

Opening Statement by Dr. Una May (Director of Participation and Ethics at Sport Ireland)

Challenges Facing Women in Sport

I thank the Committee for its invitation to address it this afternoon.

I am joined this morning by Nora Stapleton, Women in Sport Lead with Sport Ireland.

The Committee will hear from myself in relation to this matter, while both myself and Nora will be able to answer any questions the committee might have. I will provide context and input from a Sport Ireland perspective across each of the four target areas of the Sport Ireland Policy on Women in Sport, including a synopsis of our national level female participation trends and research we have commissioned and supported in this area.

The Sport Ireland Women in Sport Programme was first created in 2005 following ESRI research that identified a significant gap in the participation rates of females and males. From 2005 through to 2018, the Women in Sport Programme has funded a wide range of initiatives delivered by NGBs and LSPs to further the agenda of gender equality in sport. The programme was reviewed and relaunched in 2019 to coincide with the development of Sport Ireland's Policy on Women in Sport. This policy identifies four key areas, which have emerged as current gaps & future opportunities for women in sport. These are:

1. Leadership and Governance
2. Coaching and Officiating
3. Active Participation
4. Visibility

As a statutory agency, Sport Ireland's vision for women in sport is one where women have an equal opportunity to achieve their full potential, while enjoying a lifelong involvement in sport. Sport Ireland's Women in Sport Policy expresses Sport Ireland's commitment to women in sport. It seeks to build on the significant work which has already been undertaken in this area within the sport sector to date and, in recognising the opportunity to make a significant impact on the lives of women through their involvement in sport.

Nora Stapleton was employed as the Sport Ireland Women in Sport Lead in 2019 and coordinates the roll out of actions to achieve the objectives set out in the policy. She is supported by the Sport Ireland Women in Sport Steering Committee who meet 4-6 times per year on topics relating to the Policy. To

date, over €22m has been invested through the Women in Sport Programme in National Governing Bodies and Local Sports Partnerships.

While participation levels among both genders have increased since 2017, a slightly larger increase in participation among women has led to a narrowing of the gender gap – from 4.5% in 2017 to 3.4% in 2019. Significantly, this gap has narrowed from 15.7% since 2007 when the ISM commenced.

Since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, it has shaped sports participation trends nationally. Sport Ireland has continuously monitored the effects of the pandemic on sport and physical activity participation with the most recent report (July-September this year) showing that participation in sport continued to rise throughout the year with numbers approaching pre-pandemic levels. Unfortunately, it has identified growing gradients in sports participation for women. Male sports participation has grown faster than female participation resulting in a widening gender gap. 48% of men report taking part in sport while 38% of women reported taking part in sport, though there is no difference in genders in overall physical activity levels, due to higher levels of women walking for recreation (77% vs. 68% of males).

Previous waves of this ISM research have indicated that a key barrier to sports participation in females aged 16+ is a perception of not having enough time to play sport. For many this barrier will be due to childcare responsibilities, which it may be expected would impact differently on each gender.

Other barriers to female participation include:

- Lack of awareness of physical activity guidelines
- Lack of confidence
- Poor health and injury
- Cost
- Access to facilities.

Disparities in female participation in physical activity tend to be affected by age, socioeconomic status, disability, and pregnancy. More recently, Sport Ireland have started to identify the particular needs of women at peri-menopause or menopause stages of their lives and the impact this time can have on levels of activity. Various programmes are being supported through Women in Sport funding that target this particular cohort. These programmes can act as a pilot to others as we try to increase activity levels.

In teenage girls and young adults, the 2021 Adolescent Girls Get Active research report which focused on girls who are currently disengaged with sport and exercise outlines the perceived barriers to sport for teenage girls. Girls feeling that they are “not good enough” or “are not sporty” is often rooted in their experience of traditional, more dominant team sports and the stereotypes reinforced in popular culture and experiences.

Despite the physical contrasts in rural and urban living, the research found that the underlying wants and needs of teenage girls are often similar. They feel there is a lack of social space for teens where they feel welcomed, wanted, and included. They feel there are limited opportunities to try new things, learn new skills and ultimately feel good about themselves.

Adolescence is a critical life-stage and these formative years are when attitudes and behaviours are established that shape the women they will become. Girls who are active in their teenage years and develop a love of sport are much more likely to establish a life-long relationship with sport and exercise in adulthood.

The sporting environment in which teenage girls participate in can have a huge impact on retaining them in sport. In order to address this area, Sport Ireland have created an evidence based coaching workshop for coaches of teenage girls. The goal of the workshops is to develop more informed coaches who can help reduce the drop out of teenage girls from sport by adapting their coaching methods to suit the motivations and needs of their athletes.

The roll out of these workshops has recently commenced through LSPs and NGBs around the country with over 1000 coaches likely to have attended by February 2022.

Moving on to Leadership and Governance, Sport Ireland welcomed the recent Government announcement regarding a new target of 40% gender balance on the Boards of sporting organisations. Over the last two years, Sport Ireland have been monitoring the gender composition on the Boards of NGBs and LSPs through annual Snapshots of Women in Leadership. These Snapshots have shown how the percentage of women on Boards has increased from 24% in 2019 to currently stand at 32% for NGBs and 37% for LSPs. 39 NGBs and 20 LSPs have 30% or more women on their Board.

Through research conducted during the creation of Sport Ireland’s Gender Diversity on Boards Toolkit (see link in Appendix) a number of challenges were identified that impacts the recruitment and retention of women on Boards. These include the format and timings of meetings to make them more accessible for members when taking into account family and work commitments. The absence of leadership training, traditional recruitment methods and a lack of mentoring and support to new

female Board members have all been recognised as challenges when increasing female stats at leadership and governance levels.

As well as the recently created Gender Diversity on Boards Toolkit which supports Boards in developing and maintain better gender balance, Sport Ireland continue to create other programmes and resources to support women in leadership and Governance. The M-Power Mentoring programme continues to roll out twice each year with approximately 50% of attendees female. Management programmes such as the Arena and Accelerate programmes, while have approximately 50/50 gender split in attendees, have also included modules on Diversity and Inclusion with a gender focus.

Through its Women in Sport Funding Programme, Sport Ireland supports a number of Women in Sport Leadership Programmes ongoing in the NGBs and LSPs. These programmes are supporting current female leaders as well as those with potential to hold leadership and governance roles within their sport. One such example is the successful Women in Sport Leadership Programme run by Swim Ireland and available to members from all sports and LSPs. Over the last year, the programme has trained over 150 women from across 30+ organisations on areas such as Leadership and Values, Networking and Collaboration, Handling Challenging Situations, Crisis Management, Governance, Developing Resilience, Communications and Developing Your Personal Brand, amongst others.

The importance of ensuring women in sport is visible is well documented and reported on. In 2019, Sport Ireland conducted their second report on Women's Sport in Irish Print Media. This report outlined a 1.1% increase in media coverage of women's sport in the four years previous. Sport Ireland intend to repeat this exercise in 2022. The lack of gender targets for media outlets receiving Government funding means it is difficult for Sport Ireland to measure or track progress relating to how visible women's sport is, i.e. percentage of coverage dedicated to female sporting events or articles and images showing females sports news.

The capacity within the sports sector can also mean that some sports just don't have the necessary resource to ensure female sporting news is available and shared with the relevant media channels.

There is also a new challenge which is the way in which people consume sports news and events now. Mainstream TV, radio and newspapers are being replaced with pay per view TV, apps, social media and podcasts. This is an area in which Sport Ireland are starting to explore in order to be able to support the sports sector for the future consumption of sport.

While acknowledging that increasing the visibility of female athletes is important, Sport Ireland also see the importance of making females visible across all areas of the game, i.e. female leaders in sport, female coaches, female umpires and officiators, female social participants. By increasing the visibility of females through all facets of sport in society, we make it normal for female involvement to be embedded in sport rather than the exception.

Various initiatives and programmes have been created by Sport Ireland and which are further outlined in the support document provided to this committee. These include the first ever media training programme for female pundits and analysts with over 120 females benefiting from various levels of support and training. The Women on Wednesday Sport Series continues to highlight local role models under the topic of physical activity while in 2022, Sport Ireland will again run its Women in Sport Week. The week takes place from March 7th to 13th and is an occasion to highlight ongoing projects within Sport Ireland, as well as raising awareness of female athletes and women in sport programmes in the National Governing Body and Local Sports Partnerships.

The Sport Ireland Women in Coaching Working Group was established in March 2020 as a sub-group of the Women in Sport Steering Committee. Its remit is to provide recommendations to the committee as to how Sport Ireland can increase the number of females progressing through the coaching pathway.

In March, Sport Ireland released the findings of an online coaching survey which exclusively targeted active and inactive female coaches across all sports on the island of Ireland. The survey identified barriers to coaching which can be grouped into five areas; time constraints; sexism and gender related issues; lack of confidence; lack of NGB and Club support and parental factors.

Following up on the coaching research, Sport Ireland created and launched the Women in Coaching Toolkit which can be used by organisations to help them in their planning for the recruitment, development and retention of women in coaching.

The culture within sport organisations is also a factor that can affect female coaches. If the culture has been traditionally male dominated then the environment can sometimes not be conducive to making female coaches feel valued and supported. The Women in Coaching Toolkit aims to educate sports on this topic and guide them on how they can address this issue if it exists in their sport.

The number of women coaching in high performance sport in Ireland is very low. Elite level female coaches described how they can feel isolated in their development and would benefit from a network of similar coaches for support and learning. Over the next number of months, Sport Ireland plans to establish a coaching network for elite-level female coaches.

There is a clear gender gradient within volunteering as noted in the 2019 ISM, with 14% of men vs 10% of women regularly volunteering for Sport. The gender gap differs across the life course, with younger women as likely to volunteer for sport as men, but a strong gender gap (in favour of men) emerges among older age groups. Half of all women (51%) have never volunteered for sport. Those who do volunteer are less likely than men to coach, referee or be a club official.

Finally, I would once again like to thank this committee for the opportunity to address them today. As you can hopefully see, the work of Sport Ireland under the topic of Women in Sport is one that covers a wide remit when you consider the four target areas of the Policy. The organisation is no longer one that only monitors and provides funding and investment to the sports sector, but helps support, guide and provide resources for the sector to help them ensure women have an equal opportunity to achieve their full potential, while enjoying a lifelong involvement in sport.

Both myself and Nora welcome any questions you might have.