

Developing Public Policy for Women in Sport

A Discourse Analysis

by Kristin Bell-Altenstad and Sue Vail

Le but de cet article est d'ouvrir une discussion critique sur le discours qui domine au sein des politiques fédérales canadiennes concernant les femmes et les sports. En examinant le rôle historique du gouvernement fédéral dans les sports, nous

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constatons que la croissance des organisations sportives au Canada n'a pas donné lieu à un engagement gouvernemental vers l'égalité des femmes dans le sport.

The study of public policy has traditionally been shaped by a variety of political objectives and ideological principles that reflect a particular viewpoint of the "political" world. Recently, however, the study of public-policy making has adopted the analysis of "policy conceptualization" as a prerequisite for making sense of public policy. As Burt, Code, and Dorney contend, one must describe a condition before one can prescribe a cure.

Policy discourse analysis focuses on the process of conceptualization in which one must engage in order to "describe a condition." For example, issues do not simply arise out of objective conditions, they are continuously constructed social phenomena (Burstein). In order for any issue to become a "public" issue, it must be defined as a problem. From a public policy perspective, this process of conceptualization is vital because as Bell states "the way in which the problem is conceptualized has an important bearing on the nature of the response, including the kind of policy instrument selected" (96).

Thus, the way in which the problem is perceived deeply conditions the kinds of solutions one attempts to employ. Because of this, the problem becomes critical to our understanding of policy decisions and dilemma conceptualization. Hogwood and Gunn claim that "one of the least explored aspects of real-life policy making... is how certain issues get on the political agendas for discussion and action while others do not" (7).

Legitimacy of the "women in sport" problem

There is a great deal of ambivalence among feminists

surrounding the "problem" of women in sport. Feminists are not unified in answering the question: how can equality ultimately be achieved? It is conceivable that the failure of feminists to uniformly conceptualize this problem has militated against efforts to improve the status of women and girls in sport.

Few feminists have devoted attention to the issue of women in sport, and those that do address sport, do so from different perspectives. These varying approaches to the issue of women's involvement in sport have raised different, often contradictory, questions. For example, some feminists feel that sport should be rejected entirely as an activity of male prowess; others feel that although sport is a male domain, that it must be changed to become more inclusive; still others accept sport as a traditional male rite of passage and choose to focus on improving access for women (Hall).

The support of many feminists is lost, however, because many believe that the institution of sport, as do other societal institutions, serves to perpetually reinforce inequality.

What we have at present is a man-centred... breeding ground not of humanism, but of masculine privilege. As women have gradually and reluctantly been admitted into the mainstream,... they have been made participants in a system that prepares men to take up roles of power. It [is a system that] asks questions and teaches "facts" generated by a male intellectual tradition, and that both subtly and openly confirms men as leaders and shapers of human destiny. The exceptional women who have emerged from this system and who hold distinguished positions in it are just that: the required exceptions used by every system to justify and maintain itself. (Rich 127)

For those who are committed to changing women's inferior status in sport, many feel that government policy is a significant approach. Jensen argued that to legitimize their concerns, women must enter the political struggle of making claims to generate policy outcomes.

It has been a struggle for those women in sport to identify or label the issues and problems such that they are understandable in terms of the governing discourse. Discourse in sport is governed by predominantly white men who come from similar socio-economic, educational and sports backgrounds (Macintosh and Beamish). Upon entering the discourse, women must define their experiences within the confines of that universe of political discourse. Thus, women must identify the issues in male terms. It appears that this has had a negative impact on the

development and implementation of public policy addressing women and sport.

Toward a federal government policy on "women in sport"

In 1961 the Conservative government passed Bill C-131, the Fitness and Amateur Sport Act. With this Act, the Fitness and Amateur Sport Branch was created as part of the Department of National Health and Welfare. With the passage of this Bill, the federal government formally began its involvement with amateur sport. The immediate

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effect of the Act was felt in the form of an unprecedented stimulus to the agencies in the fields of fitness, recreation, and sport across the country. A major outcome of the Bill was an expansion in the number of national sport organizations and an expansion of their respective mandates to enhance the performance of elite athletes.

Although the Bill clearly increased the focus on excellence in sport and its impact on national prestige, it did not address gender equality. The topic of women's participation in sport did not surface onto the political agenda until 1970, with the publication of the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which addressed the problem of unequal female participation in sport programs. One recommendation directed Fitness and Amateur Sport to undertake research to determine why fewer girls than boys were participating in sports programs at the school level and to recommend remedial action.

Pursuant to acting upon this recommendation, Fitness and Amateur Sport undertook a number of research and related projects over the next ten years, including a national conference. Several documents with many recommendations for action were produced but few if any were acted upon.

Moved to action by pressure from federal and national status of women agencies and concerned feminists in sport, Fitness and Amateur Sport established a Women's Program in 1980 that was to act as a focal point within the federal government for issues related to women and sport. More studies were conducted to show the inequities and a number of pilot projects were launched based on affirmative action principles. The Program made some small strides but did not have the clout it needed to address sustained change. In the mid-1980's Sport Canada felt it had "an obligation to fulfill its mandate with respect to women, by not only providing leadership and financial

assistance, but by providing policy direction" (Mickelson 45-6). Thus work began on the development of a policy.

An analysis of the problem

In 1986, a Women in Sport policy was published by Sport Canada, a directorate of the then Fitness and Amateur Sport Branch. To date, this is the only federal government document that addresses gender inequities in sport. Mickelson explained that this policy paper was preceded by various studies which revealed "the paucity of women in National Sport Organizations as participants, coaches, officials and administrators" (44).

The policy document was intended to establish a federal position on women in sport based on "the issues" which contribute to the barriers responsible for the dearth of women in various leadership and participatory positions within National Sport Organizations. The policy identifies five issues as being key contributors to the barriers affecting women's participation in sport: systemic and structural injustices, resource allocation, traditional roles, stratification of sport, and the responsibilities of national sport organizations.

The labelling of a problem, and the talk which emerges from the political debate surrounding the problem are pivotal to the outcome of a given policy. If the problem is defined inadequately at any point in the process, then its chance of accurate interpretation and appropriate action are substantially decreased. While the major objective of the policy was "to attain equality for women in sport" (Fitness and Amateur Sport 14), a deconstruction of the issues as defined within it showed that the various conceptualizations within the document may have inadequately diagnosed the problems faced by women in sport.

To begin, equality is not defined in the policy.

...if the objective of the policy is to achieve equality, there must be some criteria whereby [equality] can be measured. This cannot simply be numerical (i.e. [a] 50/50 formula) but must also take into account the attitudes...[of those women the policy is addressing]. Until women feel that they are being treated equally, equality does not exist (Mickelson 50-1).

Not only are key terms undefined, but the policy avoids challenging existing social structures which perpetuate inequality. The social system disadvantages women, and in fact, requirements for involvement in sport systematically block female participation. For example, studies show that leisure time for women is very different from men's. Sporting activities, particularly coaching, are typically held in the early evenings and on weekends, leisure time for many men, but domestic working time for many women (Lenskyj).

The issue of limited resources is explained as a major contributor to low participation rates. Research has shown that facility allocation, dollars spent and time apportioned

to women's sport correlates with rates of participation (Angus Reid Group). This problem is softly stated in the policy and does not clearly address the responsibility of government in directly contributing resources or in ensuring that the public funding provided to sport organizations through grants is apportioned equitably to address female and male needs. It is interesting to note that the initial budget for all Women's Program activities in 1980 was \$250,000. In 1992 the Women's Program budget allocation was \$300,000, less than one per cent of the federal government's total contribution to national sport and fitness organizations (Fitness and Amateur Sport).

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With respect to traditional roles, the policy largely refers to the lack of female role models, explaining this as having resulted from girls and women having poor self-images in sport. It is important to note that the roles assigned to boys and girls/men and women are not challenged in this section, but rather discussion is centred on the failure of girls and women to attribute "male" characteristics to themselves.

The policy does not identify social attitudes as barriers to equal opportunity in sport, beyond pointing out that traditional roles assigned to girls and women hamper their participation. It appears to neglect the fundamental questions crucial to explaining the root of the problem. Are all traditionally male characteristics associated with sport positive and admirable traits for human beings? Should women abandon all aspects of their traditional roles and upbringing by assimilating to these traits deemed male in order to participate in sport as equals? What social forces maintain our gender-assigned traditional roles and who is responsible for changing these roles?

Sport stratification is referred to as the servicing and organizing of sport participants based on relevant parameters which would ensure fair competition. The question of integration versus separate-but-equal has been a contentious one for many in the sport community. This issue is addressed in the policy in that support for sex-integration until the age of puberty is stated as the desirable situation, and presumably the government position, although the document is weak on defining this integration.

Regarding responsibilities of National Sport Organizations, the issue is the necessity for these organizations to be responsible to the public in terms of providing opportunities for girls and women as well as boys and men. Beyond this acknowledgement of the power that Na-

tional Sport Organizations have regarding "who plays," nothing is said about the inequities existing and being perpetuated within these organizations, with the ongoing support of government funding (Hall, Cullen and Slack).

The policy clearly affirms the significance of Sport Canada's role in sport, but makes no attempt to restructure the ideological barriers which impede equal involvement for women at all levels in sport. It is interesting to note that, according to a former director of the Women's Program, the writers of this public policy were a group of women committed to improving the status of women and girls in sport and physical activity (Vail). A dilemma faced by these women, as government employees, may have been the extent to which they felt they could depart from the dominant discourse and still bring the policy to fruition. A problem must always be conceptualized so that it is understood within the boundaries of the contemporary discourse, not necessarily the progressive counter discourse (Jensen). It would appear that the policy writers may have been limited in their attempts to move beyond the confines of the federal government's dominant discourse.

While the "Women in Sport" policy identified the issues or barriers which discourage the participation of women in sport, in many cases these problems were presented without solutions leading to substantive change. The obvious lack of documented criteria for measuring change, as well as an absence of compliance measures for National Sport Organizations to ensure that public funds were allocated equitably within these organizations, left the policy as a "toothless tiger."

Aftermath

Since the release of the policy, women continue to be under-represented in key decision-making and technical positions in National Sport Organizations. In a 1990 study of the professional staff structure of twelve National Sport Organizations, it was found that women held 90 per cent of the support positions, while 28 per cent held senior management positions, 23 per cent senior technical positions and less than ten per cent of national coaching positions (Macintosh and Whitson).

Because the policy carries no penalties that would apply to these national not-for-profit sport governing bodies if they do not ensure equality of opportunity, the degree to which organizations have addressed the issue ranges from not at all to the implementation of specific policies such as the gender balancing of boards of directors and sexual harassment.

In a 1990 study conducted by Hall, Cullen and Slack entitled *The Gender Structure of National Sport Organizations*, many of the volunteer leaders, both male and female, surveyed did not believe that there was a problem with the under-representation of women in sport. Most firmly believe that either females are represented in their organization in proportion to their num-

bers as participants (although in none of the 12 sports was this actually the case), or that their sport is wide open to anyone of either sex providing they are qualified and willing to work.

A male respondent summed it up best:

If one is willing to take risks, grab opportunities, and make the sacrifices required (just as all previous successful people who started near the bottom have) then gender is virtually a non-issue in terms of climbing the chosen ladder of success (Hall, Cullen and Slack 27).

Understanding this attitude is fundamental to understanding the complexity of the problem for women in sport. These researchers argue that the structure of the sport organization itself does not create a barrier to women's participation but that the real attitudinal problems are more firmly entrenched and much more difficult to address. Once women enter bureaucratic organizations that have been defined by males, it seems that the institutional profile inherently hinders the full participation of the women within it and consequently creates barriers for entry. It is further argued by Hall, Cullen and Slack that a message of non-commitment to gender equity has been sent to the National Sport Organizations. Little money has been allocated over the years for the maintenance and growth of the federal Women's Program and no strong implementation directives were provided in the policy to encourage compliance through the grant application process.

Conclusion

While the Women in Sport policy has been strongly critiqued throughout this paper, it is nonetheless worthy of some praise. Some National Sport Organizations have turned to it for guidance in attempting to make their organizations more welcoming to girls and women. Some innovative programming has been developed and shared amongst those organizations open to change.

However, through this analysis it has become apparent that the effective development and implementation of the policy has been impeded by a lack of clarity in the writing and interpretation of the issues (or problems) affecting the participation of girls and women in sport. Further, the difficulties of developing this policy from within a powerful, patriarchal institution in a way that recognized the required political discourse and allowed the governing elite to be comfortable with its approval, has greatly limited its ability to stimulate change.

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