

A MESSAGE OF HOPE

I firmly believe that governments should be committed to the development of women's sport and of women's role in sport.

Of course, the role of public authorities should not be confused with the vital work carried out by national and international sports associations.

The two complement one another.

I would therefore like to outline the ways in which the French government is supporting women's sport.

Firstly, we were aware that the role of girls and women in sport was still subject to many inequalities.

– Inequalities within the governing bodies: of more than 100 sports federations, only one has a female President.

– Inequalities in technical staff: less than 8% of umpires are women, for example.

– Inequalities in terms of access to facilities in some sports.

But that is not all – there is a great deal more at stake.

Just as their role in society is growing, so women are becoming increasingly involved in sport.

The number of sportswomen has shot up over the last twenty years. Although women remain very much in the minority in some sports, the range of disciplines in which they participate is broadening all the time. The a priori of so-called male or female sports are disappearing.

In 1999, female rugby players took part in the Five Nations tournament for the first time. The French Olympic delegation in Sydney will include more women in team events than ever before.

Yes, women are getting more and more involved in sport.

I can remember what the media, including the female press, were saying in the run-up to the football World Cup in France.

by Marie-George Buffet*



Women, who were presumed to know nothing about football, were going to have to endure four weeks of pure hell. Theatres reduced their ticket prices and special women-only evenings were organized.

All of these predictions, based on paternalistic, sexist clichés, proved to be totally wrong. What remains in our memories is women's enthusiasm for an event which reached far beyond the football field.

An event with which millions of women could identify with, because it seemed to convey generosity, solidarity and universality.

This close affinity that women feel for the values which sport should always represent is precisely what makes the remaining inequalities all the more unacceptable.

It is clear that women's position in sport is often made to reflect their place in economic, social and political life.

A 19th-century French philosopher used to say that a society's level of emancipation could always be measured according to how liberated its female population was. This still holds true today.

Nevertheless, the development of women's role in sport should not depend on how their position changes in society as a whole.

On the contrary, I believe that this overall transformation is taking place

in every area of life. On the sports fields as well as among boards of directors, in our stadia as well as our national assemblies.

And I am delighted that we in France have adopted the principle of parity in our elective bodies.

It was on this basis that the development of women's sport became a priority two years ago.

The first national conference on "Women and Sport" was held last May. Specific measures were adopted at that conference.

For example, we abolished the distinction between male and female sports in the recognition procedure for top-level disciplines.

Also, with the agreement of the sports movement, we made the role of women and the development of women's sport one of the aims of the conventions that we are all signing.

In this context, the Sports Bill, which the Senate is debating, proposes that ministerial approval be given to the principle of guaranteeing women and men equal access to positions in the governing bodies.

Under the terms of the convention we have signed with the French football federation concerning the use of the profits from the 1998 World Cup, some of this money is to be spent on developing women's football.

It is often suggested, quite rightly, that sport can help foster the social integration of disadvantaged young people.

I should point out, however, that in areas where girls tend to be excluded and where infringements of their rights as citizens are commonplace, they are often prevented from participating in programmes designed to promote social integration through sport.

I believe it is our responsibility to ensure that, as part of any such pro-

ject benefiting from State funding, large numbers of girls are able, through sport, to discover a new freedom and part of their own citizenship.

In several regions of the world, women are denied their most basic rights. This conference should help to develop cooperation and exchange so that these women can be helped in their struggles.

At the Olympic Games in Sydney we will be able to rejoice in the fact that the role of women has advanced. However, we must not lose sight of the huge inequalities which remain in various parts of the world.

We need to ask ourselves: "Should certain governments be left to decide whether or not to send women to the Olympic Games?"

I believe the answer is clear: women should form part of every Olympic delegation if the universal values of Olympism are to be respected.

And I know that the sports movement is committed to this humanist goal.

But, as we all know, much depends on women themselves.

We should therefore ensure that anything which prevents women from assuming positions of responsibility is properly dealt with.

It is not up to women to prove what they can contribute to sport.

It is up to public authorities to recognize what women's sport brings to sport in general and to demonstrate this recognition through their actions.

No country can claim to be a great sporting nation without the involvement of women.

This is the message of hope that I wanted to bring you on behalf of the French government and people, the sportsmen and -women of our country.

* French Minister of Youth and Sports.



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