

# Gender equity gap still exists in Olympic leadership opportunities

April 12 2013

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USA Water Polo National Team, 2012 Olympic gold medalists. Credit: USA Water Polo

Despite attempts to support the inclusion of greater numbers of women on the international sporting scene, few women hold leadership roles in the international and U.S. Olympic and Paralympic organizations.

According to a new report by the Sport, Health and Activity Research

and Policy (SHARP) Center for Women and Girls—a Women's Sports Foundation and University of Michigan collaboration—the International Olympic Committee's rhetoric of gender equality has gained only minimal responses from the National Olympic Committees, International Federations and International Paralympic Committee.

These organizations still struggle to meet the IOC's request in 2000 that women hold at least 20 percent of leadership positions, according to the SHARP report. The IOC, for the first time, has met its stated goal of 20 percent female representation among its membership with 21 percent of the current members (22 of 106) being female.

"The Women's Sports Foundation began this research series to follow women in the Olympic and Paralympic movement and, because the first three reports showed that progress toward gender equity has been limited, the SHARP Center saw a critical need to carry this work forward," said Kathy Babiak, SHARP co-director and associate professor of sport management at U-M's School of [Kinesiology](#). "In fact, the current findings inform us that there is much more work to be done."

While the U.S. exceeds many countries with 37 percent female representation on the USOC Board of Directors, eight of the 29 established U.S. National Governing Bodies are below the 20 percent threshold ranging from zero to 18 percent [female representation](#)—judo, cycling, triathlon, table tennis, canoe/kayak, wrestling, Taekwondo and soccer—and of 58 executive leadership roles in the U.S. NGBs, only six positions are held by women (10 percent), down from eight positions (14 percent) in 2008.



Muffy Davis, Paracycling, 2012 Paralympic gold medalist. Credit: Thom Gourley

"The SHARP Center findings demonstrate both the successes and shortfalls of the IOC's gender equity thresholds," said Women's Sports Foundation CEO Kathryn Olson. "We are far from the 50/50 split in balanced leadership which embodies the inclusive spirit of the Olympic and Paralympic movement. There are abundant returns that come to women who serve in a leadership capacity in sport and they are an integral part of the team, actively advocating for women as athletes."

The report also uncovers gender inequities in athletic participation by men and women. Although competing in the same number of Olympic sports as their male counterparts in 2012, women competed in 131

events, while men competed in 163 events. In addition, there were eight mixed events, putting women in a total of 139 events (46 percent) and men in 171 events (56 percent) of the 302 events offered at the 2012 Games.

Paralympic women had the opportunity to compete in 236 of 503 events. There were 200 women's events, 267 men's events and 36 mixed events. Female Paralympians compete in 47 percent of events, but continue to account for less than 40 percent of the total athletes.

Among the study's key findings:

- The vast majority (85 percent) of National Olympic Committees have all-male leadership teams. Only six of the 28 IFs have exceeded the 20 percent threshold.
- Women still have not exceeded 45 percent of the total participants in the Olympic Games and 36 percent in the Paralympic Games; however, in the 2012 Olympic Games, for the first time in history, women made up more than half of the U.S. Olympic athletes (51 percent).
- In both the Olympic and Paralympic Games, delegations from wealthy nations were more gender equitable than those of less financed nations.
- American women dominate team sport competition in the Olympic Games, in large measure due to the impact of Title IX.

Based on the findings, the Women's Sports Foundation, a leading organization in girls' and women's sports, developed specific, evidence-based policy recommendations intended to provide governing bodies, athletes, and policymakers with new information with an eye toward making the Olympic and Paralympic movement equitable for all.

The foundation's recommendations include:

- Enforce accountability for meeting gender equity thresholds: Noncompliance should be considered in evaluating which sports are added or removed from the Olympic program, which countries are eligible for IOC office, which countries are considered as a potential host city for the Olympic Games, among others.
- Raise gender equity standards: Increase the 20 percent and 30 percent [gender equity](#) goals for women in [leadership roles](#) and set 50 percent equity goals for participation by the 2016 Games.
- Increase Olympic Solidarity scholarships to female athletes to at least 50 percent.
- Institute clear and evidence-based reporting requirements with regard to current patterns and improvements toward representation of women leaders within the IOC, IPC, NGBs and NOCs.

The report, "[Women](#) in the Olympic and Paralympic Games: An Analysis of Participation and Leadership Opportunities" online at: [irwg.research.umich.edu/sharp/sharpresearch.html](http://irwg.research.umich.edu/sharp/sharpresearch.html)

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Gender equity gap still exists in Olympic leadership opportunities (2013, April 12) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-gender-equity-gap-olympic-leadership.html>

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