

## **Executive Summary: Biathlon Canada Gender Equity Research Project**

### **7 July, 2022**

Beginning in 2020, Dr. Michele K. Donnelly of the Department of Sport Management at Brock University conducted a gender audit of Biathlon Canada. Biathlon Canada received funding from the Government of Canada to support this project, and its commitment to improving gender equity in all aspects of its organization and operation. This gender audit focused on: 1. Establishing a baseline for Biathlon Canada with respect to gender equity (i.e., where are we now?); 2. Identifying critical gaps and challenges; and 3. Making evidence-based recommendations to improve gender equity for Biathlon Canada, and for biathlon in Canada.

Canadian Women and Sport's definition of gender equity informs the work of this project:

Gender Equity is the process of allocating resources, programs, and decision making fairly to all genders without any discrimination on the basis of gender, and addressing any imbalances in the benefits available to people of different genders (What is gender equity?).

Crucially, this definition of gender equity emphasizes that fair treatment does not necessarily mean equal treatment. It may be necessary to treat women and men differently, in terms of opportunities and resources, in order to address existing inequalities and inequities.

Biathlon Canada operates in the larger context of sport in Canada and globally, and women continue to be underrepresented in sport at all levels, both as participants, and even more significantly as decision makers. Recognizing the persistence of gender inequality in sport, the Government of Canada announced, in Budget 2018, a target to achieve gender equity in sport at every level by 2035. National Sport Organizations must lead the efforts to achieve gender equity by ensuring a critical mass of women in decision making positions (at least 30%), and adopting gender equity as an organizational value, so that board members and senior staff feel they and their organization are responsible for taking active measures to facilitate gender equity (Adriaanse, 2016).

By undertaking a gender equity audit and working to implement the recommendations in a timely fashion, Biathlon Canada has already started to act on the International Biathlon Union's (IBU) recommendation that "Each IBU Member NF should develop, monitor, and review a national action plan on gender equality" (Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2026). Further, the IBU emphasizes the importance of monitoring and reporting. Immediately adopting these practices, and scheduling regular reviews of progress made, will ensure that Biathlon Canada is a gender equity leader in the biathlon community, and in Canadian sport.

Information was collected for the gender audit from four main sources: 1. Biathlon Canada provided membership registration data (individual and club) for 2019-2020, when available, and historical data going back to 2011-2012. Biathlon Canada also shared information about certified coaches (that was current as of May 2021), and their policies. 2. A survey sent to clubs, divisions, and training centres. Survey questions focused on physical space and ownership, athletes and coaches, and current policies and practices related to gender equity. 3. A review of content of the Biathlon Canada website. 4. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually with 14 Biathlon Canada members. The interview participants had between 3 and 40 years of experience in biathlon. 12 participants identified as women, and two participants identified as men. Their roles in biathlon included athlete, board member, coach, official, and parent, and all participants had served, or currently serve, in more than one role. Two main aspects of biathlon featured in the data collected: 1. participation in biathlon; and 2. the larger culture of biathlon in which that participation takes place.

### Participation in biathlon

The gender composition of biathlon participation over time is consistently 40% women and 60% men. Comparing the proportion of men and women in each membership category, highlights in what ways men and women are involved in biathlon, and where gender differences may exist. Overall, 65% of all certified coaches in Canada are men and 35% are women. This distribution is quite consistent across the provinces and territories. One major limitation of this data set is that it reveals only the number of certified coaches; it does not tell us how many of those coaches are actively coaching biathlon, in what capacity (volunteer or paid), and at what levels. From 2017 to 2020, the members of the Biathlon Canada Board of Directors were no more than 29% women. When Biathlon Canada increased the number of directors to 10 in 2020-2021, it reached a high of 30% women. With the increase to 12 in 2021-2022, there are now 7 women directors (58%). It is crucial that Biathlon Canada record and report consistent, annual data about the gender composition of both its Board and committees.

### Facilitators of participation – elements that encourage girls’ and women’s participation

Successful women coaches have often had ‘something else’ in their experience that has contributed to their positive experiences of coaching. For example, some women coaches described having active mentors/sponsors, others referred to specific training and expertise, and some identified perceptions of a specific aspect of their experience or identity (e.g., family support, national origin) as facilitating their coaching experiences. Many interview participants identified the impact of an individual champion for gender equity. This reinforced findings that the push for gender equity in Biathlon Canada, and in biathlon generally, is perceived as being due to the efforts of individual champions rather than an organizational level commitment and investments. The existence of an individual champion for gender equity may be identified as a facilitator of girls’ and women’s participation in biathlon; however, when that individual leaves the sport/club/organization, barriers to participation persist. This raises concerns about the sustainability of current decisions and initiatives, i.e., if there is not the necessary institutionalization of gender equitable practices and support at the level of Biathlon Canada.

### Barriers to participation – elements that impede girls’ and women’s participation

Limited representation of women in biathlon included both the lack of women coaches and concerns about decision-making and women’s teams and tours. Almost every interview participant mentioned that there has never been a woman coach of the national team. This was related, for some participants, to a sense of (discouraging) historical continuity of limited opportunities for women, especially as coaches. Women are absent and/or underrepresented in coaching at the competitive levels of biathlon. However, overall, many participants expressed a belief that women’s experiences in biathlon have improved over time, and/or they are better than women’s experiences in other sports, such as cross country skiing. Participants raised a number of concerns about decisions regarding the national and touring teams, such as not filling the women’s side for tours. In addition, there were concerns about lack of transparency in the decision-making process. During interviews, women participants consistently normalized gender inequality and sexism. For example, many women said versions of: “Of course I have heard sexist comments”, but for the most part, they did so in the context of discussing how the situation for women in biathlon has improved over time. In some cases, it was apparent that women participants had both experienced and, to a degree, internalized some elements of gender inequality in terms of their expectations for themselves in their biathlon role, e.g., holding themselves to a higher standard than the men around them.

Participants identified a significant dropout from biathlon during late high school, or at the end of high school. They discussed that there is nowhere for athletes to go after high school if they are not at the

most competitive levels of biathlon (e.g., going to train in Alberta and trying to make the national team). This is an issue for both boys and girls; however, when there are fewer girls participating in biathlon, retention is even more crucial. Related to this, a number of participants referred to the very limited number of women role models that girls could look to when deciding whether or not to continue in biathlon. A number of participants discussed the importance of the social aspects of biathlon for attracting and retaining girls. They highlighted the significance of having more than one girl on a team. In the participants' experiences, this benefited athletes in terms of competition (having somebody to race against consistently), but also in terms of their overall experiences of biathlon (including training, travel, etc.). The latter were identified as the most important in terms of retention. Finally, the cost associated with participating in Biathlon was discussed as a significant barrier to participation.

Survey respondents identified limited resources/people as barriers to implementing a policy about gender. A number of respondents claimed there was not a need for a policy about gender because there were not any current issues around gender. This suggests both limited understanding about gender inequality in biathlon and the lack of a proactive approach.

### Biathlon culture

Most participants identified the culture of biathlon, at the club level, as being part of what contributed to their long-term involvement in the sport. Specifically, the participants identified the sense of community experienced in their clubs. This sense of belonging contributed to their taking on multiple roles, and investing a significant amount of time into biathlon. It was clear from many participants' experiences that biathlon is a "family affair". Most continue to be involved even after their own biathlon participation has ended and, in some cases, parents remain active even when they no longer have any children competing in biathlon. As one participant explained, "You need an entire village to run a biathlon race".

Two main and related themes were identified related to the participants' perceptions of Biathlon Canada. In general, participants felt quite disconnected from the organization; that is, they thought about Biathlon Canada as being largely removed from their experiences of biathlon (focused almost exclusively on the National Team), rather than as a membership organization that directly influenced their participation. Participants identified both a lack of support from Biathlon Canada and a lack of transparency in Biathlon Canada's decision making processes. There is a perceived lack of support from Biathlon Canada to address barriers to girls' and women's continued engagement in biathlon (e.g., removing barriers to girls' and women's involvement, whether they are financial, social, etc.; and facilitating girls' and women's involvement through intentional encouragement, addressing competing roles, offering equal representation, etc.).

### Recommendations

**Short-term goals** have an operational element, with action plans for the immediate future.

**Recommendation 1:** Develop organization-wide awareness and understanding about how to incorporate a gender equity lens into policies and practices

**1.1:** Review vision, mission and values

**1.2:** Develop specific organizational objectives that will help achieve vision and mission

**Recommendation 2:** Include a gender quota for the Board of Directors in the Biathlon Canada bylaws

**2.1:** Include a gender quota for voting members at the Biathlon Canada Annual General Meeting (AGM) in the Biathlon Canada bylaws

**2.2:** Establish recommended targets – with a specified timeline – for gender representation on Boards of Directors at the club and division levels

**Recommendation 3:** Establish recommended targets – with specified timeline – for gender representation in staff positions at Biathlon Canada, and at the club and divisions level

**Recommendation 4:** Review public facing presence of Biathlon Canada. Translate the commitment to gender equity into (visible) action

**4.1:** Produce and disseminate an annual report

**Recommendation 5:** Improve the relationship between Biathlon Canada and clubs

**5.1:** Form a Club Advisory Board

**5.2:** Develop biathlon-specific gender equity resources for use by clubs and Divisions

**Recommendation 6:** Commit to full, substantive participation in IBU gender equality initiatives

**Recommendation 7:** Form a Biathlon Canada Athletes' Committee

**Long-term goals** are those to be accomplished further in the future; they will require a significant amount of time and planning. In many cases reaching the long-term goal will require several smaller steps during the process (i.e., likely connecting to the short-term goals).

**Recommendation 1:** Conduct regular gender audits of the organization

**Recommendation 2:** Commit to ongoing, consistent data collection and reporting

**Recommendation 3:** Assess progress toward established quotas and recommended targets

**Recommendation 4:** Work with clubs to enhance the limited participation opportunities in biathlon for young people nearing or at the end of high school (and pre-Masters' level)

## Conclusion

The recent (and longer term) history of women's biathlon in Canada demonstrates two main points that must inform the gender equity-focused work that Biathlon Canada does moving forward:

1. The necessary work of increasing women's involvement in biathlon cannot be delegated to a single committee or individual (volunteer or staff member). Rather, Biathlon Canada's commitment to gender equity – as part of the core values of integrity and fairness – must be included in all decision making and strategic planning.
2. Progress toward gender equity is not linear and it is not guaranteed. That is, gender equity can only be realized through sustained, intentional, and institutionalized action. The work that Biathlon Canada is doing now should be understood as a renewed starting point, which necessitates consistent and continued investment.