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By Dawn Reiss

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For women in sports, 2015 has been a good year.

“If you look back at the year, from a sports perspective, it was about the Women’s World Cup. It was about Serena Williams. It was about Jessica Mendoza. It was about Jen Welter,” says Rachel Epstein, espnW’s director of business operations and strategy. “It was about real dominance by women.”

But women’s sports and women in sports still have a long way to go, one of the primary topics of the [espnW: Women + Sports Summit](#), held Oct. 12-14 at [St. Regis Monarch Beach](#) in Dana Point, California. Conceived in 2009 as a one-time conference, the summit continues to be a forum to have frank conversations around women in the workplace. “It quickly became something we knew was important to do every year,” says Epstein. “It’s truly become a cornerstone of the ESPN business.”

This year’s event was a place to celebrate accomplishments like the Women’s World Cup, Serena Williams’ domination and TV announcer Jessica Mendoza breaking new ground. Yet the conversation served as a reminder that women, specifically in the sports business, are still trying to break glass ceilings. We talked to Epstein, a former tennis star at Indiana University, and Amy Stanton, founder and CEO of Stanton & Company, a California-based marketing and public relations agency that promotes the conference.

Don’t get overwhelmed. Just focus on improving one thing.

The past three espnW: Women + Sports Summits have focused on creating an action plan to help women achieve their goals. “It’s what we call ‘Do one thing,’” Epstein says. “It’s the idea that everybody in various capacities can do one thing to help create opportunities and change for women in sports.”

Women need to support other women, especially in meetings.

Cynthia Hogan, the NFL’s top lobbyist as the league’s senior vice president of public policy and government affairs, recalled that as deputy assistant to the president and counsel to the vice president of the United States there were instances when ideas she and other women presented would only gain traction when a man echoed it. To combat the pattern, the women came up with a plan. “Every time a woman would bring up an idea, another woman would say, ‘That’s such a great idea,’ and make sure their voices were getting heard,” says Stanton.

Celebrate trailblazing women.

Some people may be tired of using a gender qualifier when someone like Mendoza becomes the first woman to do play-by-play for a Major League Baseball playoff game, but it should be celebrated. “She broke that barrier,” Epstein says. “She’s blazing the trail. More power to her and to all of us.” Eventually Epstein hopes women will lead in so many categories and “the equity will be so equal” that it won’t be necessary. Until then, she says, “Let’s call it out and celebrate it.”

Find solutions, not problems.

“Any time we’re having the ‘life isn’t fair’ conversation, I have to put an end to it because frankly is counterproductive,” says Stanton, who represents a variety of [female athletes](#) including surfer Claire Bevilacqua; Olympic gold medalist sprinter Carmelita Jeter; Olympic snowboarder Gretchen Bleiler; professional hockey player and the first female skater to practice with an NHL team, Hilary Knight; and the first woman to free climb El Capitan, Steph Davis. Instead ask: What are some of the solutions? What are some of the things we haven’t tried?

“It makes a huge statement when a huge brand is also riding behind women’s sports.”

Corporations need and should continue to use more positive messaging to target women.

One example is the #LikeAGirl campaign for Always feminine products, which played off stereotypes of how people perceive “acting like a girl” versus what it is in reality. “It makes a huge statement when a huge brand is also riding behind women’s sports,”

Stanton says. “Even if it’s in an unconventional way. I think those are the signs of progress.” Stanton says that’s a reason big corporations like Wal-Mart and Northwestern Mutual joined the conference as sponsors this year was to hone in on a growing and captive audience they are trying to target.

Women in leadership roles need to bring in other women.

Why do the likes of soccer legend and Connect Sports Marketplace speaker Abby Wambach think we need more women in positions of power? “I think there’s a domino effect in a good way,” Epstein says. “It’s about one woman at a time ensuring that the women breaking through that glass ceiling are bringing other women with them. That’s critical.”

Don’t create your own glass ceiling.

Keynote Michele Roberts, executive director of the National Basketball Players Association and the first woman to head a major professional sports union, described how she would walk into all-male, closed-door meetings while working as a trial lawyer earlier in her career. “Some women were frustrated that she hadn’t asked permission and upset that she was doing that,” says Stanton, adding, “It was such a good example of how women can create their own boundaries without even realizing it.”

Value yourself and negotiate for higher pay.

To be a leader in the workplace and to learn how to negotiate for higher pay, Roberts told the audience to remember this mantra: “I value myself. I don’t allow you to value me.” That’s important, says Epstein. “It’s about one woman at a time not accepting less,” Epstein says. “It’s about being strong and doing exactly what your male counterpart would do.”