A Strategic Business Case for Women in Sport Leadership

Swarali Patil, Western University  
Alison Doherty (Advisor), Western University

Management - Leadership (Amateur Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Session: Live Q&A for Management 1 (Asynchronous)  
Saturday June 5, 2021, 1:40 PM - 2:40 PM

Providing equitable opportunities and increasing the engagement of women continues to be a challenge for many sport organizations (Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Hoeber, 2007; Burton, 2015; Hoeber & Shaw, 2019). Their efforts can be supported by understanding how an investment in women, particularly in leadership roles, can support an organization's overall mission and goals. Specifically, this understanding can be helped by a shift from thinking of gender equity in sport as a "cause," to its consideration as a "business case," for change. Senior leaders have called for resources that can help them make a persuasive case for investing in women in sport (A. Sandmeyer-Graves, personal communication, October 20, 2018). Connecting equity to the strategic interests of an organization can help ensure it is taken seriously, and addressed systematically, for effective change (Berger, 2018). The purpose of this study was to develop a strategic framework for sport organizations to invest in women in leadership roles.

The framework is situated in the Canadian national sport organization (NSO) context and was developed in a three-stage process. First, we identified the goals of NSOs by reviewing the strategic plans of 30 organizations. These goals were verified by current and former leaders of three organizations, and ensured the framework captures the priorities of NSOs. Second, we undertook a systematic literature review to understand the impact on organizational goal achievement through internal practices (e.g., policies, programs, training, changes to HR practices) pertaining to women in the workplace, and in leadership, specifically. There is a growing body of research about the positive impacts of enhanced engagement of women, for an organization's goal achievement and bottom line (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2016; Larkin et al., 2015), but there is limited evidence of this in the sport context. Thus, the framework is informed by evidence from a variety of sectors regarding outcomes that correspond with NSO priorities (e.g., performance, structural governance, risk management, stakeholder satisfaction). Third, it was important to ensure the resultant framework is situated in the culture and environment of sport in Canada and has utility for NSOs. Thus, the credibility and potential effectiveness of the framework was established (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Creswell & Miller, 2000) through semi-structured interviews with a sample of 10 NSO leaders, using a conversational approach (Patton, 2015).

The strategic framework highlights practices and initiatives that NSOs can develop and implement to engage women in leadership roles that may be expected to impact on organizational goal achievement and competitive advantage. The development of this "business case" contributes to the women and gender equity in sport leadership literature and presents theoretical connections between equity and an organization's mission and goals that provide a springboard for further investigation in the sport setting.