



Gender equality strategies at national association level. Examples of best practices in Central and South America

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality is a crucial issue that transcends the boundaries of tennis and sport and affects society as a whole. Historically, tennis has been a pioneering sport when it comes to making clear and defending the rights of women in all walks of life. Regarding professional tennis, tennis has had great representatives in this field such as Billie Jean King who has been a pioneer in achieving gender equality in professional tennis. The ITF, for its part, launched the Advantage All campaign to generate a movement that would help visualize the existing situation in our sport. The objective of this article is to present the visions that some women related to tennis in different countries of Central and South America have about the different initiatives carried out. In addition, experiences, opinions, and perceptions regarding the different programs are shared. We hope this collaboration will be useful for all those interested in contributing to achieving gender equality in tennis.

Key words: Gender, equality, advantage all, programmes.

Received: 1 June 2023

Accepted: 10 July 2023

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INTRODUCTION

Female tennis participation and competition scenario

Female tennis worldwide has a participation challenge, with noticeable gender disparity at competitive and older age groups despite a fairly even split amongst the much younger age groups. The data obtained in different studies suggest that there are challenges in retaining female players in the sport, indicating a need for greater measures to understand and address the underlying causes of this scenario. Gender disparity is a significant issue in competitive tennis, particularly at older age groups, despite a more balanced participation among younger players (Ward & Buscome, 2019). Stereotype threat, which refers to the psychological effect of negative stereotypes, may contribute to the underperformance and demotivation of girls in tennis. However, research has shown that stereotype threat can have both positive and negative effects on performance. Efforts to understand and address the underlying causes of gender inequality in tennis are necessary.

From a pure coaching perspective, one of the key goals is to engage more girls in tennis. To do this, it is important to create an environment that promotes verbal communication and peer learning. Furthermore, encouraging girls to work on problems together in pairs or groups can also enhance their problem-solving abilities. Additionally, scheduling



younger groups on adjacent courts to older ones can provide role models for younger girls to imitate (Regan, 2019). It is also beneficial to encourage verbal fluency in tactics and tennis terminology, and using peer learning by pairing more experienced players with less experienced ones can help build confidence and improve skills.

In this context, motivation is a crucial factor and girls' motivation to play tennis can be influenced by various factors. One major factor is the desire for success and the ratio of victories to defeats (Krolak, 2013). Additionally, girls may be

motivated by the enjoyment of the game and the opportunity for progress and performance (Bykanova-Yudanov, 2018). It is important for coaches to understand the social factors and the individual needs of female tennis players to support their development and maximize their potential (Mouelhi-Ghizani et al., 2023).

ITF RESEARCH

The ITF's Advantage All strategy, to ensure equal opportunities for women and men in tennis on and off the court, works to generate action to bring about the necessary changes that will lead to parity. In the field of women coaches, data available in the ITF Global Tennis Report 2021 indicates that 22% of coaches worldwide are women, a far cry from the 50% parity sought. To bring about this change, in the coaching area the ITF is working on the ITF Female Coaches Network project. At the end of 2022 we gathered and analysed figures that led us to set goals for 2023 (ITF, 2021).

We found that the participation of female coaches in Play Tennis certification courses or higher that were supported with ITF funds had no more than 30% female participation and we set a target that by 2023 female participation should be no less than 30%.

On the participation of female coaches in the role of captains of the U12, U14 and U16 national teams, we found that their participation ranged from 30% in the younger age groups to 17% in the older age groups. We set a target for 2023 that 30% of the captains in these teams will be women. This goal has been accompanied by the promotion of CBI level 1 and CAP level 2 certification courses for female coaches to have certified professionals in the roles of captains of national youth and senior teams.

Two other objectives have been to increase the participation of women in the ITF World Coaches Conference, both as participants and speakers. By 2023 we aim to have between 15-20% of participants and 33% of speakers.

Actions to improve in these areas have the important participation of National Federations. In this article we want to share the contributions of the Federations of Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, and Panama, who with clear purpose and objectives are carrying out actions to achieve parity in the participation of women and men in all areas of tennis in their countries.

COLOMBIA (Fabiola Zuluaga)

Fabiola is a former professional tennis player who reached #16 in the WTA rankings. She is currently a Level 3 certified coach.

In Colombia we have several strategies and programmes that are being developed so that women are increasingly involved and considered in tennis. The process is complete: from training, through the management at different levels of athletes and the accompaniment of them, including in their professional stage. Personally, I have had the opportunity to participate and contribute to all of them.

It has been a great success that we ex-players have stayed in the country and made a career as coaches. Passing on the experiences and knowledge gained over the years as professionals is fundamental for sportswomen who are thinking about or trying to enter this world, which from the

outside looks simple, but living it is completely different to what you have in mind.

Public policies in Colombia demand gender equity. We must have 30% of women in management positions, captainships and in all the events that take place in the country. Today I am the only woman in the technical commission of the Colombian Tennis Federation (FCT); and we are 5 women leading groups such as the BJK Cup, Olympic cycle teams and women's teams participating in the South Americans.

With the support of the ITF and the commitment of the FCT, leagues and clubs, the participation of female coaches in training and refresher courses is increasing. Currently, we have approximately 100 female coaches trained with ITF level 1 (+50), level 2 (35) and level 3 (12) courses, in addition to those who continue in the process, thanks to the work of the FCT Training Directorate. Recently the first Play Tennis tutor course was held with 9 Colombian coaches.

We have a Colombia team that brings together 87 youth players from the country, of which 43 are women, receiving support from the Ministry of Sport for their participation both nationally and internationally.

The effort to hold professional tournaments is an important boost for the development of tennis in Colombia. For several years now, the number of women's tournaments held in the country has increased, giving our players the opportunity to compete at home, saving money, optimising time, and allowing them to spend more time with their work team.

Everything starts from the seedlings. We also have children's festivals where the women's categories are respected, even if there is very little participation or enrolment. The important thing is to give them the opportunity to play and enjoy tennis, so if there are very few participants, we organise an exchange with the boys, ensuring competition and opportunities for exposure in these initial stages, which are fundamental for personal and sporting growth and development.

CHILE (Macarena Miranda)

Macarena is a former professional player and currently an organiser of women's professional tournaments in Chile.

There are few episodes in my life that can be told without mentioning tennis. I played tennis as a junior and professional, and I was also captain and player for Chile in the now defunct Fed Cup, now known as the Billie Jean King Cup, even organising the event in 2020, being the first woman to do so in my country.

Prior to that I was director of ITF women's tournaments since 2008 and currently I have been directing the WTA tournament in Chile for the last two years. All that experience has allowed me to build an analysis that shows an advance compared to decades ago, this is undeniable if you contrast it with the time when I was playing. However, there is still a lot to be done, and the federations of each country in South America must take a leading role in the pending issues.

As a first task, development programmes should be implemented for our players under 10 years of age. Tennis should not compete with tennis, but with other disciplines that are ahead of us in this aspect and therefore have many facilities in this first stage, especially in the school stage. We must get closer to the schools.

It is also key to be able to generate quality competencies at national and regional level. We need to open up the channels of communication between the different regional associations. Interestingly, between the effects of the health crisis, during and after the pandemic, there was a fluid communication at regional level that I am very happy to see is still going on today.

The result of this are the transition tournaments between juniors and professionals, competitions that, for me, are key. In my opinion, it is very important to be in tune with each other to have a good calendar. Everything that has to do with the exchange of wild cards, generating a route according to the specific purposes of each team, I think it is essential, but without neglecting the macro, the development of women's tennis on the continent. This was done very little and today we can say the opposite. In my country, the Chilean Tennis Federation, the Ministry of Sport, and the National Institute of Sport (IND) have been very important for this.

I cannot fail to mention the South American Tennis Confederation, COSAT, their role in incorporating tennis players in their work commissions I think is a wise decision. The work of the ITF and its president David Haggerty through the Advantage All Programme is commendable. We can all contribute with what was good in our time and what was missing to achieve a circuit that we longed for at the time. I insist. What we see now is not enough, but it is close to what we should aspire to. We are on the right track.

COSTA RICA (Patricia Castro)

Patricia Castro is the Manager of the Costa Rican Tennis Federation. This section will present the project for the study and growth of women tennis players in Costa Rica.

The Costa Rican Tennis Federation (FCT) has had a Board of Directors that has complied with the principle of gender parity for more than 5 terms, 100% of the administrative staff are women and it is always the first option that the national women's teams are accompanied by a female captain or coach.

However, at a general level, there is no parity since there is a very significant difference in the number of tennis facilitators, which is maintained and is notorious in each course or training that is given, the female participation rate is 1 woman for every 10 men.

Also, in the game as such, at a competitive, social or recreational level, just by analysing the national rankings in all categories of the National Tournament Circuit, the disparity in participation and the desertion of women as they move up the playing level is tangible.

For this reason, the FCT has among its projects, to increase the participation of women in tennis in all areas, not only at the level of coaches.

The starting point is to know what we have, to know how many women play tennis, since the country's social clubs, academies, cantonal committees, schools and colleges have women's leagues or teams. Therefore, there is a large population of women playing tennis that is outside the database, and that is the information we are going to collect. We are also interested in having data on those who once played and then quit, and knowing this will feed into the strategies to be implemented, which will also be of great help in improving the current processes.

The database will include several details, including the level of play, whether she is a coach, social, competitive or recreational player, where she plays (training or lesson schedule) or used to play (reasons why she no longer plays), whether she has children, whether they play tennis, what her profession is and whether she is practising it (work schedule) and other questions that will help us build the work plan for the creation of programmes for the reincorporation and motivation of the female population in tennis.

The plan is to study this data and thus develop strategies for the development of programmes that are adapted to the needs and availability of the players.

For example, the women interviewed indicate that they are interested in teaching tennis, but for family or professional reasons they cannot be trained for 4 consecutive days in the Play Tennis methodology, so different options will be sought, such as taking the course at different times, or more accessible blocks of time.

We also aim to identify women interested in collaborating with the process from other areas, such as professionals in psychology, nutrition, physiotherapy and other professions related to sport, who want to join the teaching project, but at the specific level of tutors and adapt their speciality to the teaching of existing or new tennis facilitators.

At the competition level, knowing the reasons why they do not participate in national tournaments is the only way to see options for changes or improvements that will motivate them again or keep them in practice.

This survey will be carried out digitally and in person, in order to obtain as many responses as possible. Due to resource limitations, the support of student interns will be sought for the application and tabulation of the data, which will then be analysed internally at the FCT by the different commissions and by the Board of Directors as such.

It is expected that the process of creating the database and drafting development strategies will be completed by the end of 2023 and implementation can start in 2024.

PANAMA (Darlene Kahn)

Darlene Kahn is a former professional player, a professional executive, and a CAP level 2 coach. In this section she presents in the following lines the Panama Tennis Federation's proposal to grow women's participation in tennis.

Over the years, we have seen that there is less participation of girls in national and international tournaments. To remedy this situation, the Panamanian Tennis Federation (FPT) has come up with some strategies, which are described below.

The FPT has set a goal of increasing the number of women coaches and getting them ITF certified. On a personal level, I have had the opportunity to obtain ITF Level 1 and Level 2 certifications and there is a lot of interest in Panama, mostly from female players, who want to become coaches and get certified. Recently, five Panamanian coaches obtained the Level 2 CAP in a course held in Panama. This shows the potential we have and the professional quality of our coaches. This programme will continue to be encouraged, as the goal is to have 25% of coaches certified nationally by 2024. This initiative includes the training of coaches in all provinces, targeting former players, players, physical education

teachers, among others, who are interested in this sport and its teaching. The objective is to form a community of coaches and together, improve the quality of teaching throughout Panama and contribute to the development of tennis.

After being trained, very wisely, the Panamanian Tennis Federation asked me to be the Captain of the U14 Girls National Team that would participate in the World Junior Tennis Competition in the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo. We followed 2 weeks of arduous training, prior to the competition, which was enough to bring a very motivated team to the competition. The team consisted of three young girls, who despite being in their first year in this category, we managed to qualify for the quarter finals. This was a great achievement for Panama and a very positive experience for the girls, as this tournament marked the beginning of a new stage. It is achieved, that parents have more confidence for the girls to travel to tournaments, it is achieved, a team integration, and it is achieved, to have a captain that increases the confidence and motivation of the players. From now on, we hope to have a greater representation of girls in the tournaments to gain international experience and raise the competitive level of Panama.

In conclusion, by encouraging the participation of women in the formation, representation, and development of tennis in Panama, we join forces and close the gap that has been open for many years, in which the competitive level of girls was very low, as there was little representation in international tournaments. With these actions and with the right guidance and leadership in the junior and Billie Jean King Cup teams, we will see favourable changes for Panama in the very near future.

CONCLUSION

We hope that what has been shared by experts from the Colombian, Chilean, Costa Rican and Panamanian Tennis Federations in this article will serve as inspiration and guidance for other National Federations who are developing their "Advantage All" strategies to achieve equal participation of women and men in tennis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest and that they did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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