
Sport, Physical Activity, and the Women's Movement

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The women's rights movement in the United States stemmed from discriminatory practices encountered by some American women in the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London during June, 1840. The First Women's Rights Convention in the United States was held at Seneca Falls, New York, July 19-20, 1848. Mid-nineteenth American women, in addition to lacking voting power, were denied freedom to pursue interests that extended beyond the care of their homes. Feminists who assembled at Seneca Falls concentrated on seeking reforms in areas that directly affected their freedom to function in a society which was not yet tolerant of sportswomen.

Catharine Beecher, proponent of education and calisthenics for women, may have sparked a more pronounced interest in physical activity among women's rights workers had she chosen to join their crusade. In 1851 she expressed disapproval of the feminist movement which, she maintained, offended conservatives. Twenty years later she remained steadfast in her objections to suffrage for women.

While Catharine Beecher advanced teacher preparation for women, a delay in dress reform and physical activity occurred. The bloomer costume, a striking departure from traditional dress, was worn by a few daring feminists but was vehemently rejected. Wear-

ing the bloomer was not a central issue at the National Women's Rights Convention in Syracuse, New York during the fall, 1852, but widespread controversy over proper attire for women ensued. The bloomer was a striking departure from traditional dress and remedy for the constrictions of costume. However, it brought forth public outrage, making its wearers the subject of insult. Because of the rejection of the bloomer, an opportunity to alleviate dress restrictions and perhaps encourage physical activity was thwarted during the early days of the women's rights movement.

The time-consuming work of the women's movement and the general feeling of oppression among women left little time for physical exercise of a recreational nature. Women who were in positions to advance physical activity were engulfed by their burdensome problems that demanded immediate attention. During the course of the women's movement explanations were advanced about why women did not pursue exercise. In 1882 Elizabeth Cady Stanton contended that the threat of being ostracized kept many women from engaging in physical activity.

Turn of the century women who were members of the fledgling physical education profession, though not large in numbers, were teaching the strategies of basketball, then a novelty sport. They shunned the highly competitive male athletic model. They were not compelled to join the women's movement which demanded radical reforms. In essence they were designing their own programs and for the most part encountered few obstructions. Teaching was so highly respected that women did not encounter obstacles in preparation or establishing themselves that women experienced in the traditionally male profession. By comparison to women who were seeking societal reforms, they experienced little discrimination.

After women achieved the right to vote, the women's movement waned in the 1920s. In the 1960s the reawakening of the women's movement coincided with the national crusade for improving the plight of oppressed minority groups. Sportswomen of the 1960s inaugurated the women's sports movement. Denied intercollegiate athletic competition, these former playday and sportsday participants demanded opportunities for highly skilled girls and women to excel in sports. Legislation, considered a boon to the women's sports movement by some and to others a destructive influence on men's sports, has produced radical changes in athletic and physical education programs.