

WAR OF SEXES IN SPORTING DISCIPLINES: A BLOW AT EQUALITY, FAIRNESS AND FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

The advocates of human rights speak highly of giving women equal opportunities by recognizing the international mandate to safeguard their rights and yet, a premier institution such as that of International Olympic Committee, gives importance to the distinctions that act as a hindrance in her growth process. This trend reflects deepening discrimination to such levels that it suppresses a woman's dream of moving ahead in life. The paper focuses on bias in distribution of events for women particularly in Olympic Games. Imagine giving yourself completely to a sporting discipline, so much that you work day and night to convert the dream of becoming something great into a reality. Dreams, aspirations, hard work do not see the sex of a person but one's gender has become a great deal when it comes to sports. The concept of intelligible differentia applies to women and works for their empowerment but protecting women is different from restraining them to display their skills. No doubt, separate events are justifiable due to biological differences between the two sexes but where physical strength does not play a primary role and emphasis is more on strategy, skills and tactics, segregation will lead to inequality. This distinction has given rise to social inequality, gender stereotyping in televised sports and ultimately, acceptability of women in sports. Despite having Olympic Charter and Code on Sports, nothing substantial is being done to improve the participation of women in sports. However, in Olympics 2020, to be held in Tokyo, efforts have been made to improve gender equality with highest ever number of women's events. This is just the beginning; a lot has to be done in this regard.

Keywords: Olympic Games, Social inequality, Gender stereotyping, Human rights, Participation, Empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

'In contests involving strength, speed and reactive ability, women are nowhere near as good as men' [1].

A man's built is entirely different from that of a woman. She is considered beautiful, delicate, and sensitive. He, on the other hand, is considered muscular, rugged, brawny and of course, the protector of the inferior sex. It took us ages to change this dogmatic concept defining the roles of a man and a woman. And today, yet again, we stand in front of the age-old perception of women and

restricting their abilities. In our day-to-day life, a woman works equally hard as a man and gender integration has been accepted almost everywhere. In all other spheres, women have stood on equal footing as men but sports as an activity has segregated its players on the basis of sex. Modern Olympic Games were founded by Baron Pierre de Coubertin and till the time he lead the IOC, he did not promote women's events. He described Olympics as "the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, art for its setting, and female applause as reward" [2]. The

IOC leadership maintained this mentality against women in sports, and limited women's participation in the Olympic Games for over fifty years. In past years, though participation as well as the number of events for women has increased, but it has not equaled men. Sports promote sportsmanship when played at such a prestigious international level but in guise of sportsmanship, biased distinction and inequity have been promoted. Certain sports have mixed events such as the team figure skating event, badminton, tennis, mixed relays, curling, luge, and equestrian. Other sports such as boxing, judo, hockey, cycling, weightlifting, etc., hold separate events for men and women. This might be understandable and unavoidable due to differences in the physical built of the two sexes, but what about the events where the two sexes do not physically fight each other? Archery, artistic gymnastics, shooting, chess (national level), etc., are some of the disciplines wherein separate events are held for the two sexes. Some scholars argue that segregation in sports is based on the false assumption that women and girls are unable to compete with men and boys. This segregation, they argue, gives rise to social inferiority [3]. But the fact that men and women differ in muscle strength, body composition, cardio respiratory endurance, etc., cannot be denied. Does this mean that sport segregation is justified? Does this segregation have a negative impact on the level of female achievements? Keeping in mind the performance of the great Indian sportswomen at the Rio Olympics, is it justified to consider them too weak that the sport events for both men and women cannot be mingled?

Broadly speaking, there are three types of segregation made between a male and a female:

1. When there are different sporting events for men and women: Canoe (singles and doubles in Olympics) is held for males alone whereas rhythmic

gymnastics is held for female participation alone.

2. When the sport is same but it is sex segregated: Events such as athletics, volleyball, etc.
3. When the sport is same but the events are specially designed differently for men and women; for example, under gymnastics, the common events for men and women are floor exercise and vault.

HISTORY OF SEX SEGREGATION IN SPORTS

Historically in America, both men and women were engaged in separate sporting activities. During 19th century, working class men became anxious about the feminizing effects on boys and growing trend of gender equality all over. Thus, keeping in mind such a situation, various institutions supported and promoted sports as an activity separate for men and women. So as to inculcate masculine activities, team sports, especially football, were aimed at male participants [4]. One of the sports' primary functions in 19th century was to create and establish dominant styles of masculinity in extreme opposition to the qualities society had ascribed to women and femininity. This gave birth to different expectations from men and women and their respective roles were defined. In India, the situation was entirely different. Earlier, families had dogmatic views and were not in favor of sending their daughters to play any sport. Girls were supposed to take care of the family and hence, most of the events were male dominated. In order to attract women in the field of sports, segregation was made so that they could play without any hesitation and more importantly, to protect them as they were considered fragile and delicate. Sex segregation is a protective principle of modern sports and is an important element in the marginalization and subordination of girls and women in sports and beyond. It is deeply ingrained in all the sporting activities. Though,

presently, female participation has increased in sports but still, they are considered less skillful and less worthy of reward, attention, and praise than male players. There is hardly any case challenging sex segregation in sports in India and this has been accepted throughout the country as a way of life.

JUSTIFICATION BEHIND HAVING SEPARATE SPORTING EVENTS

Having separate sporting events for both men and women is justifiable for certain reasons. Some of them could be:

Biological Differences

The rational explanation for having separate events among men and women is their different body structures and innate characteristics determined by genetics and hormones. Women have more body fat than men due to higher levels of estrogen and men have higher levels of testosterone, which gives them a performance advantage. Testosterone enables men to increase protein synthesis in muscles, develop and maintain muscle mass, and boost energy.

To Ensure a Fair Game

Owing to biological differences, women must be given a fair opportunity to prove their abilities and that is the reason why, we've separate sporting events. If a man is made to compete with a woman in a boxing match, it would certainly not be justified since the chances of a female player outperforming a male player are extremely low. Men are physically stronger than women, on an average. It was found in a study that men had an average of 26 lb. (12 kg) more skeletal muscle mass than women. Women also exhibited about 40% less upper-body strength and 33 percent less lower-body strength [5]. There are no anti-feminist thoughts in this idea. It is a clear cut case of biological differences which cannot be ignored.

Variation in Body Strength

The reason why no separate events are demanded for certain sports is variation in body strength used by both men and women. Take, for example, artistic gymnastics; on keen observation of the event, it becomes clear that three main male events in gymnastics are hugely dependent on upper body strength. They're always holding their entire body weight by their arms. The women's events seem to focus more on combinations of upper and lower body strength. The common events for men and women are floor exercise and vault. Rest all other events under gymnastics are different for men and women.

Despite keeping the above-mentioned points in view, isn't it true that women are catching up and their position, physical capabilities have improved? The scenario has completely changed and the level of training that female players are receiving is similar to the training received by male players. The idea is not to put a man and a woman in the same ring and made to fight each other but it is high time that we give some consideration to other events and make some effort to integrate them so that opportunities of growth are provided equally to both men and women without favoring either sex.

SEPARATION BREEDS INEQUALITY

Sex segregation in sporting disciplines does not only reflect biological differences persisting between the two sexes but sadly, a flawed premise that women are athletically inferior to men [6]. Not all sports are based on physical strength, agility, and physically fighting the opposite sex. It's not just speed, strength that makes a good player but rather being smart and strategical. There are variations of speed that each player puts up in different games. All the sporting events do not require same level of energy and speed. Furthermore, the main purpose of

sports is that best players should face one another irrespective of their sexes. Times have changed. There are a lot many improvements in sports science and technology. Also, effective training is now made available to female sportswomen. If we compare female sportspersons from past to present day, we'll see a remarkable alteration in women's physiques. They're demonstrably stronger and faster as a result of the shifting cultural and political winds that opened vistas to them that were previously unimagined. Certain sports events can be integrated such as:

Sailing

Most of the time, it's not about the physical strength but reading the course (wind shifts, current, tides etc.) and having the skill to make your boat go faster, other tactics that help you make through the finish line.

Fencing

This discipline requires speed, finesse, strategy, and has no use for brute strength. Large size can be both advantage and disadvantage in this sport.

Chess

It is a game that is played at national level and it is all about strategy, sharp mind, and how quick you are. What would be the purpose for segregating sexes for a game that has nothing to do with physical strength?

Archery

What sort of advantage would a man have over a woman in the game of archery? Shooting is a sport that certainly requires more brain than brawn. Keen sight, breath control, and trigger squeeze are among the qualities that make an Olympic-caliber shooter. Yet, most shooting competitions remain segregated. In fact, until 1976, the competition was not segregated. It wasn't until a woman won the gold in the same year that the sport was then segregated. The same happened in 1992, when Zhang

Shan won the gold in a mixed skeet competition. Yet in 1996, before she could defend her title, women were shut out of the event entirely. Clearly the segregation of the sexes in the Olympics is not always a decision made with fairness in mind [7].

Soccer, Hockey, etc.

These games are not just about fancy footwork, being quick, strong or fit, but also about co-ordination, tactical awareness, natural aptitude for team tactics and a great many more like skills.

Sequel to Segregation

Sex segregation in sports, nonetheless, has serious implications and effects which cannot be ignored. These should be taken into consideration for protection of women's right and giving them equal opportunity to prove their abilities.

1. **Social Inequality:** It gives birth to social inequality and mothers it. These separate events for men and women create gaps in the minds of the people and thus, unknowingly, it gives birth to social inequality. No matter how much a female player improves in her sport, unless she comes face-to-face with her male counterparts, they will never consider her better.
2. **Gender Stereotyping in Televised Sports:** Furthermore, this segregation leads to gender stereotyping in televised sports. Television as a medium creates awareness among people that gone are those days when girls were kept confined in professional boundary and were permitted to become teachers alone. But segregation of events for men and women keeps on emphasizing on the fact that females are weaker and inferior sex and the same point is echoed by the media. Out of approximately 264 minutes of total sports coverage over the six-week period, 244 minutes (92%) covered men's sports, 12 minutes (5%) covered women's sports, and 8 minutes (3%)

covered gender-neutral topics [8]. It is not surprising that men's sports were covered more than women's sports.

3. **Acceptability:** People have stopped questioning obligatory sex segregation in sports and made it a part of their life. Not many people challenge it and they've taken this concept for granted. Such coercive means of playing sports are taught from the very beginning in schools and colleges itself. And afterwards, players make it a way of their life. There is hardly any case where sex segregation in sports is challenged. Sex segregation in sports indirectly aims at defining women's role and proving a baseless fact that women are inferior to men.
4. **Discrimination:** Women are discriminated against in sports due to this segregation. The infamous South Asian Games 2016 is the testimony to the fact. Men athletes were accommodated in a four-star hotel, whereas female athletes were put up in guest rooms at a local institute 20 km away from the stadium. Also, sport segregation serves to retard the development of women and deprive them of some of the benefits they would have received in integrated sports.
5. **Sex-Based Rule Difference:** There are certain rules which are about perpetuating the myth of women's comparative frailty. Is it even reasonable to argue that continuance of the 1902-based rule mandating women tennis players win the best two out of three matches (in Grand Slams), as opposed to men's three out of five? Does this rule suggest that great tennis players such as Serena Williams and Venus Williams aren't able to hold themselves for longer?

SEPARATE BUT EQUAL

The most important case concerning segregation was that of *Plessy v. Ferguson* [9], in which the court ruled that

segregation laws were constitutional if equal facilities were provided to whites and blacks. This decision was overruled in the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* [10], which declared that racially segregated public schools were inherently unequal. The relevant part of this case that concerns the topic of segregation on the basis of sex in sports provided for a doctrine "separate but equal". The same doctrine is applied to sports and it means acknowledging the differences between the two sexes. Women's separation from men is beneficial and actually encourages equality among athletes but if we adapt the language of the Supreme Court in the *Brown* ruling and substitute the word 'sex' for 'race', the question that Chief Justice Earl Warren might ask is: Does segregation of women in athletics, solely on the basis of sex, even though the physical abilities and other factors may be equal, deprive women of equal opportunities [11].

An analogy was drawn by LaVaquer-Manty [12] when he said:

"Wheelchairs affect athletic performance: on average, in the aggregate, they make the athletes faster than biped runners. A separate competitive division for wheelchair users is a way of making sure competition also remains meaningful for runners. This benefits participants in wheelchairs because they are able to compete in races but it also insures that runners on foot are not negatively affected by them. In the same way, the concept of "separate but equal" is the best strategy to guarantee that women are given equal opportunities in sports and that they benefit from their participation as much as possible."

Having separate events for physically disabled sportspersons and runners is an entirely different situation, if a comparison has to be made with men and women. It is

not contended that sports integration should take place at all levels, but in certain events where strategies, skills play greater role than displaying physical strength.

LEGAL VIEWPOINT

Olympic Charter (in Force from 2 August, 2015)

The Olympic Games were played for the first time at Olympia in Greece in 776 BC. The ultimate goal of ancient Olympic Games was to be the best. In the modern sense, the best amateur athletes in the world match skill and endurance in a series of contests called the Olympic Games with the aim to foster the ideal of *a sound mind in a sound body* and to promote friendship among nations. Section 2(7) of the Olympic Charter provides for the mission of the International Olympic Committee, which is to promote Olympism throughout the world and to lead the Olympic Movement. The Indian Olympic Committee's role is to encourage and support the promotion of women in sports at all levels and in all structures with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women. The principle of equality as mentioned in the charter is a mere provision. Though the Charter talks about many other important aspects, but when it comes to its implementation, the charter has failed.

National Sports Development Code of India, 2011

Statement of purpose [13] of the National Sports Development of India suggests that there is a need to regulate sports and it arises out of several considerations and one of them is to protect gender equality in sports. However, the provision is more theoretical than practical. In the beginning of the year 2017, the government constituted a panel to draft National Sports Development Code. The panel shall be constituted to study the existing sports governance frame work and make recommendations on bringing out a

comprehensive National Sports Development Code across sports disciplines. Hopefully, gender equality will play a greater role in the new code.

Constitution of India

Equality is one of the magnificent cornerstones of the Indian democracy. In the Indian Constitution, this right is embodied in Article 14. Though Article 14 touches upon intelligible differentia, but where a woman can be empowered by giving her more rights, she should not be deprived by giving it a veil of protection.

IOC's Women and Sports Commission

A commission was created to deal with the topic of discrimination in sports and women's involvement in sports. Created in 1995, the IOC's Women and Sports Working Group served as a consultative body composed of representatives of the three constituent bodies of the Olympic Movement (the IOC, Ifs, and NOCs), plus an athlete representative and independent members. Chaired by Anita L. DeFrantz, the Working Group became a full Commission in 2004, and advises the IOC President and the Executive Board on which policies to adopt in order to increase female participation in sports at all levels [14]. This commission also presents a Women and Sport Trophy annually which recognizes a woman internationally who has embodied the values of the IOC and who has supported efforts to increase women's participation in sport at all levels. This trophy is supposed to symbolize the IOC's commitment to honoring those who are beneficial to gender equality in sports [15].

IOC's World Conference

Every four years, the IOC organizes a world conference on women and sports, where the primary objective is to analyze the progress made in this field within the Olympic Movement and to define a prioritized plan of action to improve and increase the participation of women in

sports. The fifth edition was held in Los Angeles, USA, in February 2012 with over 700 delegates from 121 countries in attendance. The delegates unanimously approved “The Los Angeles Declaration”, a series of recommendations aimed at promoting gender equality in sports and using sports as a tool to improve the lives of women around the world [16].

RECENT DEVELOPMENT IN OLYMPICS

The Olympic Charter states that one of the roles of the IOC is “to encourage and support the promotion of women in sports at all levels and in all structures, with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women” [17]. Mini steps are being taken so as to ensure equality in sporting disciplines. The decision marks a key milestone in evolution of the Olympic Program by significantly improving gender equality. In Tokyo Olympics 2020, the number of mixed events will double from nine in Rio 2016 to 18 and the 2020 Olympics will observe the highest ever number of women participation in the games and highest ever number of women events [18].

CONCLUSION

A sport is nothing about equal results but equal opportunities. The purpose and spirit of sports should be kept alive and individuals should be allowed irrespective of their sexes to compete against one another. There is a difference between coercive sex segregation in sports (which happens at all ages and competitive levels and is the topic of concern for all), and voluntary sex segregation in community-level sports. The first step that any community can take is to integrate the events for men and women and broadening the mindsets of people. The sexual differences are irrelevant to a certain extent. Wherever possible, the sport events should be integrated because it is crucial that the best person wins and it should not be made a gender-game. Such integration

will bring about positive results in women empowerment. If the capabilities of female players are challenged by putting them up against the male players, it will take some time, but they’ll perform equally or even better than their male competitors. Nothing is impossible. What was considered impossible a decade ago is possible today. There are many provisions in various laws that talk about equality among the two sexes but in reality, how many of them have practical application, is a million dollar question. The need of the hour is to give women a chance and their due share rather than considering them too weak to compete with men. The definition of gender equality has changed. Women can beat men, and vice versa, in the meaningful competition and this is the definition of gender equality in sports. There was a time when people were not willing to send their daughters out of their homes but today, India has produced great sportspersons such as Jwala Gutta (badminton), Krishna Poonia (track and field), MC Mary Kom (women’s boxing), PV Sindhu (badminton), Sakshi Malik (wrestling), Saina Nehwal (badminton), Sania Mirza (tennis), Dipa Karmakar (gymnastics), etc. The dogmatic view that women cannot compete with men holds no justification in today’s world, except that integration of certain sports for men and women will bridge the barriers, reduce discrimination and will give an opportunity to rethink and reconstitute the system of sports. Desegregating sports could very well be a long and complex transition and this might seem as difficult as stopping a running train but this is not a small topic that can be ignored. Current system of segregation displays one message that women are inferior and not good enough as compared to men. Our society has been struggling for long to tackle the issue of discrimination but even today, certain areas require attention to place a woman on the same pedestal as a man. Accordingly, the IOC must further consider internal reform to put ethics first,

not only for the athletes with unresolved disputes, but also for the continued strength of the Olympic Movement.

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