Women In Sports Essay, Research Paper

Women in Sports, the Paradigm Shift from Taken-for-Granted to Critical Thinking

Doctor Chandler Gilman once said, In women, inferiority of the locomotive apparatus of physical labour, is apparent in all parts The brain is both absolutely and relatively smaller than in men. Women have an abundant supply of soft and semi-fluid cellular tissue which creates softness and delicacy of mind, low power, nonresistance, passivity and under favourable circumstances, a habit of self-sacrifice. This is one of many taken-for-granted beliefs, which was typical in the past and seen quite frequently up to thirty years ago. Throughout history, women actively participated in sports in a patriarchal society and the viewpoint was that women were depicted as weaker and not as capable of physical activity, that their role in sports was limited to spectatoring. Women thirty years ago and to this current day, are fighting to shred off taken-for-granted assumptions of women not capable of physical activity, and to observe females in a new critical light, that they are equal to their male counterparts in sports. To see the paradigm shift from the taken-for-granted to critical, it will be shown through the historical, present and different and new ways to keep on thinking critically, in order to maintain a future of women in sports. As well there will be a discussion throughout on the re-thinking of my personal assumptions of women in sports, all of this will attempt to prove that women have certainly come a long way in the last thirty years and will continue to reach new heights from a critical perspective.

Throughout much of history, women have been perceived as inferior to men and have been denied access to equal opportunities in most social institutions, including sport. The study of female involvement in sport reveals an interesting example of social change, both within and across cultures. This social change has involved cultural definitions of femininity; the normative behaviour expected of males and females in all social institutions; the number and kind of sport opportunities provided to women, compared with men; and varying rates of cultural change across societies. So what is the history of women s involvement in sport? The reason and occasions for participation have varied from religious festivals to symbolic achievements of adulthood to recreation for health and fun. In the past women were forbidden to participate in or to even view the Olympic Games of ancient Greece, therefore women established their own program of sports competition, which they named the Heraen Games after Hera, the wife of Zeus. It was considered tolerable for women to keep healthy in order to be good breeders. The glories of true athletic success were reserved for the men of ancient Greece, and the winners became religious, political and cultural heroes. Women were not part of what was considered to be real sport but were sporting nonetheless. In the American colonial experience, a similar pattern emerges of women s participation. Women were restricted by the patriarchs of their communities in the games they could play, but evidence from journals, diaries, letters, and newspapers of the times indicates that the ladies of some wealth included dancing, spectatoring of horse and boat races, skating, sleighing, kolven and golf. The physical activities were socially defined as different from those of men. One activity shared by both sexes was horseback riding. The game of cricket for women emerged in the 1700s, and there is some evidence that colonial women held foot races.

The next part of history that is to be investigated is the mid-ninetieth century Victorian era, in which the arguments against female participation in sport are often based on a set of beliefs. Victorians believed that the ideal woman should perform her patriotic duties of attracting a mate, bearing and rearing children, and serving her husband. Any social activity that might restrict or interfere with these responsibilities was discouraged or prevented. Medical and journalistic opinions perpetuated the myth of the frail female, and early feminists argued that to sweat and strain was unfeminine. To further elaborate on the medical opinion of the past, early medical practitioners thought sport posed hazards for the weaker gender. Lenskyj (1984) cites this turn-of-the-century opinion: Kenealy, a female doctor, commented in 1899 on: the passing of a dainty, elusive quality in the face of the athletic woman, whose bicycle face was characterized by muscular tension where formerly there had been sympathy and tenderness. The arguments were primarily based on two unfounded sets of beliefs. First, people drew on physiological, biological, and medical opinions (usually expressed by males) that sport was harmful to women. Second, people sought to perpetuate culturally based definitions to ideal feminine dress and behaviour. Women often sanctioned these definitions. These beliefs resulted in stereotypes that became part of the informal gender-role socialization process of succeeding generations. These stereotypes governed women s involvement in sport. Sometimes these beliefs were institutionalized as bizarre local laws. For example, it is illegal, according to local law, for women in Nacogdoches, Texas, to wink at men at a track meet. In Colby, Kansas, a woman cannot wear a hat while playing golf. In Joplin, Missouri, it is against the law to knit at football games. A brief overview of some of the important historical events just discussed and others could be seen in Table 1, which is seen below. It is evident that women participated in some sports throughout history and were excluded by males, but however by observing the Table, the greatest changes for women in sports occurred in the Twentieth century, especially in the last thirty years. So what is the cause for the increase of females participating in sports in the last thirty years? It is due to the social structure starting to become more critical and look beyond taken-for-granted assumptions. Below are reasons why and how in the present social change has occurred.

Female participation in sports has been done over the centuries, but has increased tremendously in the last thirty years to the present. Frank Deford noted in 1996 that what has happened in the last generation to women in sports has been nothing short of revolutionary and those who would seek to understand the 21st century woman dismiss sports at their peril. Frank and many others like him believe that since the early 1970s, the single most dramatic change in the world of sport has been the increased participation of girls and women. The main reasons for the increased participation are new opportunities, government legislation demanding equal treatment for women in public programs, the women s movement, the health and fitness movement and increased media coverage of women in sports, in which all have developed and used a critical state of mind.

As mentioned above, the primary reason more girls and women participate in sports today is that there are more opportunities than ever before. Prior to the mid-1970s, many girls and women did not play sports for one simple reason: teams and programs didn t exist. Young women today may not realize it, but few of their mothers had the opportunities they now enjoy in their schools and communities. One distinct example of an opportunity for women to participate in sports is the Olympic games. In the past, women were not included in the ancient Olympic games, and female athletes did not participate in the first modern Olympic games in 1896. This was partly due to Pierre de Coubertin, the founder and first president of the modern Olympics. If you observe the Table directly below, it is clear

to see the taken-for-granted beliefs of women in sports from de Coubertin perspective.

Despite the views of de Coubertin, the Paris Olympic Organizing Committee introduced competition for women in the socially accepted games of tennis and golf, and 12 participants competed in 1904. Since 1904 there has been a steady, slow increase in both the number of events for women and the number of female entrants (Krotee, 1988). Great variation still exists in the number of women sent by each nation. Semyonov (1981) found that the participation rates of women increase as the fertility rate in a country decreases and as the percentage of women in the labour force increases. In effect, these indices reflect social change with respect to women s rights and the increasing opportunities for women in a given society. Therefore, a more critical approach was taken to allow females the equal opportunity of participating in the Olympics. Also, teams and programs developed over the past two decades have uncovered and cultivated interests ignored or taken-for-granted in the past. Girls and women still do not receive an equal share of sport resources in most organizations and communities, but their increased participation clearly has gone hand in hand with the development of new opportunities. One example, of this increase participation could be seen in the Miller Lite Report. Since the middle of the 1970s, many more girls and young women have begun participating in competitive sport. The Miller Lite Report (Miller Brewing Company, 1983) cited statistics from the Women s Sports Foundation, which showed that the percentage of female high school athletes increased from 7% to 35% from 1972 to 1984. Similarly, from 1972 to 1986 the number of high school girls in interscholastic sport increased from 300, 000 to 1,800,000; and at the college level, from 32,000 to 150,000. There has also been an increase from 5.6 to 6.9 sports per college available to women between 1977 and 1984. In contrast, the increase for males was from 7.3 to 7.4 teams (McPherson, 225-6). With this increase between 1977 and 1984, it could be predicted that these numbers are even larger today. The majority of these new opportunities owe their existence to some form of political pressure or government legislation.

Another current example of going past taken-for-granted, to achieve equality in sports was due to government regulations. People tend to complain about government regulations, but literally millions of girls and women would not be playing sports today if it were not for liberal local and national legislation mandating new opportunities. Various policies and rules have come into existence as a result of concerted efforts to raise legal issues and apply pressure on political representatives. These efforts have been made by individuals and groups committed to the struggle to achieve fairness in sports. One important policy which affected women in sports in the seventies to the present, was the American policy Title IX, the 1972 federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in federally funded educational institutions. Which could be seen below. Combined with the advocacy efforts of the women s sports movement, this legislation had a significant impact by expanding physical activity opportunities for girls and women and changing attitudes about the appropriateness of sports for females, to dispel take-for-granted beliefs. During the decade and a half that followed the passage of Title IX, the number of girls participating in high school rose from 294, 015 in 1971 to 1,836, 356 in 1986-87. Another study reported that 30.5 percent of high-school girls took part in interscholastic sports in 1990-1991, compared to less than one percent of high-school girls who participated in such sports in 1971, before the enactment of Title IX. These figures not only reflect an unprecedented increase, but also demonstrate that when girls sporting involvement in vigorously supported by social institutions, they participate in record numbers.

The worldwide women s movement over the past thirty years to the current has emphasized that females are enhanced as human beings when they have opportunities to develop their intellectual and physical abilities. This idea has encouraged women of all ages to pursue their interests in sports, and it has led to the creation of new interests among those who, in the past, never would have thought of participating in sports. The women s movement also helped redefine occupational and family roles for women, and this has provided more women with the time and resources needed for sport participation. As the ideals of the women s have become more widely accepted, and as male control over lives and bodies of women have weakened, more women have been choosing to play sports. More change is needed, especially in poor countries and among low-income women, but the choices now available to women are less restricted than they once were. What started out, as the radical thinking of a few now has become a widely accepted global effort to promote and guarantee sport participation opportunities for girls and women.

Another factor going past the taken-for-granted beliefs since the mid-1970s, is the increase of awareness of health and fitness, which has encouraged women to become involved in many physical activities, including sports. Although much of the emphasis in this movement has been tied to the traditional feminine ideal of being thin and sexually attractive to men, there also has been an emphasis on the development of physical strength and competence. Muscles have become more widely accepted as desirable attributes among women of all ages. Traditional standards still exist, as illustrated by many clothing fashions and marketing strategies associated with women s fitness. But many women have moved beyond those standards and given priority to physical competence and the good feelings that go with rather than trying to look like anorexic models in fashion magazines. Furthermore, many transnational corporations, such as Nike and Reebok, recently have bandwagon to the fitness and sport bandwagon. Even though their ads are designed to sell clothes, shoes, and even sweat-proof makeup, they present strong messages intended to appeal to women s enthusiasm for sports as a symbol of female liberation and power. As well sport participation has been encouraged in the process.

Even though women s sports are not covered as often or in the same detail as men s sports, girls and women can see and read about the achievements of women athletes in a wider range of sports than ever before. The wide range of sports could be seen through such athletes as the United States soccer superstar Mia Hamm, who could be seen below in Picture 1, or Florence Griffith Joyner, an amazing track superstar, seen in Picture 2 below, or lastly Manon Rheume in Picture 3, was the first female to play in the National Hockey

League. Seeing women athletes on television and reading about them in newspapers and magazines encourages girls and women to be active as athletes themselves. When growing up seeing female athletes on the television like the Canadian Olympic rower Silken Laumann, it would motivate and make myself realize that if she could go to the Olympics so can I, she was a role model. As girls grow up, they often want to see what is possible before they experiment with and develop their own athletic skills. This is the case because many of them still receive mixed messages about becoming serious athletes; their vision of the athletic woman gets clouded by swimsuit models in Sports Illustrated and other powerful images emphasizing the need to be thin and sexually appealing to men. Under these cultural conditions, the media coverage of everything from professional women s basketball to synchronized swimming helps girls and young women conclude that sports are human activities, not male activities.

Media companies, like their corporate counterparts that sell sporting goods, have begun to realize that women really do make up half the world s population, and, therefore, half the world s consumers. NBC, the U.S. television network that covered the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, experienced great ratings success when it targeted women during its 175 hours of coverage. Many men complained about this new approach, since they liked it better when their interests were the only ones that mattered in sports media coverage. But we can expect to see the real existence of women athletes and spectators acknowledged in the media coverage of the future, and that coverage clearly will change the images that all of us associate with sport and athletic achievement. The real existence of women athletes is already on the road to equal coverage to their male counterparts. For example take the Sydney 2000 Olympics which was covered quite extensively in the Toronto Star, it s coverage shows the same amount of females to males covered, especially in the Olympic Review which was on Monday, October 2, 2000, it recognized such athletes as Anne Montminy and Steve Gilles. It is definitely clear to say that women have made superb strides in the last thirty years to the present in all areas of sports and that they cannot be denied equal sport participation opportunities. So how exactly can females continue this critical approach to sports and what will be the women s stand in sports in the future.

Involvement in physical activity and sport is so beneficial for females of all ages, it is important to ensure that girls and women are given sufficient opportunities to develop their physical skills and to continue to think critically and look beyond the taken-for-granted beliefs of the past. Specific recommendations for fostering and increasing girls participation in physical activity could change the direction for women in sports in the future. One way to change the direction of women in sports positively is to eliminate gender-typing whenever possible. Activities should never be labeled as girl s games or boys games, feminine or masculine. When children come to school with preconceptions about girls games and boys games, teachers may wish to introduce new activities that aren t already gender-typed (e.g., hackey-sack, croquet and so on). Leaders should avoid using sex as a basis for forming physical activity groups. If children need to be grouped, use criteria that are gender-neutral (e.g. kids with brothers versus kids with sisters etc.). Girls and boys need to work and play together, starting from an early age. Arbitrarily segregating girls and boys may create hostility and perpetuate power imbalances, and although there has been a great deal of recent interest in gender-segregated schools, there is as yet no direct evidence that gender-segregated physical activity is desirable. The important consideration is to be sure that all children have adequate preparation. It is easiest for both sexes to play together and learn in small, non-competitive groups, where children know each other well and have the prerequisite skills. Another step to success is that professionals must actively intervene in the face of discrimination. When adults observe inequities or gender stereotyping on the playing field or in the classroom, it is often best to openly confront issues of sexism, prejudice or discrimination. Children should be encouraged to develop critical thinking about gender-based biases. Coaches and physical educators could play an influential role for women in sports as well. They should give girls equal access and attention. Both girls and boys should play the important and interesting positions in a game (e.g., pitcher, goalie, forward). In addition, both should receive feedback to help improve their skills.

There are even more ways to maintain critical thinking. Another way to improve stereotypes is for all of us to challenge it whenever possible. When teachers choose games and lead activities, a female teacher might play football, a male teacher might jump rope. Physical educators, exercise leaders and coaches should develop and implement new models of sport and physical activity. For example, professionals can emphasize learning new skills, having fun, co-operating and making friends. Although competitive skills and attitudes may be a valuable preparation for today s working world, competition should not be allowed to displace other sports values and experiences. One last step to success is that parents, coaches and physical activity leaders should avoid the use of gender-typed language. For instance, do not refer to athletes as he or use generic male or mean both males and females. It may be helpful to tell children stories that allow them to imagine situations where traditional gender roles are reversed. At a young age, children may seem resistant to change, but adults can provide them with non-sexist information that they will rely on as they mature. If everyone maintains this critical stance, women s sports, although on the way to equality, could eventually become equal to their male counterparts, or possibly surpass them. Women in the future will probably receive more funds to operate and expand competitive sport programs, there will be more competitive sports teams, and for example the Women s National Basketball Association is a new competitive sports league. As well, women will receive more power, coaching opportunities and jobs in sports, which in the past were usually reserved for males. These are just a few examples of how women in sports are starting to rise, due to the social change and are starting to grow further. If everyone continues to follow this critical framework, than women, will be not taken-for-granted in the sense that they can t do sports because they are weak and fragile, but they are just as capable to their male counterparts.

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