

## Broader Women's Participation in the Olympic Games

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Even the briefest historical survey will furnish sufficient proof that women have always been obliged to fight for what they should never have been deprived from in the first place — human rights. It is almost incredible that even today, when human thought has shown flights of unprecedented advance, women should still find occasion to run against unjustified backwardness. Women are fighting for equality, on the one side, and if equality happens to exist, they are fighting against the possibilities of its being jeopardized, on the other. We have in mind the second case, as witnessed in the field of sports. We all know that the Olympic Movement has done more than anything else for the promotion of sports at international level, and that without the Olympic Games women's rights in the field of sports would hardly have found international recognition. And yet, irrespective of the fact that the number of men's sports is greater, the corresponding proportion between men and women indulging in physical exercise general speaking, and taking part at Olympic Games in particular strongly tips the balance in favour of the men.

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Why are women hindered in their sporting development? There are two main arguments: intensive participation in sports is claimed to have an unfavourable effect upon the woman's health, and second — to outward coarseness and privation of their charm and feminine grace.

The first argument has been on many occasions sharply refuted by a number of physiologists. But what is the opinion of the ordinary observer, who may not be versed in the intricate points of physiological sciences? 'Sound mind in a sound body' is a popular device. Is it meant to apply to men only? Sports are an important instrument

through which a balanced personality can be attained, and this is inevitably true of either sex. What is more, women today in many instances have greater burdens to bear than men. In addition to the care of their home and family, maternity, etc., women are taking an increasing part in all professional activities characteristic of our modern times. In order to be able to cope with the great variety of obligations, women have to keep in good health, to retain their full working capacities and have opportunities for rest and for the recuperation of their forces. Sports can be most useful in this respect. The Olympic Games have furnished ample proof of what we have just said.

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Everyone who has had the great privilege of attending the Games has been cheered by the bubbling health and vitality of the top athletes. What is the background of these sunny personalities? Noble ambition, purposefulness, will and resolution, and a hygienic life — all qualities which are so indispensable to life.

I remember Shirley Strickland of Australia, who won two gold medals at the Games in Melbourne.

On the stand of honour, an object of admiration of the huge crowd. Shirley's eyes darted among the thousands of enthusiastic spectators and tried to find her two little children, who after the decoration dashed into her arms. Strong and slim, a fighter and winner in the field of sports, a loving mother and respected by her fellow workers — this was the true picture of the Olympic champion.

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Following the participation of women in Olympic sports we come upon interesting facts which eloquently refute the view that

sports can be harmful to the health of women. In his book *Meet the Olympians* D. Mishev mentions numerous Olympic champions in different sports, who have been mothers of many children. Shall we mention D. Erwin (diving) and Ma Mitchel (fencing) of the U.S.A., with four children each. Athletes Fanny Blankers — Koen (Holland) and Dorothy Tyler (Great Britain), Ellen Müller-Priss (Austria) who have all two children each. All these sportswomen have not only won fame, for their Olympic gold medals and world records, but also by their long Olympic career — covering periods of 24, 20 and 16 years of age. Shall we also mention the unrivalled Soviet women gymnasts, which have taken part at the Games in Helsinki, Melbourne and Home. At Helsinki half of these slim and graceful women were mothers : Urbanovich, Danilova Dougeli, Mouratova, etc.

Their example has inspired scores of thousands of young girls, women and mothers, particularly in countries where sports now enjoy social support. The Spartakiada national festivals of physical culture which have become a tradition in countries like the U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, are a splendid demonstration of the usefulness of sports for women and a moving panorama of cheer and vitality, grace, skill and physical strength — a sure gage for the proper development of our coming generations.

Will all these facts be able to rouse certain present-day ancestral minds out of their deep slumber ?

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As regards the second question — the accusation that sports tend to roughen femininity — can it be that people who hold such views are short-sighted or that they have not given themselves the trouble of watching athletic events involving the participation of women. No one with an aesthetic feeling can fail to be impressed by the slim and graceful sports-woman of today, with perhaps certain exceptions in the puts and throws. Let us mention however that their robustness is not attained by hard training, but that it is the athlete's outstanding initial physical power which acts as the determining factor in the choice of these events.

Life has changed to such a degree that the delicate dolls leading a vain existence, aiming only to charm and seduce, have fortunately run out of fashion. But, in spite of this, sport has still failed to take its due part in the everyday life of the modern woman. There are huge territories on the terrestrial globe where women cannot even think of indulging in sports. This is particularly true of Africa and part of Asia. Wherever the eyes of women are veiled bloomers and jerseys, and bodies exposed to the sun, air and outsiders' eyes, are all taboo.

An inspiring and stimulating example is necessary to break the barriers of backwardness and reveal the enlightened sense

of the old proverb of *Sound mind in a sound body*. But we believe that such a stimulus does exist. The Olympic Games are imbued with such spirit and beauty, that they can draw in their wake the noble ambitions of world youth. They are a motive force, and in the same time a mirror reflecting the victorious march of sports.

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The International Olympic Committee decision, taken at the Session in Athens, to increase women's participation in the Olympics by the addition of new events is highly commendable. It expresses the sense of responsibility on the part of the International Olympic Committee regarding the development of sports among women. This is a definite step forward, when one takes into account the fact that the women's participation in the Olympic Games has not kept pace with the development of sports in general. In 1900, during the second Olympic Games, only a few women disputed tennis honours. By 1908 their participation was reduced to only a few archers. Later both sports were dropped from the Olympic programme. Women's swimming events were only included in 1912 at the Games in Stockholm ; fencing — in 1924 ; athletics and gymnastics — in 1928. Canoeing was added in 1948 and the equestrian dressage in 1952. But women have enthusiastically taken up other sports, which, for one or another reason, still do not figure on the Olympic programme in spite of the fact that they are fully suited to the women's physique and beneficial to health. Let us hope that this gap too may be bridged in the nearest future.

If, in many parts of the world, women still have to suffer different social prejudices and backward conceptions, may they find in sports this rightful freedom, which is the hole-mark of the Olympic Movement !