

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT

### IOC POLICY AND STRATEGIES

**H**istory shows that the evolution of women's participation in the Olympic Movement has been increasing slowly and progressively over the years, after their first participation in the Games of the II Olympiad in 1900. This evolution has taken place in a social, political and cultural context which was not always favourable, but where women's issues started to be addressed and led to major actions and regulations which recognized and defended women's rights at all levels of society. Reference texts such as the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, the Beijing declaration and platform for action, the European Sports Charter, and the Brighton declaration have been particularly instrumental in raising awareness about these issues and supporting actions throughout the world. The Olympic Movement and the sports community at large followed this evolution and progressively undertook various initiatives to allow broader participation by women in sport and in its administrative structures, although to a lesser extent. As leader of the Olympic Movement, whose first objective is to promote Olympism and develop sport world-wide, the International Olympic Committee has played a complementary role in starting a positive trend to enhance women's

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participation in sport, especially in the last 20 years.

We can witness that a major shift in the history of women's participation in the Olympic Movement has taken place since the 1970-80s. Since this period, we have witnessed an increasing awareness of the contribution of sport to well-being, and in particular to women's well-being. An increasing number of women's sports associations and clubs were

established, mostly in the developed countries but also in developing ones. The IOC, National Olympic Committees (NOCs), International and National Federations and other sports organizations began to introduce initiatives to both enable more women to practise whatever sports they wished and to train them as sports coaches and administrators. At the Olympic Games level, the Olympic women's programme was subject to consistent development, with more sports and disciplines being introduced. Similarly, an increasing number of women athletes were accredited to the Games and gained international recognition. For its part, the IOC has for some years been addressing the issue of women in sports in several ways. Its policy centres on three basic objectives.

#### Promoting women's sport at the Olympic Games

The women's programme at the Olympic Games was enlarged, in cooperation with the respective International Sports Federations (IFs) and the Organizing Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs). This development was further reinforced by the IOC's decision that all sports seeking inclusion in the programme must include women's events. As a result, women competed in about 40%



Start of the women's 800 m in Amsterdam in 1928.



*Women's taekwondo,  
an Olympic sport in Sydney*

of all events at the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, the Centennial Games, in Atlanta in 1996. For the first time, women also accounted for about 34% of the total number of athletes who took part in the Games.

Two years later, the XVIII Olympic Winter Games in Nagano in February 1998 set a record for women's participation with 36,2%.

Similarly, as we celebrate the 100 years of women's participation in the Olympic Games, the programme of the Games of the XXVII Olympiad in Sydney in 2000 will include four new sports and 24 new events for women. Women will compete in 25 sports and 132 events (44% of the total events - including mixed). For the first time, women will also compete in the same number of team sports as men and will account for 38% of the total number of athletes (+ 4% compared to 1996). These changes in the programme are a major step forward, especially considering that the total number of ath-

letes has been decreased from 10,700 to 10,382.

However, there is still room for important progress in the world of women's sport. In many countries, economic difficulties, not to mention social barriers and cultural traditions, still place sport far behind other priorities. Thus the IOC initiatives through the Olympic Solidarity assistance programmes for the benefit of all NOCs, of which an increasing number of women are the beneficiaries, support the organization of technical sports courses, training, improvement, specialization or retraining sessions for athletes, coaches and administrators, procurement of sports equipment, and the organization of local competitions. At the Olympic Movement level, they are often an important factor in the physical and technical preparation of sportswomen.

### **Women leaders in sport**

The IOC policy objectives do not only focus on sports practice, they are also highly concerned by women's involvement in the decision-making structures of sports organizations. Although there has been progress in their participation in physical activities and in the Olympic Games, the percentage of women leaders and administrators in the IOC, IFs or NOCs is still very low.

It was in this framework that the IOC resolved that the NOCs and IFs should reserve at least 10% of all positions in their decision-making structures for women by the end of 2000, and at least 20% by the end of 2005. The IOC is aware of the fact that such a goal can only be reached progressively and that successive stages must be set to achieve this. However, about 150 NOCs (out of the 199 recognized) have already responded positively and appointed women in their leadership structures. About 40% of the IFs have also

started to work to this end. But more needs to be done to ensure that all sports organizations adopt a coherent and gender-inclusive policy which concretely enables both women and men to fully exercise their duties in the organization, not merely as a token position. For its part, the IOC has achieved some positive results in the field of women's leadership. In 1981, under the impulse of President Samaranch, women were coopted as IOC members for the first time. To date, 14 women have joined the IOC (one is now an honorary member), which currently has 113 active members. Similarly, IOC Commissions and Working groups have included more women than before, enabling their direct contribution to all issues and policies which the IOC is engaged in. Moreover, for the first time in the history of the Olympic Movement, a woman, Anita DeFrantz, became IOC Vice-President in 1997.

### **Advocating women's increased participation in sport**

The IOC has also undertaken more general action in the field of advocacy, with the aim of raising awareness of the need to address and find suitable solutions to women's issues in sport. Among other things, the IOC Centennial Olympic Congress, Congress of Unity, held in Paris in 1994, played an important part in addressing the role of women in the Olympic Movement. As a result of this Congress, key recommendations were adopted to enhance their participation at all levels and to ensure that, on the basis of the principle of equality of opportunities between men and women, they could play a more significant role in the Olympic Movement. All the members of the Olympic family were strongly encouraged to undertake technical and advocacy programmes to support this policy.



The outcomes of this Congress also led to the inclusion in the Olympic Charter of an explicit reference to the need to promote women's advancement in sport at all levels. Rule 2, paragraph 5 stipulates that : *"(...)the IOC strongly encourages, by appropriate means, the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures, particularly in the executive bodies of national and international sports organizations with a view to the strict application of the principle of equality between men and women"*.

A Women and Sport Working Group was also established in 1995 by the IOC President to advise the Executive Board on suitable policies to be implemented in this field. A section for the Advancement of Women was also created within the IOC Department of International Cooperation.

The IOC argues for a gender-inclusive approach at all major meetings which involve the Olympic Movement, and through the media. A page on the IOC web site on Women in the Olympic Movement was created to provide online information. The IOC also regularly includes articles about these issues in the *Olympic Review*. Furthermore, as of the year 2000, the IOC will award annually six IOC Women & Sport Trophies (one for each continent, and one at world level) to a woman, a man or an institution that have made an outstanding contribution in advancing the status of women in sport, and have encouraged and strengthened the participation of women and girls on the field of play, in coaching and in administration and leadership world-wide.

In addition to this, since 1996 the IOC has established a programme of informative regional seminars for women administrators, coaches, technical officials, and journalists in the national and international sports movement. Through these seminars, the IOC strives primarily to achieve four main objectives:

- To raise levels of awareness within the Olympic Movement, and the NOCs in particular, about the different aspects and problems connected with women's participation 'in sport at all levels;

- To provide women with up-to-date information on the promotion of women in sport using relevant documents adopted at regional and international level (rules, regulations, agreements, decisions, etc.), texts of speeches, research work and exchanges of experiences;

- To enable women involved in the sports movement to establish or further develop a support network addressing these issues and encourage them to expand it;

- To encourage these women to identify and implement a key action and/or strategy plan for each NOC/country in order to promote increased participation by women in sport in their country.

Since the beginning of this programme, women affiliated to the NOCs of the five continents have benefited from these seminars.

The IOC also organizes quadrennial World Conferences on Women in Sport which aim to assess the progress made on this issue especially within the Olympic Movement, and to outline priority actions for improving the situation. At the first Conference in Lausanne in 1996, the participants adopted a list of recommendations aimed at promoting women's role in the Olympic Movement and in the sports world in general, and at ensuring better opportunities for them. Most of these recommendations have already been taken into account by the IOC's policy on women's advancement.

The second IOC World Conference, being held on 6th to 8th March 2000 in Paris (France), will provide a renewed opportunity to analyse the accomplishments of four years of work and future challenges for

women in the Olympic Movement and sport in general through socio-logical, historical, cultural, health, and political approaches.

### Conclusion

In the centennial year of women's participation in the Olympic Games we can say that women's involvement in sport is progressing. The speed of the process which has been started does of course vary, but it is important that it is actually under way more or less everywhere. Following the recommendations of the 1996 Lausanne Conference and those formulated by the IOC Working Group, concrete progress has been achieved in many areas of the Olympic Movement:

- a gender-inclusive approach has been adopted for policies, programmes and procedures at the IOC level as well as by several NOCs and IFs;

- progress is being made regarding the 10% goal within NOCs and IFs;

- many NOCs have established Women and Sport Commissions within their structures to follow-up related matters at national level;

- the Olympic programme of the Olympic Games is almost equitable;

- Olympic Solidarity has been assisting more women in their technical training through its regular programmes, and has also established a special programme to assist NOCs in implementing activities promoting women's participation in the sports movement and encouraging research on this;

- gender verification tests have been suspended (as of the Games in Sydney);

- and international cooperation on these issues among the Olympic Movement and with other partners from governmental and non-governmental organizations has increased. Closer links and joint projects between



*Future table tennis coaches on a course in Khartoum (Sudan).*

institutions in charge of women's affairs and sports organizations at national and international level are being established, with numerous mutual benefits arising from this cooperation.

However, more needs to be done urgently to reach a situation of equal opportunities for women and men. Many obstacles still have to be overcome.

We need to strengthen our joint work with NOCs and IFs to ensure that women involved in sport are not marginalized but fully integrated and recognized in sports organizations for their abilities and contribution to sports development alongside men. We also need to encourage and mentor more young girls and women to participate in sport and support them with appropriate programmes through their NOCs and IFs.

Let us not forget either that, at the political level, and particularly in developing countries, the development of women's participation in sport is still hampered by economic and social difficulties. It is also important to highlight that,

although the sports world and the Olympic Movement are contributing to sports development, governments are still the main players in this area. It is therefore fundamental that governmental and non-governmental institutions dealing with sport reinforce their cooperation and promote women's active involvement, visibility and recognition in sport.

It is even more crucial to argue more strongly for the maintenance of physical education at all levels of children's education, for both girls and boys, as it is the basis of the development of sports activities later on in life. Furthermore, the concrete physical and psychological benefits of regular physical activity are proved by numerous scientific research studies and should be included in the formulation of long-term health and education policies at national and international level.

Similarly, we need to work more closely with the media as, despite the increasing number of high-level performances

by female athletes, women continue to see their athletic accomplishments distorted by both the print and electronic media, which often underreport and trivialize women's sport.

There is no doubt that further important actions need to be implemented in developing women's participation in sport. No is there any doubt that any attempt in this direction calls for collaboration and effort from every source: the sports community, inter- and non-governmental organizations, political authorities, economic powers, researchers, and the media. It is down this path that the IOC and the sporting and non-sporting worlds, must move together in the future to ensure that the 21st century opens up new opportunities for women, and that women and girls truly exercise their right to participate in the world of sport

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