

Women & Sport



*2nd IOC World Conference
on Women and Sport*

THE 2ND IOC WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN AND SPORT

The 2nd World Conference on Women and Sport was organized from 6 to 8 March 2000, aptly ending on International Women's Day, at the International Conference Centre in Paris, almost in the shadow of the Arc de Triomphe. Just over 470 delegates from 143 nations attended the conference.

Though the final story of the 2000 Paris Conference may not be written for several years, the 2nd IOC World Conference on Women and Sport ended with a series of recommendations that may well influence women's sports for decades to come.

Following the opening address by Henri Sérandour, President of the French National Olympic and Sports Committee (CNOSF), the IOC President noted that the IOC was committed to making the new century the beginning of a new era for women in sport. The French Minister for Youth and Sport, Marie-George Buffet, expressed her conviction that the development of women's sport needed commitment from governments.

Each day of the Conference was divided into two main themes, with several presentations being given on each theme. After each presentation, a lively discussion ensued with the audience participating from two different rooms of the International Conference Centre.

For the first theme "One Hundred Years of Women's Participation in the Olympic Games", IOC Vice-president Anita DeFrantz spoke on "Women at the Olympic Games: Lessons

by Bill Mallon*



Learned and Challenges for the Future", and emphasized the positive steps made by women at the Olympic Games and in the Olympic Movement. She is an example of this herself, as the first female to hold the position of IOC Vice-president. DeFrantz noted that cultural, religious, and traditional standards continue to be a major problem in the advancement of women's participation in sports in many nations.

The second presentation was given by former Olympic diving medallist, Elizabeth Ferris of Great Britain, the Vice-president of the World Olympians Association. Speaking on "Promoting Women Sports Leaders: Are Quotas the Way Forward?", she noted that women have made great strides in the past few years but there is still a long way to go. She stressed that not only should attention be paid to quantitative targets but qualitative standards for women in sports and sports administration must be emphasized.

The following speech by Maria Stefan, the Vice-president of Global Business Development for the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry (WFSGI), described the

importance of women in marketing considerations for all sports-related businesses. She felt that women should have a say in, and be appointed to, all important committees dealing with the finance and marketing of sports.

Gudrun Doll-Tepper, President of the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE) chaired the afternoon session dedicated to the "Social and Educational Functions of Sport". Maria Lourdes Appadoo, Administrative Secretary of the National Women's Sport Commission in Mauritius, gave her talk on "Promoting Women's Sport in Different Cultural Settings" and emphasized that there must be cooperation between governments, and non-governmental organizations, such as the IOC and NOCs, to promote women and sport in varying cultures. She also recommended the creation of women's sport associations to enhance female participation in educational sports programmes.

Presenting "Equality of Opportunities: Overcoming Social and Structural Constraints", Elizabeth Darlison, the Executive Director of WomenSport International, noted that women's numbers in sports have increased in recent years, but that women are often still absent in the areas of sports administration and leadership. She also recommended that women attempt to alleviate this problem by actively seeking these leadership positions.

The final topic on the first day was "Images of Women's Sport Beyond

Esthetics: The Role of the Media” by Inas Mazhar, a sports journalist from Egypt. She noted that the increase in women’s numbers in sports has been accompanied by a commensurate increase in media coverage, but this coverage is often stereotyped and focused on physical appearance rather than on their athletic talent. She recognized that it is important for women to seek roles in sports journalism to help overcome this problem.

The second day of the Conference was devoted to two themes: “Human Development and the Promotion of Peace” and “Physical Education and Sport for Health”. Under the chairmanship of Jean Fabre, the Deputy Director of the European Office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the first presentation dealt with “Social Development and Women’s Sport in Developing Countries” by Fatou Bensouda, Secretary of State for Justice in the Gambia. The second was “Promoting a Culture of Peace Through Sport” given by Kaisa Savolainen, Director of the

Department of Education and a Culture of Peace at UNESCO. The third presentation was “The Role of Youth in Women’s Sport Development” given by William Angel, Chief of the United Nations Youth Unit, while the final talk was “Violence and Harassment in Sport” by Kari Fasting of the Norwegian Institute for Sport and Physical Education. The theme of the second morning emphasized that women face many obstacles to being allowed to participate in sports, especially in developing nations. These obstacles are often cultural, social, and religious in nature and are not easily overcome. The debate on sport being used for the promotion of peace was an important one. It was noted that sport and its values could bring together people of differing nationalities and cultures in a peaceful manner. UNESCO recalled that equality between men and women was a key aspect in building a culture of peace.

William Angel discussed the fact that physical education should occupy a central position in school curricula

for all children - boys and girls. He felt that efforts in this area were insufficient and deserved greater emphasis to give all children the opportunity to progress in sports.

Kari Fasting’s talk on harassment against women noted that the problems women face in this regard in sport are a reflection of society in general and she gave several examples of combating this problem. She considered it necessary in particular to exercise care in choosing coaches for young women.

The afternoon session chaired by Zakia Bartagi, the Chairperson of the Medical Commission for the Mediterranean Games in Tunis 2001 and the Director of Sports Medicine and Science at the National Centre of Sports Medicine in Tunis, dealt with the theme of “Physical Education and Sport for Health”. Patricia Sangenis, a cardiologist from Buenos Aires, Argentina, and a member of the IOC Medical Commission, made the first presentation entitled “Health Benefits of Active Living for Women” and noted that coronary heart disease is a



(From l. to r.) Henri Sérandour, Marie-George Buffet, the IOC President, Anita DeFrantz and Fékrou Kidane.

health problem shared by both men and women, and that epidemiological studies show a direct relationship between lack of physical activity and coronary heart disease, in both men and women, even when corrected for other risk factors. She also discussed the fact that the older population is especially at risk from a sedentary lifestyle, with a progressive decline in aerobic fitness and lean muscle mass and strength. During the debate, the problem of the female athletic triad of osteoporosis, dysmenorrhea, and eating disorders was discussed.

The second presentation was by Margaret Talbot of Great Britain, the President of the International Association for Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW), on "For a Reinforcement of Physical Education". She began by noting that physical education develops an understanding of the role of aerobic and anaerobic activity in health and enhances self-confidence and self-esteem. But unfortunately, she also pointed out that physical education is not always available to all people. Those most excluded have been girls, women, the disabled, minorities, and the poor. It has been shown that girls are more dependent on school physical education than are boys to learn physical skills. Margaret Talbot called on governments to invest in physical education in the school curriculum, recognizing the special benefits to girls and women.

The third and final day of the Conference began with a celebration of International Women's Day. Three French athletes - Colette Besson, Beatrice Hess, and Isabelle Mir - spoke about the joys and struggles that have marked their careers. Besson was gold medalist in the 400 metres in 1968 at Mexico City, but wondered why this victory had changed her life so little. She pondered "if this victory had been

achieved by a man, would there have been more opportunities, more recognition in France?"

Beatrice Hess, a disabled swimmer who won six gold medals at the 1996 Paralympics in Atlanta, emphasized the point that women could overcome many handicaps - physical, social, and cultural with determination and perseverance. Isabelle Mir, a silver medalist in alpine skiing (downhill) in Grenoble in 1968, pointed out that the French women's ski team had shown character to be able to display their talents and win recognition in a ski world dominated at the time almost exclusively by men.

The first theme discussed was "International Cooperation", starting with the presentation on "The Role of Governments in the Advancement of Women in Sport" by Margo Vliegthart, the Secretary of State for Youth, Welfare and Sports in The Netherlands. She noted that sports administration has been a traditionally male-dominated arena, and she considered this unacceptable. She called upon governments and other supervisory bodies to create conditions in which women would have the same rights as men in sporting administration.

The next presentation was on "The Advancement of Women In and Through Sport" by Breda Pavlic, the Director of Women and Gender Equity for UNESCO, who noted the role that sport may play in advancing opportunities for women and proposed more links between UNESCO and sporting organizations for greater equality for women and to help combat discrimination.

Mimi Murray, the President of the International Council for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport and Dance (ICHPER-SD) then spoke on "The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations", discussing the various proposals and recommendations that have been

made to promote women in sport and called upon governments and NGOs to work together to help realize these various goals. She emphasized the need for women to be in decision-making capacities at all levels of sports administration.

Nicole Dechavanne, Honorary President of the French Federation of Physical Education and Voluntary Gymnastics, made the final formal presentation of the Conference, speaking on "The Promotion of Women in Sports Organizations." She noted that women have had few opportunities in this field in the past, but that the situation has improved, although there is still a long way to go to achieve equality.

The afternoon of the final day was devoted to the theme of "New Perspectives for the 21st Century" chaired by Anita DeFrantz. A general discussion of the many presentations began the afternoon session, followed by a Resolution and a series of Recommendations that the 2nd IOC World Conference on Women and Sport would present to world sporting leaders in an effort to equalize men's and women's participation in sports, physical education, and sports leadership (see box).

The 2nd IOC World Conference on Women and Sport was an enriching Conference that could have far-reaching ramifications for women's sports in the early years of the 21st Century. All those present agreed that women's sports were better off than they once were, but in closing, paraphrasing the words of the French writer, Andre Brink, seems most appropriate: "[She] continued the sluggish motion that carried them forward step-by-step. Looking ahead, [she] tended to lose courage. But looking back it was impossible to deny the length of the road [she had] already travelled."

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