

## SPORT AS A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL OBSERVATORY

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research is to understand the underlying historical and political factors which have affected the inclusion of women in international sports. It is maintained that gender inequality still exists in many major sporting competitions. As such, it is necessary to assess what has been done before and what still needs to be done in order to combat gender inequality on the field and outside of it. We will look at how sports is used as a civilizing method to uphold the patriarchy. We will also discuss how feminist movements have influenced the advancement of women's rights in sports. Then, the Olympic Games, FIFA, and the media are scrutinized for their history of inclusion and empowering women. This will allow for a multi-faceted study of sexism in global sports as we move towards full, indiscriminate participation of female athletes in global competitions.

### Palabras Clave

Feminism, women's rights, sports, Olympic Games, FIFA,

## INTRODUCCIÓN

It was a night of incredible pride for the land of the free, home of the brave; a night that will go down in the history books. On Sunday, July 5, 2015, the U.S. women's national soccer team basked in glory as they won the FIFA World Cup with a score of 5-2 over Japan. The match, watched by 25.4 million viewers in the U.S. [1], shattered American soccer TV ratings record thus demonstrating how such an excellent team can unite a nation. Soccer itself is not a very popular sport in the U.S. where the Big Four sports of basketball, American football, baseball, and hockey dominate. Nonetheless, as the women's soccer team eyed their third world championship, many viewers tuned in to watch the match in hopes that their national team succeed. And succeed they did. However, what should have been a proud moment at the awarding ceremony only brought to light more social issues which are disconcerting, to say the least. The U.S. women's soccer team, the champion of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, received \$2 million as their prize money. This is very disproportionate to what the champion German men's soccer team received at the 2014 FIFA Men's World Cup with \$35 million [2]. In fact, in the same men's tournament, even losing teams walked away with at least \$8 million [2]. This kind of gender pay gap where women only earn 6% of what men earn is only one dimension of the socio-political problems still present in modern sports. Whether in FIFA, FIBA, or the Olympic Games, there still exists the idea that women must work twice as hard to earn half as much recognition as the men. There are many features present in analyzing the sexism in global sports. Primarily, it is necessary to examine its socio-political dimensions in order to move towards full, indiscriminate participation of women in global competitions. Most importantly, one must acknowledge that women have faced many obstacles throughout history to fight for equality in sports. Clearly, the fight is not yet over, and it will take a lot of institutional change for female athletes

to receive the respect they deserve in and out of the field.

## RESULTADOS Y DISCUSIÓN

First and foremost, it is essential to understand the history of sport's gendered identities. Since the beginning of formal play, women were restricted from full participation to maintain the dominant system of the patriarchy. In Great Britain, as British 'games cult' rose in popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sports became more gendered in order to establish strong class and imperial inflections which gave importance to qualities of leadership and manliness. Moreover, boys were encouraged to play sports to affirm their masculinity and to sustain English elite virtues and the civilizing benefits of British imperialism. This is comparable to women who were prohibited from sports, because they must assume the role of the mother and must not overtax the female frame and its vital reproductive organs. This kind of archaic and sexist thinking may seem a thing of the past, yet contemporary sociologist John Carroll advocated for the return of women to the kitchen in 1985. In fact, Carroll called for the removal of women in sports because it is "the living arena for the great value of manliness" [3, 82]. Unfortunately, it will not be surprising to hear that many in today's world still agree with the views of Carroll regarding the notions of the male and female role in sports.

Many academic critiques of the inherent masculinity in sport have also delved into how physical culture maintains heterosexual, male domination. According to social theorist R.W. Connell, these norms are what restrict women into joining an activity built around a culture which idealizes a certain form of masculine character [3, 94]. Built around toughness and competitiveness, women's subordination, and marginalization of gay men, hegemonic masculinity is an identity established in a global social hierarchy of men over women. Additionally, hegemonic masculinity produces the idea of "femiphobia" where men are fearful of appearing female or effeminate, thus

fueling hyper masculinity, homophobia, and misogyny. One sport which highly emphasizes this hyper conformity to masculine norms is American football. In this sport, male athletes are presented as larger-than-life, giant players who are inherently tough. They are seen as heroic and strong for playing such an aggressive and violent sport, thus discouraging women from joining what seems to be a “war-zone.” In the end, these kinds of cultural beliefs of fixed societal male and female roles are detrimental to the social advances of women in legal, political, and civil battles. Consequently, this affects women’s sports participation to growing ever slowly and gradually.

It is important to recognize that feminist movements were key to advancing women’s position in society. First wave feminism began in the 1850s and lasted until the 1930s. Through first-wave feminism, women became more vocal about their inclusion in the democratic political system advocating for universal suffrage, wider education and employment opportunities, and resistance to sexual subordination. Certainly, there were a handful of female athletes who became part of this first wave movement to pressure society to allow them to play in official games. Most, however, were only concerned with being able to play games as they wanted. Nonetheless, during the inter-war era, more women became involved in energetic roles as they just previously held men’s jobs after WWI. As such, they took greater political autonomy and created and controlled separate sports clubs and associations. Then, second-wave feminism hit in the 1960s until the 1980s wherein women made substantial advances as sports producers almost to the level of men. This propelled many laws to be passed worldwide advancing the participation of women in sport and beyond. In the United States, for example, Title IX was passed in 1972 prohibiting gender discrimination within sports at colleges and high schools. As a result, the NCAA authorized national championships for women in sports like basketball, golf, soccer, swimming, tennis, and outdoor track events. Additionally, women took up more leadership positions in

sports, such as Gayle Gardner who became the first female play-by-play commentator on the NFL in 1987 and Judith Sweet who became the NCAA president in 1991 [3, 86].

In order to assess what still needs to be done for gender equality in global sports, one must look into the historical inclusion of women in the Olympic Games. Founder of the modern Olympics Baron Pierre de Coubertin once said, “I do not approve of the participation of women in public competitions. In the Olympic Games, their primary role should be to crown the victors” [4]. As a non-critical product of a very sexist world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, de Coubertin set the stage for a difficult path for women to be able to play sports on the international stage. In fact, de Coubertin was a lifelong vocal opponent of the inclusion of women in sports. Nonetheless, de Coubertin would not be able to combat the advances made by women to increase their sports participation. The effect of the feminist movements were definitely felt as female athletes first participated in the Olympics in 1900. However, it was not until 1924 when women pushed for more inclusion in official games that women’s events were finally but reluctantly recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the main governing board of the Olympics [3, 85]. Looking at statistics of Olympics female participation, one may notice that the data increase has been slow, but steady. Throughout history women’s participation has always been below 50%. Women made up 12% of all Olympic competitors at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, 20% at Montreal in 1976, 29% at Barcelona in 1992, 38% at Sydney in 2000, and 44% at London in 2012 [3, 85]. As women’s boxing was also added to the 2012 London Olympics, it became the first Olympics wherein women competed in every sport on the Olympic program. The Olympic Charter states that one of the functions of the IOC is “to encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures, with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women” [5, 1]. This officially progressive viewpoint of the IOC clearly contrasts

with that of de Coubertin's view. Yet it is for the better that this led to a new rule passed in 1991 mandating that all new sports wishing to be included on the Olympic program must feature women's events. Since then, women's events have been added to the Olympic program, such as badminton, judo, weightlifting, and wrestling. Truly, this is a step in the right direction so that female athletes everywhere understand that they are just as important as men on an international sporting stage.

The IOC establishes that it has a positive, progressive outlook for the participation of women in global sports. However, key to swifter advancement of women in spaces where they are marginalized is the promotion of women in positions of power. It is important to note that older, upper-class men dominate sport's governing bodies. To illustrate, the current and past presidents of FIFA, FIBA and the IOC have all been men. The IOC admits that the percentage of women in its governing and administrative bodies has remained low. Therefore, they came up with a set of objectives to remedy the situation, such as reserving at least 20% of the decision-making positions for women, especially in executive and legislative bodies by 2005 [5, 2]. Unfortunately, they had failed to meet this objective. We can only hope that more women become interested in these relevant leadership positions in the future. Conclusively, women's roles in leadership positions are necessary to oppose the men who build their careers through the exclusion of women in sports or the decision making process. Women make up half the world population. It is thus only appropriate that they make up half of international sport's governing bodies so that they can positively influence policies. This will ensure that equity policies are in place in order to make sport experiences for men and women be qualitatively similar.

Another dimension of sport which must be further critiqued is the objectification of female athletes. Female objectification is an ongoing social problem both inside and outside of sports. However, the

female athlete's body is much diminished due to sports media. Sports media is party to the trivialization of female athlete's athletic achievements. They often sexualize the female body in order to market matches and to generate public interest. Take for example the case of tennis player Anna Kournikova. Albeit a good player, Kournikova was never good enough to win a single grand slam tournament. As such, she did not merit as much attention as the grand slam champions. Nonetheless, tennis sports media loved to focus on Kournikova due to her attractiveness whose body fit the paradoxical ideal female body shape of "firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin." The media further commodifies female athletes through off-court endorsements of perfume and underwear for the heterosexual male gaze. Then, at sports events the cameramen often shoot "honey shots" of attractive, partly clothed female audience and athletes. Furthermore, male 'sports' magazines such as Sports Illustrated run swimsuit issues and convince female celebrity athletes to be shot with minimal clothing in suggestive poses. Although one may argue that posing for male magazines is a form of self-expression and choice, the big picture reveals that female athletes have a weak structural position in the sporting world such that they have to resort to self-sexualization to generate public interest. Sports media is party to the damages done to the image of female athletes as hardworking people who can excel at what they do. It is very difficult to intervene with the media to make sure that they focus on the achievements of deserving female athletes rather than the sexualization of attractive but less accomplished ones. Nevertheless, there is hope that sports governing bodies be stricter in the future so that that sports media become more professional and cover sports events straightforwardly, lest they not be allowed to cover the event.

The fight for gender equality in sports is still an ongoing process. In the recently concluded 2015 Women's FIFA World Cup, we have seen how the American soccer team's prestige and status as champions appear diminished through the wide

wage gap they received compared to the losing men's team in the 2014 Men's FIFA World Cup. As soccer is the most played sport in the world, FIFA maintains a high degree of responsibility and influence over how the sport is played, organized, and perceived in the media. However, mired by so much corruption and headed by a sexist president, FIFA appears to do more harm to the image of the women's soccer game. Longtime sitting FIFA President Sepp Blatter once suggested that women play in tighter shorts to increase the popularity of the game. He adds, "Female players are pretty...and they already have some different rules to men – such as playing with a lighter ball. That decision was taken to create a more female aesthetic, so why not do it in fashion" [6]. Blatter's valuing of how tight the female uniform should be is inherently sexist and is detrimental to the advancements made by women in sports. Since he heads FIFA, it is then of no surprise that many gender disparities exist within the organization. For example, although men's teams in the World Cup played on grass, women's teams had to play on artificial grass, leaving many with serious turf burns. Additionally, the Women's World Cup attracted few marketing revenues and corporate support compared to the Men's World Cup, although the final game broke soccer viewing records in the U.S. FIFA's secretary general cites that it is due to the fact that this is only the seventh women's tournament compared to the men who have had 30. However, it is suspect that FIFA comments on the disproportion given that they are currently undergoing an FBI investigation for corrupt handling of those revenues. Luckily, Blatter announced that he shall resign after his successor is elected on December 2015. Until then, we can only hope that institutional changes be put in place so that women's soccer will be treated with the same respect and regard that men's soccer receives.

## CONCLUSIONES

The world of sports continues to be mired with gender gap issues as female athletes are perceived as inferior to male athletes. This is plainly not the case as some research suggests that strength differentials can be reduced to 5% [3, 87]. Furthermore, the success of the U.S. women's soccer team in the 2015 FIFA World Cup shows that women are also exciting, successful, and dominant on the field. However, sports media must fundamentally change so that they focus on female athletes' achievements, not on their sexualization. Ultimately, more women must be empowered to take up leadership positions in sporting governing boards because they will surely support legislation which advance gender equity. This will only benefit the whole sporting world positively as it encourages stronger competition, better players, more fans, and higher revenue over the long run.

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