCAN programs led them to recognize their role in 'paying it forward' by sharing the knowledge they gained through their participation in these programs and committing to supporting the next generation of coaches.

"When I go on deck now, I take the time to talk to younger female coaches or younger coaches in general, introduce myself, give them an opportunity to chat as well as make myself available so that they can see this as more than just a part-time job, but can become a career."

This suggests that knowledge sharing is a very important step in demystifying the HP sport environment for women and revealing their role in supporting the development of the next generation of women coaches.

Further underlying this sentiment is the persistent tendency to position women coaches as exceptions rather than a normalized component of the coaching workforce. While celebrating individual or small-group success stories, such as the Budapest Experience, can increase visibility, exception-based accounts risk reinforcing the idea that women's advancement is unusual or extraordinary. In fact, while coaches in both SwimCAN programs received direct exposure to HP settings, the women interviewed revealed they had seen little to no new coaching experiences at the HP level.

Rather than positioning gender equity conversations as the responsibility of women alone, our women coaches highlighted the importance of men allies contributing to the creation of respectful, inclusive, and developmentally supportive environments. Engaging men as allies is an essential step towards sustainable change. Many men coaches have reported uncertainty about how to contribute to gender equity efforts, suggesting a need for clearer guidance and peer influence. Hearing from men coaches who have actively engaged in equity work could be particularly powerful, helping to normalize new practices and challenge assumptions within the coaching culture. An intentional approach embedding expectations around allyship and inclusive leadership within coach education and leadership standards could reinforce that gender equity is a shared responsibility rather than an individual choice.

As discussed in this article, women coaches in both programs described being encouraged by SwimCAN staff to ask questions, initiate conversations with senior coaches, and place themselves in visible HP contexts, actions that require confidence and emotional labour. This shared responsibility reduced the expectation that women must continually explain or advocate for 'women's issues' and instead reframes equity as a collective concern within HP sport. Recognizing the invisible emotional labour women coaches face is critical for understanding why confidence-building, mentorship, and access to high-performance environments emerge as central mechanisms of support within such gender equity initiatives.

SwimCAN's approach has been promising, especially with the strategic placement of high-powered individuals within the HP context who see the connection between increasing the

number of women coaches and Canada performing consistently on the world stage. We encourage other NSOs to learn from these initiatives and strive for advocacy and allyship at all levels of sport organizations, with a particular emphasis placed on those in leadership roles with decision-making power.

NSOs such as SwimCAN have increasingly initiated targeted gender equity opportunities aimed at supporting women coaches' development, retention, and advancement. Yet, confounding these initiatives are certain persistent structural, cultural, and relational barriers, including gendered expectations, mentorship, and exclusion from informal professional networks embedded within the entire sport system.

Conclusion

Our purpose was to explore women coaches' experiences within SwimCAN's gender equity initiatives, with particular attention to outcomes related to personal and professional development and the advancement of the sport in Canada. Based on our learnings cited above, we confidently encourage other NSOs to learn from these initiatives, and highlight the importance of peer learning, the relationship between coaching confidence and career advancement, and giving access to HP spaces and networks often unavailable to women coaches. In this work, women's lived experiences need to be more thoughtfully considered in the context of our society, and allyship needs to be further emphasized because this is definitely not only a 'women's issue'. We, as well as the women coaches we spoke to, believe that SwimCAN is a true leader in gender equity initiatives, and we hope to continue to see its work result in more women in high-performance coaching and leadership roles within swimming and across sports in Canada.

About the Authors

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Siobhan Rourke is a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa. Her research focuses on gender equity in sport, specifically improving the sport landscape for women and girls by working with coaches to create more inclusive, welcoming spaces. She is also a Certified Mental Performance Consultant and a Senior Program Coordinator leading Research and Evaluation initiatives for Girls Forward Foundation, a Canadian charity on a mission to empower girls through sport, physical activity, and education.

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Carol Cárdenas-Castro is an MA student at the University of Ottawa. Her research interests focus on cross-cultural practices of coaching and leadership, particularly in contexts where performance, well-being, and learning intersect. She has over a decade of experience designing and implementing training and development programs aimed at improving individual and team performance across diverse settings, including sports, the arts, and the technology industry. Her professional background includes work in learning and development and psychological skills training.

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A full professor at the University of Ottawa in sport pedagogy and psychology, Diane's research interests include the development of sport leaders. She has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to research Para sport coaching, women in coaching, social learning leadership, and the use of design thinking to better support university student-athletes. Diane and her graduate students are working with the CAC on the WAGE- funded Women and Gender Equity in Coaching project. Her research approach is mostly qualitative, often participatory, and frequently embodies forms of social learning spaces such as communities of practice.

References available upon request.