



ISSN: 2456-0057
IJPNPE 2018; 3(2): 472-476
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www.journalofsports.com
Received: 15-05-2018
Accepted: 07-06-2018

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Women in Olympics

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Abstract

The adverse topic of women in sports stems from society's disregard to viewing women as persons. Women were, and in other parts of the world continue to be viewed as property of men and have no significant role in society. Being allowed into the Olympics was a step in the right direction for women across the world, but it was meager attempt equality. Women were still restricted by what events they were allowed to compete in, how they were trained and coached and even limited as to what they could wear. This article will evolve around the subject of female integration and participation in athletics in the Olympic Games, analyzing the initial difficulties they encountered, the role played by sports institutions as well as international federations and the Olympic International Committee.

Keywords: female, athletic, Olympic, game

Introduction

The ancient Olympic Games, held between 776 BC and 393 AC, were a religious sports festival carried out every four years, in Olympia, in honour of Zeus. They were the most important Pan-Hellenic games, having been forbidden by the emperor Theodosius I, who considered the games a pagan cult. Only men and boys were allowed to participate in this sports event.

Pierre de Coubertin, is considered the founder of the modern Olympic Games. This young Frenchman, who believed in a life philosophy based on the harmony of body, will and mind, uniting sports, culture and education, aimed at reviving the ancient Olympic Games. It was under this goal that Coubertin organized an International Congress in 1894 at the University of Sorbonne, in Paris, where he presented his proposal to revive the Olympic Games. His decision to do so was taken on the 23rd of June 1884. It was unanimously agreed that the first modern Olympic Games should be held in Olympia Greece, two years later.

Since then, the Olympic Games started to be organized every four years. However, when Pierre de Coubertin idealized to reorganize the ancient Games, he did not do so while envisioning an equal participation from men and women. His position regarding this matter is well known, the games should be exclusively for men. Coubertin's initial position regarding the participation of women in the Games started to change in the second edition of the modern Olympic Games, held in Paris, in 1900. Since then, female participation has been growing with the objective of achieving the much-desired gender equality.

Women first took part in the Olympic Games in Paris in 1900, four years after the first Olympic Games of the modern era in Athens. Despite the reticence of the reviver of the modern Games, Pierre de Coubertin, 22 women out of a total of 997 athletes competed in just five sports: tennis, sailing, croquet, equestrian and golf. But only golf and tennis had events for women only. Female participation has increased steadily since then, with women accounting for more than 44 per cent of the participants at the 2012 Games in London, compared with 23 per cent at the Games in 1984 in Los Angeles and just over 13 per cent at the 1964 Games in Tokyo. In the last 20 years, the IOC has also increased the number of women's events on the Olympic programme, in cooperation with the International Federations (IFs) and the Organising Committees. With the addition of women's boxing, the 2012 Olympic Games in London were the first in which women competed in every sport on the Olympic programme. Also, since 1991, all new sports wishing to be included on the Olympic programme must feature women's events.

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A century of opportunities

With the revival of the modern Olympic Games, women, similarly as to what had happened in the ancient Games, were not allowed to participate. There was however the case of a Greek athlete, Melpomema, who wanted to participate in the marathon during the 1896 Athens Olympic Games but she was banned by the organisation.

This question was however changed in the following edition of the Games. In the early 20th century women had very few opportunities outside the household and family sphere. The number of women that dedicated themselves to practicing sports was very small. It was said that women ought to be fragile, modest and reluctant to exert themselves. Those who did practice sports should not compete, and their clothing was limited to what was socially accepted at the time, there were no exceptions.

Women mostly practiced elegant sports, some even nicknamed “ladylike” such as: tennis, croquet, cycling, ice skating or golf. Aristocratic women also dedicated some of their time to equestrian sports and sailing. The practice of physically demanding sports such as hockey, cricket, swimming or athletics was not socially accepted. In an interview to the Portuguese weekly newspaper *Expresso*, a Portuguese athlete, Helena Villalva, who had been selected to the female gymnastics team in the 1952 Olympic Games, recalls that “(...) female gym teachers taught sitting at a desk, wearing a coat and foot warmers” (*Expresso*, 13th August 2016).

Many of the sports we know today started appearing around this time. Team-based sports were mostly directed at men, with women dedicating themselves to individual sports, sacrificing competitiveness for elegance. With time, they also started participating in gymnastics exhibitions and swimming, gradually women practicing sports started to become socially accepted.

Slowly, they also stopped wearing corsets, so they could wear shorter skirts and began wearing their hair loose and shorter. Technological development and the end of the First World War also caused a mindset shift and women started leaving their households, replacing men in factories, offices and workshops. The rhythm of the Belle Epoque was left behind as the world entered the “Roaring Twenties”.

The British athlete Charlotte Cooper (1870-1966) won the female Olympic Tennis Tournament, becoming the first female Olympic Champion in history. She also added to this feat the victory in mixed doubles, and the North American Margaret Ives Abbot (1878-1955), was the champion of the female Golf Tournament, consisting of nine holes. Considering that the events took place in different venues, and that the Olympics were the Programme of the World Fair, and even though she was not officially part of the North American delegation, she signed up for the tournament and won. Later on, it was known that Margaret Abbot was never made aware that she had been the first female Olympic Champion of the United States of America (Leder, 1996: 13).

A new chapter had begun with the consecration of the first female Olympic Champions. Four years later, the Olympics were held in the North American city of St. Louis and the only competition opened to women was archery. The Games were again part of the World Fair and as such they lasted four and a half months. 651 athletes competed from the 1st of July to the 23rd of November. Only six of them were women, and all of them were North American. The great champion was Lida Howell (1859-1939), who conquered three Olympic Champion titles, two of them individual and one in a team.

This edition of the Olympic Games had, for the first time, three different types of medals to be awarded to the top three competitors: gold, silver and bronze.

The 1908 Olympic Games, which were initially planned to be held in Rome, Italy, were held in London instead due to the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1906. Those Games had the longest duration so far, spanning across six months and four days, from the 27th of April to the 31st of October. There were 2 008 competing athletes, 37 of which were women who participated in archery, tennis and ice skating, a winter sport that first appeared in the Games 16 years before the first winter edition, which only happened in 1924, in Chamonix, France.

Four years later, the number of participants grew yet again. Of a total of 2 407 athletes, 48 were women competing in aquatic sports (swimming and diving) and in female and mixed doubles tennis competitions. For the first time, athletes from all five continents were present, but it was also known for including art competitions: literature, sculpture, painting, architecture and music. Curiously the author who won the literary prize was Pierre de Coubertin under the pseudonym of Georges Hohrod.

The 1916 Olympic Games were the first Games in history to be cancelled since the revival of the modern Olympic Movement. The outbreak of the First World War and the conflicts on French soil had already forced the International Olympic Committee to relocate to Switzerland in 1915, a neutral country, where it has remained since.

During the post-war years, countries started to slowly recover from the economic and social impact caused by the First World War, but the interwar years, organisation and progress are felt overall. It is also a time of change for women, which is inevitably felt both in sports and in the Olympic Games. More women participated in the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games. Out of 2 626 athletes, 63 were female, and this number duplicated four years later. In the 1924 Paris Games, out of 3 089 athletes, 135 were women, who have also started to participate in fencing competitions. Later on, in Amsterdam, women started to participate in athletics and gymnastics. The number of participating women naturally rose up to 277 women out of 2 883 athletes.

The Olympic Games returned to North America with some innovations, such as the first Olympic Villages. However, these were only available for male athletes, as the organisation claimed they had no logistical conditions to also accommodate women. The participation in the tenth edition of the Games, in Los Angeles, 1932, was greatly reduced: only 1 206 men and 126 women competed for the much-wanted medals across the 16 days that the competition lasted.

The following edition of the Games made history for very different reasons, namely political ones. During the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games participation rates increased. Women started to compete in ski, another sport which would later on become part of the Winter Games programme. Out of 3963 athletes competing 331 were women.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games were cancelled. Since a great percentage of the male population had been mobilized for military service, women were called in to replace men in day-to-day tasks.

After a 12-year hiatus, the world naturally changed, and that change would reflect itself in the next editions of the Olympic Games. Women slowly began to conquer more space and prominence in sporting venues and society began accepting them.

From the 1948 London Olympic Games to the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, women slowly earn their own place in the Olympic Program, increasing their participation in number and in sports. They started to compete in canoeing, equestrian sports and for the first time in a team sport: volleyball.

In 1956, on the 7th edition of the Winter Olympic Games held in Cortina D'Ampezo, Italy, the Olympic Oath was taken by a woman for the first time, the Italian skier Giuliana Chenal-Minuzzo (1931 - ...). She, who four years before, had won a bronze medal in the 1952 Oslo Winter Olympic Games, in the downhill competition and eight years later, in the 1960 Squaw Valley Winter Games, would win another bronze medal, this time in the giant slalom competition.

In the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games, the Mexican athlete Enriqueta Basilio (1948 - ...) that competed in 800 meters hurdles also made history by being the first woman to light the Olympic Cauldron (in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games a tower to light a flame was included for the first time, which became a trademark of all Games) and four years later, in the 1972 Munich Games, which were marked by an appalling terrorist attack (eleven athletes belonging to the Israel team were made hostage by the Palestinian group Black September. The negotiations between the group and the local police were unsuccessful and all hostages were killed.), also registered new participation records: the total number of athletes was over 7 000 and the women competing over 1 000 (IOC Factsheet, 2013).

In 1991, the IOC defined that to be included in the Olympic Programme sports have to include women. Until the end of the 20th century, women kept showing their ability to assert themselves in diverse areas of society. Some examples are Margaret Thatcher becoming prime-minister of Great Britain, Sandra Day O'Connor becoming the first woman in the Supreme Court of the United States of America and Valentina Tereshkova becoming the first female astronaut and the first woman to go to space.

In the Games, women started being allowed to compete in rowing, basketball, handball, hockey, shooting, cycling, table tennis, sailing, badminton, judo, football and softball. In the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, there were 3 512 women athletes in the first Games to reach 10 318 athletes.

With the beginning of the 21st century, women's struggle for equality continued, inside and outside of sports. In the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, which marked a hundred years since women started their participation, the relay of the Olympic Flame in the Stadium during the opening ceremony was done exclusively by women, all of them Australian athletes. Cathy Freeman (1973 - ...), the first Aboriginal athlete to represent Australia, had the honour of lit the Olympic Cauldron in the opening ceremony, in a clear sign of integration of ethnical minorities in the biggest multisport event in the world. Women were then present in even more sport disciplines: weightlifting, modern pentathlon, taekwondo, triathlon, wrestling, boxing and rugby.

Equal participation for women in the Olympics took a century to be achieved, this happened for the first time in the 2012 London Olympic Games, where for the first time women were allowed to compete in boxing. However although women participated in all sports included in the Olympic Programme, the number of events was still slightly under parity, at 47, 4%, with 16 more.

One hundred and sixteen years after the first edition of the modern Olympic Games, in which only men were allowed, the 2012 London Games made history by being the first Games in which all delegations included female athletes.

The percentage of countries that included female athletes grew from 2% in Paris (1900), reached 45% in the Olympic Games of Antwerp (1920), 54% in Amsterdam (1928), 70% in Montreal (1976), 85% in Atlanta (1996), 96% in Beijing (2008) and finally reached 100% in the London Olympic Games (2012).

As to the number of athletes participating in the Olympic Games, the 31st edition of the Games, held in the Brazilian city Rio de Janeiro, in 2016, registered a new participation record with 5 176 women out of 11 444 athletes.

The percentage of women is not yet equal, albeit by a small margin. Between 1900 and 1920, the percentage of women amongst the total athletes of the Games was between 1% and 2%. The numbers began increasing in Antwerp (1920) when the percentage hit 10%, and in Montreal (1976) it got to 21%. In the Atlanta Games (1996) 34% of all athletes were women and in Beijing (2008), 42%. In the last two editions (2012 and 2016), the percentages were 44% and 45%, respectively.

For Tokyo 2020 the International Olympic Committee aims to bring these figures closer together, foreseeing a participation ratio of 48,8% with five new sports to be included in the Olympic Programme – baseball/softball, climbing, karate and surf, which will have male, female and mixed competitions.

By confirming this purpose, the goals defined by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in their strategic document – Olympic Agenda 2020, one of which was to achieve an equal participation among men and women in the Olympic Games, are very close to being achieved.

The Winter Olympic Games

Since their revival, summer and winter sports were not distinguished in the Olympic Programme, and as such you could find some winter sports such as ice skating and ski in the Programme of the so called "Summer Olympics". The International Winter Sports Week held in the French city of Chamonix, in 1924, was two years later recognized by the IOC as the first edition of the Olympic Winter Games. In this first edition, both summer and winter Olympic Games were assigned to the same organising country. Until the 1936 Olympic Games they were even held in the same year, in 1936 Germany held the summer edition in Berlin and the winter edition in Partenkirchen.

After an interruption due to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the Games started being assigned to different countries, but they were still organized in the same year. After 1986, the IOC decided to intersperse the summer and winter editions, always held in even years. As such, the 1992 Albertville Games were succeeded by the 1994 Lillehammer Games. Since then, they continue to follow a four-year cycle.

Gender equality in the events in the Programme of the Winter Olympic Games was achieved only in the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games, where men and women competed for the same number of medals. In 2018 there was a new imbalance with 49 competitions for men, 44 for women, and 9 in mixed teams. Women have been participating in the Winter Olympic Games since their first edition with a ratio of 4,3%, which has been growing up to the last Games, in 2018, in the South Korean town of PyeongChang, with a percentage of 42,5%.

The IOC set the following objectives

The NOCs, IFs, National Federations and sporting bodies belonging to the Olympic Movement must set the objective of reserving at least 20% of decision-making positions for women (particularly in all executive and legislative bodies) within their structures by the end of 2005. This objective was

not achieved in a certain number of NOCs. Twenty-seven NOCs (of 135 who participated in the IOC survey) have 30 per cent or more women on their Executive Board. 62 NOCs have less than 20% women on their Executive Boards and 10 NOCs still have no women on their Executive Board. However, a first objective (having at least 10% of women in decision-making positions by December 2000) was met by more than 61% of NOCs and 52% of IFs. The IOC is nevertheless aware that such an objective can be attained only in successive stages. A number of NOCs and IFs have already shown their willingness to work on achieving parity between men and women.

Women in the IOC

The first two women, the Venezuelan Flor Isava Fonseca and Norwegian Pirjo Haeggman were co-opted as IOC members in 1981. As of May 2014, 24 women are active IOC members out of 106 (around 22.6%). Four women are honorary members.

In 1990, for the first time in the history of the IOC, a woman was elected on to the Executive Board (Flor Isava Fonseca), and in 1997, another woman, Anita DeFrantz, became an IOC Vice-President (1997-2001). In 2004 Gunilla Lindberg was also elected as IOC Vice-President. Olympic champion Nawal El Mouta wakel from Morocco was elected as a member of the IOC Executive Board in 2008 and IOC Vice-President in July 2012. . In 2013, four women (26.6%) are members of the IOC Executive Board: Nawal El Moutawakel, Gunilla Lindberg, Claudia Bokel and Anita L. DeFrantz.

More and more women are chairing IOC commissions, such as the Coordination Commissions for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, the PyeongChang 2018 Olympic Winter Games and the 2nd Winter Youth Olympic Games in 2016 in Lillehammer, as well as the Women and Sport Commission and Athletes' Commission.

Milestones

- At the first modern Olympic Games in Athens 1896, no women competed, as de Coubertin felt that their inclusion would be "impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and incorrect."
- Women first competed at the 1900 Paris Games. Women were allowed to compete in lawn tennis and golf, though there were three French women competing in croquet and there was at least one woman sailor as part of mixed crews. It is commonly believed that first woman to win an Olympic event was England's Charlotte Cooper, who won the tennis singles title, however Swiss sailor Hélène de Pourtalès won a gold medal as part of a team in sailing earlier than this. (see more firsts, and more on Pourtalès)
- Here are the first women competitors in the Modern Olympic Games of 1900, in chronological order:
 - May 22 - Helen de Pourtales, Switzerland (Yachting)
 - May 31 - Elvira Guerra, France (Equestrian). There may have been another woman also competing in the equestrian events.
 - Jun 28 - Mme Ohnier, Madame Depres, and Mme Filleaul Brohy, France (Croquet)
 - July 11 - winner Charlotte Cooper, Great Britain (Tennis) plus other female competitors.
 - Oct 3 - winner Margaret Abbott, USA (Golf) plus other female competitors.
- Women competed in swimming events for the first time in 1912, but none of them was from America, which did not allow its female athletes to compete in events without

long skirts. The first women's swimming gold medal was won by the Australian Sarah 'Fanny' Durack, who won the 100m freestyle in 1912.

- In 1928, women competed in track and field events for the first time. The first woman to win an Olympic gold medal in track and field was Poland's Halina Konopacka when she broke her own world record with a throw of 39.62 metres to win the discus at Amsterdam 1928. In the 800m track event, it was claimed that many collapsed at the end of the race (which has been disputed), leading to the event being banned until 1960.
- Women's shooting events were first included in the Olympics in 1984. There were three events, three position rifle, air rifle and sport pistol.
- The first Arab Muslim woman to claim an Olympic gold medal was Morocco's Nawal El Moutawakel when she won the women's 400 metres hurdles at LA 1984.
- In 1996, a women's only sport was introduced - Softball (softball is no longer part of the Olympic program)
- The 2000 Olympics was the first time that women were allowed to compete in the Olympics in weightlifting.
- A women's wrestling competition was introduced in 2004. Women compete in freestyle wrestling, but not greco-roman.
- There are only two Olympic sports where men and women compete directly against each other; equestrian and sailing, though in sailing it is now only in one event. Tennis (in early Games and since 2012) and Badminton (since 1996) have mixed doubles events.
- Qatar, Brunei and Saudi Arabic all sent female participants to the London 2012 Olympic Games, meaning now every national Olympic committee has sent women to the Olympic Games.
- With the addition of women's boxing at the 2012 London Games, there are men and women competing in all Olympic sports. However, there are still two sporting *disciplines* that are solely for women: synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics.
- In cycling in 2012, for the first time men and women competed in the same number of events in all cycling disciplines. However, women have shorter distances for some events.
- In Rio 2016, 44% of medals were awarded in women's events, the highest ever. In 1984, the figure was only just over 25%.

Great Female Olympic Achievements

- In 1948, Dutch athlete Fanny Blankers-Koen won four gold medals, the equivalent of the medals Jesse Owens had won twelve years earlier. She held the world record in the high and long jumps, but did not compete in those as the rules prohibited women from competing in more than three individual events.
- British Equestrian, Lorna Johns tone was 70 years and 5 days old when she rode at the 1972 Games, thus being the oldest woman ever to compete at an Olympic Games..
- Soviet athlete Maria Gorokhovskaya - unhindered by the limits set on female competitors at earlier Games - in 1952 set a record for most medals won by a woman in one Olympics, with two golds and five silvers.
- US Shooter Margaret Murdock won a silver medal in the rifle competition (which at that time included men and women) at the 1976 Olympics. She was the first woman to win a medal in shooting at the Olympic Games.
- Canoeist Josefa Idem became the first woman to compete

in eight Olympic Games, eventually reaching the final of the K1-500m event at the 2012 Olympics at the age of 48. She competed for West Germany in 1988, then for Italy from 1992 until 2012.

Introduction of women sports in Olympics

- * 1900 Tennis Golf
- * 1904 Archery
- * 1908 Tennis
- * Skating
- * 1912 Aquatics
- * 1924 Fencing
- * 1928 Athletics, Gymnastics
- * 1936 Skiing
- * 1948 Canoe-Kayak
- * 1952 Equestrian
- * 1964 Volleyball, Luge
- * 1976 Rowing, Basketball, Handball
- * 1980 Hockey
- * 1984 Shooting, Cycling
- * 1988 Tennis
- * Table Tennis, Sailing
- * 1992 Badminton,
- * 1996 Football, Softball
- * 1998 Curling, Ice Hockey
- * 2000 Weightlifting, Modern Pentathlon, Taekwondo,
- * 2002 Bobsleigh
- * 2004 Wrestling
- * 2012 Boxing 2016 Golf
- * Rugby

Conclusion

This essay confirms that female Olympic athletes have been true ambassadors of the changes that happen in society, not only from a point of view of practicing and excelling at sports but also in the roles of women in our contemporary society. They became stronger, more muscular, training hard under the same conditions as men so they could achieve their goals and glory. Many times, they have dual careers, balancing studies with sports, or the role of wife and mother in their families. Many women have helped break barriers regarding racial, sexual orientation, cultural and religious issues all over the world, winning not only medals and glory but also the hearts of many admirers.

The Olympic women of the 20th century who frequently faced the social and cultural traditions and conventions that discouraged, and sometimes even prohibited, their participation in the Olympic Games forged a path that allowed female athletes of the 21st century to compete under fully equal rights in the Olympic Games.

Sport has increasingly become a more important and more visible way of changing the roles of women and documenting their progress in the world. Since their first participation in the 1900 Olympic Games up till now, female Olympic Athletes have been attracting the attention of the world with their strength, determination and beauty. It is expected that in the next editions of the Games the percentage of men and women will be the same, thus achieving the 50% target set by the 2020 Agenda.

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