

Empowerment of women through sports

■ ANITA MUDLIAR

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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".

Author for correspondence :

ANITA MUDLIAR

Shri Nashikrao Tirpude College of
Physical Education, NAGPUR
(M.S.) INDIA
Email: mudliaranita@gmail.com

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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

media, women's sport is not only marginalized but also often presented in a different style that reflects and reinforces gender stereotypes. Violence against women, exploitation and harassment in sport are manifestations of the perceptions of men's dominance, physical strength and power, which are traditionally portrayed in male sport.

A number of critical elements have been identified for challenging gender discrimination and unequal gender relations, and establishing an enabling environment for gender equality and the empowerment of women, in many different areas, including women and sport. They include improving women's capabilities, through education and health; increasing their access to and control over opportunities and resources, such as employment and economic assets; enhancing their agency and leadership roles; protecting and promoting their human rights and ensuring their security, including freedom from violence.

Over the past decade, there has been a growing understanding that access to and participation in sport and physical education is not only a right in itself, but can also be used to promote a number of important, development goals through facilitating democratic principles, promoting leadership development, and encouraging tolerance and respect, as well as providing access to opportunities and social networks. All areas of development can be influenced by sport, including health, education, employment, social inclusion, political development and peace and security.

International processes :

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) plays a central leadership role in the world of sport, and its policies set standards in international, regional and national sporting events and procedures. In 1994, it requested that the Olympic Charter be amended to include an explicit reference to the need for action on women and sport. This is reflected in the current Charter, adopted in 2004, which states that one of the roles of the Committee 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." In 1995, the International Olympic Committee established a Working Group on Women and Sport, which was elevated to the status of a Commission in 2004.

The International Working Group on Women and Sport, an independent coordinating body of government organizations, aims to be a catalyst, for the advancement and empowerment of women and sport globally. It was established in 1994 at the First World Conference on Women and Sport, held in Brighton, United Kingdom, organized by the British Sports Council and supported by the International Olympic Committee.

The Second International Working Group on Women

and Sport World Conference on Women and Sport took place in Windhoek, Namibia, in 1998. The Third IWG World Conference in Montreal, Canada, in 2002. The Fourth IWG World Conference, held in May 2006 in Kumamoto, Japan, concluded with the Kumamoto Commitment to Collaboration, which expressed participants' commitment to building a collaborative network in order to realize gender equality in and through sport.

In 2001, the first Asian Conference on Women and Sport, held in Osaka, Japan, led to the establishment of the Asian Working Group on Women and Sport (AWG).

The Commonwealth Games Federation also promotes the role of women in sports as participants and as decision-makers. Regulation 6 of its March 2006.

Conclusion:

Gender mainstreaming in sport is essential and requires that sporting bodies and institutions identify and explicitly address the relevant gender perspectives in all areas of their activities, for example, in policy development, planning processes, budget procedures, human resources development-including recruitment, promotion, retention and training and in research and statistics. The main-streaming of gender perspectives into all sport policies and programmes will require a deeper understanding of the barriers women and girls may face in accessing, participating in and benefiting from sport and physical activity, and the identification of ways to address them. For example, establishing appropriate physical resources and infrastructure, developing equitable rules and regulations, and raising awareness on the benefits of sport and the capabilities of women and girls are all useful strategies for bringing about change.

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