

Women in Society and their participation in sport (I) *

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Introduction

"Female" and "male" are biological categories "Femininity" and "masculinity" are social definitions. Appropriate conceptions of ideal masculine and feminine behaviour and emotions are taught in every culture very early in life so individuals will "fit" into their society. In any given society, at any point in time, these learned, sex-typed role definitions and expectations result in differing self-images for men and women. General agreement exists within and among societies with regard to what men and women are supposed to be like. Expected behaviours are based on the assumption that what is masculine is not feminine and what is feminine is not masculine.

One's biological sex has been the primary criterion for sex-role identity, traditionally conceptualised as masculine and feminine. Genetic, hormonal, and anatomical differences between men and women exist; however, these differences are irrelevant for most practical, and for all humanistic purposes. The idea that biology is destiny is unappealing to most, yet all societies have accorded significance to biological gender which has exceeded that which is warranted by physiological differences between males and females. Expectations regarding social and family responsibilities, behaviour, legal rights and obligations, politics, government, dress, sport, decision-making, and many other social factors, have been differentiated for males and females.

Many theorists, exploring the psychology of women, feel that the real explanation of the status of the female is not something implicit in the nature of the female, but rather a manifestation of the male ego. Men have traditionally defined the concept of femininity and have emphasised the importance of the feminine image. Since competitive sport is synonymous with masculinity, it cannot be feminine. In many situations the natural desire and motivation of the female for competitive sport experience may be totally stifled, either directly or indirectly, by male disapproval. From an early age most females are taught to direct their behaviours toward "pleasing" the male.

In today's cultures the female is neither expected nor required to develop athletic abilities ; she is expected only to be physically attractive. She is socialised to use her body to attract and please the male while the male learns to use his body to please himself, to develop social and behavioural skills, and to gain recognitions for his abilities. The male discovers early in life that athletic accomplishments open doors to his masculine identity and image. For him, physical prowess and sport's skills provide almost universal social acceptance, while the female will find that certain groups consider her socially unacceptable if she displays physical prowess and skill in sports. How did this come to be ?

Historical Overview

The perceptions of masculinity and femininity go back for centuries. Physical contests have been primarily for males in nearly all cultures, despite the existence in mythology of female hunting, fertility, and athletic goddesses, and speculations about female-dominated socie-

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ties. In numerous societies male economic and warfaring activities evolved into sports, but female activities did not.

Beyond the relationship of men's work to sport, sports have been associated with male physical energy. According to Twin (1979), the classical world's conviction that vitality was exclusively masculine is found in Aristotle's theory of human conception. The foetus was a mixture of semen and menstrual liquid with semen being purified blood acting as the active, critical "germinating fluid". The word semen means seed and reflects this view, as does the adjective seminal which means germinative or original.

With Aristotle's perspective of the male biologically monopolising vitality, excluding females from the original Greek Olympic Games was not unexpected. Women were not allowed to watch or to participate in the Games or in the literature and musical competitions which formed a religious festival in celebration of Zeus.

The winners of the original Greek Games became religious and political heroes and were honoured with civil privileges and titles. In Athens they were supported for life at the public's expense. Further, they were frequently promised a "beautiful and good woman" as a reward for winning.

The women of the Greek city-state Sparta, served as the only partial exception to the classical society's belief in male physical energy. From girlhood they were trained in running, wrestling, jumping, and discus and javelin throwing. Their activities were designed to develop health and emotional stamina thought necessary to bear sons who would become great warriors and leaders of the state. There is no indication as to whether or not the Spartan female winners were awarded a "beautiful and good man".

With the exception of the Spartan women, most Grecian women were denied entrance to any physical activities other than domestic tasks. The exclusion of women from sports has continued for thousands of years, while males have participated in some type of sport throughout all societies. As late as the Victorian era, many doctors believed that athletics and sport could damage a woman's health-the greatest concern was that her reproductive organs would be injured. The British government of that time issued an official report which stated "games" for girls would lead to flat-chestedness and impair their childbearing abilities. It took a brave woman to dare to play croquet during this period of history, let alone participate in any vigorous, active sport.

The belief in feminine physical frailty was emphasised during the nineteenth century in America as well as in Europe. In the mid-1800's the "ideal" feminine role-model was one whose strengths were moral and emotional, with no attention devoted to physical development. Both popular and scientific views supported the notion of inactivity as being natural and desirable for the female. Physicians thought that too much exertion would create a nervous response reflected in everything from hysteria to dyspepsia. It was assumed that the uterus was connected to the nervous system and that over-exertion might create problems with the reproductive system, thus affecting the health of the offspring. Females were to conserve the little energy they had ; especially during and after pregnancy. By 1850 these attitudes had, in effect, produced a society of women in ill health, whose femininity was validated by invalidism.

Middle-class women were the greatest victims of the ill health cult. Women of the lower-class who, by circumstance, had to perform physical labours were physically active. Upper-class women, who had the latitude of greater choice of pursuits, were also involved in some physical activity and sport. However, the general attitude was that females were weak, and therefore physical exertion was detrimental to their health and well-being. As a result, sports were believed to be irrelevant to a girl's future role. Ball playing was encouraged among boys because it tested speed, strength, skill, and agility. It was adamantly discouraged among girls who were thought to need none of these skills. Girls might be permitted to go "bathing" on occasion or to toss a ball around. Horseback riding was transportation and was considered appropriate if she rode side-saddle. Rolling hoops and ice skating were also allowed ; however, female ice skaters were frequently advised to "take fast hold of the coattails of their gentleman partner". If she had a firm grip and could hang on, she could enjoy all the pleasure of exercise without incurring any of the fatigue !

As indicated, the ideal female role-model represented a standard of delicacy. Only a minority of women could follow this model ; those who had to do back-breaking toil had to trade off their femininity. While being anatomically female, bearing children, and assuming the domestic responsibilities of the traditional female role, working women were still not considered "feminine". And, in lacking femininity, they were not really women

because genuine women were physically weak! Thus, the working woman who used her body and developed strength and stamina to do the physical labour she had to do, did so at the price of her feminine identity. This attitude prevented any attempt to strengthen the physical well-being of females until the late 1800's.

To understand the changing attitude of women's involvement in sport during the late 1800's, one has to appreciate other changes that were occurring in society. Industrialisation transformed many societies and encouraged the development of organised leisure and sports. Work and play became separate and compartmentalised as people worked at one place and played at another. As industrialisation increased in complexity, so did the structure of games and sports. As changes in work patterns occurred, sports were considered increasingly more important for the male. Widespread concern about the decline of virility associated with less manual effort and working indoors, generated more interest in sports involvement to counter these effects. Because urban jobs separated men from their families, along with required schooling, which was dominated by female teachers, organisations devoted to activities and sports for boys only, were developed.

Traditionally, societies have believed that sports revitalise "masculinity" and masculine instincts, loosely referred to as virility. Priests, educators, writers, reformers, and politicians endorsed sports involvement as a solution to social problems attributed to male energy, aggression, and other assumed needs. It was believed that lower-class males who did not have energy outlets became involved in crime and fornication. Males of the upper-class who had too little energy were thought to become effeminate and homosexual. To accommodate these concerns and beliefs, and to preserve, yet refine the "animal nature" of the male, numerous summer camps, religious and community groups, and school educational systems developed sports programmes for boys.

The end result of these attitudes and beliefs, without scientific evidence, established the long-term assumption that sports were an expression of male sexuality and virility. Sports became the prerogative of the male ; they were essential to his development both physically and behaviourally.

Sports fields were laboratories for him to acquire the qualities believed to be essential to success : hard work, competitiveness, diligence, perseverance, aggression, ambition,

humility, and respect for authority. The physical and behavioural demands of organised sport reinforced characteristics that were associated with masculinity. At the same time, these traits were the antithesis of what the female was expected to emulate. As a result, sports continued to be a masculine domain which females were not allowed to enter without paying a price-that price being her "femininity".

The invention of the bicycle in the 1870's probably did as much to "free" women from their sedentary bondage as any one product of industrialisation. Women's fashions changed drastically ; skirts were shortened, the slit skirt appeared, and bloomers were back. However, the bicycle created much controversy. The Boston Women's League warned that over 30 % of all "fallen" women had at some time been bicycle riders. They resolved :



"Whereas bicycling by young women has helped to swell the ranks of reckless girls who finally drift into the standing army of outcast women of the US, more than any other medium... therefore, be it resolved that the Women's Rescue League petitions all true women and clergymen to aid in denouncing the present bicycle craze by women as indecent and vulgar."
The Literary Digest, 1896

Despite the association of "fallen women" with bicycle riding, the change in fashion paved the way for freer movement and more activity. Corsets, petticoats, gloves, hats, and bathing suits, that were sure to pull one under if they got wet, all went by the way as women discovered they could enjoy movement and participation without the restriction of too much fabric,

Women's increasing participation in sports in the late 1800's was not a result of the belief that sports would help her develop desirable characteristics. In fact, hard work, diligence, and perseverance were considered unfeminine: so were the women who displayed them! Factors that did influence continued development and participation were such things as the rise of the industrial leisure class, higher education for women, changing religious attitudes, etc. The middle-class women became involved and the interest soon spread to the other classes. Tennis and golf joined the fox hunts as appropriate pursuits. Institutions of higher education for women countered the charge that intellectual pursuits were physically harmful to women, especially to their reproductive organs, by advocating mild physical activity as a way of keeping the female body healthy. By the early 1900's studies in America showed that college women were healthier than those who were not in college, and attributed this to the regular exercise programmes required of college women.

The sight of women playing tennis, golf, cycling, rowing, exercising, playing basketball and field hockey, prior to World War I, hailed a new era of the tomboy and the end of the sickly, corseted, restricted women of the Victorian era. Special basketball rules were devised to minimise exertion and roughness, and tennis tournaments were reduced from three to five sets to two or three sets for women. Women played field hockey in long-sleeved, ankle-length dresses, minus their corsets, which was considered a reform. Many "masculine" sports were considered impossible to modify, thus sports such as football, boxing, baseball, most of track and field, and soccer were deemed inappropriate and unfeminine. Competition was discouraged in the "feminised" sports because the essential elements of competition such as achievement, ambition, effort, and exertion were considered unfeminine. Females were only to play for fun, social interaction, and health.

World War I removed many more restraints and paved the way for the female's twentieth century involvement in physical activity and sport. However, her body was still considered a means to a social end, that of beauty and health for motherhood, rather than something to be trained in itself for other accomplishments and satisfactions. However, for those women who had discovered the joys and pleasures of being physically active and healthy, there was no curtailment. They continued in their pursuits and served as role-models for other young women and girls to follow. Women became more than athletic, they became athletes. Helen Wills, the top US female tennis player between 1923 and 1935, was praised for setting an example of "*wonderful womanhood that uses sports to enhance its womanly charm instead of to affect an artificial masculinity*". (Literary Digest, 1926).

There were objections to female involvement in sports, and those who objected contended that organised, competitive sports for women pushed them physically and emotionally beyond their limits. Nervous instability, premature ossification, narrow pelvis, immature vaginas, difficult deliveries, heart strain, and spinsterhood were thought to befall women who made a serious commitment to competitive sport. Educators and civic leaders were up in arms over the issue of women's participation in the Olympic Games; disapproval was nearly unanimous. In 1928 a request was made to suspend the newly added female track and field competition, and if possible eliminate women's participation in the Olympic Games altogether. Their rationale was that Pierre de Coubertin had not wanted females included; since the Olympic Games was a male organisation, they should not conduct sports for women.

The notions that women are physically more delicate and behaviourally less toughminded, competitive, aggressive, etc, have prohibited them from participating in sports throughout history. Even today the world is faced with the strange anomaly of thousands of women running marathons, yet the all-male International Olympic Committee refuses to sanction any race longer than the 1500 metre for women.

(To be continued)

