I had the opportunity to attend the 5th World Conference on Women and Sport in Los Angeles, California on February 16–19, 2012. The World Conference on Women and Sport is sponsored by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and was hosted by the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and the Southern California Committee for the Olympic Games (SCCOG). The IOC World Conference on Women and Sport takes place every four years to examine the progress made within the Olympic movement and identify ways to improve and increase the participation of women in the world of sport. Approximately 750 participants with representation from 140 countries attended sessions devoted to leadership views on women in the world of sport, partnerships for progress, the business of sport, sustainable responsibility, Title IX, empowering women and girls through education, and growing up in a gender-balanced society. Participants included members of the media, educators, researchers, athletes, coaches, administrators, and representatives from National Olympic Committees, International and National Sport Federations, global companies, and the United Nations system. The theme for the 5th World Conference was “Together Stronger: The Future of Sport.”

I am faculty in the Department of Health and Kinesiology at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. My research focuses on the social psychological experiences of women and girls in sport and their barriers to involvement. It is from this perspective that I write this conference review. Due to the number of concurrent sessions, I will highlight only those that I attended. A complete listing of presentations and presenters can be found at the conference website (www.womenandsport2012.com).

Thursday’s Opening Ceremony began in the evening at the Nokia Center and started with video footage from the Olympic Games. As this was the first set of images presented, it was surprising that all of the images appeared to be of male Olympians, a disturbing oversight for attendance at a conference celebrating and
encouraging women’s involvement in sport. As Christine Brennan, USA Today columnist and conference presenter, stated in her post-conference column,

When an opening video flickered before [conference attendees]…it was an IOC highlight reel of Olympic performances, but something was wrong with it. It included footage of one great male athlete after another. There were almost no women in it. Out of 34 athletes who appeared in that film, there were the recognizable images of just four women, and they went by so quickly that many conference attendees didn’t think there were any at all (Brennan, 2012).

As Brennan accurately suggested,

When you watch footage like that, as I did as a speaker at the conference, you have to give the IOC credit for honesty: It didn’t even try to fake its concern for the achievements of women in sport. Or perhaps it is simply cluelessness; the IOC doesn’t know, or perhaps doesn’t care, about how awful that opening video looked (Brennan, 2012).

Welcome and opening remarks were made by Larry Probst, USOC President, Anita DeFrantz, IOC Women and Sport Commission Chair, Antonio Villaraigosa, Mayor of Los Angeles, and Jacques Rogge, IOC President. The 2012 Women and Sport Awards were then presented, with India’s Manisha Malhotra winning the World Trophy for her commitment to helping disadvantaged girls progress through sport. The five continental winners included Peninnah Aligawesa Kabenge (Africa-Uganda), the Bradesco Sports and Education Programme and Centre (Americas-Brazil), Zaiton Othman (Asia-Malaysia), Aikaterini Nafplioti-Panagopoulos (Europe-Greece), and Roseline Blake (Oceania-Cook Islands). Each recipient was recognized for her role in getting more women and girls involved in sport as athletes, administrators, leaders and members of the media (for more information on each recipient, go to http://www.olympic.org/Documents/Olympism_in_action/Women_and_sport/IOC_FOCUS_JAN%202012%20EN.pdf).

The opening ceremony concluded with a brief panel discussion with Michelle Kwan, Billie Jean King, Julie Foudy, and Manisha Malhotra. Led by Kwan, the panelists were asked why they do advocacy work for women in sport. The theme of their responses focused on “making a difference,” stressing that in order to see sustainable change we must empower women. All of the panelists spoke passionately about the importance of mentorship and the need for women to help other women. Julie Foudy spoke specifically about the mentorship Billie Jean King has provided her throughout her career. Billie Jean King suggested that men and women must work together to achieve more inclusion and equality across the board, “I’ve had men in my life who’ve mentored me, who’ve made a difference.” Furthermore, King suggested that it is “the men who have the true power” and are “the ones who are truly going to make change…until we get women in positions of power.”

The representation of women in positions of leadership within sport was a primary theme of the 2012 conference. As IOC President, Jacques Rogge stated, “We need more women leaders throughout the Olympic Movement, not only to prove our commitment to gender equality, but to take advantage of their brains, their energy and their creativity.” Almost all of the presenters discussed the need for more women in decision-making positions in the world of sport. Lord Sebastian Coe, Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the 2012 Olympic Games, discussed the involvement of women in leadership positions in the preparations for the 2012 Games. Coe, who made it his edict to have women represent half of the London Organizing Committee employees, was especially proud to report the current figures for women in head positions for London 2012: human resources 60%, finance 59%, legal 54%, commercial 58%, sport and venue 50%, and volunteers 54%. Coe stressed that such equality is “essential for proper governance of conduct of an organization.” Despite the progress, however, Coe stressed the need for continued improvement throughout all levels of sport, especially in the recruitment and mentoring of future female leaders. Lakshmi Puri, Executive Director of United Nations Women, also noted the importance of recognizing the “layers of discrimination,” and the need to acknowledge differences in women across class, race, ethnicity, nationality, geographic location and ability status. She emphasized the need to see “different women working in different [leadership] capacities” in sport.