

FEMINIST ISSUES IN SPORTS



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ABSTRACT:

Western feminism today is not the clear-cut feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. While there have always been splinter groups within the Western feminist tradition, mainstream feminism of 20 years ago was clearly characterized by a desire to prove that women are equal to men. The Western feminist of 1970 was infused with a righteous fire, a fire fueled by anger against discrimination. That fire was focused on discrediting the disparaging, demeaning, and unfounded belief that women are necessarily inferior to men in the ways of the world. Thus, in order to gain equality, feminists emphasized the similarity of women and men.

KEY WORDS: Feminist issues , mainstream feminism , political institutions.

INTRODUCTION:

Today, Western feminism does not seem to be as certain of its goals. Feminists are divided on whether to emphasize similarity or focus on differences. They fear that in achieving

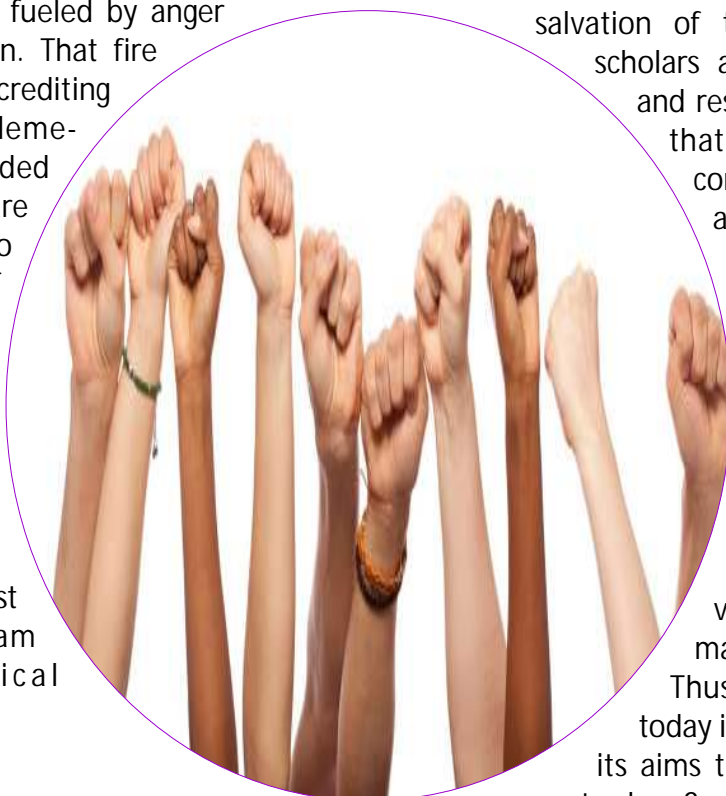


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the status and power traditionally held by men, they may lose the qualities that they value, such as a sense of interconnectedness and empathy. Feminists look at the world and think, "What a hash men have made of this. Do we really want to be like men if this is what men do?" So, feminists have begun to emphasize their differences from men, and they have decided that those differences may be the salvation of the world. Feminist scholars are providing theory and research which suggest that women really do construct their worlds in a uniquely feminine way.

Furthermore, there is a hint of moral superiority in this theory and research, so that it is quite tempting to conclude that traditional feminine virtue must be maintained at all costs.

Thus, the feminism of today is much less unified in its aims than the feminism of yesterday. Some feminists still are trying to achieve parity with men in a man's world; some feminists are hoping for an end to gender distinctions through a position that values



the qualities traditionally associated with each gender; and some feminists are emphasizing women's unique and exalted virtues to the extent that men are seen as the enemy. In 1990, debates among proponents of these positions are especially sharp when the topic is women's participation or advancement in the military, political institutions, business, or organized sports.

The world of sport provides an excellent example of the issues facing feminists today. Scholarly Western literature pertaining to women and sports encompasses the gamut of feminist thought. Some writers have devoted considerable effort to debunking myths about the physiological and psychological differences between female and male athletes. Others have emphasized the benefits of androgyny to the individual and the potential benefits of an amalgamation of feminine and masculine qualities in the female athlete. Finally, some writers have pointed out that women are more cooperative and less competitive than men; therefore, they must not sully their characters by engaging in malelike behaviors associated with sports.

The intent of this paper is to present representative research and theory relevant to the current issues regarding women and sports. In so doing, it is hoped that the parallel between these issues and the issues of feminism will become clear. It should be noted that, by and large, the literature reviewed in this paper does not address issues of race and ethnicity as they relate to sports. Thus, a potentially salient factor in the feminist debate on women in sports is omitted. It is hoped that future research and theory will include these issues.

Women who value athletic participation have been fighting an uphill battle to gain recognition from and parity with men. In spite of their efforts, extreme disparity still exists. There is much less social and economic support for the Western female athlete than for her male counterpart, and fewer females pursue athletic careers (Butt, 1987). For example, while athletic participation for women in the United States increased dramatically throughout the 1970s, it is still far below male participation. Even with the enactment of Title IX, a U.S. law that prohibits sex discrimination in any organization receiving federal money, female athletes receive less money and social support, and their playing environments are inferior to those of males (Coakley, 1982).

Prevailing attitudes about women and men have made it difficult for large sectors of Western society to accept the fact that females can compete successfully (Coakley, 1982). In general, people tend to have higher expectations for males, and they evaluate male performance more favorably than female performance. For example, when the score of an intercollegiate basketball game was announced on television, the audience had different reactions depending on whether they thought the score was the outcome of a women's basketball game or a men's basketball game. The announced score was 41-40. When viewers thought it referred to a women's team, they attributed the low score to ineptness and lack of skill. However, when they thought the score referred to a men's team, they attributed the low score to tight defense (Cheska, 1981).

Rees and Andres (1980) tested children between the ages of four and six on grip strength. While they found that the girls and boys did not differ in their performance, 72% of the subjects believed that the boys would be stronger. Iso-Ahola (1979) investigated attributions of fourth-grade children following a motor-maze game. The children competed with same-sex and opposite-sex peers, and the outcome was controlled by the experimenter. It was found that boys losing to girls were less likely to attribute the loss to their opponent's ability than were boys who lost to other boys. Bird and Williams (1980) found that adolescent subjects attributed successful male athletic performance to effort while attributing successful female athletic performance to luck. Finally, Brawley, Lander, Miller, and Kearnes (1979) found that male and female subjects overestimated the endurance capacity of a male accomplice, and underestimated the capacity of a female accomplice when each had performed a

motor task identically.

Regardless of actual outcome, then, many people (both female and male) persist in believing that female performance capacity is inferior to male. When it comes to competitive games involving physical coordination and strength, it is a "man's world." After all, weren't these games designed to give men a place to prove their physical and psychological superiority over other men? There is a sense of outrage that women would dare to penetrate this bastion of maleness. Ferris (1981b) quotes a doctor who holds an influential and active position in sports medicine. This doctor's view is that "women, in taking part in sport, are engaging in activities specifically designed and evolved to 'glorify the male and his particular characteristics'" (p. 8).

It is this attitude of prejudice towards female athletes that has led Western feminists to try to debunk the myth of female inferiority in sports. It has been alleged through the ages that women are not physically or psychologically equipped to compete successfully in sports. As late as 1980, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) refused to allow women to compete in long-distance running events because members of the IOC did not believe that women could endure the strain of such events. (The IOC chose to ignore the fact that women already had been competing successfully in long-distance events for years.)

How does the female athlete compare to the male athlete in terms of performance potential? The two-way Channel swim record is held by a woman, Cynthia Nicholas of Canada. Another woman, Penny Lee Dean (USA), holds the England to France record. Women have climbed Everest. . . . Dame Naomi James (NZ) held the round-the-world, solo-sailor record. Again, Ann Sayer holds the record for the grueling, seven-day Three Peaks Walk. Betty Cook won the World Powerboat Title in 1979. Also, . . . a woman jockey, Ann Ferris, won the Irish Hurdles steeplechase and yet another woman, Bev Francis of Australia, set a women's world record in a man's middleweight weightlifting competition beating all the men in the event along the way. In cycling, Beryl Burton of Great Britain, many time holder of the world title, riding in a 12-h event, created a new competition record and covered 277 miles, two more than her closest male rival. Another enduring female, Gail Roy, set a new high altitude ballooning record in 1979 without the aid of oxygen (sic). (Ferris, 1981a, p. 15)

Furthermore, women have been excelling at a rapid clip since the time of Ferris' tally. For example, for four successive years, women have won the very difficult Iditarod dogsled race in Alaska.

Research supports this anecdotal evidence of women's basic capacity to compete successfully with men, and it implicates general societal attitudes about women as the limiting factor in women's performance. Previous studies that have compared the physical capacity of women relative to men have used the average woman and the average man as subjects. In these studies, women were clearly inferior to men. However, as researchers have pointed out (e.g., Wilmore, 1979), the average woman in these studies led a very sedentary life compared to the average man; thus, the inferiority of women has been hopelessly confounded with lack of exercise and experience typical of female subjects used in this research. Comparisons of highly trained female and male athletes suggest that they are more alike than different in the physiological parameters of body composition and physique, muscle fiber characteristics, strength, and cardiovascular capacity (Wilmore, 1979).

Dyer (1976, 1977) and Ferris (1981a) have compared world records of women and men in track and swimming events. In performances requiring strenuous exertion, women's performances are improving at a faster rate than are men's. This is true for almost all distances, although women's rate of improvement relative to men's is greater at the longer distances. For example, Ferris (1981a) found that between 1969 and 1980, the difference between the world marathon record for women and men declined by almost 1/3. The women's record had decreased by more than 40 minutes while the men's

record had remained unchanged.

Poortmans (1981) compared Olympic records in swimming, running, and jumping events. These records show that the best female performance is 81 to 93% of the best male performance. However, in races extending beyond two hours, women begin to excel. Two women broke the world record for swimming the English Channel in 1976. The 1974 AAU Open Super-Marathon run of 100 miles was won by a woman.

In an effort to suggest the influence of social factors in limiting women's athletic performance, Dyer (1976) compared the difference between female and male athletic performance in different countries. These countries included East Germany, the USSR, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, West Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia, Finland, Czechoslovakia, Italy, France, South Africa, and Belgium. In track events, he found that there was a large disparity between countries in the percentage of difference between female and male performance. That is, in some countries, the difference was large, and in others the difference was small. Because the genetic and environmental influence on female and male athletes within a given country is presumably the same, he concluded that social factors must account for the relative parity or disparity of female and male track performance. He identified these social factors as differential provision of facilities and encouragement of sport by educators, employers, and the general public. Furthermore, he found that the female national records for swimming in several countries exceeded the male national records for the same events in several other countries. This, too, suggests that social factors have a significant influence on female performance.

Summarizing the research on women's athletic performance, it has been found that women have performed as well as, and occasionally better than men in many sporting events; the best female performances in swimming and running are approaching the best male performances in these sports; and highly trained female athletes are very similar to highly trained male athletes in their physiological capacity for sport and exercise. They may even have some advantages over men in some areas such as body-heat regulation and buoyancy (Ferris, 1981a).

In spite of the evidence, however, many people, women as well as men, refuse to believe that females can compete on a level commensurate with males. For example, Butt (1987), who competed in professional women's tennis and is presently a sports psychologist, claims that women are always going to be inferior to men in their physical capacities. And Greta Waitz, whose 1980 world record marathon time would have beaten every men's Olympic marathon time up to 1948, says "I don't think a woman can run a marathon as fast as a man. Physically, men are stronger than we are" (quoted in Ferris, 1981a, p. 27).

Along with attitudes about the physical inferiority of women are limiting beliefs about the psychological unsuitability of women for sports competition. To be a proper woman in Western culture is to be feminine, and to be feminine is all too often presumed to be unresourceful, intellectually inferior, incompetent, unrealistic, immature, subjective, submissive, easily influenced, and wracked with feelings of inferiority (Broverman, Broverman, Carlson, Rosencrantz, & Vogel, 1970). In addition, it is widely held that women are not competitive and lack the desire to win that sustains competitive endeavors. Obviously, with this description of femininity, it is thought that women are not psychologically suited to the rigors of sports. Furthermore, it has been contended that those women who do succeed in sports must ultimately face a painful discontinuity in their roles as women and their roles as athletes. This alleged role conflict of women in sport is captured in the following poem by Barbara Lamblin, entitled "First Peace."

i was the all american girl, the winner, the champion, the swell kid, good gal, national swimmer,

model of the prize daughter bringing it home for dad i even got the father's trophy i was also a jock, dyke, stupid dumb blonde frigid, castrating, domineering bitch, called all these names in silence, the double standard wearing me down inside.

Other scholarly literature pertaining to women and sports suggests that women who compete in sports have the best of both worlds. They have maintained their femininity while acquiring healthy masculine behaviors that have been shown to correlate with well-being and high self-concept. This literature does not fear the masculinization of female athletes. It simply notes that female athletes have made a healthy adjustment to the world of sports as it is; neither sacrificing their expressive qualities, nor undervaluing the instrumental qualities needed to achieve in sports. It suggests that while reaping some important benefits from engaging in organized sports, women should be influencing sports in a positive way. Thus, the underlying androgyny inherent in sports can be more fully expressed by both females and males.

In a study of female and male gymnasts at the 1976 Olympic games, it was found that men actually interacted more with their teammates prior to a performance than did women, and that men gave and received more positive feedback following a performance than did women (Salmela, 1980). Thus it appears that male athletes do, indeed, engage in some of the expressive behaviors traditionally associated with females.

Oglesby (1984) identifies six expressive qualities that have positive application in sports, and are already an aspect of participation in sports. These include passivity, submissiveness, subordination, dependency, naturalness, and improvisation. Passivity is necessary when an athlete needs to curtail training activities following injury or in order to initiate a specific training regimen. It is also necessary for athletes in order for them to take instructions from their coach. Submissiveness is necessary in order for athletes to attend to the rules and conventions of the game they are playing, including the acceptance of failure or loss. Subordination is necessary in order for athletes to accept corrective feedback and change old habits and strategies. It is also required in order for an athlete to accept a role assigned to her or him that may have negative consequences for personal achievement. Dependency is often required when an athlete has to give up personal control to a teammate or coach. Naturalness is important because it embodies the personal significance of athletic involvement, and values the uniqueness of each player, as well as forming the basis for the development of new techniques, strategies, and equipment. Improvisation leads to acting out of the rule-bound pattern of sport. This often is the basis for brilliant, spontaneous, strategic maneuvers, and it provides the impetus for acting on one's own when a formulated play breaks down.

Sherif (1972) has questioned the assumption that females are less competitive than their male counterparts. It is her contention that when working on a task that has relevance for them, women are just as competitive as men. In the past, Western sports and games may not have had the same value to females that other endeavors may have had. Thus, the research shows only that when females are competing in certain games, they are less competitive than males. It does not indicate that females are generally less competitive than males.

Since expressiveness appears to be an integral part of sports participation and achievement, Oglesby (1984) makes a plea for emphasizing the value of expressiveness in sports. This would allow both female and male athletes an opportunity to develop their expressive qualities in an atmosphere that promotes the overall growth of the athlete. She states that "sport is an important social event that can facilitate the expression of diverse human qualities. Shouldn't we allow these expressions their natural opportunities" (p. 399)?

Similarly, Bredemeier (1984) argues for a synthesis of expressive and instrumental qualities in

sports. She notes that people have predicted that greater inclusion of females in sports would lead to greater valuing of expressive qualities in sports. However, this has not happened so far. As women's athletics has received more government, media, professional, and business attention, it has been co-opted by the national and international androcentric sports establishment, and it has been encouraged to adopt male standards. Rather than influencing sports in a positive way, women's sports has tended to be influenced by the dominant sports philosophy of males.

In reviewing the current Western literature on women and sports, the feminist lines appear to be rather clearly drawn. Some literature is aimed at dispelling myths about female inferiority in sports. This literature appears to have at its core the intent to promote women as worthy athletic competitors who can and should realize their athletic potential. This intent is made clear by Allen (1972), who states that very few women have any conception of their potential to excel at sports. They have limiting self-concepts that have been inculcated by a society that views women as athletically (and generally) inferior.

One of the major points of dissension for feminists interested in sports hinges on the issue of whether or not women lose their cooperativeness and interpersonal orientation when they become involved in competitive sports. For example, Butt (1987) claims that sport generally represents the dominant values of a particular society, and in modern Western society these values are clearly androcentric. It is her contention that women in sports have chosen to emulate men, and that this has been to the female athlete's detriment. According to Butt, the female competitor in professional athletics has tended to take on the worst attributes of the male athlete role. The cooperation, compassion, and broader communal identity of the female tend to become submerged. Unfortunately, one must conclude that, save for a few, the professional female athlete has not merely been bought for a time. She has sold out. (P. 131)

Other scholarly literature pertaining to women and sports suggests that women who compete in sports have the best of both worlds. They have maintained their femininity while acquiring healthy masculine behaviors that have been shown to correlate with well-being and high self-concept. This literature does not fear the masculinization of female athletes. It simply notes that female athletes have made a healthy adjustment to the world of sports as it is; neither sacrificing their expressive qualities, nor undervaluing the instrumental qualities needed to achieve in sports. It suggests that while reaping some important benefits from engaging in organized sports, women should be influencing sports in a positive way. Thus, the underlying androgyny inherent in sports can be more fully expressed by both females and males.

A third body of literature calls for women to eschew the values of traditionally maledominated sports. This literature conveys the message that women who choose to excel in sports, as currently constituted, are selling out. As Butt (1987) avers, women athletes who have achieved success have too often chosen to put competitiveness and aggression ahead of other, healthier values. This literature sees male-oriented sports as the enemy and calls for women to replace male values in sports with values traditionally alleged to be feminine.

Eula West (1986, cited in Bennett, Whitaker, Smith, & Sablove, 1987) speaks eloquently for this position when she states:

As currently practiced, much of sport rests solidly on domination of one person or group by another. From this basic tenet of patriarchy stem all the abuses that occur in sport and all the abuses women receive when they engage in sport. The feminist transformation of sport to serve the needs of women requires that concepts of domination and submission be eliminated. This transformation will render sport, as we now know it, unrecognizable. (p. 378)

How would sports look if it were transformed according to the feminist values espoused by this position? Birrell and Richter (1987) present an example of such a sports structure in their analysis of four softball teams participating in a summer softball league. On three of these teams, a conscious effort was exerted to overcome the flaws these women felt were inherent in male-structured sport. These flaws include: exaggerated emphasis on winning, authoritarian managerial hierarchy, favoritism based on skill level, exclusion because of social identity, antagonism towards opponents, and encouragement of physical risk-taking. The softball structure that emerged from trying to avoid the pitfalls of male-structured sports was “. . . a form of softball that is process oriented, collective, supportive, inclusive, and infused with an ethic of care” (p. 408).

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