

Empowerment of women through sports

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■ ABSTRACT

Women's participation in sport has a long history. It is a history marked by division and discrimination but also one filled with major accomplishments by female athletes and important advances for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Women were often perceived as being too weak for sport, particularly endurance sports, such as marathons, weightlifting and cycling, and it was often argued in the past that sport was harmful to women's health, particularly their reproductive health. In 1896, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympics, stated: "No matter how toughened a sportswoman may be, her organism is not cut out to sustain certain shocks".

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Women's participation in sport has a long history. Among the many remarkable achievements are those of Helene Madison of the United States of America, the first woman to swim the 100-yard freestyle in one minute at the 1932 Olympics; Maria-Teresa de Filippis of Italy, the first woman to compete in a European Grand Prix auto race in 1958; Nawal El Moutawakel of Morocco, the first woman from an Islamic nation to win an Olympic medal for the 400-metre hurdles at the 1984 Olympics and Tegla Loroupe of Kenya, who in 1994 became the first African woman to win a major marathon. Women have taken up top leadership positions in sport, such as Presidents and Secretaries-General of National Olympic Committees. More and more women have also taken up employment opportunities in all areas of sport, including as coaches, managers, officials and sport journalists.

Participation in sport and physical activity can also facilitate good mental health for women of all ages, including the management of mental disorders such as Alzheimer's disease. It can promote psychological well-being through building self-esteem, confidence and social integration, as well as help reduce stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression. This is particularly important as rates of depression among women are almost double those of men in both developed and developing countries. Adolescent girls in particular are

vulnerable to anxiety and depressive disorders and are significantly more likely than boys to have seriously considered suicide by the age of 15.

The benefits of women's participation for sport and society :

The participation of women and girls in sport challenges gender stereotypes and discrimination, and can therefore be a vehicle to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, in particular. Women in sport leadership can shape attitudes towards women's capabilities as leaders and decision-makers, especially in traditional male domains. Women's involvement in sports can make a significant contribution to public life and community development.

The positive outcomes of sport for gender equality and women's empowerment are constrained by gender-based discrimination in all areas and at all levels of sport and physical activity, fuelled by continuing stereotypes of women's physical abilities and social roles. Women are frequently segregated involuntarily into different types of sports, events and competitions specifically targeted to women. Women's access to positions of leadership and decision-making is constrained from the local level to the international level. The value placed on women's sport is often lower, resulting in inadequate resources and unequal wages and prizes. In the