

Sport Nunavut's Gender Equity Policy

Relevance, Rhetoric, and Reality

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Le Nunavut, troisième territoire canadien créé le 1er avril 1999 reflète sous plusieurs aspects, la spécificité de la culture Inuit, mais la Fédération territoriale des sports, Sport Nunavut a plutôt adopté une politique d'équité des genres qui a été calquée sur celle prescrite et en vigueur dans le monde occidental des Blancs.

On April 1, 1999, the Northwest Territories (NWT), Canada's largest territory, was split in two forming Nunavut, Canada's third territory as well as an Inuit homeland. That day marked a new beginning for the residents of the eastern arctic, as well as the formation of Canada's newest Territorial Sport Federation (TSF), Sport Nunavut. Sport Nunavut followed the path of the other two TSFs in drafting a Gender Equity Policy. The creation of Sport Nunavut's Gender Equity Policy is due in part to two other documents: the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both of which support the notion of the benefits of universal values. The implementation of Sport Nunavut's Gender Equity Policy has been problematic; while the new policy exists on paper, it has frequently been ignored in Nunavut communities. Using Nussbaum's framework of universal values and her adaptation of Sen's "capabilities approach," along with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this paper will show that Sport Nunavut's Gender Equity Policy is contingent on prescribed whitestream, Western notions of feminism and gender roles.

Glassford investigated and provided a description of the traditional

games of the Inuit in the nineteenth century: "Being nomadic people, the Inuit were required to create activities that involved simple rules and simple equipment. ... They were, in short, ideally suited to the Arctic environment prior to the intrusion of the southern white culture" (88). Glassford further notes that these games were primarily "festivities for men to challenge one another to tests of strength, skill or endurance" (83). Women were permitted to participate in a few activities, such as *peedletataq* (knee jumping), but such participation was more of an exception than the rule (Glassford). Inuit sport during this period in time reflected the different roles occupied by men and women in Inuit society, where the division of labour was very pronounced.

In 1955, the Canadian government brought bureaucracy to the North. Village centralization was initiated and education, health and social services were taken over by government departments (Kemp). In 1962 the territorial government—which operated out of Ottawa until 1967 (Paraschak 1997)—signed an agreement allowing for the introduction of public recreation to the NWT (Paraschak 1985). The government's support of the development of recreation programs in the North coincided with the centralization and organization of Inuit life. As participation in traditional games and activities that were tied to seasonal festivities "out on the land" decreased, the government increased its efforts to provide consistent recreational programs (Paraschak 1985). According to Paraschak (1985), the Government of the NWT used a "guided

approach" (23) towards recreation. Such a colonial approach was—and is—not without its problems:

The Government of the Northwest Territories is made up mainly of people originating from southern Canada, who have a different approach toward life than native northerners located in small communities. Since it is government workers who establish the programs and services for recreation, very often those programs end up being based on southern Canadian rather than native standards, even though they are created to meet native needs. (Paraschak 1985: 11)

Indeed, it is within this colonial framework that Sport Nunavut's Gender Equity Policy came to fruition.

During the past half century, there have been many changes to the Inuit

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Champion of the bannock and tea brewing competition, Nunavut Day, 1998. Photo: Audrey Giles.

way of life, including sport and recreation. According to Paraschak (1999), "First Nations sport culture ... reflect[s] ongoing shifts in gender relations between Native and non-Native communities, and within Native communities" (164). While Sport Nunavut's Gender Equity Policy reflects such shifts, it also mirrors the ways in which sport administrators often use whitestream sport as an unproblematic model for all sport in Canada. The policy states that Sport Nunavut, along with the Territorial Sport Organizations, will,

work to create an environment in which all girls and women see themselves and are recognized by others as participants, athletes, players, coaches, officials, managers, decision-makers and leaders in sport; where resources and opportunities are equitably distributed, meet the needs of girls and women and where girls and women have reasonable access to a full range of opportunities in a safe and welcoming environment. (1)

It is important to note that Sport Nunavut did not create its own Gender Equity Policy. Rather, it adopted the vague wording of the Gender Equity Policy from Sport North, the TSF for the NWT. Sport North drafted what was intended to be its interim *Gender Equity Policy* in 1995. However, over the past seven years, it has not been updated into a permanent policy. As a result, Sport Nunavut adopted a four-year old interim policy as what it describes as yet another interim policy. Notably, this policy fails to include a timeline for which the goal of gender equity is to be obtained.

The pressure to impose a gender equity policy stems from a number of fronts. The notion of equality has been promoted by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Section 15 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* states, "every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination ... based

on race, national or ethnic identity, sex age or mental or physical disability." Thus, every person in Canada is supposed to be considered equal. Article 2 of the *United Nations Declaration* has similar content to the *Charter*: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights ... without distinction of any kind, such as ... sex" Interestingly, Article 24 of the *Declaration* states, "everyone has the right to rest and leisure." Indeed, both the *Charter* and the *Declaration* can be used to reinforce whitestream ideals of gender equity in sport.

In the utopian society suggested by the *Charter* and the *Declaration*, Sport Nunavut's *Gender Equity Policy* would be redundant and unnecessary. Nevertheless, the sport administrators who created and adopted the policy clearly felt that it was important that "Sport Nunavut in cooperation with the Territorial Sport Organizations work towards an equitable distribution of resources and opportunities to girls and women when developing, delivering and evaluating its programs" (2). Such a

policy indicates that the equitable conditions that the *Charter* and *Declaration* prescribe are not present, but are instead a goal. But whose goal?

The idea of universal human rights is one that is fraught with complexities. We live in a world where people are not treated equally. Indeed, discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, ability, and sexual orientation is rampant. How, then, does one decide which values are universal rather than merely reflecting the dominant group's ideals? Why are some values worthy of being adopted by the world as rights while others are not? Martha Nussbaum's *In Defense of Universal Values* addresses these very issues and how they are relevant for women in India. However, her arguments can be easily extended to Inuit women in Nunavut. Nussbaum presents three arguments against the universal value of gender equity: the argument from culture; the argument from the good of diversity; and the argument from paternalism. She and finds problems with each of these arguments and, in turn, applies a modified version of Sen's "capabilities approach."

In her argument from culture, Nussbaum states, "Feminists should not assume without argument that those [Hindu and Muslim norms of female modesty, deference, and obedience] are bad norms, incapable of constructing good and flourishing lives for women" (6). Such female norms are also prevalent in Inuit society and can be readily seen in sport participation. While boys and men participate in sport, girls and women frequently stay in the home to care for familial responsibilities. When girls and women have some leisure time, it is common for them to be spectators rather than participants. Does this situation demand rectification in the way of a gender equity policy? As Nussbaum wisely states, objection to these norms "oversimplifies tradition, ignoring coun-

ter-traditions of female defiance and strength ... [and] in general forgetting to ask women themselves what they think of these norms" (7).

Forgetting to ask residents of the North how they feel about sport and recreation has been a consistent theme in sport in the North. Though there have been recent attempts to have community-driven recreation, such attempts were not extended to the policy level: rather than having a consultation process, Sport Nunavut adopted Sport North's Gender Equity Policy. While, understandably, the transition process involved in the formation of Sport Nunavut involved certain time constraints, the prescriptive measures that were involved in the process were problematic. Notably, the claims made by Sport Nunavut officials, the very officials who adopted the Gender Equity Policy concerning Inuit women's participation in sport and recreation, indicate a large discrepancy between the rhetoric concerning the need to have Inuit women involved in sport and recreation and the reality of the situation.

During my undergraduate degree, I attempted to write a paper on Inuit women's participation in sport and recreation. While interviewing sport administrators in Nunavut, I asked for a list of Inuit women who I might be able to interview for the paper. In response, I was provided with the name of only one woman and was told that there are very few women over the age of thirty involved in sport and recreation, as they are too busy raising families to participate in sport. Statistics, however, tell a different story. In 1994, Statistics Canada conducted the Sport Participation in Canada Survey for Sport Canada. It found that 38 per cent of Canadian women endorsed an affirmative answer to the question, "During the past 12 months did you regularly participate in any sports such as—volleyball, bowling or skiing?" (Statistics Canada). Interestingly, the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) researched a similar

question: "Do you participate in any sports, games, dance or recreation which involve physical activity"? 56.6 per cent of female Inuit responded that they did, with team and racquet sports identified as the most popular sports (Statistics Canada 1991). Among Inuit women age 30-49, a 51 per cent participation rate was reported (Statistics Canada 1991), thus yielding a *higher* participation rate amongst Inuit women compared with the overall population of Canada. While neither the Sport Participation Survey nor the APS defined the term "regularly," the results are informative. Whether the research methods used by the APS are flawed or Sport Nunavut is unaware of the rate of recreation participation in the territory is difficult to decipher. A possible confounding problem may be the different interpretations of what is considered to be legitimate sport by Inuit women, Sport Nunavut officials, and those who conducted the APS.

The argument from the good of diversity presents another interesting challenge to ideals of equity in sport. Inuit games are primarily for men, with a notable exception being the "Good Woman Contest." In this contest, individuals take part in a number of tasks that a woman completes in a typical day, such as bannock making and tea brewing. The individual who is both the fastest and produces the best tasting bannock is deemed the winner. While this event has been preserved in the Northern Games, men have now begun to take part. Though the event is contested, it is done in a somewhat facetious manner: "While men on the traplines do carry out many of the tasks included in the Good Woman Contest, their performance in this event often generates laughter from the audience more so than it does amazement over their skills" (Paraschak 1997: 14). Thus, despite the bi-directional nature of participation of men and women in historically single sex sports, there is still a reluctance to completely accept this

relatively recent change in Inuit sport. The “Good Woman” contest provides an example of how the “separate but equal” argument may provide a more adequate approach to grappling with this topic. For example, perhaps an ideal of equality for Inuit Games would be to offer the full range of men’s and women’s events and not promote competition in the other gender’s events. However, should a woman or man choose to take part in that event, that would be allowed—though, as evidenced by the male participation in the “Good Woman” contest, it may not be fully accepted.

Finally, we have the argument from paternalism. In this argument, Nussbaum states:

when we use a set of universal norms as benchmarks for the world’s varied societies, we show too little respect for people’s freedom as agents ... People are the best judges of what is good for them, and if we say that their own choices are not good for them we treat them like children. (8)

In 1997 the people of Nunavut displayed their feelings on the topic of gender equity, a display that resulted in the rejection of gender equity in the form of a public plebiscite. The inhabitants of what would soon be Nunavut were asked to vote on a proposal that would have had one female and one male representative from each constituency sit in the new Territorial legislature. On May 26, 1997, 39 per cent of eligible votes cast their ballots: 57 per cent rejected the idea of gender parity, while 43 per cent supported the proposal (Gombay). These mixed results, which were interpreted as a rejection of gender equity in a government context, could be extended to gender equity a sporting context. However, Sport Nunavut officials—likely afraid of losing funding from Sport Canada—chose to adopt a gender equity policy anyway.

Failure to consult with the resi-

dents of Nunavut on gender equity may be viewed as a paternalistic form of cultural invasion. According to Freire,

Cultural invasion ... signifies that the ultimate seat of decision regarding the action of those who are invaded lies not with them but with the invaders. And when the power of decision is located outside rather than within the one who should decide, the latter has only the illusion of deciding. (159)

Sometimes, however, the illusion of deciding is not even present. In 1981, the Sport and Recreation Division of the Government of the NWT viewed convincing community members of the value of recreation as one of its responsibilities. Paraschak (1996) states that this “begs the questions concerning whose form of recreation is to be valued” (107). Paraschak also found that this division of the government was responsible for providing advice on ways to maximize community participation in recreational activities. She notes that though Aboriginal peoples were the “logical source for ideas on maximizing native participation in sport ... they were not consulted by government on this issue (107). The question could be asked whether an analogous situation is emerging with Inuit women’s involvement in sport. As the seemingly logical source for ideas on the potential benefits and drawbacks of gender equity in sport participation, would it not seem reasonable that the very group who will be touched by policy changes be consulted regarding potential changes?

Despite the best efforts of those who drafted the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the United Nation’s Declaration of Universal Human Rights, and Sport Nunavut’s Gender Equity Policy, Inuit women have not attained the Western feminist ideal of equity. Nussbaum finds that “liberty is not just

a matter of having rights on paper, it requires being in a position to exercise those rights” (10). The resistance to gender equity suggests that there are cultural issues that have hindered the acceptance of the Gender Equity Policy, such as Inuit women’s traditional familial and domestic responsibilities. If Inuit women are happy to stay in their private sphere and not enter the more public sporting sphere, does that then make the Gender Equity Policy superfluous?

According to the capabilities approach, the answer would have to be “no.” The capabilities approach posits the following central question: “what is *x* actually able to do and be?” (Nussbaum 14). Inuit women do not have the same sporting opportunities available to them as do Inuit men. Thus, they are unable to develop to the same skill level and become the athletes that they *might* like to be. The Gender Equity Policy is important as it states that, should a woman in Nunavut want to take part in sport, she should be given the opportunity. This is very different from the idea that women should be forced to participate in sport to a level that is equal to that of male participants. Instead, infrastructure and resources should be made available so that Inuit women have the ability to choose their own good.

Oxaal finds that,

empowerment is essentially a “bottom-up” process rather than a “top-down” strategy. Recent experience suggests that gender planners working towards an empowerment approach must develop ways of enabling women themselves to decide what their gender interests are and how to bring about change. Promoting empowerment also requires that organizations review their structures and procedures, to increase their accountability and responsiveness to the women whose empowerment they aim to support.

Such empowerment will only come with restraint on the part of government officials with “true missionary zest” (Paraschak 1982: 427). Nevertheless, a cautious approach must be taken to any changes. Kassam and Wuttunee state that Aboriginal women are already oppressed by the “pent up rage of men whose lives were turned upside down by the social change [that came with colonization] and took their frustration out on their wives” (56). Any further social change might come at a similar price—and such a price may be too high for Inuit women to pay. Indeed, as Freire notes,

Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated. (52)

The rapid changes in sport and recreation in Nunavut have been met with resistance and much uncertainty. The historical colonial approach to decision-making, where “the decisions concerning what is best for community recreation are made by non-native government personnel, rather than by indigenous northerners” (Paraschak 1996: 107), has left a legacy whereby “what is considered best in [E]urocanadian society is accepted as best for the northern communities, without considering the unique nature of NWT communities” (107). While Inuit women do not speak with a unified voice, it is important that their voices be heard so that they can create what they deem to be appropriate sport environments and opportunities. Perhaps Partington and Orlick put it best when they stated, “sport involvement is healthy and healthful when the specific values of the game synchronize with the rules or values of the cultural context within which participants operate” (147). Unfor-

tunately, this is not (yet) the case in the North.

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