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FEMALE ATHLETES: CHANGING THE PREJUDICIAL ATTITUDES

Sport pervades society to such an extent that it has been described as microcosm of society. Its pervasiveness has led to the study of sport from a sociological perspective. Several pressing problems and discriminatory practices are still, unfortunately, faced by many athletes, females in particular.

Female participation and popularity in sports increased dramatically in the twentieth century, especially in the last quarter-century, reflecting changes in modern societies that emphasized gender parity. Although the level of participation and performance still varies greatly by country and by sport, women's sports are widely accepted throughout the world today. In a few instances, such as figure skating, female athletes rival or exceed their male counterparts in popularity. In many sports women usually do not compete on equal terms against men [1].

The International Olympic Committee fully recognises that gender parity at sports competitions is not enough. The goal of gender equality is enshrined in the Olympic Charter, which compels the IOC to «encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels» [2]. Being founded more than a century ago to harness the power of sport at the service of humanity, the IOC played an important role in encouraging National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and International Federations (IFs) to enhance the presence of women in sport.

Although women were excluded from the ancient Olympic Games, and the founder of the modern Olympic Games viewed their role as cheering spectators, there has been a gradual acceptance of girls and women as sports participants.

Traditionally, both physiological and societal factors contributed to the discriminatory treatment that many girls and women experienced when they initially sought to compete in sports.

Even though males beyond puberty have advantages in sports, emphasizing speed, strength and power, this does not justify the past virtual exclusion of females from sports.

Many researches provide evidence that most females are not so strong, are shorter and lighter, have lower maximum oxygen uptakes, and because of their size have smaller lung capacities, vital capacities and cardiac outputs.

Yet, many female athletes have surpassed the prejudicial limitations placed on them, by running and swimming faster and longer, competing professionally against and with males, achieving high levels of muscular strength and endurance, and becoming proficient in sports skills, which once was the domain of males only.

The physical potential of girls and women is not yet known, since they must first have equal opportunities in sports to achieve their maximum.

Contrary to the writings of the early 1900s, women do not risk sterility when they train strenuously and compete aggressively. Like males, females benefit in multiple ways when they achieve physically.

Societal attitudes change slowly: sports have traditionally been viewed as masculine – for males only.

Familial and environmental influences affix sex identification to sports. For example, boys are usually given balls and outdoor toys, while girls usually receive dolls or quiet and passive toys.

Early in life girls learn that if they participate in sports, they risk being called a tomboy or being viewed as less feminine or less attractive. Peer group pressure results in a role conflict, making choosing sports more difficult. Therefore, many girls opt out.

The more determined ones may compensate by always emphasizing a feminine appearance, by deemphasizing their athletic involvement and their successes, and by selecting a sport that is viewed as more acceptable, such as gymnastics, swimming or tennis.

The other alternative is to participate actively in sport, regardless of the consequences. Although very few chose this route in the past, the situation is changing.

Television commercials that portray woman as sports enthusiasts still include sexist overtones and innuendos. Newspapers or periodicals that publish sports stories on women seldom use them as lead stories and never cover them as extensively as they do with males' sports stories.

More and more women are playing sports – but you wouldn't know it from mass media. Though it isn't surprising to discover that men's sports gets more coverage, it has been eye opening for researchers to find that women's sports account for less than 2 percent of network news [3].

Since women have lower salaries, they have less discretionary income to spend for sporting equipment and fitness club memberships.

Women working outside home, usually enjoy less leisure time for recreational activities because of a combination work, family and housework obligations.

Because of traditional programming and less interest of women in sports in the past, they have yet to receive equal access in public or private facilities.

Control, however, shifted to men. Today, a small percentage of women coach girls and women, and few women administer athletic programs for females.

Among the factors leading to the increasing number of men coaching girls and women are the following: too few women with expertise or interest in coaching; unwillingness of many women to coach highly competitive teams; and hiring practices in which male athletic directors and school principles prefer to hire male coaches.

When female and male athletic programs were combined, usually on the premise of equal opportunity, men were inevitably named to the top positions either because of seniority or because of the belief that they knew athletics better.

Occasionally, though, a female is hired to administer an athletics program that competes at the highest collegiate level. Thus, a major issue confronting athletic programs is the need for more qualified female coaches and sport administrators.

Although there is a rise and surge in the participation by women in sports, a large disparity still remains. These disparities are prevalent globally and continue to hinder equality in sports. Many institutions and programs still remain conservative and do not contribute to gender equity in sports [1].

Today, city recreation programs and private clubs are trying to attract more women, and the emphasis on fitness stimulates greater acceptance of women who not only look and dress fit, but are fit. Myths die slowly, and prejudicial attitudes are even more resistant to change.

References:

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TO SWIM OR NOT TO SWIM: THE RISKS AND BENEFITS FOR HUMAN HEALTH

Prehistoric man learnt to swim in order to cross rivers and lakes. Cave paintings from the Stone Age depicting swimmers have been found in «the cave of swimmers» in the southwestern part of Egypt around 10000 years ago [1]. Swimming was also referred to in Greek mythology. Written references of recreational swimming date from 2000 BC, with some of the earliest references to swimming including the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Bible and others.

Swimming emerged as a competitive recreational activity in the 1830s in England. In 1828, the first indoor swimming pool was opened to the public. Swimming was not widely practised until the early 19th century, when the National Swimming Society of Great Britain began to hold competitions in six artificial swimming pools built around London. The recreational activity grew in popularity and in 1880 the first national governing body, the Amateur Swimming Association, was formed [2].