

HOCKEY CANADA

BUILDING THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' HOCKEY



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WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' HOCKEY STEERING COMMITTEE

This discussion paper was overseen by a steering committee chaired by current **Hockey Canada board member and National Women's Team (NWT)** alumna Gillian Apps, which will be tasked with developing formal recommendations to inform Hockey Canada's – and Canada's – next women's and girls' hockey strategic plan.

The paper is intended to inform all Canadians who are invested in the success of women's and girls' hockey in our country on the current challenges that exist in the women's game, all of which are significant and have permeated for decades, in order to help collectively remove those barriers at all levels and help the sport realize its full potential in Canada.

As part of the committee, Apps is joined by 14 individuals with significant experience in women's hockey and sport:

- **Pierre Arsenault**, chief executive officer of U SPORTS
- **Therese Brisson**, president and chief executive officer of Alpine Canada and NWT alumna
- **Cassie Campbell-Pascall**, broadcaster, special advisor to the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) and NWT alumna
- **Debra Gassewitz**, president and chief executive officer of the Sport Information Resource Centre
- **Jayna Hefford**, senior vice-president of hockey operations for the PWHL and NWT alumna
- **Katherine Henderson**, president and chief executive officer of Hockey Canada
- **Marian Jacko**, Hockey Canada Board of Directors
- **Angela James**, Hockey Canada Foundation Board of Directors and NWT alumna
- **Rob Knesaurek**, senior vice-president of youth development and industry growth with the National Hockey League
- **Anne Merklinger**, chief executive officer of Own the Podium
- **Mary-Kay Messier**, vice-president of marketing for Bauer Hockey
- **Brad Morris**, Hockey Canada Foundation Board of Directors
- **Allison Sandmeyer-Graves**, chief executive officer of Canadian Women & Sport
- **Kim St-Pierre**, regional manager at Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities and NWT alumna

The members of the committee have volunteered their time to help ensure that by 2030, the Canadian hockey system is able to support the unprecedented growth of participants in women's and girls' hockey, which we anticipate will exceed 170,000 players by then.

Through research from Hockey Canada, its Members and Canadian Women & Sport, six key barriers have been identified which are negatively impacting the growth and potential of women's and girls' hockey in Canada: education and training, policy and governance, structure, equity in resource allocation, visibility and celebration, and data.



As part of the committee's work, IMI International will launch a qualitative survey for all Canadians to share their insights and experiences in women's and girls' hockey to ensure the formal recommendations represent the perspectives of players, coaches, officials, administrators, volunteers, fans, partners and government who love our National Winter Sport.

Further qualitative research from IMI International will seek input from those in the Hockey Canada system, stakeholders of hockey in Canada and Canadians.

VISION 2030

By Jonathan Goldbloom, Gillian Apps and Katherine Henderson

Canada has always been at the forefront of hockey, and the women's game is no different.

In 1890, then-Lady Isobel Stanley, the daughter of Governor General Lord Stanley, hosted the first recorded women's hockey game at Rideau Hall in Ottawa.

Exactly 100 years later, it was Canada that hosted the inaugural International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) World Women's Championship, which saw the home team win gold in – where else – Ottawa, and ignite a movement that continues to grow today.

Since then, Canada has won 12 more world championships and five Olympic gold medals, which have helped inspire millions of women and girls to lace up their skates and experience hockey for themselves on ponds and rinks across the nation.

And now, participation and interest in women's and girls' hockey at the grassroots level has never been stronger in our country and around the world.

This year, Hockey Canada registered more than 100,000 women and girls who played in sanctioned-hockey programs, the most ever recorded in our history, with significant increases in the number of women who coached or officiated in the 2023-24 season as well.

The majority of players on our National Women's Team are playing in the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) and are all inspiring girls across the country whether they are wearing the Maple Leaf or their respective PWHL jersey.

The time for women's and girls' hockey is now, and our goal is that by 2030 there will be over 170,000 women and girls playing hockey in Canada.

One day, we hope no girl is kept from participating in hockey because of gender-based barriers.

However, success depends on our ensuring the Canadian hockey system is prepared to continue to support this unprecedented growth.

The reality is, as it is set up today, it is not.

But that isn't to say it cannot evolve.

It will require collaboration from federal, provincial and municipal governments, our 13 Members, our colleagues with national and provincial and territorial sport organizations, corporate and hockey partners, and all Canadians who want women's and girls' hockey to not just exist in our country, **but thrive.**



Together, we have the chance to change Canadian sport and collectively address real issues and barriers that have impacted the women's game for far too long.

If we truly want to bring more women and girls into hockey in Canada and keep them as lifelong active contributors to the game, we cannot sit by idly and let existing systemic challenges in hockey fester for any longer.

The future of the sport depends on it.

We are looking to reshape how women's and girls' hockey is prioritized in our system in order to provide it the resources needed to flourish and set the standard for how women's sport is structured in Canada.

With all levels of government, we need to address aging facilities and historical challenges with women's and girls' teams securing ice time in rinks across our country.

We want every woman and girl in Canada to understand there is a place for them in our National Winter Sport, whether that's as a player, coach, official, administrator, fan or volunteer.

It is essential that we develop national standards for how women's and girls' hockey is run in Canada to create consistency in its delivery to ensure that no matter where you are lacing up your skates, you're having fun and are safe on and off the ice.

We must understand how we can offer support to universities to strengthen U SPORTS women's hockey and not just keep more of our Canadian student-athletes north of the border, but have a university hockey system that is seen as a leader around the world.

And our system needs to be welcoming and accommodating to newcomers of the sport, no matter their age, background or skill level.

Because why can't the greatest hockey country in the world better support the women and girls who are so proud to play our National Winter Sport?

Rest assured, this is a priority for Hockey Canada as we look forward to an extremely bright future for hockey in Canada.

To accomplish this, we are inviting all Canadians on this journey with us.

A journey that is setting out to reimagine what women's hockey and women's sport can represent and offer the millions of players, coaches, officials, administrators, volunteers and fans who love hockey, by equipping our national hockey system to welcome more women and girls than we could have ever dreamed was possible.

Led by a steering committee of 15 prominent stakeholders that include gold medallists and Hockey Hall of Fame inductees, this discussion paper summarizes research collected by Hockey Canada, our Members and Canadian Women & Sport that identified six barriers that are currently negatively impacting the potential growth of women's and girls' hockey.

The discussion paper is intended to engage and mobilize all Canadians who want to help realize the potential of women's and girls' hockey to take a step back and think: How can we move forward together?



What is the role of all of us as Canadians to remove the barriers that currently exist in the women's game?

And that's why the next step of this work will be hearing from you and your fellow Canadians directly.

In collaboration with IMI International, we will be launching a public survey to help the committee determine its formal recommendations to ensure that by 2030, the Canadian hockey system will welcome the more than 170,000 women and girls we intend to have playing hockey.

These recommendations will be made public in the first half of 2025 and help inform Hockey Canada's - and Canada's - next women's and girls' hockey strategic plan.

The excitement surrounding women's and girls' hockey is real.

There is no denying that it is captivating the conversations in our homes, in our communities and in our rinks like never before.

And now is the time to evolve our hockey system if we want to have programs that keep growing and welcome more Canadians each season, as well as provide a pathway that allows our national teams to continue winning gold medals on the world stage.

Let's keep that momentum going and, by 2030, have a system that all Canadians can be proud of and provides a model for the rest of the world.

JONATHAN GOLDBLOOM

Chair, Hockey Canada Board of Directors

GILLIAN APPS

Hockey Canada Board Member and Chair, Women's and Girls' Hockey Steering Committee

Katherine Henderson

President and Chief Executive Officer, Hockey Canada

CURRENT STATUS OF WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' HOCKEY IN CANADA

In the 2023-24 hockey season, there were 108,313 women and girls registered as players in Hockey Canada-sanctioned programs, which represented 19.9% of all participants, the highest percentage in Canadian hockey history.

Almost 45% of those athletes were registered with the Ontario Hockey Federation and its member the Ontario Women's Hockey Association, representing the largest number of women and girls playing hockey in Canada. Hockey Alberta had the second-most with 12% of the national total, and BC Hockey was third with 10%.





At the U18 level and younger, there were 99,561 registered players across Canada, of which nearly 65% of participants played on girls-only teams, meaning over 35% were on mixed teams.

Last season also saw increases in the number of women coaching and officiating in Canada, with 6,052 coaches and 4,066 officials registered, and more women in these positions at 12 of the 13 Members. This represented a 16% increase in women coaches and 28% in women officials compared to the 2022-23 season.

Compared to boys and men, data shows that girls and women playing hockey in Canada play hockey for fewer years and have a poorer year-over-year retention rate.

The average length in hockey for girls and women is 7.24 years, which is more than 2.4 years less than boys and men, and in the 2023-24 season, the retention rate for girls and women was 84.9%. This was 2.9% lower than boys and men.

At the university level last season, 35 teams competed in U SPORTS women's hockey, rostering more than 800 combined student-athletes, the vast majority of whom were Canadian and stayed in Canada to keep playing hockey.

However, in the NCAA, nearly 33% of the more than 1,100 Division I women's hockey players were Canadian, meaning that almost 400 student-athletes left Canada to play university hockey in the American system.

All players on Canada's National Women's Team and Canada's National Women's Development Team in 2023-24 played their university careers in the NCAA.

THE SIX KEY BARRIERS TO GROWING WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' HOCKEY IN CANADA

In 2020, Hockey Canada established a task team of experienced national team athletes, coaches and administrators that provided their experiences, observations and feedback on women's and girls' hockey as part of a review of the Female Canadian Development Model (CDM).

This group recognized existing challenges impacting women and girls, and began to discuss possible changes that could be implemented to the CDM to advance the women's game.

One of the critical priorities that was established by the task team was the importance of Hockey Canada creating an executive role on its senior leadership team dedicated to overseeing women's and girls' grassroots hockey at the national level and working with the organization's Members to support their efforts to deliver the women's and girls' game to participants across the country.

Marin Hickox joined Hockey Canada as its first director of women's and girls' hockey in May 2022, and was elevated to vice-president of women's and girls' hockey one year later.

Through her initial work with the Members, Marin helped establish a network of 28 women's and girls' hockey leads at the Member level who met for a three-day workshop led by Canadian Women & Sport in June 2023, and again in June 2024.

The data collected at those sessions from the leads and their colleagues with each Member, in addition to the findings from the task team report in 2020, combined to create the foundation for this discussion paper and the work of the steering committee by identifying the major gaps that are negatively impacting women's and girls' hockey in Canada.



This work identified six key barriers which will be crucial to overcome in order for the sport to lead the way with grassroots programming in Canada and beyond:

- Structure of Women's and Girls' Hockey
- Equity in Resource Allocation
- Policy and Governance
- Education and Training
- Data
- Visibility and Celebration

Within these six barriers, a number of examples were cited that highlight current gaps in women's and girls' hockey in Canada.

Between Hockey Canada, its Members and their local hockey associations, there are over 2,800 boards governing hockey in Canada. This has created inconsistencies with governance and program delivery to participants across the country, which has indirectly caused a lack of cohesion, direction and standards and resulted in more turnover of volunteers, including coaches.

At the local levels, volunteers are the ones often primarily responsible for advocating for increased resources, which can include battling with teams and other associations who may not have a vested interest in women's and girls' hockey.

There remain stereotypes that women's and girls' hockey is not as competitive as the game is for men and boys.

This is furthered by a lack of guidance from Hockey Canada and its Members on how associations should be managing women's and girls' hockey, which has reinforced local attitudes in some areas of the country that the sport does not need to be resourced as appropriately as men's and boys' hockey.

Although there has been progress at the national, provincial and local levels, the historical lack of diversity on boards and in decision-makers in hockey continues to limit the sport's potential at all levels.

Despite women and girls representing 19.9% of all participants in Hockey Canada-sanctioned programs, the sport is often not allocated the same resources as men's and boys' teams, including ice time, funding, staffing, equipment and coverage.

To date, there is no ice equity access policy in Canada, which has resulted in ice time managed at the local level being given priority to groups with agreements that often pre-date the creation of women's and girls' hockey programs in their respective communities.

Women's and girls' hockey-specific programs often rely on grants and additional streams of funding to operate, which leads to instability for initiatives and a lack of certainty towards what the future of the sport might hold.

There is no specific education or training module for women and girls playing hockey in Canada, nor are there standard resources provided to administrators, coaches and volunteers.

Limited and inconsistent injury prevention education designed specifically for girls playing hockey has led to fewer girls staying in hockey, and sport in general.

Although Hockey Canada now oversees three women-only coaching programs, girls and women coaches experienced a retention rate that was 12.8% lower than boys and men for the 2023-24 season, with negative interactions and criticism cited as two of the primary reasons for not returning behind the bench.

The Rally Report published by Canadian Women & Sport in 2022 found that the top benefits for girls participating in sport are physical health, fun and enjoyment, and social, yet a survey of girls who left hockey identified politics and a lack of fun as two of the top reasons for not returning to the game.

At the grassroots level, sharing best practices across the country and celebrating those successes could increase the fun that participants have playing or being involved in hockey, and helps reinforce that there can be an identity specific to women's and girls' hockey and the unique camaraderie it represents.

And internationally, despite the success that Canada and its athletes have had in women's hockey, there remains a gap between the on-ice achievements and the celebrations of them off the ice, including how athletes and teams are promoted.

Increasing the promotion of high-performance women's athletes and their teams in professional and international hockey can inspire even more girls and women to participate in sport, which teaches them important life skills and promotes a healthy and active lifestyle and enhances their sense of pride by being part of a movement that is much bigger than themselves.

Although it is not unique to the women's and girls' game, cost remains a consistent barrier to entry for too many Canadians who face challenges with rising registration fees, equipment and travel expenses.

HOW CAN WE ADDRESS THESE BARRIERS?

In order to ensure that women's and girls' hockey in Canada can overcome these barriers and challenges, it will take the input, feedback and support of all Canadians to help us evolve the system to be set up for sustained success.

One that will bring more gold medals on the ice to Canada's national teams, and gold medal experiences to participants in grassroots hockey across the country.

But we must start by asking ourselves questions that will fundamentally shape what that will look like for years to come:

- Can we standardize the delivery of women's and girls' hockey to participants, especially for younger athletes, and if so, should that be set at the national or provincial and territorial level?
- Do the 65% of participants playing hockey on girls-only teams represent the best development path for girls and women?
- Moving forward, how will Hockey Canada's development models evolve to equally prioritize women's and girls' hockey with men's and boys'?

- Will we be able to work with government and other stakeholders to find solutions for the current lack of ice time for girls and women across Canada, and who needs to be at the table for those discussions?
- Can we, together with our government partners, build rinks or multi-sport facilities that are designed specifically for women and girls?
- How can we retain more girls playing hockey at all levels?
- Why is there a perception that women's and girls' hockey isn't as competitive or as much of a priority as boys' and men's hockey in many communities?
- How can Hockey Canada and its Members work with community hockey organizations who are operating programs that introduce Canadians to the game beyond traditional local hockey associations?
- Are Canadian parents being engaged enough to understand their expectations for enrolling their child in hockey and how they can be better supported?
- Collectively, how can we seek to lower expenses for registration, equipment and travel, despite increasing costs in certain areas of the game?
- What steps need to be taken for all Hockey Canada Members to have a full-time staff member dedicated to overseeing women's and girls' hockey?
- Is the Canadian hockey system resourced enough to support the intended growth of women's and girls' hockey participants by 2030 by providing enough ice time for teams, and if not, how will we get there?
- If women and girls represent 19.9% of all participants in Hockey Canada programs, how can we ensure those governing the game on the more than 2,800 hockey boards across Canada have that much representation from women, if not more?
- Across Canada, how will we better engage with new Canadians and under-represented groups who have felt left out of hockey, and welcome them into the sport?
- How will hockey stakeholders work together to ensure women and girls of all backgrounds feel empowered to participate in hockey if they choose to do so, and how are they being reached out to?
- Is there support from Canadian universities to better resource U SPORTS women's hockey programs to a level where more student-athletes will want to play their post-secondary careers on home ice?
- Can U SPORTS women's hockey evolve to be a product that is seen as a leader around the world and a legitimate path to a professional career and further national team participation?

- How can Hockey Canada and its Members better support the pathway for U SPORTS women's hockey players, coaches and staff?
- Will specific research on injuries in women's and girls' hockey lead to fewer injuries and more participants in the game?
- How will we increase the visibility and celebration of our national team athletes to inspire the next generation of players, coaches and fans?
- Collectively, how do we address the lack of development opportunities for women to build their skills and experiences towards leadership positions in hockey and sport?
- What can be done to keep more women coaches behind the bench and serve as mentors to the girls they're coaching?
- How can we design training and education modules for administrators, coaches and volunteers that are specific to women's and girls' hockey that enhances their ability to be leaders in the sport?
- Should training programs be enhanced for girls playing hockey as they enter their teenage years to encourage them to stay as active participants in sport, and be expanded to cover mental health and other topics that are particularly relevant at that stage of their lives?
- Are there enough opportunities for athletes who still aspire to play professionally but have exhausted their years of eligibility at university and college, and women who want to continue to play recreational hockey as adults?
- And perhaps most important of all, how can we make women's and girls' hockey more fun?

In the coming months, IMI International will launch formal quantitative and qualitative research process that will seek feedback from athletes, coaches, officials, administrators, volunteers, fans and all Canadians on these questions and more.

This data will help the committee develop formal recommendations, which we expect to issue publicly in Spring 2025.

Those recommendations will serve as the framework to help Hockey Canada develop and finalize our country's next strategic plan for women's and girls' hockey, which will further establish Canada as a world leader in women's hockey.

Our National Winter Sport is an important aspect of who we are as Canadians, including for the members of the women's and girls' hockey steering committee.

In partnership with Hockey Canada, we are committed to informing all Canadians of our progress throughout this project and, as part of that, want to hear from as many of you as possible to support this important work.

Together, the future of women's and girls' hockey in Canada has limitless potential.

HEAR FROM THE COMMITTEE

“U SPORTS is eager to work with Hockey Canada and the women’s and girls’ steering committee to realize the potential of women’s and girls’ hockey, including at the university level, in Canada. We embrace our responsibility to actively create expanding opportunities for women and girls to get involved in the game that means so much to us.”

Pierre Arsenault, chief executive officer of U SPORTS

“When we talk about the delivery of women’s and girls’ hockey in Canada, it’s important to take a step back and ask what are our must haves? As an extremely big country, with different realities in each province, territory and community, it may not be a one-size-fits-all approach, but the important thing is that we are all open to creative ways to address the barriers that currently exist and have honest conversations to advance the game for women and girls.”

Therese Brisson, president and chief executive officer of Alpine Canada and National Women’s Team alumna

“In women’s hockey, we have heard the word hope for far too long. Now, it’s time to get things done. I am so proud to be part of this group that is committed to taking action to give our sport the resources it needs to succeed for generations to come.”

Cassie Campbell-Pascall, broadcaster, special advisor to the PWHL and National Women’s Team alumna

Hockey is at the heart of our Canadian identity, and fostering a lifelong connection to the sport — beyond traditional organized play — is crucial for our future. We have an incredible opportunity to expand hockey’s reach in schools, which holds the potential to engage more women, girls, and Canadians in a meaningful way.”

Debra Gassewitz, president and CEO of the Sport Information Resource Centre

“Celebrating the women who represent our communities, teams and country is critical to growing the game, and we must collectively broaden the pool of athletes who we highlight to resonate with even more Canadians. There are a number of ways to expand the relationship between Hockey Canada and the PWHL to further grow women’s and girls’ hockey, and through this committee I am excited to work with the other 14 individuals to build the future of the sport in Canada.”

Jayna Hefford, senior vice-president of hockey operations for the PWHL and National Women’s Team alumna

“Hockey has had a prominent role in the lives of many Indigenous people, including women and girls who played the game while attending Indian Residential Schools. As an act of reconciliation and as a partial response to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls National Inquiry Calls for Justice, we need to honour the significance of this history and commit to raising awareness and to education. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that for Indigenous



people in this country, the game of hockey has saved lives. We must continue working to understand how to create an even greater connection between Indigenous people and the game of hockey and to do what we can to lift one another up.”

Marian Jacko, Hockey Canada Board of Directors

“The structure of women’s and girls’ hockey in Canada, including its governance model, is something that we know needs to be evaluated as we look to build a system that doesn’t just work, but thrives and allows all participants with opportunities to succeed in hockey and life. I’m excited to work with our committee to positively impact the game, and in particular review the current training and education offerings to ensure they are meeting the needs of those who are supposed to benefit from them.”

Angela James, Hockey Canada Foundation Board of Directors and National Women’s Team alumna

“Participating in hockey is about more than just the game: it benefits overall wellbeing, builds teamwork and encourages people of all ages to have fun. All forms of hockey are important, whether it’s street hockey, ball hockey or ice hockey, and our committee understands that we need to embrace adaptable thinking and stay flexible in our approach as we work towards recommendations for women’s and girls’ hockey. We’re so excited to build off the momentum in this community and help showcase the greatest game on earth.”

Rob Knesaurek, senior vice-president of youth development and industry growth with the National Hockey League

“Through this committee’s work, there are so many opportunities ahead to positively impact not just women’s and girls’ hockey in Canada, but women’s and girls’ sport. I am thrilled to be part of this inspiring work and know it will benefit all participants and fans of our National Winter Sport, including at future Olympic and Paralympic games.”

Anne Merklinger, chief executive officer of Own the Podium

“The stakes are even higher for girls because sport has the power to change the world. We know that playing sports builds self-confidence and values that positively impact girls’ development and future career success. It is our responsibility as leaders and as a hockey community to increase opportunities for more girls to play and more women to take leadership roles at every level of our game. We’re already seeing progress in these areas, but there is much work to be done. We are at a growth inflection point for hockey and girls seeing themselves in hockey will accelerate participation, create equity and ensure the future of the game.”

Mary-Kay Messier, vice-president of marketing for Bauer Hockey

“Success is not only about more players starting the game, but equally keeping players in-and-around the game and feeling passionate towards everything the game can be – from play to passion. We all share a responsibility to develop lifelong participants and fans and ensuring that everyone feels welcome and supported in realizing their own hockey journey and how it can strengthen areas throughout their lives. There is a lot of work to come, but I am so excited at the openness of this process and group of invested leaders to drive action and help identify solutions to barriers that have been pushed aside for far too long.”

Brad Morris, Hockey Canada Foundation Board of Directors





“While hockey can bring many positive benefits to the lives of those who participate in it, it is equally as important to acknowledge that there remain significant gaps that must be addressed systemically in order to welcome groups who have traditionally not been included in the game, including new Canadians and women and girls. Across all levels, we must hear from more diverse perspectives as we work towards removing the barriers that have existed, and continue to exist, in hockey.”

Allison Sandmeyer-Graves, chief executive officer of Canadian Women & Sport

“While it’s clear that we have made strides in women’s and girls’ hockey, there are still several deep-rooted challenges that are preventing the sport from realizing its full potential. We need to address these barriers in order to create a thriving and vibrant system that will drive more opportunities for players, coaches, officials and executives in hockey.”

Kim St-Pierre, regional manager at Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities and National Women’s Team alumna





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