

A POLICY ANALYSIS OF GENDER INEQUALITY WITHIN THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT

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Apparently, women have made substantial gains in their overall levels of participation in Olympic competition since the inception of the Modern Olympic Games in 1896. These visible benefits, however, have served to mask the overall inequality of male/female participation in the Games (Fleming, 1984). Large gaps in participation rates of males and females still remain and, at the Calgary 1988 Winter Olympic Games, women constituted only 21% of participants. Women fared little better at the 1988 Summer Olympics, at Seoul; they represented 26% of participants (Simri, 1979). This disparity in athlete participation is indicative of gender inequality throughout the Olympic Movement, inequality which is even more visible at the organizational and administrative levels. In the first part of this paper, I will look at the principle actors and dominant forces or determinants that have affected women's involvement in the Olympic Movement. In the second part, I will offer an analysis of both explicit and implicit IOC policy regarding women's involvement in the Olympic movement.

Relations of gender and the Olympic Movement reveal themselves best when examined from a historical perspective. The historical context in which these dominant actors and forces have developed has much to tell us about where we are today. Women were barred from Olympia during the Ancient Olympic Games in Greece, although it has been shown that women did participate in Games of their own (Simri, 1979). Baron de Coubertin, the founder of the Modern Olympic Games, used women's exclusion in ancient times to justify their exclusion from the modern Games.

“The young I.O.C. set to itself the task of renewing the Olympic Games in the spirit of the ancient ones and as no women participated in the Ancient Games, there ‘obviously’ was to be no place for them in the modern ones” (Ibid.:12).

Coubertin believed strongly that the Olympic programme should exclude women and team sports; a position he vigorously maintained throughout his tenure as President of the IOC. His efforts severely limited the role of women in the Olympic Movement, and it was not until the tail end of his presidency that some change began to occur. Even then, however, significant change did not actually occur until after the Second World War.

In 1894 when Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympic Games, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was established; it is this group that “controls and directs the Olympic Movement which governs the Modern Olympic Games” (Davenport, 1988:42). IOC membership is based on a principle of perpetual succession, that is, the IOC selects its own members (Welch and Lerch, 1981). This self-perpetuation produces the elitist and patriarchal nature of this committee which, after almost 100 years of exclusion, selected its first women in 1981.

Although, Pierre de Coubertin was the primary opponent of women's involvement early in the Olympic movement, and he used his role as President of the IOC (until 1925) to try to ensure that women did not participate in the Olympic Games, he was thwarted many times in trying to exclude women entirely from the Olympic programme. Still, he was successful in significantly limiting the involvement of women in the Games and in perpetuating his attitudes within the organization. Perhaps one of his most famous statements regarding women's participation in the Olympics is most revealing:

“Women have but one task, that of the role of crowning the winner with garlands ... in public competitions, women's participation must be absolutely prohibited. It is indecent that spectators should be exposed to the risk of seeing the body of a woman being smashed before their eyes. Besides, no matter how toughened a sportswoman may be, her organism is not cut out to sustain certain shocks (Fuller, 1987:4-10).

Even when Coubertin was no longer in control of the IOC his influence could be seen in the Olympic Movement.

Count Henri Baillet-Latour, whose attitude regarding female participation was strikingly similar to Coubertin's, succeeded Coubertin (Simri, 1983).

“I.O.C. president, Count Baillet-Latour of Belgium suggested to the Olympic Congress in Berlin in 1930 to permit women to participate only in “esthetical” events -- gymnastics, swimming, skating and tennis” (Ibid.:69).

Although, Baillet-Latour was not as blatantly misogynistic as Coubertin, he saw women as playing a very minor role in the Games and within the Movement as a whole (Ibid.). His successor, Avery Brundage, an American, provide little relief from the traditional misogynistic character of IOC presidents. Prior to his election as IOC President he was president of the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) and, during that period he had this to say about women in athletics:

“As swimmers and divers, girls are beautiful and adroit, as they are ineffective and unpleasing on the track” (Simri, 1983, p.72 -- from Things Seen and Heard).

Lucas (/1990) states that Brundage “ran a checkered history regarding elite female athletic competition” (3). Mary H. Leigh in Lucas (1990) suggests that Brundage was actually supportive of women's athletic involvement but had a change of heart when he decided the movement had gone too far, too fast.

Lord Killanin was theoretically more open to female participation in the Games. Unfortunately his good intentions were never fulfilled. Increases in female participation rates were not followed by increases in women in positions of authority within in the Olympic Movement.

Juan Antonio Samaranch has been the president of the IOC since 1980, and is scheduled to retire from the post in 1993. It has been during his tenure as President that there has been significant and radical reconstruction of Olympic tradition, rules and

regulations (Lucas, 1990). It was under his leadership that the first woman was elected to the IOC and now, there are seven women on the IOC. This is important if it is remembered that the IOC functions on a principle of perpetual secession, and that for 87 years it was a completely male dominated organization (Lekarska, 1990).

Monique Berlioux, the first woman to significantly influence the operations of the IOC, became a dominant force (second only to the president) in the Olympic movement (Davenport, 1988). She became the executive director in 1971 and remained in that position until her forced resignation by Samaranch in 1985 (Ibid.). During her tenure she became the right-arm of the president,

“she planned IOC meetings, edited the monthly publications of the IOC (Olympic Review), served as spokesperson on Olympic matters, and sat in on TV negotiations” (Ibid.:43).

She was the executive director during the tenure of Brundage, Killanin and Samaranch. It was her perception that she did more for the equality of women from her post as executive director than would have been possible if she had been an official member of the IOC (Ibid.).

A portion of the IOC, the International Olympic Academy (IOA), was formed to promote study and discussion related to the Olympic Movement (Davenport, 1988); it was designed to be the educational and cultural arm of the IOC (Varpalotai, 1990). The IOA was originally the idea of Pierre de Coubertin. He tried to implement it as early as 1937, but was unsuccessful. His idea was not abandoned as John Ketsias of Greece and Carl Diem of Germany worked relentlessly to establish a place where Coubertin’s vision could be fulfilled (Davenport, 1988). However, it was not until 1961 that the first session of the IOA was held.

“From the beginning, the International Olympic Academy has been open to both men and women and yet the number of male delegates has far surpassed the number of female participants” (Ibid.:45).

The first IOA session studying women in the Olympic Movement was held in Greece in 1990.

The National Olympic Committees (NOCs) have played a significant role in reproducing gender inequalities within the Olympic Movement. Simri (1979) suggests that the NOCs, as a whole, have been far less liberal regarding women in sport, than the IOC. There are an extremely low number of women in positions of authority in the 167 NOCs. Out of the 167 NOCs recognized by the IOC, there are six female NOC presidents and four secretary generals; the participation rate for women at the head of NOCs is 3.0 percent (Kakridi-Enz, 1990).

The International Sport Federations (ISFs) play an important role in creating the opportunity for equal participation of women in the Olympic Games. It is the responsibility of the ISFs to develop the sport that they govern, both male and female (Kort, 1991). Potential Olympic sports must be nominated by their ISFs in order to be considered for inclusion in the Olympic programme. Thus, they have control over which and how many women’s sports are proposed to the IOC for inclusion. A sport must be developed extensively by the ISF before the IOC will consider it for the Olympic programme. Thus, the

ISFs play a crucial role in the development of women's sports, particularly with regard to the Olympic programme (Ibid.).

There are a large number of key actors that have influenced the role of women within the Olympic movement; I have provided a brief look at them in the first section of this paper. The major actors are: the International Olympic Committee, the International Olympic Academy, the National Olympic Committees, the International Sport Federations, Pierre de Coubertin, Count Henri Baillet-Latour, Avery Brundage, Lord Killanian, Juan Antonio Samaranch, and Monique Berlioux. The past pages have attempted to deal with the specific persons or organizations that have influenced women's role in the Olympic Movement. There are numerous other general determinants or forces which have affected women's involvement in the Olympic Movement. In this next section I will discuss these determinants or forces and how they have specifically affected women.

Female sporting involvement varies tremendously between different cultures depending primarily on traditional and religious attitudes regarding women.

“The fact that women's sport is unacceptable in many societies and highly desirable in others emphasizes the lack of a clearly defined role for women in sport in today's world, which in turn, is reflected in women's role in the Olympic Games” (Spears, 1976:54).

These factors have historically contributed to gender inequalities in the Olympic movement and continue to do so today. Low participation by women in international competition is the result of the low status of women in traditional cultures (Lenskyj, 1990). Simri (1983) suggests that religion is one of the main factors contributing to the underdevelopment of women's sports.

“One may say that conservative Catholicism and Islam have been among the major drawbacks of women's sports on a universal level” (Simri, 1979:33).

He goes on to give an excellent example: when Ayatollah Kholmeini came to power in Iran in 1979 he declared in one of his first edicts that women were forbidden from participating in physical activity in improper dress and in the presence of men (Simri, 1983). In the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, 41 out of 159 NOCs sent all male delegations. In Calgary, 16 out of 57 NOCs sent all male delegations (Kakridi-Enz, 1990). Religion could be seen as a primary factor in the failure of many of these countries to send women in their delegations.

World War II temporarily halted the development of women's sport, and sport in general. In the aftermath of World War II women made significant gains in sport. “Between 1948 and 1968 marks a clearly upward curve of women's sports in the world” (Lekarska, 1990:5). According to Rail (1990) the progress of women's sport has been very dramatic in the post World War II era. During the war women were forced into the labour market and they experienced new social and economic freedoms. Many women were unwilling to give up these new found privileges. Sport was just one area in which women were making substantial gains in involvement following the war. It was the beginning of a new era for women. “A record number of 385 athletes from 33 countries participated in the 1948 London Olympics” (Simri, 1983:90). With the exception of the 1956 Olympic Games there has been steady increases in women's participation in the Games. It is important to remember that the

effects of World War II contributed greatly to the emancipation of women in all facets of life, sport included.

The entry of the U.S.S.R. into the Olympic arena in 1952 had important ramifications for women's participation in the Games.

“The immediate success of the Soviet Union in the women's events of the Olympic Games was a major cause for its representatives to try to expand women's sports in the Games” (Simri, 1979:39).

The Soviet Union sent a proposal to the IOC shortly after the 1952 Olympic Games requesting that the IOC maximize the number of women's sports and events on the Olympic programme. The IOC rejected this proposal and voted not to expand the Olympic programme for women (Lyberg, 1988-89).

Women in the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries have dominated Olympic competition since their entry.

“Soviet participation and the later development of women's sports in other Communist countries have caused an extreme improvement in the Olympic achievements of female athletes” (Simri, 1979:40).

Thus, they have set a precedent that other countries have been forced to follow if they wish to remain competitive in Olympic competition. It is unfortunate that the women of these countries are receiving equality in the quest for Olympic medals rather than for the sake of equality. Nevertheless, it has been very beneficial for women in sport. Simri (1979) notes that the Soviet Union and the dominate Eastern Bloc countries continue to put pressure on the IOC to develop women's sport to greatest possible extent.

Concern at the turn of the century with the physiological aspects of women in sport was one of the most significant factors influencing the development of women's sport (Rail, 1990).

“In fact, many of the experts' findings of the 1920s and 1930s continued to be used to restrict women's sport in the post-war period. Theories of moral superiority, vitalism, displacement, and over-exertion are a few examples” (Ibid.:2).

Rail (1990) also suggests that women's accomplishments in sport have been affected by a class of medical and sport 'experts'. It was just such experts who determined what activities were socially correct and which activities were safe for women given their special anatomy. Bandy stated in Bialeschki (1990) that

“the social practices of the 1800s and 1900s set the stage for the popular view among physicians and others that women were physiologically, anatomically, biologically, and psychologically inferior to men, thus incapable of participating in physical activity and sport” (44).

A statement by the medical community was issued in the 1920s regarding the dangers of female Olympic competition and resulted in sporting competition at all levels becoming the subject of much debate (Rail, 1990).

The most severe opposition that the female athlete faced early in the Olympic Movement was based on such medical opinion (Simri, 1983). These medical opinions were considered to be medical truths, today we are aware that the majority of these opinions were purely conjecture (Ibid.). Recently the medical community has begun to contribute to the emancipation of women in sport.

“The American College of Sports Medicine issued an opinion statement supporting full participation of women in distance events and this helped the inclusion of a women’s marathon in the 1984 Olympic Games” (Rail, 1990b:18-19).

The revelation of the mythical nature of ideas about women in sport and the refutation of these ideas has been brought about primarily by the medical community. Thus, they have had an important role in creating the idea that full sporting participation for women is acceptable on physiological, anatomical and psychological levels.

The media has had a significant negative effect on the development of women in sport. There has been a constant “preoccupation with the appearance, emotions, and maternal duties of females athletes” (Lenskyj, 1984:3). The media has been primarily responsible for the creation of negative stereotypes of female athletes which have been extremely detrimental to the development of sport for women.

The media does not deal with male athletes in a similar fashion. An excellent example of how media coverage has effected women’s participation in the Olympic Games revolves around the 800m athletic event for women in the 1928 Olympic Games. When female athletes collapsed at the finish line of the 800 metres it was perceived as tragic and horrifying. The perception of male athletes collapsing at the finish line of athletic events at the same Olympic Games was significantly different. It was perceived as dramatic and courageous. The following is an example of the medias portrayal of the situation:

The half dozen prostrate and obviously distressed forms lying in the grass at the side of the track after the race may not warrant a complete condemnation, but it certainly suggests unpleasant possibilities (The London Times, “The Olympic Games”, 1928, August 3, 6, quoted in Judith Jenkins George, 1988:40).

Leigh (1975) suggests that the negative and distorted publicity of the 800-meter run was used to support the disapproval of all Olympic and other intense competition for women. This response was primarily responsible for limiting the growth of women’s athletic competitions for 50 years (George, 1988).

The French Women’s Sport Federation became the first women’s multi-sport organization when it was formed in 1917 by Alice Milliat. The International Women’s Sport Federation (FSFI) developed out of this organization four years later, in 1921. Milliat was also primarily responsible for the development of this organization.

The Women's World Games were created by the FSFI. These Games occurred four times between 1922 to 1934 (Simri, 1983). The efforts of the FSFI centred around the inclusion of a full program of athletics for women in the Olympic Games, but its efforts were not limited to track and field (Ibid.). In 1935, the FSFI threatened to exclude all women from the Olympic Games if a full program for women's athletics was not included; at the same time the IOC narrowly voted to retain women's athletics (Ibid.) It is noted in the IOC minutes from Cairo in 1938 that a remarkable letter was received which requested that all feminine sports on the programme of the Games should be deleted (Lyberg, 1988-89). The "IOC considered this request as a matter of the Ifs" (Ibid.:209). A note included following this request in the IOC minutes read as such:

"Note: This request had a very deep meaning. It was in fact the intention of the organization to start Olympic Games for women. Probably this request helped women's sports to come on the programme later" (Ibid.:209).

The growing power of the FSFI was becoming a concern in the male-dominated sporting world. Steps were necessary to reduce or eliminate its power. In 1936, the IAAF had promised to include a full program for women's athletics and demanded that the FSFI eliminate the Women's World Games. The FSFI ceased to function shortly afterward (Simri, 1983). The promise of a full program for women's athletics was not kept. However, the FSFI played a crucial role in the development of women's sport within the Olympic movement; primarily by placing increased pressure for gender equality on the IOC and the IAAF.

The previous two sections have focused on the key actors and the more general determinants or forces that have influenced gender inequality within the Olympic Movement. The final section will outline some explicit and implicit IOC policy regarding gender inequality. I will also attempt to provide some evaluation of IOC policy.

The IOC has not always been a wealthy organization. In the early years, the IOC was constantly striving to reduce the number of participants in the Games. This policy of reduction was primarily for economic reasons. A solution that was often proposed was to eliminate existing female sports and to forbid the entry of new women's sports to the Olympic programme (Lyberg, 1988-89). One of Pierre de Coubertin's goals was to keep women and team sports out of the Olympic Games. He was able to utilize the reduction of the entire program as justification for the reduction and elimination of women's sports and events on the Olympic programme. The IOC continues efforts today to reduce the number of participants in the Games; although not for economic reasons.

It is no longer being suggested that women's sports be eliminated from the Olympic program. Rather the IOC has instituted a policy which makes it easier for new female sports to enter the Olympic program. New sports must be widely practised by men in 50 countries and three continents to be admitted to the Olympic programme. New sports must be widely practised by women in only 35 countries and three continents to be admitted (Lenskyj, 1990).

"The fact that different criteria exist for the admission of new sport/events for women suggests some recognition of the need for affirmative action steps" (Ibid.:11). This has obviously been a substantial attempt by the IOC to reduce gender inequality within the Olympic programme.

However, the 1990 Olympic Charter states that demonstration sports will be discontinued in 1996. Demonstration sports have been the primary road for many new women's sport/events to enter the Olympic programme. This will make it more difficult for new women's sports to enter the programme. This is not a positive step for women involved in the Olympic Movement (Ibid.).

In dealing with more specific policy "the 22nd IOC session held in Paris in 1924 decided to open the doors for a larger participation of women in the games" (Lekarska, 1990:4). This policy was enacted in the last year of Coubertin's presidency. This was the first indication of any IOC policy concerned with gender inequality. It is noted however, in Lyberg (1988-89) that the IOC considered the elimination of the entire women's program in 1929. In 1953, the IOC voted on the following amendment: "women are not to be excluded from the Games, but only participation in 'suitable' sports" (Ibid.:300). This amendment was passed by the IOC. It was not until 1957, when the reduction of the Olympic programme was again considered, that it was not suggested that the women's program be entirely eliminated (Ibid.).

The IOC Executive Board "agreed that both men and women athletes should be treated equally, and there was no need for a special commission consisting of women only" (IOC Executive Board, 1975:5). This statement by the IOC was the first specific policy statement that suggested that the IOC had in theory adopted a gender equity stance. It also indicates that the IOC was only willing to go so far in attempts to eradicate gender inequality within the Olympic movement.

The most severe inequalities are located in the NOCs and the ISFs. There are very few women in positions of power in these organizations (Kakridi-Enz, 1990). The IOC has ratified its Olympic Charter, Rule 32, to state that "Women are allowed to compete according to the rules of the International Federation concerned" (IOC Executive Board, 1977:5). This change has left the eradication of gender inequalities solely in the hands of the ISFs, where gender inequality is the most severe. It is suggested by Simri (1979) that the IOC altered Rule 32 to avoid the responsibility for the eradication of gender inequality.

Recent debate on Rule 32 has dealt with the removal of 'allowed' from the context of the rule. The context of the rule implies that women are allowed to compete rather than it being a fundamental right. It also suggests that it is a privilege which may be revoked at any time.

The participation of women in the Olympic Games was discussed at IOC Executive Board meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland in October 1980. The following was the result of their discussions:

It was universally agreed within the IOC that there should be greater women's participation, not only because the standards were sufficiently high, but also because of the popularity of women's sport. The President agreed that women's participation should be increased as much as possible. At present, only 30% of the Olympic sports included women, which was too small a proportion (IOC Executive Board, October, 1980).

It has been primarily since this time that the greatest changes have occurred for women in the Olympic movement.

Explicit policies, such as the different criteria for the entrance of new men's and women's sports, indicate the IOC's recognition for the necessity of affirmative action. The IOC, however, does not have a specific policy dealing with gender inequality. It is essential that the IOC develop a specific policy regarding gender and the Olympic movement. A discussion group at the 30th Session of the International Olympic Academy in Greece, with Marg MacNeil as Chair recommended that the IOC state their "(i) definition of equality, (ii) criteria for measuring equality, and (iii) a policy to mediate the practises and decision-making process of the IOC in order to ensure the creation of an Olympic movement which is free from gender inequalities". This type of policy statement would be significant step toward ensuring gender equality within the Olympic Movement.

The IOC has used its wealth from television right to develop and implement Olympic Solidarity and to fund the operation of both Olympic Solidarity and the IOA (Bugeja, 1990). The IOA studied women in the Olympic movement for the first time in the IOA session in Greece in 1990. One of the specific goals of Olympic Solidarity is the reduction of gender inequality. "Olympic Solidarity provides funds for the following activities: ... the promotion of women's sports in collaboration with the IOC Programme Commission.... and support for participation at the International Olympic Academy" (Bugeja, 1990:10). Olympic Solidarity picks up the cost for one man and one women to attend each IOA session (Kakridi-Enz, 1990). If they choose not to send a woman the cost can not be applied to another man. Forty percent of NOCs attending the IOA session in 1989 did not send women (Ibid.).

The wealth of the IOC could be used in many ways to promote gender equality within the Olympic movement. The IOC could develop workshops to promote women in sport, utilizing both its vast sources of information and its organization. This would be particularly important in developing countries and countries with strong traditional and cultural barriers to women in sport. Female athletes do not receive equitable amounts of media coverage and the coverage they do receive is less likely to be prime time coverage. The IOC could refuse to deal with a network that does not provide equal and non-sexist coverage of male and female sports.

The IOC has maintained two conflicting policies. The first is the recent emphasis on gender equality. The second policy is the reduction of the Olympic programme. This policy has existed almost since the inception of the modern Olympic Games. Thus, at one time they were not conflicting policies. However, in more recent times, initiatives to reduce the Olympic programme have interfered with attempts to promote gender equality. The new standards imposed by the IOC have made it more difficult for new sports to enter the Olympic programme. Even though, there are lower standards for the admittance of new women's sports.

It has been difficult to evaluate IOC policy on gender equality, since very little explicit policy exists. However, an empirical evaluation would see that women athletes have made steady advances in participation at the Olympic Games and continue to do so. However, there is still a long way to go before equality is reached. The situation at the administration and organizational level is not so positive. Women are significantly under-represented on the IOC, particularly in positions of power, the NOCs and the ISFs. It is essential that the IOC take a leading role in the eradication of gender inequality within the Olympic movement.

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