



Women in the Olympic Movement

by Juan Antonio Samaranch

Women's place in society is a subject of constant debate. Indeed, owing to the broad range of opinions and traditions, even adopting a platform for collective action at the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, in 1995, was difficult.

Sport practised at competition level or for pleasure has become a powerful social force, influencing the structure of our society considerably. Although they did not partake in the first modern Olympic Games in 1896 in Athens, women have nonetheless participated in all subsequent editions since 1900, in a growing number of sports, disciplines and events. Thus, a record number of 3,626 women² or almost 40% of the total number of athletes, entered the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, the Centennial Games, in Atlanta in 1996, competing in 21 sports and 108 events, 11 of them mixed. Moreover, the IOC has decided that any new sport that wishes to be included in the Olympic programme must also comprise women's events.

Much remains to be done, however. The low level of participation by women in sport is fundamentally linked to the social difficulties which they face and the predominating cultural traditions in certain communities.

The extent of women's participation in the administration of sports organizations is hardly better. Within the Olympic Movement leadership as well, the percentage of women is still too small. In 1994, at the Centennial Olympic Congress, Congress of Unity, this subject was debated and it

was recommended that special efforts be made to increase women's role within decision-making bodies. We have therefore called on the components of the Olympic family to make every effort to fill 10% of the posts in their legislative and executive bodies with women by the year 2000, and 20% by 2005.

The IOC has, for its part, coopted women members, and will soon reach the 10% threshold. A Women and Sport working group, chaired by IOC Executive Board member Anita DeFrantz, has been set up to further develop the role of women in contemporary sport. A section in charge of women's advancement has been created within the IOC secretariat. The first world conference on women and sport was held in Lausanne in October 1996, offering the Olympic family an opportunity to reflect together on the ways and means of ensuring greater integration and participation by women in our Movement. A programme of seminars has also been set up, and, parallel to this, the NOCs are being encouraged to assure that there is an equitable balance of men and women enrolled in the technical courses financed by Olympic Solidarity. It is essential that we act in advance, for we know our limits and what we are capable of. Our approach must not be characterized by words, but by concrete actions. The Olympic Movement is determined to make its contribution so that the 21st century marks the beginning of a new era for women in world sport.