

"Think Global, Act Global"

The Future of International Women's Sport *

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It is argued that the impact of the women's movement in wider society has not been matched by feminist influence in sport. This proposition is examined in relation to the progress of women in sport through a number of stages from EXCLUSION, through INCLUSION to EQUITY and TRANSFORMATION. The relationship of different feminisms to action at each stage is discussed and the strengths and weakness of existing women's sport networks assessed. Comparisons are drawn between the women's movement in sport and the tactics of the 'green' or environmental movement in their efforts to bring about sustainable change in society. The paper concludes that feminists in sport now need to think and act globally, to recognise the value of multiple approaches to change and, in particular, to work towards transformation of sport in order to make it more humane for both women and men.

As a social movement feminism has made, and continues to make, a significant impact upon the way our societies operate. Governments, especially those in western industrialised nations, have had to accept, some of them very reluctantly, that the gender revolution has changed the way they should govern. Once gender-blind, most of these governments have by now developed at least partial sightedness on gender and women's issues. However, if we apply the 'feminist vision test' to sport then the situation becomes, once again, occluded. Not only have governments overlooked women's sport in constructing their equity agenda but most women's sport organisations have demonstrated inward-looking, parochial attitudes and have made few connections to broader political or social groups (Brackenridge, 1992 and 1993). In Lowe's words (1983) they have been *issue-based* rather than *value-based*: the *issue* has been participation in sport, recreation, physical education or dance when the *value* could have been equality or liberation. So why is it that, despite steady growth in the numbers of women participating in sport, women's sport has failed to achieve the impact of the broader feminist movement? This article sets out first, to explore that question with particular reference to the emergence of an international community of women's sport and secondly, to examine the proposition that women in sport might learn some lessons from the political processes adopted by the environmental movement.

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* This paper is an extended and adapted version of an address given to the International Women and Sport Conference, 'Women, Sport and the Challenge of Change' in Brighton, UK in May 1994.

WHERE IS THE FEMINISM IN WOMEN'S SPORT?

I suggest that women's sport has moved, and is still moving, through a series of developmental stages from EXCLUSION, to INCLUSION, to EQUITY, to TRANSFORMATION. Not all women's sports groups are aware of the progression from stage to stage, nor is progression always something actively sought. Where progression has been achieved by default then it might be argued that there is no feminist agenda or consciousness at work, in other words that any increase in privileges *for* women or decrease in discrimination *against* women is incidental to the main objective, to play sport. Such groups may even avow, sometimes vehemently, an anti-feminist stance. Figure 1 is an attempt to summarise and give examples of the relationship of feminist perspectives to each stage of this development process.

Figure 1 here

It is necessary for any given women's sports group to recognise exactly where it is in this sequence before embarking on pressure for change for, whilst it is theoretically possible to try and 'jump' from *exclusion* to *equity* or from *inclusion* to *transformation*, it is unlikely that this will result in sustainable change. If the wrong pressure tactics are adopted, the cause of women in sport might be damaged and the system regress again. The reason for this sequential development lies in the capacity of the institution of sport for incremental (gradual/minor) rather than step (sudden/major) change. Clearly, these hypotheses should be tested empirically by studying the history of women's sport organisations.

For many women, particularly those in the so-called 'developing' nations, the transition from *exclusion* to *inclusion* in sport is still their main challenge and talk of gender equity may seem like a luxury. For those still struggling to achieve women's rights in health, education and employment - and there are many millions of them - gender equity in sport comes very low down the political agenda. This is especially so for those who are kept in ignorance without means of communication, kept in poverty without means of access to resources or kept under individual or collective patriarchal control without freedom or personal autonomy.

Even in the so-called 'developed' nations there are women whose entry into previously all-male sports is still proving difficult: for example, women's efforts for recognition and status in the pole vault, triple jump and hammer throw have by no means met with easy success, even in countries with a strong and distinguished history in Track and Field Athletics. For such women the fight for *inclusion* must precede that for *equity*. Conversely, there are countries in which women in general are devoid of the rights of citizenship yet who have been 'allowed' to participate as part of a broad political and economic development agenda. For these women, battles for *political inclusion* must precede those for *sports equity* if there are to be sustainable changes since equity in sport can only be achieved in an equitable society.

NETWORKS FOR WOMEN'S SPORT

All women's organisations recognise the benefits of effective networking. At the local or regional level the purposes served by networking include:

- giving mutual support
- offering a forum for the exchange of ideas, skills, good practice and information
- receiving or giving advice and learning from others in similar situations
- sharing of resources

(Women's Sports Foundation UK, 1992)

The collective wisdom and strength of a network equals more than the sum of the parts which is why networking is so important to women in sport, as exemplified in the achievements of the Women in Sport Working Group of the European Sports Conference (Talbot, 1994). One of the most significant aspects of networking amongst women's groups is the recognition that women should be able to set their own agenda - the principle of 'women doing it for themselves'. Within the sportsworld this is not a popular message! Indeed, some of the most successful examples of women's organisations are those which have kept a clear, and perhaps respectful, distance from the mainstream or establishment groups: an example here might be that of the International Association for Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women, a group with a history of over forty years and members from over sixty countries. Organising in this way has allowed such groups to develop their own distinctive methods of working and to value and use the work of their women members to an extent rarely, if ever, seen in mixed sex organisations. What this way of working has not achieved, however, is any lasting impression upon the system as a whole nor, importantly, upon those who hold most of the power within it.

The principles of networking apply internationally as they do locally but on an international scale there are perhaps some added dimensions. One of these is the dimension of *cultural sensitivity*, a need for us to recognise, respect and learn from the different traditions and contributions of those from other countries: a sense of reciprocity is needed if we are to network effectively across national boundaries. It is all too easy for those from white, wealthy, academic traditions to assume that they know best, to act as if they had a monopoly on sport science knowledge, on policy and best practice in sport for women. Cultural sensitivity is all the more important when the compounding inequality of racism faced by black and racial minority women is acknowledged. Linked to this dimension is that of *religious tolerance* and the need to recognise the different starting points from which women and men address the issues of women in sport.

HOW WELL DO WOMEN IN SPORT NETWORK WITH OTHER GROUPS?

In broad terms the components of the network which women in sport are seeking to establish include the following:-
government,
non-government,
women,
and sport.

Government is the body politic, with a multiple-issue agenda, which has the authority, power and resources to either support or to block the strategies which women wish to implement, using both legal and financial leverage...

Non-government is essentially the voluntary or not-for-profit sector which includes charitable groups, pressure groups and others with overt, often single-issues agendas. It also covers the commercial or for-profit sector which includes the media and corporate sponsors...

Women constitute over half the population, of whom a relatively small minority play organised sport. Whilst women differ widely in wealth, race, religion, physical ability and sexuality, they all share the same marginalisation in society and exclusion from power and authority and the same potential health and leisure benefits of sport and recreation...

Sport is a social institution and a set of practices designed essentially by and for men, which is increasingly having to deal with a number of contemporary crises including: drug abuse, commercial control and exploitation, racial and sexual discrimination, and various forms of cheating. All in all, it might be argued that sport is in grave danger of complete moral bankruptcy.

If these are the basic components of a network for women in sport, how well do the various elements interrelate?

Women + Government: women have a weak relationship to government because of their traditional assignment to the private rather than the public sphere, for example through child-rearing and domestic roles. With a few notable exceptions, women have much lower representation in government than men and, because of their separation from both resources and sources of influence, have limited prospects for bringing about political change from within government.

Women + Non-government: women traditionally have a much stronger relationship to non-government institutions although in mixed sex groups have still had to endure marginal status and various forms of segregation based on sex. Where women have formed their own non-government organisations they have achieved some remarkable successes for themselves and others, for example through charity groups and foundations for educational and welfare purposes. There are also examples of strong non-government women's groups which have used national and international networking to further their causes, such as the Soroptimists, and the Business and Professional Women's Association.

Women + Sport: women have an ambivalent relationship to sport. Many women have experienced sport only through their school physical education programmes and found this, at best, a temporary pleasure and, at worst, a painful irrelevance to the rest of their lives. Some even live in countries where there is no physical education at all. Even for those who enjoyed physical education and are keen to engage in sport beyond school there have been extensive barriers to overcome based on lack of resources, transport, time, or various forms of sex discrimination (Green et. al., 1990). Highly politicised women have usually dismissed, and therefore shunned, sport as a male game which has low or no priority compared with the 'real' welfare needs of women. However, one strategy for persuading such women of the importance of women's sport and physical activity is to build the issues into their existing agendas for improving women's health or addressing sexual violence. Overall, there are relatively few women who not only see the benefits of sport and recreation for their

sex but who are also prepared to tackle insitutional and personal discrimination in sport in order to gain access to opportunities for women and girls.

Those women who *do* care about women's sport and physical activity constitute what Lowe (1983) calls the '*attentive public*', a term he first applied to people with active interest in the environmental movement. It is sobering to realise that the attentive public for women and sport issues is probably very small, even though Lowe himself argues that the women's movement in general has been more successful than the environmental movement. For most, then, the issue of women in sport is a non-issue.

BECOMING A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

In order for women in sport to become a truly global movement, as opposed to a disparate set of groups with different aspirations and commitment to various forms of feminism, they need to activate the network of links outlined above. To increase the size of their attentive public it is first necessary to recognise what stage of the developmental process has been reached, then to be realistic about what can be achieved and choose the tactics which will be most likely to effect change. Women need to be clear about what they want and take a positive rather than negative or destructive approach. As the research literature of the past twenty years shows, it is clear what problems face women in sport. It is also relatively easy to see which tactics might work to move from *exclusion* to *inclusion*, or from *inclusion* to *equity* since we have now witnessed many examples of good practice in these areas. However, it is not so easy to put in place realistic ideas for *transformation* in sport since such ideas are likely to threaten not only the existing balance of gender-power relations in sport but also the very nature of sport itself. For example, what would feminist basketball look like? What leadership systems might embrace the needs and interests of women? How might major events be restructured to be more gender-balanced and more woman-friendly? These and many other questions must be answered before the sporting establishment will start to listen seriously to calls for change. The project of feminist transformation in sport includes so many tasks that women need to be very clear about what is wanted and focus sharply on those priorities which are achievable.

This paper has attempted to show how the various components of a prospective network for women's sport differ in their power, authority and commitment to women's sport. Further to this, they also differ in their potential to stimulate reform: for example, it is contended that pressure for social change can only come from non-government groups, such as the great social movements. Classic examples are the Civil Rights Movement, the Peace Movement, the Women's Movement and the Environmental Movement. Political activism has always stemmed from voluntary groups because freedom of association must always come first.

"Ideas come in from the edges." Inertia is endemic to government institutions..." It is only people on the fringe who can ever think and question ideas." (Wright, quoting Sir Alfred Sherman in *The Guardian*, 1994)

On the other hand, government groups, by definition, are committed to the defence of their electoral position and are thus less likely to take a radical stance on any single issue, be it pollution control or equal rights. Moreover, where the majority of activity

within a given social sphere rests outside government, as it does in sport in many countries, then it is highly unlikely that government pressure will result in fundamental change to that activity. Only where vested interests are challenged will government intervention be applied as happened, for example, with the withdrawal of visas by the USA government from their 1980 Moscow Olympic teams after the invasion of Afghanistan by the then-USSR. What vested political interests can we identify which might cause governments to intervene for the betterment of women in sport? It is difficult to think of a single example.

The *most* women in sport might expect to achieve from networking with government agencies, whether within or between countries, is a shift towards more gender equitable practices in sport, in other words a shift from *inclusion to equity*. Such a shift would obviously be very welcome, especially for those women for whom the struggle from *exclusion to inclusion* was long and hard-fought but, in itself it would not be enough to challenge the various contemporary crises facing sport mentioned above, caused by, for example, drug abuse, commercialism and moral decay. For women to challenge rather than simply participate in sport there needs to be a concerted effort to articulate the transformative values of sport. By this is meant a preparedness to stand up and be counted on the issues, to expose the causes of crisis and to put in place alternative systems and approaches which will, ultimately, make sport a more humane activity for both women *and* men. Some of the more shocking examples of sport and physical activity for women have been exposed by women's research. They include: pressure on young gymnasts and dancers to submit to extreme diets and training regimes which cause premature bone loss and skeletal decline; expectations from male coaches of sexual favours from their female athletes in return for team selection; ostracism and humiliation of lesbians in sport; degradation of women by male administrators and committee members through the practice of so-called 'gender verification'. According to the transformative approach, these practices must be stopped and positive changes brought about which will enhance the dignity of women and men and emphasise the positive benefits of sport and physical activity. In 1994 a new voluntary organisation, *WomenSport International (WSI)*, was formed with the express intention of taking up this transformative agenda.

LEARNING FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

When contemplating an international strategy for women's sport, it is interesting to draw from the experiences and activities of the green or environmental movement which has been one of the most visible social movements of our time. However, whilst Lowe (1983, p. 27) argues that the environmental movement grew out of "support for an attack on the central values and beliefs of industrial capitalism" more recent observers of environmentalism, such as the former Director of Greenpeace, Peter Wilkinson, suggest that "In the 1990s people don't want demonstrations, they want solutions to problems." (in Brown 1994, p. 15).

Environmental groups operate only part of their time as pressure groups, also spending resources on services to members or related direct action such as purchase or occupation of environmentally sensitive sites. They may also try to exert influence on bodies other than public authorities, for example Trade Unions, companies, professional associations and other environmental groups. In the case of women's sport, the targets for pressure by those following a transformative agenda include

much the same kinds of agencies: government departments, companies and sponsors, professional sports and physical education associations and other voluntary sports organisations, especially those with large women's membership and those holding power over multinational sporting competitions such as the International Olympic Committee of the Commonwealth Games Secretariat. Direct action as a tactic in the overall strategy for international women's sport is perfectly feasible under the transformative agenda: the black power salute of Smith and Carlos at the 1968 Olympic Games, an example of non-violent direct action, had an immediate and lasting effect on the debate about racism in sport. Equally, it would be possible for radical feminists to occupy sports fields, to lie down in front of the runners in the London Marathon, to wave banners with derogatory slogans outside the headquarters of McDonald's or Coca Cola or to stage a hundred similar protests against the contemporary masculine-engendered crises in sport. But what would that achieve? It would probably result in regression, almost certainly cause a backlash against women in sport and leave them, once more, excluded. Francis Sullivan, Forest Conservation Officer of the Worldwide Fund for Nature suggests that environmentalists must

...try and make pragmatic decisions to make things better. It means being flexible but unless you are on the inside you cannot push forward.

(in Brown 1994, p. 15)

The aim of the transformative agenda is change in sport not the destruction of sport as has been argued for by some using neo-marxist critique (e.g. Bröhm, 1978). In order to implement transformation women in sport must select their campaigns with great care: they must be

suitable to the overall profile of the organisation
visible
winnable, and
reasonable in terms of the prevailing political climate

Each campaign must also be underpinned by an excellent research base so that the facts of the case cannot be disputed.

If women are to achieve their transformative priorities they will need to network with any and all groups who are willing to work with them: this may entail developing partnerships with previously unlikely or unknown allies. In the past women in sport have been very poor at networking beyond their own confines but they should now develop an outward face instead of simply trying to persuade the converted.

FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2 shows the range of international organisations which might contribute to the implementation of an international strategy on women and sport: of those highlighted, some might concern themselves with pressing for gender equity through government agencies, some might work for equity and transformation through voluntary sector and quasi-governmental groups and some might lobby solely for transformation in sport. Such is the conservatism of women's sports organisations that there is probably no purely transformative group in existence yet and even *WSI* has committed itself to

work in alliance with any group, government or non-government, women's group or sport group, which shares its aims and objectives.

A transformative women's sport group such as *WSI* may aspire to operate democratically but, as with the effective environmental groups, it may become pragmatically necessary to give the leadership considerable autonomy. In the case of the environmental group Greenpeace, the ideological cause was *moral entrepreneurship* (Yearley, 1991) but the practical reality led to democratic compromise since the group became known by what it achieved rather than what or how it debated. Direct action served to bring environmentalism to public attention through media coverage: Yearly argues that environmentalism remained a social concern because the public had no independent access to the truth about environmental issues and therefore came to accept the accounts of Greenpeace. In the case of women and sport there is also a strong ideological and moral cause but public attention has yet to become effectively engaged and the 'truth' about humanitarian issues in sport is only just beginning to surface through such critical agencies as BBC TV's 'On The Line' series in the UK, Mariah Burton Nelson's book about sexual harassment in sport (1994) and Simpson and Jennings' expose of the self-perpetuating oligarchy that is the International Olympic Committee (1992).

CONCLUSION

The strength of a women's sport network lies not only in the shared concerns of women but also in the diversity of approaches taken to address these concerns.

...the strength of the feminist movement has been and will continue to be different from other movements for human liberation to the extent that it encourages and nourishes the growth of different visions of feminism...The demand for ideological conformity, so prominent in many male dominated social movements, would surely signal the failure of feminism to go beyond the limits of patriarchy. At the same time, it would be naive, morally deficient and intellectually dishonest to pretend that every vision of feminism is as good as the next in its power to transform the status of women, to transcend their problems in sport and, ultimately to create a better society.

Boutlier & SanGiovanni (1983, p. 17)

Greenpeace exhorts us to 'Think global, act local!' in respect of the environment. The argument of this paper is that it is time for women's sport to think global and act global! Not all women involved in sport have the opportunity to do practical work on a global level but all can develop a global consciousness. Boutlier and SanGiovanni ask whether it is expecting too much to 'both gain entrance (to sport) *and* to transform the arena' but also ask whether entry is worthwhile *without* transformation' (1983, p. 37) (emphases added). There is no easy answer to this question. Women in sport must all work in the ways best suited to their own positions, whether inside government or outside it, and in ways most comfortable to them, whether working for equity or for transformation. Those working for equity have an important part to play in changing and improving the access and opportunities for women in sport: those working for transformation within sport may eventually achieve sustainable changes which improve not only women's but also men's experiences of sport. More

importantly, they may contribute in a small way to the improvement of women's lives *beyond* sport.

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