



Canadian Association  
for the Advancement  
of Women and Sport  
and Physical Activity

# 'Seeing the Invisible, Speaking about the Unspoken'

A POSITION PAPER ON HOMOPHOBIA IN SPORT

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Speaking about the Unspoken'

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## definition of terms

As leaders in sport, we must all learn to be more comfortable talking about the issue of homophobia. Younger generations of Canadians are certainly more at ease with this language. To help, here are some common terms and simple definitions.

**Bisexual** – a term that describes an individual whose emotional and sexual attractions and connections are with persons of both sexes.

**Coming out, or being out of the closet, or being out** – the process of becoming aware of that one’s sexual orientation is not heterosexual, accepting it and telling others about it.

**Gay** – a term that describes an individual whose primary emotional and sexual attractions and connections are with persons of the same sex (also homosexual).

**Gender dysphoria** – a term describing the intense and continuous discomfort a person feels when their physical sex and gender identity are not aligned.

**Gender identity** – a person’s internal sense of themselves as male, female or something in between.

**Heterosexism** – The assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual and that heterosexuality is the only ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ expression of sexuality.

**Homophobia** – fear or hatred of homosexuals or homosexuality. Homophobia can be expressed both subtly and overtly.

**In the closet** – keeping one’s sexual orientation secret. People can be in the closet to varying degrees: for example, while they might be ‘out’ in their personal life, they might remain in the closet with their families, work colleagues or sports team.

**Lesbian** – a more specific term to describe a homosexual female.

**LGBT or LGBTQ** – an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (queer or questioning). Increasingly, this general acronym is used to describe a broader community of sexually diverse minorities, including gays and lesbians.

**Questioning** – a term used to describe individuals who are unsure of their sexual orientation.

**Sexual orientation** – the direction of one’s sexual attraction towards the same sex (homosexual), the opposite sex (heterosexual) or both sexes (bisexual). Sexual orientation occurs along a continuum.

**Straight** – a term that describes an individual whose primary emotional and sexual attractions and connections are with persons of the opposite sex (also heterosexual)

**Transgendered** – an umbrella term used to describe a wide array of persons whose gender identity does not conform to stereotypical gender norms of male or female.

**Transitioned** – a term that refers to a person experiencing gender dysphoria who chooses to align their gender role and gender identity. Transitioned individuals undergo hormonal treatment, surgery and possibly other body modifications so that they may live their lives physically, psychologically and emotionally as either a woman or a man.

**Two-spirited** – This term derives from a Native tradition and describes people who display characteristic of both genders. It is used today in reference to LGBTQ persons of Native origin.

## background

Canada is a leader in promoting a sport environment that is safe and welcoming. In recent years, Canadian sport leaders have pursued a number of national policy initiatives in support of this goal, including anti-harassment policies, accessibility programs, education and awareness about bullying and violence, protocols for volunteer screening, and programs to promote safety, fun, fair play and ethical conduct within Canadian sport programs.

Harassment, bullying, violence and homophobia make sport exclusive and unsafe, and undermine the powerful potential of sport to contribute to personal, social and community development. Addressing the issue of homophobia in sport is thus 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.

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### *The value of diversity*

*Billie Jean King, writing in the introduction to the Education Kit It Takes a Team published by the Women's Sports Foundation, describes sport as being a laboratory for values, including the value of diversity. She eloquently describes how diverse we are: "We are all different from the color of our skins to the pitch of our voices, from our religions and ethnicities to our sexual orientations and to the sizes, shapes and abilities of our bodies." A welcoming sport environment is one which embraces this diversity.*

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## purpose of this paper

CAAWS has prepared this paper to initiate a discussion about homophobia in sport. CAAWS views it as a first step in a longer-term strategy to reduce homophobia in Canadian sport and to make sport an inclusive and safe place for all participants. This paper is not intended to provide an answer to the problem of homophobia in sport — but to start a discussion that will hopefully lead to future solutions.

Part of CAAWS' mandate is to promote participation in sport by girls and women. Homophobia in sport is often an obstacle to participation, presenting barriers and challenges to individuals, both homosexual and heterosexual. While this document discusses homophobia in general terms, as it applies to both females and males, CAAWS' priority is to improve the conditions for females in sport and it is with this objective in mind that CAAWS has prepared this document.

It is hoped, however, that the discussion arising from this document will be insightful to all groups committed to making sport safe for girls and women *and* boys and men, and that subsequent actions on this issue will involve other partners so that the whole range of concerns of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered/transitioned and queer (LGBTQ) persons in Canadian sport can be addressed. This paper, however, only addresses the concerns of lesbians and gays in sport.

This document is not an academic research paper. The source materials for this paper include the excellent work already done in the United States by the *It Takes a Team* project, as well as the experiences of many lesbians and gay men in Canadian sport. An earlier version of this paper was widely circulated among athletes, coaches and other sport leaders for their input, including lesbians and gays. Their support and encouragement for this paper further reinforces CAAWS' belief that homophobia is an issue that needs to be addressed. CAAWS also hopes that this position paper will encourage others to pursue more formal study on the issue of homophobia in sport.

## why now?

CAAWS is undertaking this project now for a number of reasons. Firstly, Canada as a nation has recently joined a select group of countries that recognize the full legal rights of lesbian and gay persons. As well, in 2006, Canada will host the 1st World Outgames, a major international multi-sport event for lesbian and gay participants. This sporting event will be held in conjunction with an international conference on LGBTQ human rights. These upcoming events, as well as the significant advances made in Canada in recent years to advance minority rights, have created an environment that CAAWS believes will be receptive to a discussion about homophobia in sport.

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### *The special case for youth*

*It is widely accepted that lesbian, gay, questioning and two-spirited youth are at higher risk than their heterosexual counterparts with respect to isolation, low self-esteem, destructive behaviours, and even more extreme problems such as suicide and peer violence. These youth are more likely to commit suicide than their straight counterparts, and one in four youth who disclose their sexual orientation experience rejection by their families. When the environment of sport is safe, it has the potential to address many of these adverse conditions and improve the situation of at-risk youth.*

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## lesbians and gays: invisible and unwelcome

In most cases, the experience of sport is overwhelmingly positive for participants. The benefits of sport to our physical and mental health and well-being as individuals, as well as to the cohesiveness of our communities, are well-documented. Canadians have made significant progress in making sport more inclusive — by encouraging and enabling the participation of girls and women, those with physical and mental disabilities, the economically-disadvantaged, aboriginal persons and visible minorities.

Yet despite the enormous benefits of sport, and the earnest efforts we undertake to make sport inclusive and positive, sport is not always welcoming to lesbian and gay people. The term 'heterosexism' refers to the widely held assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual. This assumption is prevalent in sport, from the grass roots to elite levels. While we have made gains in making our schools, institutions and workplaces more welcoming of diversity, there has been very little discussion about making sport a more inclusive place for minorities.

In fact, because heterosexuality is the presumed norm, the existence of lesbians and gays in sport is rarely acknowledged. When lesbians and gays in sport are recognized, it is most often in negative and ugly ways. Many lesbians and gays choose not to be involved in sport because of the negative and hostile environment. At the same time, many heterosexual women choose not to be involved in sport because they may be perceived as being lesbian. Lesbians and gays who participate in sport often are able to do so only by remaining 'in the closet', hiding their sexual orientation from others.

For athletes and coaches at the elite level, conforming to the heterosexual norm may be necessary for maintaining team and coach relationships, and for ensuring the continuity of sponsorships or other financial support. And sadly, for most athletes and coaches who are lesbian or gay, 'coming out' is only a viable option when their athletic or coaching careers have concluded.

## what is homophobia?

Homophobia is the fear or hatred of homosexuality or homosexuals. The world of sport is extremely homophobic and this homophobia affects the sport experience in countless negative ways. In Canada, where homosexuals have full equality rights and where lesbian and gay issues are frequently discussed in mainstream society, the topic of homosexuality in sport is rarely raised. Lesbians and gays in sport are virtually invisible, their existence seldom acknowledged. In the rare situations where an athlete or coach does 'come out', reactions are typically negative and such individuals receive little or no support from their sport leaders or sport governing bodies.

Many sport leaders and participants are uncomfortable talking about 'homophobia' in sport. For many it is easier to simply deny, ignore or make fun of the issue. In this void of discussion and information-sharing, stereotypes and myths persist.

Such myths include: that lesbian and gay people are sexual predators, that lesbians and gays are unwanted on the team or in the locker room, that gay athletes prefer artistic sports to contact sports, that lesbians prefer softball or hockey to other sports, that girls who excel at sports must be lesbians. Double standards abound: that gay men have less aptitude for sport or conversely, that lesbian women have greater aptitude for sport, than their straight counterparts. Men and women are also perceived using different standards: older women involved in sport who do not appear to have husbands are presumed to be lesbians, while no such presumption is made about older men.

None of these stereotypes, myths or double standards is true. Presumptions such as these are harmful to everyone in sport, whether gay or straight, and simply serve to perpetuate a sport system that does not welcome lesbians and gays, and would prefer that they remain invisible.

In sport, homophobia takes many forms:

- We see it in the rejection by team-mates and coaches that many athletes experience when it becomes known that they are lesbian or gay. It is for this reason that many homosexuals leave sport. Others choose to remain involved in sport but do so feeling very isolated. Many athletes describe their sport experiences as 'conflicted' — although they may have derived the physical benefits that sport had to offer, they did so at a tremendous personal, psychological and emotional cost.
- We also see homophobia in the degrading character of anti-gay remarks, insults, cruel jokes and teasing, and initiation and hazing rituals. Research in schools has shown that the average high school student hears the words 'gay' or 'fag' spoken in a derogatory way on school property about 30 times per day. Remarks such as 'you don't want to play on that team, they're all lezzies' or 'pick up the game, stop playing like a bunch of queers!' are examples of anti-gay slurs that are spoken, and heard, by athletes and coaches every day.
- Building on rumours and fear, homophobia also takes shape in what has been termed 'negative recruiting'. This occurs when school coaches lure athletes away from competing schools through allegations that those school teams are coached by lesbians or include many lesbian players. While not an issue to the same degree in Canada, which has a different system of athletic financial assistance, the lesbian label nonetheless comes into play when administrators and coaches compete against others to attract athletic talent.
- Sometimes homophobia takes more extreme forms, such as when lesbian or gay youth are stigmatized or experience violence at the hands of their peers. The perpetrators of such violence are often high school-aged young men, acting in groups. Sometimes they are also the athletes and popular 'jocks' in a school. This is a demographic that sport can reach, with the resulting potential to instill positive values and to decrease the incidence of hate crimes and related harassment.

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## *Silence sustains prejudice*

*As sport leaders, we all share a responsibility to speak out against homophobia. A person who fails to intervene to stop prejudice as it occurs around them contributes to prejudice. Edmund Burke, a 19th century philosopher, wrote: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing". All too often we place the onus for action on the most vulnerable persons, by expecting them to confront the person who is intimidating them, or to lodge a formal complaint. The onus must be on all of us, who are not vulnerable, to speak out on behalf of vulnerable people.*

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- Homophobia also exists in direct discriminatory practices such as when sport organizations limit employment or other opportunities for lesbians and gays. Such discriminatory practices can be observed when sport clubs or teams choose athletes that are the most feminine, as opposed to those demonstrating the greatest leadership skills, to be team spokespersons or team captains. We also witness such discrimination in the way the media exaggerates its portrayals of athletes who are stereotypically feminine, as opposed to those athletes who have a worthy story to tell.
- Indirectly, homophobia exists when organizational or institutional policies and practices have an adverse effect on lesbian or gay persons not otherwise felt by heterosexual persons. Examples may include pricing in sport and recreational programs that does not include non-traditional families. Another example is policies for billeting or accommodation that require athletes of the same gender to share rooms or even beds, leading sometimes to awkward situations for the lesbian or gay athlete, and for heterosexual teammates. As well, homophobia exists when travel and social activities organized around sport are not planned so that singles, same sex-couples and non-traditional families can also feel welcome and participate fully.
- Lastly, homophobia exists in what we call the "chilly climate" that is created when homophobic, sexist and racist attitudes prevail to create an overall environment that is unwelcoming. Such an environment can have a lasting and deep impact on those immersed in it, both homosexual and heterosexual, causing psychological harm.

## homophobia and gender

Homophobia affects men and women differently in sport. For men, sport is a masculine place and any behaviour by males that does not conform to this masculine stereotype is considered suspect. Males who are not traditionally masculine often experience rejection by other athletes and coaches, particularly in team sports where uniform masculinity is considered essential to strong team chemistry. This strong peer pressure for male athletes to appear masculine, whether they are gay or not, can have a lasting impact on that male's personal and social development.

For women, participation in sport is often discouraged because it is still seen as contrary to societal norms for being feminine or womanly. Homophobia in sport tends to marginalize women who do not fit such gender stereotypes. Feminine women may be reluctant to participate in sport because they run the risk of being viewed or labeled as 'lesbian', and females who are not stereotypically feminine are often not welcome in sport because they will bring this label with them and thus adversely affect other women.



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## *Lack of athlete role models*

*In Canada, very few high profile athletes are out of the closet and living their lives openly, as gay or lesbian. While a small number of female professional athletes are open about their sexual orientation, not a single, currently active, major league professional athlete is out of the closet in North America. This says a great deal about how difficult it is for lesbian and gay athletes to be themselves.*

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For girls and women, homophobia in sport presents an obstacle to participation for both groups: lesbians who are not welcomed, and heterosexual girls and women who are reluctant to pursue sport activities because of the lesbian label. Thus, the existence of homophobia is a two-edged sword, working against the full participation of *all* females in the sport experience.

## addressing homophobia benefits everyone

Homophobia hurts everyone in sport. Taking steps to reduce homophobia in sport is consistent with the Canadian sport system's efforts to foster a safe and welcoming environment in sport, and also mirrors closely-held Canadian values of diversity, acceptance and fairness.

Addressing homophobia has important benefits for all:

- Athletes and coaches perform best when they are treated with respect. Inclusiveness, acceptance and diversity are essential ingredients to strong and cohesive teams.
- By removing destructive stereotypes and reducing fear and ignorance, the incredible learning environment that sport can offer is enriched and improved.
- Addressing homophobia in sport improves the situation of lesbian and gay youth who are at greater risk of isolation and harmful behaviours than their heterosexual counterparts.
- Dealing with homophobia 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, or remain in the closet, out of fear they will be labeled as lesbians.
- Tackling homophobia also 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.

Many people describe sport as an environment where values are learned and expressed through the ethical choices we make as athletes, in terms of adherence to the rules of sport, treatment of others in sport, and how we react to and cope with setbacks, challenges and victories. In particular, sport gives young people precious gifts of confidence, self-esteem and acceptance of diversity, yet this wonderful gift is squandered when homophobia goes unchallenged.

## call to action

Canada is at the forefront of the world in promoting equality of minorities, including lesbians and gays. Homosexuals in Canada have the same rights as heterosexuals and the benefit of full legal protection of those rights. Sport organizations and sport leaders in Canada thus have a legal responsibility to make sport a safer place for all persons, including lesbian and gay participants. It also goes without saying that they have a corresponding ethical responsibility.

There are numerous ways that individuals and organizations can take immediate and pragmatic first steps towards addressing this issue. Listed below are some suggested actions for both **individual leaders** (coaches, officials, administrators, athletes) and for **organizations** (clubs, schools, teams, sport governing bodies).

These are some things that we can all do as **individual leaders** involved in sport:

- Firstly, become aware of the presumed heterosexual norm of sport. Just as society is diverse, the sport world is also diverse. Open your mind to the reality that lesbian and gay athletes are in every school, on every team, in every venue and in every locker room. Our coaches, teachers, administrators, volunteers, parents and spectators include lesbian and gay persons. To assume otherwise perpetuates the invisibility of these minorities, and sustains the homophobia that keeps lesbian and gay people in this invisible state.
- Homophobia hurts everyone, and is everyone's business. Leaders in sport must learn to be less uncomfortable talking about the issues of homosexuality and homophobia in sport. For some, this may mean learning a new vocabulary. Ten years ago harassment and discrimination issues were taboo topics for discussion, but now we are talking about them quite openly — the same will happen with homophobia.
- Athletes and coaches are encouraged to treat all participants in sport fairly, regardless of their differences. We encourage you to speak out against homophobic, sexist or racist remarks as they occur around you. Avoid the use of anti-gay, sexist and racist terms and 'trash talking' among athletes and teams. Challenge opposing teams and players when they resort to this behaviour. By not speaking out, we are merely sustaining the prejudice associated with such harmful language.

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### *Creating a Positive Space in Sport...*

*For the first time in Canada, the Commonwealth Games Association of Canada created a positive space for Team Canada at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, Australia. Meeting the needs of all Team Canada members is a priority for Canadian mission staff. By creating a positive space, LGBTQ members know they are welcome and supported in one of the most important competitions of their athletic careers. To create a positive space for LGBTQ members, Team Canada 2006 undertook to:*

- *Raise awareness among mission staff and team leaders on homophobia in sport, including sharing a copy of this position paper, as well as providing additional resources for medical staff.*
- *Make sure that the host city was a safe place for LGBTQ Team members and included information of interest to the LGBTQ members in the 'Guide to Melbourne' Handbook prepared by Team Canada.*
- *Posted positive space stickers in the Team Canada areas of the Athlete Village in Melbourne and provided positive space pins for mission staff volunteers who wished to demonstrate their support for this initiative.*

- Coaches should never underestimate the positive impact they can have as authority figures. Coaches are urged to talk to athletes regularly about respect, fairness, diversity and acceptance. Learn to use inclusive language and seize teachable moments. When you hear athletes and others use ugly terms, intervene.
- 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. While the risks are considerable, the rewards may well prove to be greater. Being invisible makes you, and others like you, more vulnerable. By becoming visible, you can have a hugely positive impact on those around you.

The above suggestions are actions that all individuals can pursue which can have an immediate and powerful impact. But it is also important that our schools, clubs, teams, sport and games organizations support individuals in carrying out these actions.

The following are supportive actions that our **sport organizations** can immediately pursue:

- Create a ‘positive space’ where you practice sport. This involves publicly declaring, through visible signs, that physical premises such as your offices, team rooms, locker rooms, classroom, or the entire facility, are ‘positive spaces’. Respect is mandatory in such a space and lesbian and gay persons and other minorities can expect to feel welcome and secure in a safe space. The simple act of putting up posters or stickers can be extremely empowering for the minorities who participate in your programs and facilities, and sends an important message that the area is a welcoming space to lesbian and gay people.
- Use inclusive and gender-neutral language in all your communications, both written and verbal. Don’t presume that every female has a boyfriend or a husband, and don’t presume that families fit a traditional stereotype either. When writing or speaking, don’t fall into the easy presumption that people in sport fit into a uniform heterosexual model.
- When traveling internationally with teams, be aware that other countries may have strict laws about homosexuality. Take steps to educate yourself about whether or not a country or city is safe for your gay or lesbian athletes and coaches. Recognize that some team members may be vulnerable — inform, educate and, where necessary, take steps to protect them.
- Ensure that your medical staff are educated on how to appropriately provide medical care for your lesbian and gay team members. An assumption of heterosexuality by medical staff may influence the way in which lesbian or gay team members respond to questions, especially if they are not ‘out’ to their team.
- Examine your organization’s media strategy and ensure that it is inclusive of *all* your athletes and coaches, not just your heterosexual ones. Where appropriate, challenge the heterosexism that is prevalent in media portrayals of sport teams and sport personalities where only the straight women and men are singled out for media attention.
- Include reference to sexual orientation and homophobia in your anti-harassment and equity policies. Make it clear that these policies exist to protect athletes from bullying, harassment and intimidation. Include procedures to help coaches, teachers, administrators and other leaders deal with situations or complaints relating to discriminatory behaviour.
- Share this document with your board, staff, volunteers, and coaches, and encourage discussion about your organization’s experiences with homophobia, and what you can do to reduce the harm that homophobia causes.
- Encourage your coaches, athletes and other leaders in sport to pursue the individual actions outlined above.

## what's next?

This paper is the first step in addressing homophobia in sport in Canada. CAAWS plans to continue work in this area by developing additional resources to assist the sport community in making sport safer and more welcoming for our LGBTQ athletes, coaches, officials and administrators. Next steps include the development of a presentation, as well as a workshop, that can be used to supplement this paper. In addition, CAAWS will be recruiting “Champions/Spokespeople” from across the country who will deliver the presentations and workshops, as well as speak out on homophobia in sport. CAAWS encourages all organizations to get involved in addressing homophobia in sport.

Please contact CAAWS if you are interested in more information or would like to become more involved.

## acknowledgements and resources

This position paper was prepared for CAAWS by Rachel Corbett of the Centre for Sport and Law and the Gay and Lesbian International Sport Association (GLISA).

CAAWS acknowledges the contributions of Sandi Kirby, who authored an earlier version of this document, and of the team that prepared the Education Kit *It Takes a Team! Making Sports Safe for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Athletes and Coaches*, published by the United States Women's Sports Foundation in 2002 (Pat Griffin, Jeff Perrotti, Laurie Priest and Mike Muska).

[www.uwinnipeg.ca/~kirby](http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/~kirby)

[www.ittakesateam.org](http://www.ittakesateam.org)

CAAWS also acknowledges the groundbreaking work by Pat Griffin — author, educator and activist in social justice issues in sport and education.

[www.lesbianandgaysports.com](http://www.lesbianandgaysports.com)

CAAWS would like to thank the many athletes, coaches and other sport leaders in Canada who provided valuable feedback in the development of this position paper.

Additional information on this topic is available through the Gay and Lesbian International Sport Association, the Gay and Lesbian Athletes Association, the ‘positive space’ project of the Faculty of Physical Education and Health, University of Toronto, and their Faculty of Physical Education and Health’s positive space initiative.

[www.glisa.org](http://www.glisa.org)

[www.glpaa.org](http://www.glpaa.org)

[www.positivespace.utoronto.ca](http://www.positivespace.utoronto.ca)

[www.ac-fpeh.com/about/equity.php](http://www.ac-fpeh.com/about/equity.php)