

'Seeing the Invisible, Speaking about the Unspoken'

A POSITION PAPER ON HOMOPHOBIA IN SPORT

executive summary

Prepared by Rachel Corbett of the Centre for Sport and Law and the Gay and Lesbian International Sport Association (GLISA)

background

In recent years, Canadian sport leaders have pursued a number of national policy initiatives and programs to promote safety, fun, fair play and ethical conduct within the Canadian sport system. In most cases, the experience of sport is overwhelmingly positive for participants — but in rare cases, the sport experience is not safe and welcoming. Issues such as harassment, bullying, violence and homophobia undermine the powerful potential of sport to contribute to personal, social and community development.

In keeping with its mandate to increase the participation of women and girls in sport and physical activity, CAAWS has recently prepared a position paper on homophobia in sport. Homophobia — or the fear and hatred of homosexuals — is often an obstacle to participation in sport among all groups: women and men, young and old, homosexual and heterosexual. In particular, many girls and women shy away from sport out of fear they will be perceived as lesbians. CAAWS feels that addressing the issue of homophobia in sport is very timely given Canada's inclusive stance on minority rights as well as the Canadian sport system's overall strategy of making the sport environment, and the sport experience, safe and welcoming.

homophobia takes many forms

The world of sport is homophobic and this homophobia affects the sport experience in negative ways. In fact, because 'heterosexuality' is the presumed norm, the existence of lesbians and gays in sport is rarely acknowledged. Due to homophobia, most athletes and coaches who are lesbian or gay remain invisible, and living their lives more openly becomes an option only after they have left the sport world.

Homophobia in sport occurs when:

- People perpetuate myths and stereotypes – for example, that lesbians and gays are sexual predators, that girls who are good at sports must be lesbians, that lesbians and gays undermine team cohesion on teams.
- Athletes who are lesbian or gay are rejected by their teammates, coaches, sport organizations and sponsors.
- Athletes and teams resort to trash-talking, name-calling and hazing rituals that are degrading to lesbians and gays.
- Lesbian and gay youth are stigmatized or experience violence at the hands of their peers.
- Lesbians and gays experience direct discrimination in employment and other opportunities, and indirect discrimination in ways that the media exaggerates its portrayals of athletes who are stereotypically feminine or stereotypically masculine.
- The sport experience occurs in a 'chilly climate' that occurs when homophobic, sexist and racist attitudes are permitted to prevail.

addressing homophobia benefits everyone

Homophobia hurts everyone in sport. Taking steps to reduce homophobia in sport is not only consistent with Canada's efforts to foster a safe and welcoming environment in sport, but also mirrors closely-held Canadian values of diversity, acceptance and fairness. Addressing homophobia has important benefits for all:

- It promotes inclusiveness, acceptance and diversity — essential ingredients to strong and cohesive teams.
- It eliminates stereotypes and reduces fear and ignorance, thus enriching the learning environment that sport can offer.
- It improves the situation of lesbian and gay youth who are at greater risk of isolation and harmful behaviours than their heterosexual counterparts.
- It removes barriers to participation in sport and makes sport a more welcoming place for girls and women, many of whom may stay away from sport out of fear they will be labeled as lesbians.
- It creates a safer environment that enhances the social and psychological well-being of all participants, and paves the way for a future generation of sport leaders, athletes and coaches who are accepting of minorities and differences.

call to action

There are numerous ways that individuals and organizations can take immediate and pragmatic first steps towards addressing the issue of homophobia in sport. These are some things that we can all do as individual leaders:

- Firstly, become aware of the presumed heterosexual norm of sport. Accept the reality that lesbians and gays are in every school, on every team, in every venue.
- Athletes and coaches are encouraged to treat all participants in sport fairly and respectfully, regardless of their differences. Speak out against homophobic, sexist or racist remarks as they occur around you.
- Create a 'positive space' where you practice sport.
- Coaches are urged to talk to athletes regularly about respect, fairness, diversity and acceptance.
- If you are a leader in sport (whether as a coach, official, administrator or prominent athlete) and you are lesbian or gay yourself, consider taking steps to live your sport life more openly.

The position paper contains further suggestions and strategies for schools, clubs, teams, sport and games organizations.

next steps

CAAWS hopes that this paper is the first step to begin the discussion about homophobia in sport. Next steps include:

- The creation of a package that can be used in presentations about the topic.
- The recruitment of Champions/Spokespeople who are willing to speak about homophobia in sport.
- Developing and delivering a workshop to assist sport organizations to become more informed about the issue and to learn what they can do to address homophobia.

CAAWS also encourages other organizations to get involved in addressing homophobia in sport and making Canadian sport a safe and welcoming place.

CAAWS acknowledges the contributions of Sandi Kirby, Pat Griffin and the United States Women's Sports Foundation.

For a copy of the position paper, or for more information, please contact CAAWS at www.caaws.ca or caaws@caaws.ca

Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS)

Phone: (613) 562-5667 | Fax: (613) 562-5668 | Email: caaws@caaws.ca
N202 – 801 King Edward Ave. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6N5

www.caaws.ca