

Policy Brief

**Modifying Canadian Safe Sport Policies to Consider Pregnant and Parenting High-
Performance Athletes**

By Talia Ritondo^a, Dr. Audrey Giles^a, Dr. Francine Darroch^b

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^a University of Ottawa

^b Carleton University

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While safe sport policies have increased in Canadian National Sport Organizations (NSOs) to protect athletes from maltreatment, it remains unclear how support for equity-owed pregnant and parenting elite athletes' (PPEAs) unique circumstances are considered in these policies. Our research has demonstrated how dominant discourses surrounding gender, pregnancy, and parenting woven throughout safe sport and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies minimized support for PPEAs who are supposed to be protected by said policies.

Key Findings

- The language used in safe sport policies framed maltreatment as occurring mainly to minors, implying that abuse could not happen to adults in sport.
- EDI policies lacked discussion of how NSOs could create inclusive and safe sport for self-identifying women, transgender men, and non-binary (SWTMNB) PPEAs.
- Overall, the absence of PPEAs in safe sport policy discourse suggests that sport could be safe without considering the unique support PPEAs may need when facing maltreatment.

What is at Stake?

The presence of Canadian safe sport policies has increased in recent years to augment the protection of athletes and sport organization members from maltreatment, a pervasive issue in Canadian high-performance sport. Early analyses of these policies have critiqued their hyper-focus on sexual abuse^[1,2] since psychological abuse, harassment, discrimination, and neglect are commonly experienced by athletes^[2-4]. While it is critical to protect athletes from sexual maltreatment, it remains unclear how/if safe sport policies protect equity-owed athletes from neglect and discrimination, specifically, pregnant and parenting elite athletes (PPEAs) who are self-identified women, transgender (trans) men, and non-binary people (SWTMNB).

The importance of focusing on SWTMNB PPEAs' safe sport requirements was clear during the past two Olympic Games cycles. During the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, qualification periods and restrictive Olympic village regulations forced PPEAs to choose between being Olympians and caring for their children^[5-7]. Conversely, the 2024 Paris Olympics reported the highest number of PPEAs ever to compete in an Olympic Games. This increase led to some onsite accommodations for PPEAs, but research shows that fundamental policy changes are necessary to support PPEAs^[8-12]. Notably, athlete support policies, NSOs, and the sport system, in general, have discriminatory practices against SWTMNB PPEAs like lack of parental leave, lowered financial support, and constant conflation of pregnancy and injury^[8,9,11,13,14]. Additionally, PPEAs have been shown to face unique physiological and psychological challenges that impede their sport participation, for which researchers have already demanded equitable policy expansion^[8,8,10,15-18]. These inequitable policies and the general lack of policies supporting PPEAs are a result of dominant gender discourses surrounding pregnancy and parenting roles and athlete expectations rampant throughout the sport^[11,12].

As participation increases for SWTMNB PPEAs, it is critical to examine the quality of support for these athletes, especially safe sport policies, generally defined as policies prioritizing the safety, welfare, and rights of those in sport^[19]. To date, however, research on PPEAs' experiences, the discrimination they face from NSOs, and safe sport have been studied in silos.

Therefore, we examined Canadian NSOs' safe sport policies for the presence and manifestation of dominant discourses surrounding gender, pregnancy, and parenting and to understand how they influence safe sport policy. This brief shares findings from our research to inform policymakers of all levels on how they can create safe sport policies that, or amend current safe sport policies to, include the unique needs and circumstances of PPEAs.

Methods

In our study, we analyzed the publicly available policies relating to safe sport (e.g., official safe sport statements, abuse policies, travel policies, and equity, diversity, and inclusion policies) from all 64 Canadian NSO websites for document analysis, totalling 426 policies. We chose policies relating to safe sport – not just safe sport policies – because many NSOs actively adopted safe sport principles, drawn from the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada's *Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport* (UCCMS)^[20], into these policies to protect athletes from harassment and discrimination. Safe sport principles were. We collected and analyzed policies from NSO websites from March 2024 to September 2024.

We used Allan's^[21,22] feminist poststructural discourse analysis because, through its use, we unpacked how policies exercise power to (re)produce dominant discourses that oppress SWTMNB PPEAs. This process involved 1) organizing the policies based on policy type; 2) coding the data deductively based on our study's purpose and inductively; and 3) revising codes and integrating personal notes. Our analysis produced three overarching discourses.

Discourse 1: Maltreatment occurs mainly to minors

Policies outlined many forms of maltreatment and provided details and examples of who can experience harm in sport settings; however, the language and examples used within most policies were almost entirely directed towards maltreatment and abuse happening to minors and youth, which implied that maltreatment is an experience exclusive to minors. For instance, the application of the term “parent” only referred to those responsible for children participating sport, not to an adult participating in sport who has a child(ren), and most policies exclusively had examples that included “warning signs” if children were enduring abuse.

Recommendations: Policymakers should avoid any age-based language or examples when discussing athlete abuse in policies meant to protect athletes of all ages. Speed Skating Canada's *Abuse Policy*^[22] demonstrated that avoiding age-based language is possible as it contains age-neutral language for how abuse can be suspected and reported. Further, when referring to those at risk of abuse (sometimes referred to as “vulnerable participants” or “individuals at risk”), it is paramount when defining the term to address risk parameters related to systemic oppression (e.g., race, class, indigeneity, gender identity or expression) and power differentials in sport organizations, as illustrated in Speed Skating Canada's *Abuse Policy*^[22].

Discourse 2: Athletes are not Pregnant or Parents in EDI and Gender Equity Policies

Discourses in EDI and gender equity policies focused on generally increasing numbers of SWTMNB athletes in sport, rather than providing targeted strategies to ensure equitable participation for women and 2SLGBTQIA+ athletes who may be pregnant or parents. Further, policies lacked initiatives to sustain and expand gender equity beyond participation through

ongoing education and consulting with equity-owed groups about broader systemic issues in sport, like learning about gendered issues in sport surrounding SWTMNB PPEAs' experiences.

Recommendations: Policymakers should collaborate with current and former SWTMNB PPEAs from their NSO and other NSOs if no athlete has disclosed pregnancy/parenting status to receive feedback on revising safe sport and EDI policies to include inclusion measures for PPEAs. Further, NSO should ensure that policymakers, coaches, administrators, officials, and athletes learn about broader systemic issues in sport (e.g., sexism, racism, classism, ableism) and learn how they can create safe sport environments for athletes or teammates who are pregnant and/or parenting.

Discourse 3: PPEAs Don't Need Support to Create a Safe Sport Environment

Lack of discussion regarding the rights and needs of SWTMNB PPEAs generated the discourse that sport could be safe without considering the support PPEAs may need when facing maltreatment as an equity-owed population. For instance, codes of conduct listed ways to support and protect athletes but omitted PPEAs' specific needs from their policies. The few instances in which PPEAs were ambiguous (e.g., using the term family status) or were not in place to protect athletes, such as Wheelchair Rugby Canada's *Childcare Support Policy*^[24] meant exclusively for NSO employees and not athletes.

Recommendations: Policymakers should work with PPEAs to create guidelines to insert into safe sport-related policies and include this population in safe sport language. Specifically, issues relating to discrimination, physical maltreatment, and neglect need to be addressed, as PPEAs have expressed experiencing these issues as members of NSOs^[8,9,13,14]. Further, current mentions of PPEAs must be revised to ensure that athletes' protection is considered, not just employees' and the organization's itself.

Conclusion

To conclude, shifting the language and discourses in safe sport policies to include specific protections for PPEAs is imperative, as they are an equity-owed population who need unique support to equitably participate in sport. Providing these additions and listening to the voices of SWTMNB PPEAs would not only be a great improvement to Canadian safe sport policy, but a monumental step to including PPEAs in policies and conversations about high-performance sport in general, a space in which their voices have been historically silenced and omitted.

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