

**Keynote Address
by**

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at the

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Women and girls' access to and participation in sport: a human rights issue

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Her Excellency the Governor General of the Commonwealth of Australia,
Hon. Minister for Youth and Sport,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Conference Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to have been invited by the International Working Group on Women and Sport to the 5th Conference on Women and Sport. This conference picks up from where the 2006 World Conference of Women and Sport in Kumamoto, Japan, left off.

You will recall that, at that conference, participants made a commitment. They stated and I quote “In order to realize gender equality in and through sport, we commit to building a network for close collaboration with relevant agencies and individuals. Over the next four years (2006-2010), we will further develop the vision of active participation in change born at the Kumamoto Conference”. This commitment was generated by the determination to implement the Brighton Declaration in line with the theme of Montreal “Investing in Change”. It sought to build on the work that had been done since the First Conference on Women and Sport in 1994 held at Brighton, United Kingdom. At that time it was acknowledged that sport was a cultural activity which enriched society and friendship between nations; an activity which offers individuals the opportunity of self knowledge; self expression and fulfillment; personal achievement; skills acquisition and demonstration of ability; social interaction; enjoyment; good health and wellbeing. It was further acknowledged that sport promotes involvement, integration and responsibility in society and contributed to the development of the community. But the Conference also observed that despite the fact that women constituted more than half of the world’s population, and although the percentage of their participation in sport varied between countries, in every case it was less than that of men and boys.

Women's and girls' access to and participation in sport is not a privilege. It is a right. The right to participate in sport and physical activity is enshrined in Article 1 of the UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education and Sport, for example, which states that "The practice of physical education and sport is a fundamental right for all". Similarly Articles 10 (g) and 13 (c) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW) call for States Parties to ensure the same opportunities for women and men to participate actively in sports, physical education and recreational activities. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also recognize access to and participation in sport as human rights.

It is widely acknowledged that women's and girls' inability to participate in sport is linked to the persistent gender inequalities. The United Nations General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Commission on the Status of Women have called for the creation of opportunities at the national, regional and international levels that would facilitate the participation of women and girls in sport and physical activity. This call was encapsulated in the Beijing Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The 2005 United Nations International Year for Sport and Physical Education highlighted the power of sport to enable individuals to experience equality, freedom and empowerment, noting that "the control over one's body experienced while practicing sport is particularly valuable for girls and women..."

The quadrennial international conferences, organized by the International Working Group on Women and Sport, have galvanized the global community to confront the prevailing unequal situation of women and girls in sport. The Brighton Declaration outlines eloquently the areas requiring action, including facilities, school and junior sport, developing participation, high performance sport, leadership in sport, education, training and development, sport information and research, resources and domestic and international cooperation.

In May 1998 the Windhoek Call for Action addressed all men and women responsible for, or who directly influence the conduct, development or promotion of sport, or who are in any way in the employment, education, management, training, development of girls and women in sport. In reaffirming the principles of the Brighton Declaration, the participants' Call for Action covered 11 areas. They included, among others, developing action plans for the implementation of the Brighton Declaration; establishing partnerships with the global women's movement; promoting and sharing information about the positive contribution of women's and girl's involvement in sport; building capacity of women as leaders and decision makers and ensuring that they play meaningful and visible roles in sports at all levels; encouraging the media to positively portray women's role and contribution to sport; recognizing the important role of governments to sport development and ensuring the availability of adequate resources for girls' and women's development through sport.

At Montreal in May 2002, when the Conference celebrated the positive change for women and girls in sport and physical activity over the previous four years, it also

identified remaining barriers to women's full access and participation in sport and physical activity. It was not surprising therefore that the Conference adopted the theme "Investing in change", and change we urgently need.

Some may ask.

Why change?

There is a growing understanding that sport positively benefits women and girls, contributing to their social and economic development. Physical activity and sport can be beneficial to the health of women and girls by reducing the childhood diseases that could affect them in life. The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that physical activity is not only crucial to avoiding weight gain but is also an important factor in improving adolescents' control over anxiety and depression. Physically active adolescents more readily adopt other healthy behaviours – including avoiding tobacco, alcohol and drug use – and show higher academic performance at school. However, data from 36 low- and middle-income countries indicate that 86 per cent of girls do not meet recommended levels of physical activity, which is a far higher proportion than among boys.

For older women, sport and physical activity can contribute to the prevention of non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases. Evidence suggest that for women over 60 years of age in low-, middle- and high-income countries, cardiovascular disease and stroke are major killers and causes of chronic health problems. Physical activity also helps to reduce the effects of osteoporosis, which is three times more common in women than in men, as well as Alzheimer's disease.

It has been demonstrated that creating opportunities for women and girls to participate in sport empowers them. Sport is an important tool for social empowerment through the skills and values learned, such as teamwork, negotiation, leadership, communication and respect for others. The social benefits of participation in sport are particularly important for girls, many of whom, especially adolescents, have fewer opportunities than boys for social interaction outside of the home and family.

Sport facilities can provide women and girls with safe places to gather, build social networks, offer social support, and connect them to health, education and employment information.

Participation in sport enables women and girls to enjoy freedom of expression and movement and increases their self-esteem and self-confidence. The connection between participation in sport and academic success is increasingly recognized. Girls who participate in sport tend to be more focused and disciplined which makes them more successful in school. Sport facilitates development of the sense of ownership by women and girls of their bodies, which in turn enables them to make better choices in their reproductive lives.

Change is also necessary as it opens doors in other areas such as employment. Sport offers employment opportunities to women in a wide range of areas, including as coaches, managers, physical education teachers, and journalists. Accordingly, access to sport empowers women economically.

Sport is also a vehicle for improving women's and girls leadership roles and participation in decision-making. Increase of women in leadership positions in sport would significantly influence attitudes towards women's capabilities as leaders and decision-makers. Women in these positions invariably serve as role models for girls in sport and they could also constitute a pool of mentors.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Has change occurred?

Indeed national, regional and international policy and legislative measures have been adopted and strategies for their implementation developed. This policy framework at all these levels is in place. The amendment to the Olympic Charter in 2004 to include specific reference to the need for action on women and sport was a monumental move. This was demonstrated by the increase in women's participation in the Olympic Games. The 2008 Beijing Olympics set a new record for women's participation in Olympic Games, with more than 42 per cent female athletes competing. Out of 11,196 total athletes, 4,746 were women.

Action taken at the regional and national levels to date to expand equal opportunities for women and men and boys and girls to participate in sport is also commendable. For example, recognizing that the overwhelming majority of sportswomen abandoned further involvement in sport after giving birth to a child, Poland introduced an anti-discrimination provision in the Qualified Sports Act in 2005. The provision ensures that sportswomen receive a stipend in the full amount for the duration of their pregnancy and half the amount of the sport stipend for six months following childbirth. Also, the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Hungary funded a promotional programme for women in sport with a specially designed logo and the slogan "Keep in Shape". The programme includes weekly women of sport pages in a daily newspaper, articles in sport magazines and a weekly television health and lifestyle programme. The Ministry also produced a 30-minute programme on the "History of Women in Sports" for national television.

The participation of women in sports and the role of sports in promoting gender equality have also been recognized as critical towards development. For example, "Kicking for Reconciliation!", is a Rwandan project implemented by Women without Borders, which aims to provide football training to 160 Hutu and Tutsi girls together, with a focus on self-confidence, self-awareness and trauma healing, so that they may contribute to the establishment of a peaceful and modern society in their country. Another important example is the case of top football teams in Colombia which in 2005 supported the White Ribbon Campaign, by displaying placards in their stadiums for the campaign, on occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

From a small collection of British World War II veterans in 1948, the Paralympic Games have grown to include women with disabilities to the second-largest international sport event in 2008. The International Paralympic Committee organizes Women in Sport Leadership Regional Summits and National Trainings in all regions to encourage full participation of women with disabilities and acknowledge their right to be leaders within the Paralympic Movement. It has developed a blueprint for action on gender equality in paralympic sport and calls for commitments for action to facilitate increased participation by girls and women. Leadership Summits have been organized in Africa - in Tanzania (2005) and Kenya (2006) and in Niger (2006). A pilot Regional Summit for Asia was held in Tehran, Iran, in 2004. The first European Summit was held in Bonn in 2007. Also, the regional Summit of Latin America and the Caribbean was organized in Venezuela in 2008.

It is evident that a lot of progress has been made. However, reports in connection with the Beijing plus 15 review by the 54th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March this year, indicated that gender equality and women's empowerment were still confronted with a number of challenges such as negative gender stereotypes, discrimination against girls and women, violence against women and sexual harassment, to name but a few. There also continues to be very few women in leadership and decision-making position in the sport sector. Accordingly, I would like to leave you with the following thoughts for your consideration:

- Stereotypical attitudes need to be concretely addressed, through for example, the adoption of legislation specifically mandating the equal access to and participation in sport in all public programmes. Some female athletes have already challenged the stereotypes by moving into predominantly male sports such as basketball and boxing. These courageous women need support.
- An enabling environment in which women and girls can play without fear of violence and harassment must be created. Governments, international organizations, sporting organizations, women's organizations and networks need to work together to ensure that women's and girls' participation in sport is safe and without discrimination and harassment.
- Information gathered by different networks and organizations, should be shared to facilitate its dissemination and reporting in order that good practice examples might be replicated.
- Availability of resources is critical to quality sport facilities, equipment, trainers, and programmes. Inability to pay should not be a justification for exclusion of any girls or women from exercising their right to sport and physical activity. Governments, the donor community and private sector should consider expanding investment in sport as a contribution to overall development to provide urgently needed resources.
- The coverage by the media of women's sport and physical activity must not be done selectively but rather given equal attention as that accorded to men's sport.
- Finally, the visibility of women at decision-making tables is an indivisible aspect of women's access to and participation in sport. More efforts need to be made to increase the numbers of women in leadership and decision-making.

It is my hope that four years from now when this Conference is convened, the Windhoek Call for Action would have become a reality, moving us from statements of principle and awareness-raising to action. I hope the Conference would be celebrating accelerated action from local, to national, regional to global.

I thank you for your attention and I wish you much success with the Conference.
