Women and Sport

WOMEN’S CONTRIBUTION TO SPORT IN THE 20TH CENTURY

In this article, I intend to evaluate women’s contribution to sport in the 20th century, with particular emphasis on the following elements:

- As women broke into the world of sport, which was initially reserved for men only, they brought with them the cultural values they had learnt over previous centuries.
- As they did so, they triggered a debate which helped to define the “female difference”, or “difference” in general, and to set out strategies to corroborate that philosophy.

The theory adopted here is the feminist view of “difference”. According to Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley (1996), feminist theories can be placed into one of four categories: difference, inequality, oppression and the third wave. “Difference” theories are based on the principle that accepting differences amounts to perpetuating inequality and oppression, which is why they have been criticized in many quarters. However, these ideas have recently been seen as a way of viewing people as individuals rather than in accordance with their relationships with others (Balbo, 1999; Bochetti, 1996; Subirats 1998). They suggest that women should be understood on the basis of their experiences, powers of perception, culture and traditions, etc. Although women, of course, live in a patriarchal society, “difference” theories nevertheless make it possible to highlight the individuality of women and, more broadly, of any person who does not match up to the precepts imposed by hegemonic stereotypes. Hence, without forgetting sexual inequalities and the oppression inflicted by men, these theories enable us to go further and to consider practically the specific contribution women have made to society. “Difference” theories are at odds with dualist approximations, analysis of which is polarized, and open the door to “a new form of relationship and values in society” (Subirats, 1998).

Two sports cultures

First of all, we should consider how women have introduced new disciplines and activities to the world of sport. Sports participation surveys tend to show, with varying emphasis in different countries, how women have managed to avoid imitating male behaviour when becoming involved in sport and, instead, have moulded their own social parameters.

Generally speaking, more men participate in sport than women. As a rule, sport is associated with traditionally “masculine” values (competition, the desire to be the best, strength, power, the desire for success, etc.). For this reason, many women who have not benefited from any kind of sports education are not attracted by sport. Statistics show not only that fewer women participate in sport, but that they are also less interested in it. The main differences are related to competition, or people’s understanding of competition and whether or not it is practised in a certain discipline. Men are much more interested in competition than women. They are also more likely to belong to a sports club or federation. However, the opposite is true where non-competitive sport is concerned.

Differences are also evident in sports that are more popular with one gender than the other. Men prefer contact sports with a competitive element, often synonymous with danger and aggression, such as football, handball, basketball and cycling. Women, meanwhile, favour sports that require agility, teamwork, a sense of rhythm and relaxation, such as swimming, aerobics and keep-fit. Other indicators (frequency of participation, sports facilities, involvement in adventure sports, etc) show similar trends, i.e. significant differences between men and women.

Quantitative studies tend to back up the differences that emerge from these general statistics. For example from these women have broken into a sport originally reserved for men, they have not imitated any aspect of the behaviour of their male counterparts but, on the contrary, have developed their own behavioural patterns.

According to Montse Martin (1998), whose ideas are based on those of Bourdieu, individuals who practise a sport define a sphere in which various types of interaction take place and in which different conflicts are generated by the capital of which they are the bearers (economic, cultural, social or symbolic capital, specific to each situation). Every sphere is unique. Women, for example, create different spheres to
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women, whether in top-level competitive sports or in sports practised purely for relaxation. It is also possible to draw a similar interpretation from the results of the comparative study carried out in 1999 by Ana Buñuel, Kari Fasting, Gertrud Pfister and Sheila Stratton concerning sport in the lives of European women. Having interviewed women footballers in Germany, Great Britain, Spain and Norway, the authors question whether women’s football is actually part of a man’s world. Naturally, they highlight the resistance and obstacles that women are faced with when practising characteristics, even in top-level sports that are thought to incite typically male behaviour.

Where women’s sport is concerned, we must take into account not only women’s sports culture, but also female culture in general. This culture must be put into context, i.e. a patriarchal society in which men are clearly at an advantage. For example, society still cannot accept women’s involvement in certain sports at the top level and the further these sports are from the hegemonic stereotype, the less acceptable women’s participation appears to be. It goes without saying that some women see this kind of opposition from the outside world as a source of conflict. They all wish to respond and, depending on their personal and social situations, they may adopt certain verbal behaviour and attitudes which exaggerate their femininity (Patricia del Rey, 1977; Kolnes, 1995). They may make such opposition their own in order to leave no doubt about their femininity (Martin, 1997). They might even feel anxious about it (Fasting, 1997) or, on the contrary, refuse to be affected by outside pressures (Martin, 1997).

The impact of a patriarchal society on women’s sports culture is also reflected in how often people use sports facilities (Dietrich/Heinemann/Schubert, 1990; Klein, 1993; Pfister, 1993). Women are the main visitors to gyms and fitness centres, whether private or public. They are often afraid to exercise in parks a long way from home, especially after dusk, and rarely visit such places. Their own schedule is often determined by the activities of other family members. However, these trends are much less marked among young women than among older and lower-class women.

On the other hand, most stadiums and open-air sports venues, such as athletics tracks, football pitches and parks (where they jog) are mainly frequented by men. They tend to use these facilities more regularly because their lives do not depend on what other family members are doing. Moreover, these activities usually involve membership of a sports club. With regard to the predominance of patriarchal structures in sport, it should also be noted that, although women’s sports culture is now an undeniable reality, it is still not recognized in sporting circles. Women have shown that their preferences and their use of sports infrastructures are different from the traditional view of sport, which explains current doubts about the adequacy of organizational structures.

In short, in the “world of sport”, i.e. sports clubs and federations, the focus of power, women receive scant attention. It is not just a question of the number of women in positions of responsibility, or how many of them manage to become top-class athletes, but rather of the role that might be fulfilled by specific types of action and a particular understanding of sport. In this context, it is clear that many of the activities preferred by women (keep-fit,
dance, aerobics, etc) are not, and are unlikely ever to be, embraced by traditional sports structures. They represent an epistemological break from the dominant trends observed during the last century (Lagarde, 1995).

As far as opportunities for participation are concerned, this phenomenon is accompanied by the emergence of new agents whose aim is to satisfy this new social demand. Women, for example, are the main targets of sports marketing, while the range of public amenities is largely provided to meet the needs of women who cannot always afford to join private clubs. The main consequence of women’s involvement in sport is therefore the introduction of different practices and a new understanding of sport. This, in turn, has resulted in a new definition of the organizational framework of sport.

**Promoting recognition of “difference” in sport**

Ever since sport began, women have realized that it is not a world that accepts them easily. Therefore, while continuing to demand the right to participate, they also discussed how they could make this a reality. This was the start of a lengthy process which, towards the end of the 20th century, led to the emergence of “difference” in sport.

Here, ‘difference’ means society’s recognition of a whole range of different philosophies and behaviour. It entails greater tolerance, acceptance of equality between the sexes and rejection of the hegemony of certain groups to the detriment of others. It means accepting all lifestyles chosen by individuals in a democratic system characterized by mutual respect. In sport, it means creating and implementing programmes promoting access to sport for all who desire it, respecting people’s choices and preferences. Society has only come to recognize this “difference”, which has always existed but was previously denied and concealed, following a difficult struggle at public level. This recognition is also the result of a process of introspection, enabling people to discover themselves and see themselves through their own eyes rather than through those of other people (Bochetti, 1996). For women, as for other subordinate groups, the path to recognition in sport has been a long one. Women have learnt to understand the world of “difference”. Consequently, by breaking into the world of sport, they have also helped to implement development strategies designed to help all groups of people involved in sport.

Originally, all the innovative physical activities that emerged at the end of the 18th and during the 19th centuries were for men only. Women were excluded from Jahn’s “Turnen” in Germany, Ling’s Swedish gymnastics, Amorós’ military gymnastic exercises and even the English philosophy of sport advocated by Arnold, for example. According to the ideological principles of that era, women were meant to fulfil other social functions which were totally unrelated to these physical activities (whether military or for relaxation).

It was not until the medical profession began advising women to take physical exercise in order to fulfil their role as mothers, for example, that they were encouraged to participate in some of these activities. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was acceptable for women to engage in sport and physical exercise as long as they stuck closely to the stereotypical standards expected of women at the time. Nevertheless, certain conditions were set out, enabling women to go further than the established norms and to experience activities run by women in order to protect their involvement in sport and to establish a new kind of sports development.

In her account of the history of women’s sport, Gertrud Pfister (1997) mentions the English Physical Education Colleges, the German Hochschule für Leibesübungen (School of Physical Exercise, now the Cologne Sports University) and the experiences of the American universities and the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (International Women’s Sports Federation - FSFI).

The Physical Education Colleges were meant to train women wishing to specialize in sport and physical exercise. Martina Bergmann-Osterberg, one of the pioneers of these Colleges, was appointed Lady Superintendent of Physical Education in Girls’ and Infants’ Schools. Her role was to design and run physical education programmes in schools. The teacher training colleges were founded shortly afterwards. The principle of segregation was adopted, the theory being that women knew better than anyone what they needed. “We must stop asking men to train women. This is a job that women can do better than men. We understand how women feel and we can evaluate what our gender can achieve because we know our strengths and weaknesses” - such was the attitude of these women at the time (Scraton 1992; see Pfister, 1997). These institutions were founded on the ideology of healthy motherhood, i.e. that women needed to be healthy in order to fulfill their maternal duties. This philosophy was radically opposed to the myth of the weaker sex, removing it completely from the stereotypes of the Victorian era. It provided the basis for women’s sports culture. However, this movement was widely criticized for its strictness and discipline, which only served to heighten the differences between the sexes. Segregation clearly did not help women to gain ground in terms of their influence on sports administration and, at a time when coeducation was being intro-
duced, women were powerless to impose their own ideas.
In the United States, segregation had other connotations. Starting well before World War I, but particularly from the 1920s onwards, a well-organized movement emerged, involving women working or studying in mixed or women’s universities, such as the Committee on Women’s Athletics of the American Physical Education Association (founded in 1917) and the Women’s Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation (founded in 1923). These organizations believed that women had to be trained to fulfill their role as mothers and to be good citizens. This principle, which seemed to reflect the prevailing attitude at that time, was implemented on the basis of ideas that were clearly different from the stereotypical notions of sport. Its advocates thought that enjoyment and camaraderie were more important than performance and victory. They organized “play days” in order to highlight the distinction between their ideas and those of traditional competition, adopting the motto “a girl for every sport, a sport for every girl”. In 1929, they even went so far as to urge women not to participate in the Games of the X Olympiad held in Los Angeles in 1932. The political backdrop to all these measures was actually a desire to protect the existing influence, power and control held by women’s sports structures. During the second wave of American feminism of the 1960s and 1970s the focus switched from segregation to the need for equality between men and women within a common organizational structure. Clearly, this idea, which was still considered unconventional at the beginning of the century, is now accepted by many sectors of society. It is one of the numerous seeds that have been sown throughout history, the fruits of which are recognition and acceptance of “difference” - a harvest which we are reaping today.

At the time, the *Deutsche Hochschule für Leibensübungen* was a mixed physical education teacher training college. It began training women in 1894. However, unlike their British and American counterparts, German experts were not really concerned about the need to lay the foundations of a women’s sports culture. On the contrary, they tended to advocate integration rather than segregation. The most prominent member of this group was Liselott Diem, wife of Carl Diem. She and her colleagues were determined to carry out the duties with which they had been entrusted. rejecting the notion of the weaker sex. They thought that the difference between the sexes was an idea that had been created by society and they actively promoted the notion of sexual equality. It is difficult to evaluate how successful they were. Pfister is more pessimistic, believing that the strategy of collective action is ambivalent where relations between the sexes is concerned. In this respect, Liselott Diem’s experiences are significant. She was certainly a successful woman, becoming leader of the *Sporthochschule* from 1967 to 1969, chair of physical exercise didactics and methodology at the same institution and president of numerous national and international sports science organizations. Today, however, rather than being considered a significant legacy for the feminist cause, her ideas tend to be confined to history. It was not until 1998 that a new chair in “difference” and sport was created, a position held by a woman, Ilse Hartmann-Tews.
Following the establishment of the Fédération des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Féminins (Federation of French Women’s Sports Clubs - FSFSF) in 1917, the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (International Women’s Sports Federation - FSFI) was founded in 1921, with Frenchwoman Alice Milliat as president. Both these federations were created following the refusal by the IOC and the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) to allow women to participate in the competitions they organized and their decision to disqualify any women who took part anyway. Faced with this refusal, the FSFI became very active and organized the Women’s Olympic Games in Paris in 1922, Gothenburg in 1926, Prague in 1930 and London in 1934. Its philosophical principles concerning sport were identical to established ideas. It actually advocated integration, although in the face of certain obstacles, it decided it had no option but to develop separate structures. However, the fact that they had their own international organization led them to have many discussions about the expediency of different opinions. British and American members, probably influenced by the situation in their own countries, did not like the idea of assimilation with men’s sport, as the following statement illustrates perfectly: “We are radically opposed to the idea of mixing men and women and to any other arrangement that might destroy our movement. Moreover, we would end up being taken over by men, as has already happened in other countries” (Pallett, 1955; Pfister, 1997). In the end, women were allowed to enter the Olympic Games. Nevertheless, these debates and women’s hard-won success in creating their own separate structures are engraved in the memory of women’s sport.

Pfister concludes by pointing out that previous attempts at integration and segregation in women’s sport, where the focus is on equality and difference respectively, have never produced a satisfactory outcome. Integration meant the assimilation of women into a world dominated and defined by men, whereas segregation simply endorsed the hierarchy of the sexes engendered by biological differences. I believe that the root of the problem lies in the fact that solutions have only been devised in terms of binary categories, i.e. in conformity with social structures that reflect the established social order. It is therefore time to begin thinking in other terms in order to break away from the schools of thought that have been followed up to now.

This type of study shows how women learnt about themselves during a century when, although equal rights between men and women were recognized from a legal perspective, such equality remained a distant reality. This process of introspection may not be the only cause of the greater social role played by sexual equality, but it is nevertheless an important part of philosophical thinking. Understanding a given situation is the necessary starting point if any group of people is to assert its role in society. Women therefore not only broke into the world of sport by introducing the values of female culture, but they also triggered a debate designed to raise awareness of their “difference” (and that of numerous other non-hegemonic groups).

Where are we now?

During the 20th century, major changes took place, helping to improve the situation of women and promoting their involvement in social life. Unfortunately, in some situations, millions of women are still suffering. In those cases, not only have we failed to progress, we have even moved backwards. On the other hand, the roads we have travelled, far from disappearing from the map, promise to become even wider. The fact that women are “different” is increasingly accepted by society, for example. This “difference” is becoming more visible in every walk of life, particularly in sport.

When women entered the world of sport, they brought with them their own traditions and methods. This caused far-reaching changes to the structures and behaviour of a sports system which, at the beginning of the 20th century, was still reserved exclusively for men. We have seen how women formed specific structures in such a way that they could be separate from those run by men, even within the same sport. Of course, many aspects still require change and improvement. However, as far as “difference” theories are concerned, I am not sure to what extent we can state that women are still discriminated against in sport if we only take into account “traditional” sport.
Although it cannot be ignored, this is a rather narrow point of view which takes no account of the significant changes that have taken place throughout contemporary sport. Traditional sport is, without doubt, very male-orientated. However, bearing in mind the growing number of sports disciplines and the new organizational structures which have consequently emerged, it is possible to draw quite different conclusions.

We cannot ignore new types of sport (aerobics, swimming for pleasure, dance, keep-fit, fun runs or even sport for all associations), which attract women in particular. Similarly, on the fringes of traditional infrastructures, organizations in every developed country are fighting for a new concept of sport more in keeping not only with women’s way of life, but also with that of other groups outside the usual realms of sports administration. We are currently witnessing major changes to modern sports structures and, while increased women’s involvement is not the only cause of those changes, the questions it has raised are certainly an important factor.

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Bibliography


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i The most useful information was taken from the series of surveys carried out in Spain by Manuel Garcia Ferrando (Garcia Ferrando, 1997) and the results of the first phase of the 1999 COMPASS project (Council of Europe, Strasbourg), which analyses sports participation in Europe.

ii The IOC banned the use of the name ‘Olympic Games’, so the event had to be renamed ‘Women’s World Games’.