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Dr. Rajwinder Kaur
Department of Physical
Education Dasmesh Girl's
College Mukerain, Hoshiarpur,
Punjab, India

Sport and Women's Empowerment

Dr. Rajwinder Kaur

Abstract

The paper first considers the conceptualization of power. In Western thought, power has usually been defined as strength and dominion. This definition has been reproduced in sport, where masculine ideals of force and aggression are emphasized. An alternative female conception of power stresses energy and creativity. The second part of the paper considers the possibilities for political change through sport that are consistent with the feminist vision of power. It is suggested that the potential lies in the importance for women in sport to experience their physical strength and agency, and to build organizations that develop these qualities in the community of women. Some examples of women's empowerment in and through sport are presented. Although there is nothing resembling a feminist revolution taking place in sport as yet, the instances of change that have occurred are reasons for optimism.

Keywords: Sport, empowerment of women, tentative exploration, maintenance, feminist redefinition

Introduction

This paper provides a tentative exploration of the relationship between sport and women's empowerment. The starting point for this piece is recent feminist revisions of traditional or mainstream theories of power. Probably the most fully developed of these discussions to date is contained in Nancy Hartsock's *Money, Sex, and Power* (1985)^[7]. In this volume and related works, Hartsock proposes a reconceptualization of power and outlines strategies for achieving and evaluating feminist political change. Although her work does not deal explicitly with sport, it has considerable relevance to the field. In this paper, I explore these connections to further understand the contribution of sport to the maintenance of male hegemony and to identify conditions under which social change in sport can contribute to a feminist redefinition of power and the empowerment of women.

Theorizing Power

Money, Sex, and Power is an ambitious work, concerned with defining the essentials of a feminist historical paternalism and the epistemology that underlies this approach. A full treatment of the book is well beyond the scope of this paper. At the risk of distortion through oversimplification, I review here some of the major points of Hartsock's thesis that are relevant to a discussion of sport. The first part of *Money, Sex, and Power* provides an analysis of treatments of power in Western thought. In a detailed review of wanting in this area, Hartsock shows that power has consistently been associated with strength and domination. One of the most important extensions of this view of power is in the relationship between power and sexuality. In Western culture "There is a surprising degree of consensus that hostility and domination, as opposed to intimacy and physical pleasure, are central to sexual excitement" (Nancy Hartsock, 1985:157)^[7]. Hart-sock notes further that this understanding of sexuality reflects a masculine view of sexual activity and arousal. Citing evidence from popular assumptions, social psychology, and literature, she writes that.

'We can, then, state with some confidence that the culturally produced dynamics of hostility that structure sexual excitement correspond to a masculine sexuality that depends on defiling or debasing a fetishized sexual object. Thus, we are dealing with a gendered power relation based in what our culture has defined as sexuality. In turn, this cultural construction of sexuality must be understood to express the experience of the ruling gender. This of course is to be expected' (Hartsock, 1985:164)^[7].

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Rajwinder Kaur
Department of Physical
Education Dasmesh Girl's
College Mukerain, Hoshiarpur,
Punjab, India

The importance of identifying the association between sexuality and power lies in the potential for a redefinition of each that is free from oppression. Although the basis for such a redefinition is by no means clear, Hartsock provides a start. She begins by moving from a discussion of sexuality to a consideration of eros. "Such a reformulation can both clarify some of the central dynamics of sextant and allow a broader understanding of the vanity of forms taken by sexuality in our culture" (p. 166). The psychological stature on eros indicates that there are three separate aspects. The first concerns the emergence of community, the second the role of sensuality and bodily concerns in social life, and the third the creativity and generative possibilities of eros. In Western culture, dominated by masculine notions of power and myth, years has been constructed negatively. Intimacy and fusion are posed as domination, sensuality is denied, and bodily pleasure repressed, and creativity and generation are reformulated as a fascination with death (pp. 166-177).

Ham presented her thesis on the association between power and domination, Hartsock explores the possibilities for a feminist alternative. She notes that "A community structured by forms of eros that express women's experience might take met different form" (p. 210). Evidence for this possibility is found in a comparison of wanting on power by women and men. Acknowledging that there is presently only suggestive evidence for this observation, Hartsock (p. 210) indicates that she was "unable to discover any women wanting about power who did not stress those aspects related to energy, capacity and potential".

The consistent difference in the treatment of power by women and men theorists suggests that the source of this difference lies in the contrasting experiences of men and women. In exploring these possibilities, Hartsock insists on the capacity of the sexual division of labour in structuring women's world views. This division occludes both productive and reproductive work. While women fill both categories of social roles, it is reproductive labor that constitutes the fundamental basis of their world views. "One does not (cannot) produce another human being in anything like the way one produces an object such as a chair. Much more is involved, activity that cannot easily be dichotomized to play or work. Helping another to develop, the gradual real meaning of control, the experiencing of the human matrix of one's actions - all these are important features of women's activity as mothers (Hartsock, 1985-236) [7].

The development of this world view is not limited to those who bear and rear children but is generalized to all women who, as a sex, are responsible for childbearing and rearing and are socialized to these roles.

The different roles in production and re-production that men and women fill are the basis for their differing world views. Drawing on ideas from psychoanalytic theory, Hartsock (pp. 236-247) explores these differences, emphasizing the relational aspects of women's existence, which includes the connectedness of mothers and children and the union of mind and body in reproductive labour. In contrast, the experience of the male is that of opposition, first in separation from his mother and then from the female world of the household.

Because masculine experiences have structured institutions, social life is based on dualistic opposition and the quest for power, viewed as domination. The attempt to reconstruct social life rests on a feminist reconceptualization of power that is rooted in the epistemological level of reproduction. This means that the theory of power is defined by women's experience and the hibernator possibilities in that experience

(Hartsock, 1985) [7].

Power and the Ideology of Masculinity in Sport

The conception of power as domination is fundamental to sport. As Jennifer Hargreaves (1986:112) has written, "In sport, 'masculine' identity incorporates images of activity, strength, aggression and muscularity and it impress, at the same time, an opposite female subjectivity associated with passivity, relieve weakness, gentleness and grace". Moreover, Hargreaves notes, the importance of sport in representing the ideology of masculinity lies in the emphasis on physical strength, which men have and, it is assumed, women do not in sport, men usually are active subjects while women fill passive roles, often as wives, sweethearts and admirers. "Muscularity is thus a 'sign' of male power which also engenders sexuality" (Jennifer Hargreaves, 1986) [5].

The sexual dimension of male power in sport is elaborated by Eric Dunning (1986) [2]. Dunning indicates that a number of male combat sports can be traced to folk games rooted in societies that were more patriarchal and violent than modern society. In the process of modernization, these games became more controlled or "civilized". One influence upon this process was the incorporation of the games into the curricula of the public schools, where some of the more violent practices were restricted or eliminated. These changes took place at the same time as a number of other social changes were occurring (e.g., in the structure of the nuclear family) that, at least relatively, reduced the power differential between men and women.

Eric Dunning (1986) [2] suggests that in the case of rugby, the rise of a violent subculture has been a response to the shift in the balance of power between the sexes. As men's power relative to women has declined, the symbolic expression of masculinity has increased. An example of this is the "macho subculture" of rugby football. The traditions of the rugby subculture are enacted after a game. Practices include sexual degradation of male imitates and excessive beer drinking. When drunk, players sing obscene songs that have two recurrent themes, the mocking of women and of homosexuals. Dunning suggests that both themes reflect the threat to the traditional self-image of men posed by the growing power of women.

The rugby songs that Dunning describes present a "hostile, brutal but, at the same time, fearful attitude towards women and the sexual act" (Dunning, 1986:84) [2]. He provides several examples that are vivid in their imagery of sexual violence toward women. Dunning argues that in response to the increase in women's power, the rugby subculture symbolically reduces fear of women through domination and control.

The argument that sport reflects masculine values and imagery is neither a startling or recent observation. The association between sport and masculinity has long provided justification for the provision of sport opportunities to boys, so that they will learn to be men. As well, the complementary contradiction between sport and feminism has justified the exclusion of women from sport. It has also provided the basis for much of the literature on women and sport, which has focused on the presumed role conflict experienced by female athletes. Hargreaves (1986) [5] and Dunning (1986) [2] have extended the analysis of masculinity and sport much further, however, by conceding the meaning of the ideology of masculinity for gender relations. Two points from their analysis warrant emphasis. First, they show that a critical message that emerges from the ideology is that men

sport, power is not simply about strength or superiority but about domination and more specifically, about the domination of women by men. This dominance derives from the fact that success in sport is based on physical strength which, in the ideology of masculinity, men have and women do not. The physical basis of domination is supported by the social practice of exclusion, which denies women the means to develop their athletic skills and, when barriers to women's participation are surmounted, views this movement as illegitimate.

The second point that emerges from Hargreaves' (1986) and Dunning's (1986)^[2] analyses is that the domination of women by men in sport has a powerful and at times explicit sexual dimension. Dunning's example of the degradation and symbolic violation of women in rugby songs is a particularly vivid depiction of this dimension. Other examples may be offered. Helen Lenskyj's research (1987, see article in this volume) on male control of female sexuality through sport also illustrates the power exerted by men over women through sport. A third illustration is contemporary. In recent years women's involvement in physical activity has increased and barriers to at least some activities have diminished. Not all these developments, however, have been progressive. One form of involvement has been in exercise and fitness programmes, either by attendance at classes or viewing television and video cassettes. The cultural meanings of these classes and programmes are mixed. Those that concentrate on the development of physical capacities such as strength and endurance are important additions to the opportunities available to women. Others, particularly among the TV and video versions and the more commercialized classes and programmes, are clearly directed to the development of sexual attractiveness and appeal. Here, the feminization of the fitness movement represents, not the liberation of women in sport, but their continued oppression through the equalization of physical activity.

The connections between Hartsock's (1985)^[5] analysis of power and a consideration of sport may now be drawn. Most compelling is the consistency between the conception of power developed by Hartsock and its manifestation in the ideology of masculinity in sport. As mentioned previously, the association of sport with power has long been recognized and accepted uncritically. What has not been fully acknowledged is the specifically patriarchal form of this power and its sexual dimension. By placing these elements at the center of an analysis of the ideology of masculinity in sport and viewing them from a feminist theory of power, a full appreciation of the ideology becomes possible. We then may see more clearly how sport as a site of the oppression of women contributes to the more general practice of patriarchy. As Hargreaves (1986:3)^[5] indicates in a commentary on Dunning's analysis, "If women are vilified in rugby songs, it is likely that they will be vilified in other ways too, for example, in film, in popular literature and in the home, school and workplace, so that the full effect may be a powerful way of affirming male power".

Feminist Political Change and Sport

This challenge is to realize the reconstitution of power as energy and capacity. In sport, as in other social arenas, this is an enormous task for it involves challenging both male control of the organization of sport and the supporting ideology that legitimates the subordination of women. Notwithstanding the magnitude of the challenge, the centrality of the body to athletic experience makes sport an important site for feminist

efforts to transform power. Although the path to such a transformation is by no means clear, some indication of the possibilities may be offered. In an essay that anticipates parts of the analysis in *Money, Sex, and Power*, Hartsock (1974) discusses the levels of feminist political change. She notes that political change takes place on the personal, group and institutional levels and emphasizes that although change at each level is important in itself, the three are interdependent, such that change at one level is a precondition for change in the others. Application of this idea to sport involves considering the possibilities for change at each level independently and interdependently.

At the personal level, despite the fact that sport in Western society has been demoted by men and masculinity, the experience has been liberating for some women. Many of the girls and women who have taken up sport in recent years have benefited from the opportunity to test and develop their physical skills. Testimony to the value of these experiences is found in the popular media. "Just for me", a film produced by the National Film Board of Canada and Fitness and Amateur Sport Canada, is the story of three women who change their lifestyles to incorporate physical activity. Although the changes these women make are not revolutionary, each overcomes ambivalence and obstacles (a recalcitrant husband; lack of child care; isolation from other physically active women). As a promotional device circulated to community and educational groups, the film is predictably upbeat. Nevertheless, the message it conveys is relevant to the situation of many women. This message is that regular physical activity is not only appropriate but desirable and can lead to a more positive sense of self and physical wellbeing. More politically informed personal change is evidenced in an account of a lesbian feminist softball team in Atlanta in the United States. Prior to the formation of the team, many of the members had never been involved in sport or athletics. The experience of forming the team and playing in a city league led to a number of personal changes in its members. These included the development and reinforcement of a positive attitude about their bodies and a sense of power deriving from the experience of bodily competence.

Other testimony is found in comments contained in letters to the editors of *Women's Sport* magazine. The June, 1983 issue contains readers' reactions to an article on women's body building. One reader wrote that "we exercise to get in shape, to make our bodies strong and healthy, to seek and realize the potential that lies within our bodies." Another remarked that "the message is not muscles, it is development of every aspect of ourselves to reach our potential as human beings". As Dorothy Kidd (1983: 63) writes in a commentary on these remarks: "The writers underscore the sentiment of the thousands of women who have newly taken up sport and physical activity of all kinds. This popular movement has gone a long way to claiming an autonomous place for women in sport and defaming a new concept of physical fitness appropriate to one's physical needs and aptitudes. These examples of personal development through sport may likely be generalized to an increasing number of women. That this is the case, while sport is a site of the oppression and degradation of women, is an indication of the cultural struggle being waged in sport. As Hargreaves (1986:116)^[5] indicates, sport is a site where traditional male and female identities are both reinforced and undermined and where traditional models of sport are opposed. For feminist, the good news is the initiation of the struggle, we are a long way from achieving the desired transformation.

Feminist efforts to develop alternatives to masculine forms of group or organization power have been marked by confusion and disagreement. The difficulty arises from concern to avoid the abuses of power and authority characteristic of many men's groups (Hartsock, 1974:14-16). In sport, one expression of this confusion is what Susan Birrell and Bonnie Slatton (1981) call the "embarrassment of competition". Noting that many feminists ignore sport, Birrell and Slatton suggest that the reason for the avoidance is difficulty in coming to terms with the competitive aspect of sport. Seeing competition as a male value that is associated with aggression, power and dominance, feminists turn away from sport while ignoring the creative possibilities in the experience.

Susan Birrell and Bonnie Slatton (1981:4) argue that this approach is flawed, and that the flaw lies in confusion over the meaning of competition:

The term does not mean to batter someone into submission, or to belittle the efforts of another. Strictly speaking, to compete means to strive together, "to contend emulously" as Webster would have it, elsewhere defining emulous as "ambitious to equal another" (emphasis added). To this, common usage has added "to strive to win". Thus competition is a process, but not necessarily a dehumanizing one. In fact, by challenging each other to demonstrate certain skills, by calling out the best in each other, sport can be an ennobling process'.

As an instance of a feminist redefinition of sport, Birrell and Slatton (1981) cite a game that occurred in a women's softball league in their community. One of the teams was highly skilled while the other had not won a game that season. In order to make the game more competitive and, hence, more fun (despite needing to win to maintain their league standing), the players on the skilled team played in positions unfamiliar to them. The skilled team lost, but both teams claimed the game was one of the more enjoyable they had played. Birrell and Slatton's point in this example is that, in a feminist model of competition, the objective is not to dominate but to join with the opponent in a mutually supportive and rewarding experience. A second example of a feminist sport experience, also involving softball, is found in Gabriner's (1976) account of the lesbian feminist team discussed earlier. Here too, the members of the team adopted a model of competition that stressed mutual support and development.

We downplayed the hard-liner do-or-die fierce competition of most teams and sought to play in an atmosphere of positive support, a chance for all to play and group decisions. Our coaches were our lesbian sisters and playing members of the team. The rosters were made up before each game by the whole team. During the first summer we kept careful track of how many innings each woman played, so that no woman would be a bench-warmer. Our way of functioning was very unusual for the average softball team.' (Gabriner, 1976:5).

A third example of feminist alternatives to the male model of competitive sport is found in Christine Grant's (1984) discussion of changes in international field hockey in the last fifty years. The International Women's Field Hockey Association was formed in 1927. Until the early 1970, the primary goals of the Association were to safeguard the game

and promote friendly competition among women players. International competitions were held regularly and although matches were highly competitive, they were marked by a spirit of co-operation and commitment to fair play. One striking feature of the competitions was that tournaments were structured so as to prevent emergence of a winner. This practice was based on the principle that the main purposes of playing were the experience of the game and the promotion of friendship, rather than achieving medals and rankings.

The emphasis on fair play and friendly competition began to be challenged in the 1960 and by 1971 the structure of the international tournament was changed to yield a winner and final standings. Moreover, Christine Grant (1984) observes, the spirit of play had changed to one of tense and sometimes antagonistic competition. Grant cites two reasons for the changes. The first was financial pressures. Women's field hockey had always existed on a shaky financial basis. In the 1960 a new source of funding became available to some teams in the form of government support. This support came with a price, however, for funding often was conditional on success in international competition. Thus, Christine Grant (1984:36) notes, "philosophy fell victim to finances".

The second influence was the movement for sex equality in sport in the 1960. For many, equality meant access to what men value in sport; specifically it meant success in maturational competition. In combination with the pressures emanating from government support, this misguided notion of sex equality led to the transformation of field hockey described above.

In commenting on these changes, Christine Grant (1984) suggests that the uniqueness of the original model in field hockey is a manifestation of a gender gap in sport. She indicates that when women were in control of the sport and able to resist the pressures of conforming to the male model, they chose an alternative that was radically different from men's sport.

It is interesting to note that the three examples of feminist organization in sport described above—two concerning softball and one concerning field hockey—all involve team sports. It may be argued that team sports, as contrasted with individual sports such as swimming, contain a particular potential for feminist transformation of power. Team sports, regardless of the level of competition, provide an opportunity to enjoy the experience of group effort in a competitive situation that emphasizes support and cooperation.

One of the barriers to women's empowerment has been their isolation from one another. Women who do not work outside the home are particularly isolated. Women who do work outside the home, in addition to being burdened with the demands of domestic and paid labor, often find themselves in jobs that afford little opportunity for social contact with other women. Team sports provide one arena in which women can come together in pursuit of a common goal, thereby bridging the gaps that have separated them.

The communal experience of sport is, of course, not limited to team efforts. Individual sports also provide settings in which women may cooperate in supportive competition. However, there is a particular quality to the social experience of team sports, an experience largely denied to women in the past. For women to claim this opportunity and direct it toward a redefinition of power would be an important step toward feminist political change.

The last of the levels of political change is the institutional. Citing the "fundamental links" between economic and social relations, Hartsock (1974:13) states that gaining economic

power is central to the liberation of women. In comparison to the possibilities for change discussed above, the potential for sport to contribute to the economic advancement of women is limited. Even if women were to gain significant entry into positions as professional athletes and as owners, shareholders, and administrators in sport—a development that would be a major change from current conditions—the number of women affected would be relatively small. Despite media attention to the "big business" of sport and the costs of staging extravaganzas such as the Olympics, these costs are insignificant when considered against expenditures in other areas of the public and private economic sectors. Efforts to improve the status of women in commercial sport will benefit the individuals concerned but will not substantially affect the structure of economic relations between men and women. Similarly, if in an even more fantastical scenario, commercial spectator sport were to disappear entirely, the symbolic effect on women's lives would be considerable, but the material impact—if all other forms of inequality and exploitation were unchanged—would be slight.

It is likely that the main contribution of sport to feminist change at the institutional level is indirect and occurs through related changes at the personal and group levels. As women come to experience their own power and energy and to build organizations that develop these capacities, the possibilities for economic change will be enhanced. The struggle for women's advancement takes place in all social arenas. Efforts to improve the economic condition of women are most fruitfully directed at the workplace and in the legal and political arenas. Although the contribution of sport to change at the institutional level is largely indirect, it is no less critical to the wider struggle.

Conclusion: Sport and Empowerment

The preceding section provides some indication of the possibilities for feminist change through sport. To be sure, the examples are isolated and vary in the degree to which they are informed by political consciousness. Although there is nothing resembling a sustained feminist transformation taking place in sport as yet, the specific instances of change that are occurring are reasons for optimism.

These examples also indicate the particular potential of sport to contribute to a feminist reconceptualization of power. The theory of power advanced by Hartsock stresses the centrality of the sexual division of labor in structuring women's worldviews. Hartsock notes that she discusses the sexual division of labor rather than the gender division of labor for two reasons. The first is a concern not to separate the effects of nature and nurture, for "the division of labor between men and women cannot be reduced to simply social terms" (Nancy Hartsock, 1985:233). The second reason is to keep hold of the bodily aspect of existence and "perhaps to grasp it over firmly in an effort to keep it from evaporating altogether. There is some biological bodily component to human existence. But its size and substantive content will remain unknown until at least the certainly changeable aspects of the sexual division of labor are altered" (Hartsock, 1985).

Sport provides a setting to explore the content of the bodily aspect of women's existence. It is a setting in which we can begin to unravel the social and cultural expressions of the physical differences between women and men. Historically, these differences have been expressed in the oppression and victimization of women. The liberatory possibility of sport lies in the opportunity for women to experience the creativity and energy of their bodily power and to develop this power in

the community of women.

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