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WOMEN AND MODERN SPORT Case Study

Keywords

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Abstract

Modern sport has always been a crucial cultural domain for the construction and reproduction of dominant, heterosexual masculine identities. Historically, the modern sport has been a key social space for the production and reproduction of different kinds of patriarchal social relations and identities, in which power is held by men and women are confined to subordinate roles and positions. Women have engaged in a long and still incomplete struggle to engage fully with the modern sport. Women's involvement in popular team sports tended to be closely controlled by men in accordance with patriarchal norms. In the early and mid-twentieth, substantial numbers of women, particularly in urban industrialized societies, enjoyed significant empowerment, reflecting their crucial wartime roles, wider political emancipation, growth in employment, and position within the expanding mass consumer culture. Socialist societies promoted women's sport alongside official policies of militarized nation-building and female industrial equality. In China, the communist-inspired Red Sport Movement was founded in 1932 and sought to produce more active identities, 'iron bodies', and fresh duties and responsibilities for women. In contrast, fascist regimes pursued social policies that relegated women to domestic drudgery yet also exploited the rational nationalism of sporting successes for both genders.

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At the international level, women were allowed to take part in events in 1900. They doubled the number in the 1920s, reaching almost 10 percent of all competitors in 1928.

Socialist societies promoted women's sport alongside official policies of militarized nation-building and female industrial equality. In China, the Red Sport Movement sought to produce 'iron bodies' and fresh responsibilities for women. The soviet state valorized those female athletes who displayed 'courage, grace, skill, even strength in the sporting area, winning prestige for club, factory, farm region, ethnic group and republic' (Riordan, 1991).

Women's Olympic participation grew gradually from 12 percent of all competitors in 1956, to 20 percent in 1976, around 29 percent in 1992, 38 percent in 2000, 42 percent in 2008 and almost 45 percent at London 2012. The range of disciplines for women's participation also expanded consistently. In the USA the very well known 'Title IX' federal law was passed in June 1972, prohibiting gender discrimination within sports at colleges and high schools. Even if it passed, men continued to outnumber women in sport participation and male sports such as American football and basketball were still praised.

Women's exercise regimes have significantly stretched the boundaries of 'permissible'

muscularity and female body 'hardness'. The strongest effects are perhaps experienced at the youngest ages: some research suggests that the pursuit of 'hard', gender-challenging athletic styles is more apparent in childhood (Mennesson, 2000). Women's sport continues to be heavily co-modified through integration within multi-billion-dollar consumer culture and fitness industries, which have largely reproduced hegemonic patriarchal norms regarding the idealized female body shape.

Women's everyday sport participation still encounters patriarchal forms of social closure. Some elite sport organizations such as high-status golf clubs are open only to men or discourage female involvement (for example, the Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia, which hosts the Master's tournament, admitted its first two women members only in 2012).

In terms of the gender politics of sport participation, some advances have been made at elite and everyday levels. Strongly conservative societies have come under pressure to increase women's role within the sport and wider society. For example, in 2012 and 2013, female athletes from Saudi Arabia were sent to the Olympics for the first time, were allowed to do sports in private schools and were permitted to establish state-regulated sports clubs. At an elite level, more international sport tournaments offer equal prize money for male and female competitors: the US Open tennis tournament was the first major event to do so, in 1973, while sports as football and American football have allowed some women to officiate at top-level fixtures.

There have been some feminist waves; the second-wave feminism dealt with the basic equality, while the third celebrates the diversity of women in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, norms, roles and identities. The third wave underpins the critical analysis of 'gender verification tests. In many single-sex sports, athletes may be medically tested to 'confirm' their sex according to particular criteria. Tests have almost always been concerned with seeking to identify possible 'male' athletes participating in women sports.

There are some political strategies that women might pursue in order to advance their position within the sport. The first strategy is, according to (Hargreaves, 2000), the *co-option* strategy. It is advocated by 'liberal feminists' and involves 'women catching up with men' by pursuing *moiré* equal representation in the sport. Co-operation rejects conservative claims that biological differences or traditional gender values undermine women's sports participation. Co-option may also force women to engage with men on the male ground and thus join male sporting rituals, in which they will continue to 'seem out of place' (Novak, 1993). Secondly, the *separatism* strategy, advocated by 'radical feminists', involves 'self-

realization' for women through women-only sports tournaments or associations. Separatism empowers women to explore alternative sport values, aesthetics, bodily techniques and organizational frameworks. The third strategy is the *co-operation* strategy, advocated by 'socialist feminists' that negate gender differences. Co-operation is more extensive than co-option: rather than seeking equality, it pursues policies of equity, which restructure the sport system to ensure sports experiences are qualitatively similar for women and men (Hall, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

Modern sporting disciplines have played important roles in the systematic reproduction of gender divisions and domination. Women have endured powerful structural and cultural dynamics of exclusion or control in regard to their participation in sport.

Like other fields of popular culture, the sport does not function simply to reproduce patriarchal social relations. Sports that are practised by men and women contain diverse politico-cultural dimensions.

Different strategies have been advanced on how best to effect gender-focused social transformations within the sport. Many aspects of sport reinforce gender divisions, some negotiate class and gender hierarchies, while some are significantly more radical.

The interface between gender and sport features substantial scope, not just for resistance and opposition but also for cultural-political forms of ambivalence, irony and transgression with regard to dominant relations and ideologies of power.

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