

GENDER EQUALITY IN OLYMPIC SPORT

A BRIEF STORY OF WOMEN'S SETBACKS AND SUCCESSES AT THE SUMMER OLYMPIC GAMES

– Written by Jennifer Hargreaves, UK

INTRODUCTION: 2012 - FEMALE OLYMPIANS FROM THE ARAB STATES

The London 2012 Summer Olympic Games were historically significant for female athletes. It was the first time that, with two exceptions (Republic of Nauru, St Kitts and Nevis), that there were women in the teams of all the competing nations. There was a higher percentage of female Olympians than at any previous Summer Olympics and for the first time there were women competitors in every sport. Significantly, also for the very first time, each of the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) had at least one woman in its Olympic team:

- Bahrain sent 12 athletes, 4 men and 8 women (67%).
- Kuwait sent 10 athletes, 8 men and 2 women (20%).

- Oman sent 4 athletes, 3 men and 1 woman (25%).
- Qatar sent 11 athletes, 7 men and 4 women (36.36%).
- Saudi Arabia sent 18 athletes, 16 men and 2 women (11%).
- United Arab Emirates sent 30 athletes, 28 men and 2 women (7%).

In total there were 66 male and 19 female competitors from the GCC countries at London 2012. Women comprised approximately 28% of all GCC competitors¹ compared with 44.3% overall². Although (except in the case of Bahrain) there were still more men than women, the inclusion of women in all the Gulf teams reflects a notable shift in attitudes to female sport in their countries. It signals the likelihood that there will be greater possibilities for girls and women from the region to take part in

different sports in the future and for more of them to become elite athletes and even Olympians. But Arab sportswomen are at an early stage in their Olympic endeavours, whereas Western sportswomen have come a long way towards equality with men throughout the whole of the history of the Olympic Games.

1894: THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT

The modern Olympic Movement originated in the West as an all-male event, so women who lived in western countries faced some challenges to be allowed to compete in the Olympic Games. Its founder and leading ideologue, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, established the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894. Until his death in 1937, De Coubertin remained vociferously opposed to women's



Image: Qatari Bahya Mansour al-Hamad competes during 10m air rifle women's qualification at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

participation in Olympic competition, asserting that, “The Olympic Games must be reserved for men” for the “solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism” with “female applause as reward”³.

De Coubertin reflected the dominant ideology of the 19th century that women were unsuited to take part in vigorous physical exercise. Ideas about distinctions between male and female physiologies and natures were applied systematically to social situations and specifically to defend inequalities between men and women in sport. Medical professionals in Western Europe and North America were proponents of the theory of constitutional overstrain arguing that the female body is governed by a fixed degree of energy for all physical, mental and social actions and that once girls reach puberty they should conserve energy for their procreative futures as wives and mothers⁴. Even during the first two decades of the 20th century, ideas that women were best suited to gentle, therapeutic exercise for health and that vigorous and powerful forms of movement should be avoided

remained dominant. As time went on, most forms of physical exercise for girls and women were gender-specific. They played organised sports in separate spheres from boys and men – in schools, universities, clubs and competitions and with different rules and regulations. The period covering the first Olympic Games coincided with the formative years of women's sports when national and international organisations were formed and there was a steady growth of competitions in a widening variety of sports. In increasing numbers, sportswomen were enjoying fast, vigorous, powerful and skilful forms of movement without harmful results, negating the increasingly residual arguments that the female gender was essentially weaker and less well-suited to sports than the male gender.

DEVELOPMENTS AND SETBACKS: INCLUSION OR SEPARATISM?

Women were barred from competing at the first Olympic Games in 1896, but a Greek woman, Stamata Revithi, staged a protest

by running the route of the marathon in 5 hours and 30 minutes. Because it is a long, gruelling race (42.195 km as of 1908), there was huge resistance to the introduction of a female marathon event for years to come, symbolising the exclusiveness and power of the all-male members of the IOC. It was not until the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, USA, that the women's marathon was finally accepted as an Olympic event.

Ideas about distinctions between male and female physiologies and natures were applied



Image: The London 2012 Olympic Games women's bronze medal basketball game between the USA and France.

The race was won by Joan Benoit (USA) with a time of 2 hours 24 minutes and 52 seconds. It is somewhat ironic that women are now considered physiologically more suited to marathon running than men.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, sports for western women were growing in popularity and increasing numbers of competitions were organised, often with the support of men. Although the IOC had ultimate power to make decisions, they handed over control to the organising committees of the host cities of Paris, St. Louis and London for the 1900, 1904 and 1908 Olympic Games respectively. The hosts allowed women to take part in a few 'feminine-appropriate', although 'unofficial', events'. Women's competitions were not given equal status with men's competitions until 1924, when medals were awarded to both genders. But women wanted more and in 1917 Alice Milliat,

from France, led a challenge to demand that the IOC allow women's track and field athletics into the programme of the 1920 Olympics. The IOC remained unanimously opposed to the demand, but a group of women from Europe and America were defiant. In 1921 they founded the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI) and organised a women's international athletics competition with a range of track and field events. A year later, in 1922, the FSFI held the Women's World Games in Paris (changed from Women's Olympics because the IOC claimed copyright of the term 'Olympic'). These two events attracted large crowds, proving the success of women's athletics and leading the all-male International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) to take control of women's affairs and to push for Olympic recognition. In spite of growing controversy, the IOC declined again to include women's athletics in the

1924 Olympics. The FSFI reacted by holding the Women's World Games for a second time in 1926 in Sweden (10 countries competed); then in 1930 in Czechoslovakia (17 countries) and for the last time in 1934 in England (19 countries).

Throughout the history of the Olympic Games, there have been many key moments in women's struggles to gain greater equality with men. Initially, it was predominantly western women from privileged backgrounds who took up the challenge for Olympic participation – they had time to negotiate and to train for the Games and had money to travel to them. Gradually, Olympic sportswomen came from more varied backgrounds and from countries outside the West. However, women still lacked the political power to affect decisions about their inclusion in Olympic sport. The decision to include female athletics in the 1928 Games was the result of years of struggle, fraught negotiations and highly controversial decisions. Women were only allocated five events, a reduction from eleven at the Women's World Games. In protest, British women athletes, supported by male colleagues, staged a boycott. Wanting to continue with their own Games, other women adopted a strong separatist position. Concurrently, an American contingent (women working in education) opposed all forms of elite sport in preference for healthier, playful and less aggressive forms of exercise for everyone. When some women collapsed at the end of the 800 metres final, opponents of women's sport again used 'medical' and 'biological' justifications for dropping this event from future Olympics. It was not re-instated until 1960, greatly slowing the development of women's distance running.

OLYMPIC RECOGNITION: TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

Regardless of setbacks, by the 1930s women's organised sport had spread to countries in all five continents. With improved international travel and media coverage some female Olympic champions became household names. They were



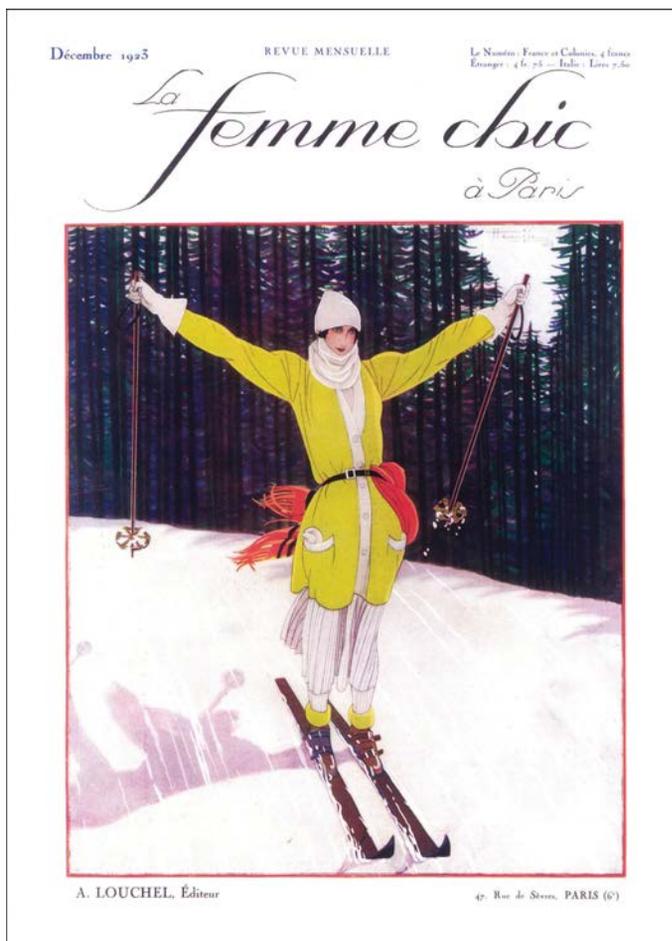
With improved international travel and media coverage some female Olympic champions became household names



generally privileged white western women. The first time African-American women participated was at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. The supreme athleticism of female sportswomen, such as Fanny Blankers-Koen (Netherlands), Babe Didrikson (USA) and Sonya Henie (Norway) were displacing the myth of female frailty and establishing that outstanding sporting ability was not incompatible with popular images of femininity or motherhood. Gradually more female athletes came from developing countries in Africa, Asia and South America and there was

a rapid expansion of numbers when the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries – notably the German Democratic Republic – focused on their female athletes in order to secure more medals. When the German Democratic Republic entered the Olympics for the first time as a separate nation state in 1968, its women dominated athletics and swimming and in 1976 women from Eastern European countries won 73% of all medals. This continued throughout the Cold War (approximately 1945 to 1980). Their increasing numbers were a rich source of potential medals to

boost national morale and international prestige. Nevertheless, gender stereotyping remained an integral feature of Olympic sport and there was continuing opposition to events still claimed as unsuitable for the female physique, such as field events and distance running. The IOC again declined to include women in the 3,000 metres at the 1980 Olympics, but eventually agreed to this in 1984, the time also of the first women's Olympic marathon. Memorably, at those Olympics, Nawal El Moutawakel was the first Arab woman to win Olympic gold (400 metres hurdles). Gradually, over time,



Images: Cover pages of the “La femme chic” magazine from the years 1923 and 1933.

events have been added to the women's Olympic programme and more women from more countries and with varied backgrounds take part in Olympic sport, but only after constant lobbying, conflict, negotiation and even legal challenges.

THE WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL SPORTS MOVEMENT

Throughout the early history of the Olympic Games, female participation was resisted. However, in more recent years there has been a radical shift in its position of the IOC concerning gender equality – in part because social norms in many countries of the world have changed to improve the opportunities for women in all areas of life and culture, including sport. Sportswomen have also been better organised and more demanding, with greater expectations in both national and international contexts. Also, women have sat on the the IOC since 1981 (when they were co-opted members)⁶.

In 1949, the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW) was formed. Its members were mostly physical education

teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges in the West. Over years it produced a network of women across the world who advocated exercise for girls and women to aid health and well-being. There were also national and regional organisations for women in sport in Europe and North America which, together with IAPESGW, set the scene for a well-organised, vigorous and determined international collective of women that became established during the 1990s.

The key year was 1994 when:

- Anita White envisioned, secured sponsorship for and organised the first World Conference on Women and Sport, held in Brighton, UK, with 280 delegates from 82 countries (including GCC countries).
- The *Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport* was compiled⁷ – a statement of principles aiming for equality for women in sport across the world.
- The International Working Group on Women and Sport (IWG) was set up,
- Women Sport International (WSI) was founded.

The *Brighton Declaration* generated unexpected support from national, regional, international government and non-government agencies and all levels of sport organisations. It was highly significant that the IOC adopted the Declaration in 1995 and encouraged by women's groups went on to set up its own Women and Sport Commission and has sponsored five IOC World Conferences on Women and Sport – the latest in February 2012. The IOC also set targets for female membership of National Olympic Committees and International Federations (10% by 2000 and 20% by 2006). The IOC itself has 106 members, 20 of whom are female – still slightly fewer than its original target – and the National Olympic Committees and International Federations of Sport remain heavily male dominated.

The *Brighton Declaration* provided confidence for Arab women in sport. They set up national and regional organisations representing their specific and different histories and cultural influences. However, although there is no doubt that between 1994 and 2012 women made notable

Image: Serbian Ana Ivanovic during her Women's Singles Tennis match against Christina Mchale of the United States, London 2012 Olympic Games.





Image: Norway's Heidi Loke shoots to score against Croatia during their Women's World Handball Championship quarterfinals in Sao Paolo, Brazil 2011.

Talent derives from a society in which sport and exercise are part of the everyday culture

gains towards gender equality in Olympic sport, those from countries where there are cultural, economic, political or religious factors restricting or preventing female participation in sport have still some way to go towards complete equality.

THE ARRIVAL OF ARAB SPORTSWOMEN ON THE OLYMPIC SCENE

Before the year 2000 no GCC country had a woman in its team. At the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Bahrain sent its first GCC female athlete. At Athens in 2004, Kuwait sent 1 woman, in Beijing in 2008 Oman and United Arab Emirates both sent 1 woman and in London 2012 Saudi Arabia sent 2 women and Qatar sent 4 women athletes.

Altogether, there have been 31 female Olympians from the GCC states competing in the last four Olympic Games and one medal winner - Maryam Yusuf Jamal from Bahrain, who won the bronze medal in the 1500 metres in 2012. Most GCC competitors competed under a 'universality' clause allowing athletes to participate without reaching Olympic qualifying standards for 'reasons of equality'. Understandably, their results were below world-class standard.

GCC women have come late into Olympic sport from countries with no established sporting infrastructure. For Olympic success there needs to be a pool of talented young athletes to draw from and regular

international competition is essential. Talent, in turn, derives from a society in which sport and exercise are part of the everyday culture of girls and young women. Looking ahead, the Qatari government has commendably made radical plans for sports infrastructure which takes account of 'factors inhibiting the participation of women', the 'special needs of women' and 'a female-specific model to develop and encourage athletic involvement for women at all levels'⁷ (*Sports Sector Strategy Report 2011-2016*). Qatar also has the magnificent Aspire Academy of Sports Excellence, built in 2004 to 'identify promising student-athletes and develop them into Olympic champions' where it hosted the 2006 Asian Games and will host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Most of the initiatives for putting women's sport 'on the map' in GCC countries have come from women themselves. Delegates at the first international conference on Women and Sport (Alexandria 1995) unanimously endorsed the *Brighton Declaration*, as did the Council of Arab Ministers of Youth and Sport the following year. The foundation of the Sport Association of Arab women followed directly, aiming 'to enhance women's participation in sport, prepare women for roles in sport leadership and ensure Arab women are represented in all

sports organisations at all levels'⁸. The GCC Women's Sport Committees collaborate to improve opportunities for girls and women in sport.

In January 2012 a landmark conference on Women and Sport was sponsored by the Qatar Museum of Olympic Sports, the Qatar Women's Sport Committee and the Qatar Olympic Committee. It attracted delegates from other GCC countries and expert international speakers and guests. A workshop specifically about women and sport in the GCC region addressed 'tensions between globalisation and the dominance of western-rooted sport models, epitomised by the Olympic Games and retention of those aspects of cultural distinctiveness that make the region and each country unique'⁹. These tensions are at the heart of negotiating a way forward. There is a general pattern of low participation rates in sport and exercise causing health problems for women at all stages of life, as well as slowing progress towards Olympic participation. Segregated facilities that ensure that girls and young women can respect their modesty and faith make participation relatively straightforward and regional competitions, such as the inaugural Arab Women's Sports Tournament (UAE, February 2012), the 3rd GCC Sports Championships (Bahrain, March 2012) and the GCC Volleyball Championship (Qatar,

2012) pose few cultural problems. But organised sport outside the region requires great sensitivity and compromise in order for Arab women to be included.

2012 – THE YEAR OF THE ARAB WOMAN ATHLETE

There is greater sensitivity than ever before to the needs of Arab female Olympians who want the right to wear sportswear that is modest and does not reveal the body. Manufacturers have designed special clothing that covers arms, legs and head and international federations are relaxing previously-enforced brief body-covering. In London 2012, there were lengthy dress-code discussions between the IOC, the International Judo Federation and representatives from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regarding the participation of judoka Wojdan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim Shaherkani. The matter was resolved by an agreement allowing her to wear modified head

covering. Shaherkani lost the bout quickly and decisively, but was warmly applauded. Sarah Attar, also from Saudi Arabia, ran the 800 metres fully covered in a long-sleeved green jacket, long black running trousers and a white hood. Although she came last in the first heat by more than half a minute, spectators stood to give her a standing ovation. “This is such a huge honour and an amazing experience, just to be representing the women,” Attar said. “I know that this can make a huge difference.”

CONCLUSION

In 2012, after more than a century of struggle, the achievements of women in Olympic sport have been remarkable and for Arab women from the GCC countries in particular, it has been a year that signals an exciting future.

Olympic sport has been integral to modernisation processes in the GCC countries and Arab women in sport have

become significant agents of change. But whereas Western sportswomen have forged greater Olympic opportunities for themselves over many years and are closer to equality with men than ever before, Arab women are at an earlier stage in their quest for recognition. There is a need for Arab girls and young women to take part in sport and exercise as a normal part of life and culture, firstly for their general health and well-being, but also to build a new generation of young talented sporting females some of whom will have Olympic potential. But in order to succeed on the world stage, they will need access to a modern sports infrastructure with facilities, coaching and competition opportunities that compare favourably with countries that have a long history of Olympic competition.

Acknowledgement: Nour El Houda, Kelly Knez and Anita White (assistance sourcing material).

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Jennifer Hargreaves Ph.D., M.A., Ac.Dip.,
Cert.Ed.

Freelance writer/consultant

Former visiting Professor, University of
Brighton and

Research Consultant, University of
Southampton, United Kingdom.

Contact: jaburnap@googlemail.com