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Women participation in the Modern Olympic Games: A Study

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Abstract

The primary objective of this study is to examine the evolution of female participation in the Summer Olympic Games. This is a descriptive research based on documental analysis, covering different sources and bibliography, including reports and factsheets of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and publications of various authors. The results represent an increase in the number of events for women in the Olympic Games since the beginning of the twentieth century. There is also a considerable increase in the number of female participation over the years of study. Since no female sportsperson participated in the inaugural edition of the Modern Olympic Games, it can be said that the gender equality in terms of opportunity and access was a twentieth century phenomenon (Source: 'Women athletes in the Olympic Games' by Rita Amaral Nunes).

Keywords: Olympic games, women, events, participation, evolution, international Olympic committee, IOC

1. Introduction

Gender is a social construct that defines the roles, behavior and activities of men and women. Social perception plays an important role in deciding the behavior of social beings in various situations and in various activities. Sport is not an exception. The participation in sport is also determined by the social norms. Sport is a field where the demonstration of strength, aggression and power is essential. According to the social norms, these are the characteristics of men and therefore the participation of men in sporting activities is considered to be 'natural'. On the contrary, the female participation in sports is not encouraged due to the social definition of 'femininity'. The physical and psychological attributes, which are essential to attain success in sports, may conflict with the society's sanctioned definition of 'femininity'. Thus, if a woman tries to achieve excellence in sports, she may risk an exclusion from the social definition of being 'normal'. This perception acts as a deterrent for the women from participating in sports.

Gender equality is a term used to describe the principle and practice of fair and equitable allocation of resources and the provision of equal opportunities for both men and women. It is nothing but the assurance that gender is a 'neutral' factor in terms of resource allocation, rights and participation. The need for gender equity is given importance in all major developmental policies, including the 'Millennium Development Goal' of the United Nations^[1].

The objective of this research work is to study the participation of the women sportspersons in the Olympic Games over the period of time and also to understand the role of the IOC in the promotion of women participation in Olympic sports. It also analyses the increase in the number of events added to the Olympic Programme for women.

2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are stated below

1. To find and explain the participation of women sportspersons in the Olympic Games
2. To study the initiatives taken by the IOC in order to promote women participation in the Modern Olympic Games

3. Materials and Methods

This is a descriptive research based on the secondary data collected from the manuals of the IOC, websites, magazines, journals and other previous research works. In order to study the trend of female participation in the Modern Olympic Games, quantitative data, available on the official website of the IOC, was also used.

4. Limitation of the Study

The limitation of this study is that this is mostly a secondary research as there was lack of comprehensive response from the respondents and the responses were socially biased.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Women participation in the Olympic Games

In the ancient Olympic Games, Hera Games ^[2] was the only event in which unmarried girls could participate. There was no such event organized for the married women. This trend continued during the initial years of the modern Olympic Games as well. The dominance of male athletes in the Olympic Games during this period was an obstacle to provide equality of access and opportunity to their female counterparts.

Hergeaves ^[3] divided the women's participation in the modern Olympic Games in three different phases. The first phase was

between 1896 and 1928, which was the period of exclusion of women from the Olympic events. The second phase was between 1928 and 1952 when the socially acceptable events in specific sports, such as gymnastics, tennis, figure skating etc., were included for the participation of women. The last phase was from 1952 till present when the women athletes constantly challenge the 'masculine hegemony' of the games. The founder of the Modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was not in favour of the participation of women sportspersons in the Modern Olympic Games. In the Olympic Review in 1912 ^[4], Coubertin explained the games as, "the solemn and periodic exaltation of the male athleticism, with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, art for its setting, and female applause as reward". He believed that "a woman's glory rightfully came through the number and quality of children she produced, and that as far as sports were concerned, her greatest accomplishment was to encourage her sons to excel rather than to seek records for herself". Due to these strong feelings of de Coubertin, women were excluded from the first Modern Olympic Games in 1896.

However, from 1900 onwards, sports like golf, tennis, and archery were added to the Modern Olympic Games for women. Table 1 represents the sports which were added for women in different Summer Olympic Games.

Table 1: Sports added for women in Olympic Games

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

*Sports which were reintroduced within the Olympic Programme

(Source: International Olympic Committee (IOC) Factsheet – Women in the Olympic Movement, January 2018) ^[5]

5.2 Events included in the Programme for Women in the Olympic Games: Trend Analysis

This part of the study analyses the increasing trend of the events that were included in the Olympic programme for women in a tabular format. The area further follows a

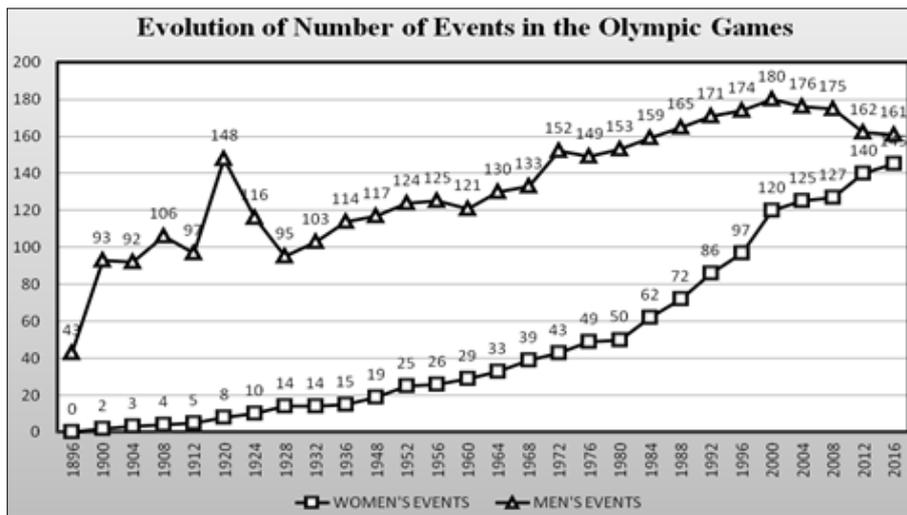
graphical representation of the tabular data and analyses the comparison of the evolution of women's events and the men's events in the Olympic Games over the years showing the overall scenario.

Table 2: Events included in the Olympic Programmes for women and a comparative study with the events for men

Year	Women's Events	Men's Events	Total Events	% of Women's Events
1896	0	43	43	0
1900	2	93	95	2.1
1904	3	92	95	3.1
1908	4	106	110	3.6
1912	5	97	102	4.9
1920	8	148	156	5.1
Year	Women's Events	Men's Events	Total Events	% of Women's Events
1924	10	116	126	7.9
1928	14	95	109	12.8
1932	14	103	117	12
1936	15	114	129	11.6
1948	19	117	136	14
1952	25	124	149	16.8
1956	26	125	151	17.2

1960	29	121	150	19.3
1964	33	130	163	20.2
1968	39	133	172	22.7
1972	43	152	195	22.1
1976	49	149	198	24.7
1980	50	153	203	24.6
1984	62	159	221	28.1
1988	72	165	237	30.4
1992	86	171	257	33.5
1996	97	174	271	35.8
2000	120	180	300	40
2004	125	176	301	41.5
2008	127	175	302	42.1
2012	140	162	302	46.4
2016	145	161	306	47.4

(Source: International Olympic Committee (IOC) Factsheet – Women in the Olympic Movement, January 2018) ^[5]



Graph 1: Graphical representation of the data showing the trend of the events included in the Olympic Games for women in comparison with men over the years

5.3 Women participation in the Olympic Games: Trend Analysis

The participation rate of women in the Olympic Games has been significantly increasing. This area focuses on the increasing rate of the women’s participation in comparison

with the total number of athletes and the total number of male participants in the Olympic Games since the beginning. The table further follows a graphical representation showing the trend of women participation in comparison with the number of men athletes.

Table 3: Number of Women athletes in the Olympic Games

Year	Male Athletes	Female Athletes	Total Athletes	% of women athletes
1896	241	0	241	0
1900	975	22	997	2.2
1904	645	6	651	0.9
1908	1971	37	2008	1.8
1912	2359	48	2407	2
1920	2561	63	2624	2.4
1924	2954	135	3089	4.4
1928	2606	277	2883	9.6
1932	1206	126	1332	9
1936	3632	331	3963	8.3
1948	3714	390	4104	9.5
1952	4436	519	4955	10.5
1956	2938	376	3314	13.3
1960	4727	611	5338	11.4
1964	4473	678	5151	13.2
1968	4735	781	5516	14.2
1972	6075	1059	7134	14.6
1976	4824	1260	6084	20.7
1980	4064	1115	5179	21.5
1984	5263	1566	6829	23
1988	6197	2194	8391	26.1
1992	6652	2704	9356	28.8

1996	6806	3512	10318	34
2000	6582	4069	10651	38.2
2004	6296	4329	10625	40.7
2008	6305	4637	10942	42.4
2012	5892	4676	10568	44.2
2016	6268	5176	11444	45.22

(Source: International Olympic Committee (IOC) Factsheet – Women in the Olympic Movement, January 2018) ^[5]



Graph 2: The graphical representation of the above table is given below

5.4 Measures taken by the IOC to increase women participation in the Olympic Games

From the above tables and diagrams, it is clear that, despite initial resistance, there had been a significant increase in the number of women's events, especially due to the policy decisions made by the administrators of the IOC.

According to Philips, the women sportspersons during the initial period of the modern Olympic Games tried to achieve two different objectives. First, was to avoid exclusion and second, was to ensure meaningful presence. In 1924, de Coubertin suggested that the female athletes should not be allowed in the Olympic Games. However, the IOC did not accept his proposal. In 1925, at the Olympic Congress, which was held in Prague, de Coubertin again claimed that the participation of women in the Olympic Games was illegal.

The official report of the Games in Stockholm ^[5] states, "An Olympiad with females would be impractical, uninteresting, un-aesthetic and improper". This report was supported by de Coubertin. In 1928, in the IOC Bulletin ^[6] (3rd year, page-5), de Coubertin reconfirmed his position by stating, "As to admission of the women to the Games, I remain strongly against it. It was against my will that they were admitted to a growing number of competitions." On 27th August 1936, a year before his death, de Coubertin wrote in Le Journal of Paris, "The only real Olympic hero, as I said, is the individual adult male. Therefore, no women or team sports".

However, in 1994, the then President of the IOC, Juan Antonio Samaranch ^[7], a strong advocate of the greater inclusion of women in sports, asked the Study Commission for the Centennial Olympic Congress, Congress of Unity ^[8], to study the problems of women's participation in the Olympic Games. A number of recommendations were made by the Commission, some of which are stated below:

1. To increase the number of women administrators in the IOC
2. To increase the number of women's competitions
3. To introduce an incentive system for the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and International Sports Federations (IFs) to train women coaches and

administrators

In 1995, the 'IOC Women and Sport Working Group' ^[9] was formed by Samaranch with the objective of developing a strategy for the implementation of the recommendations of the Centennial Congress. This Group endorsed the proposal of the Study Commission of the Centennial Olympic Congress, Congress of Unity, that the NOCs and the IFs should reserve 10% of 'offices in all their decision-making structures' for women by the year 2000 and 20% by 2005 for women. This proposal was passed in the IOC Session which was held in 1996. The 105th Session of the IOC elected three women members to the IOC.

In a document published on the 7th July 2007, the following was stated:

"to encourage and support the promotion of women in sports at all levels and in all structures, as to implement the principle of equality among men and women".

(Source: Olympic Charter, 1996)

As a follow up process, on the 127th session of the IOC, held in Monaco on 7th December 2014, it was decided to implement 40 recommendations to be implemented by 2020 and published them in the 2020 Olympic Agenda ^[10]. The recommendation number 11 specifically refers to the promotion of gender equality, to which the following was proposed:

"work with the International Federations to achieve 50% of female participation in the Olympic Games and stimulate the participation of women and their involvement in sports, thus creating more opportunities for them to participate in the Olympic Games" (Olympic Charter, 1996).

(Source: Women athletes in the Olympic games by Rita Amaral Nunes) ^[11]

One of the biggest drivers of this change has been the IOC's commitment to create more opportunities for female sportspersons by expanding the Olympic programme and include more women's events. Since 1991, any new sport, attempting to be included on the Olympic programme, must have to include the women's events, while the IOC has

decided to work closely with the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and International Sports Federations (IFs) in order to stimulate women's involvement in sport through more participation opportunities at the Olympic Games.

(Source: IOC Olympic.org - Promotion of women in sports through time) ^[12]

6. Conclusion

It is evident from history that the participation of women in sports has been determined by the social perceptions and norms. Participating in sporting activities was considered normal for men. The only one that the male athletes had to fight with in a sporting competition was their opponent. But this was not the same for women. Women had to fight against many challenges before even placing their foot on a sporting arena for a competition. Women were considered subordinates in the society in terms of sports participation, where they were looked down upon. They were considered incapable of competing in sports not only physically, but also emotionally and mentally. This has been a major social issue that has caused the lack of opportunities for women in sports.

The introduction of the modern Olympic Games without women athletes highlights De Coubertin's perception about women in sports. He had been strongly against the participation of women even after their inclusion in the games.

However, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been taking significant initiatives throughout the years to increase not only women participation in the games, but also towards the position of women as administrators in the sports bodies. The IOC has aimed towards equal participation in all levels of sports which would encourage equal opportunities for women across the globe.

The Olympic Agenda 2020 which lists out the strategic guidelines for the Olympic Movement has provided priority emphasis on attaining a balance between male and female participants.

It can also be established from this study that the participation of women in the Modern Olympic Games has been increasing prominently over the years. The trend of participation is increasing to the rate of achieving the target of equal participation, set by the IOC. It is expected that the number of male and female participants will remain almost same in the upcoming Games.

Although the gender imbalance has been dominant towards the male proportion, yet the women have continued to struggle for equal acceptance and respect. History has witnessed this extremely complex journey full of endeavor from the non-inclusion to reaching 45.22% of the total participation in 2016. But it is very unfortunate that, even during the present times, women from different parts of the world face discrimination and prejudice in terms of sports participation. Their accomplishments in sports are not viewed as magnificent as men's. Such issues build a negative impact on a woman's sporting career and also reveal the mindset of the society at present.

It is not only a long but also an inspirational story of how the women of different times have been facing social biasness and unfairness. The progress of women in terms of commitment, professionalism and determination is undeniable. In spite of all the challenges, the women have been achieving excellence by overcoming all the social barriers and cultural issues throughout the world.

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