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WOMEN AND SPORT - AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

**The Big Picture –  
An overview of the major issues  
facing women in sport today**

By

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## Introduction

In this brief address, I shall attempt to give you an overview - admittedly my own selective overview - of some of the main issues facing sport for women across the globe today, and to tell you about some of the possibilities and problems which face us. I shall begin by examining how to understand where we are today and how different groups want different things for and from women's sport. I will then look at some global developments and finally I shall describe what we might learn from best practice. I hope this will provide you with a context in which to position your own initiatives for women's sport here in Northern Ireland. I also hope it will give you cause for both optimism and caution since the facts show that women' sport has been, and will probably continue to be, characterised by both gains *and* losses. But first, a word about one of my heroines...

...she won the Wimbledon Ladies title...at the age of fifteen. She proceeded to prove that her victory had been no mere quirk of fate by winning the title on four more occasions...she became an international golfer, hockey player, and archer, and she achieved top honours in ice-skating. She was proficient at riding and mountaineering...Particularly noteworthy among the honours she won...were the British ladies Golf Championship...and the silver medal for Archery at the Olympic Games.  
(Pearson 1988: p.10)

This remarkable woman was called Charlotte "Lottie" Dodd. You might think her achievements represent a landmark in the struggle for sex equality in women's sport. You might think her a thoroughly modern heroine. In fact, her sporting successes came between the years of 1887 and 1908, at the beginning of a century which has witnessed vast fluctuations in society's acceptance of and involvement in women's sport. As we look ahead towards the start of a new millenium it is appropriate to ask whether anything much has changed since the days of Lottie Dodd? How far would she think we had progressed if she were here with us today? What would she identify as the major issues facing women's sport?

## Understanding where we are

We have to remember that not all women want to be involved in sport. For many of the world's women, feeding their infants, providing shelter, and struggling against crippling poverty just to stay alive constitute the major challenges of their lives. For those of us fortunate enough to have choices - because of our education, social systems and quality of life - then, and only then, does involvement in sport begin to matter.

One way to help us understand the development of women's sport, both in the past and in the future, and to position ourselves today, is to explore where we have reached on a four-stage journey - through Exclusion, Inclusion, Equity and Transformation. At each stage there are personal, social, institutional and political reasons why girls and women either do or do not flourish in sport, whether as players, coaches or officials.

**Exclusion** refers, almost literally, to the blocking out of women from certain activities and roles on the basis of belief systems or stereotypes, often those to do with biological or religious reasons: we might summarise this as the 'girls can't throw' stage of development. Members of the MCC at Lords have recently had to come to terms with the end of their exclusive reign at that particular club. Women golfers at St Andrews still fail to get into the clubhouse, although the Labour government is considering new legislation that would make such exclusivity in private clubs illegal.

During **inclusion** women are tolerated but not fully engaged and still lack the power to shape or run their own show. This tokenism is summarised in the apposite American phrase 'You can play but don't touch the ball'. For example, women in the International Olympic Committee are included yet denied power, despite the IOC's recent target setting exercise -10% women by the year 2005. Your own female golfers were not slow to discover a way round their lack of voting rights under our hopelessly outdated Sex Discrimination Act. Following

their English sisters, they invoked the Licensing Act of 1965, under which all members of a club must be given a vote at the AGM. Many golf clubs have found to their cost that failure to provide equal rights for women members, then, threatens the continuation of their favourite golf hole - the nineteenth!

When 'equity' is achieved, women have a full share of the play, as performers, coaches, or managers - getting equal chances to achieve in any role. In Sweden, equity is defined as having no less than 40% of either sex on any public committee or board (in stark contrast to the IOC!). In the UK, governing bodies and private applicants are now required to have equity policies in place as a criterion of Lottery funding or grant aid. Sadly, equal numbers does not always mean equal power and there are still many examples of individuals or sport bodies who are able to use the language of equity without actually changing their inequitable practices in any way. Rather like a game of snakes and ladders, then, in these circumstances we slip back from the 'equity' to 'inclusion' stage.

Finally, 'transformation' occurs when women have opportunities both to challenge and to change sport in ways that makes it more humane, whether this be through altering the rules of an individual sport or suggesting new working methods for committees or governing bodies. Transformation is a very brave step and not one that many sport organisations undertake lightly. In the international arena, both tennis and gymnastics recently *raised* the minimum age of competition to try to reduce the problems of teenage burnout and exploitation facing young females. Some visionary coaches have adopted democratic methods at national level, encouraging players to share power with them and to develop as autonomous rather than dependent beings. In Sweden, the head golf coach of both the men's and women's teams, Pia Nilsson, is a living example of a transformative coach: after her appointment, she scrapped the fitness regime at the behest of the players and started to treat them as independent individuals. She has been rewarded by her players achieving unprecedented, outstanding international rankings for a country of only 8 million inhabitants.

I suggest that, in our own endeavours for women's sport, we are all at different stages in this four-stage model, and that we all have different ambitions and different possibilities. It is highly improbable, for example, that women could leapfrog from exclusion to transformation, and highly undesirable that we should slip back from achieving equity to being merely included. Whoever you are, in whatever role and whatever sport, facility, programme or group you represent, it is important to know both where you are now and where you want to be. Whether your work is in community sports development for girls, or in coaching women at the elite level, you can use this basic framework to mark your individual and collective progress.

I will move on now to give some examples of work for women's sport that goes on as we make the various transitions from one stage to another.

### **Moving from exclusion to inclusion**

Work here focusses on tackling both legal and constitutional bans on participation and on educating those who hold outdated ideas about what sports or roles are appropriate for girls and women.

Examples include:

- planned changes to the Sex Discrimination Act to remove the exemption currently enjoyed by sport. Jane Couch's recent historic victory in the high Court allowed her to box professionally in England for the first time, and the recent vote by the MCC at Lords has allowed women (finally) to become members;
- campaigns to increase the number of sports and/or events within sports available for female participation. Atlanta Plus was a pressure group formed with the express purpose of persuading the IOC to ban teams from muslim countries from the Atlanta Olympics unless they included women members. During my time as first chair of the Women's Sports

Foundation in the 1980s I remember very lively correspondence with women pole vaulters and triple jumpers who sought full recognition within British athletics.

- educational initiatives to inform young people about the physical and cultural potential for girls and women's sport. The Women's Sports Foundation has been extremely influential in this regard, developing a curriculum pack, videos, posters and a photographic exhibition.

### **Moving from inclusion to equity**

Once participation rights are guaranteed, there is the danger that women might think their fight is over. However, token presence in sport often shackles girls and women to second class facilities, restrictive rules and inferior training and competition conditions. This is a kind of 'minimum compliance' which is within the *letter* but not the *spirit* of equity. As before, work for this transition also includes education and persuasion but it requires an even more subtle political process, emphasising equal rights without challenging the nature of the sport.

Examples include:

- using male moles on the inside of committees and organisations who can help exert pressure for constitutional change e.g. Bruce Kidd, who has worked tirelessly as an ally for women in sport by lobbying the Olympic movement for better gender equity;
- demonstrating the case for diversity and equity through both ethical and business arguments e.g. Lottery funding eligibility - again cynics might say that the MCC simply changed its eligibility rules in order to qualify for Lottery awards;
- setting up athletes' councils by which women, men and children can have a voice in the running of their sports. We see such councils in the United States Women's Sports Foundation and, soon to be established, in the UK via the UK Sports Institute (Players Association). Through such mechanisms, not only are democratic methods likely to be developed and

maintained but those most closely involved with sport, most up-to date and at the cutting edge can make a contribution to furthering our coaching and performance systems.

## **Moving from equity to transformation**

Even when girls and women have representation and full access to all roles and levels of sport there still remain some cultural pressures and practices which demean them and threaten their human rights. Many would argue that boys and men face exactly the same problems. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, it is women who have been in the vanguard of challenging the traditional culture of sport.

Examples include:

- the work of *WomenSport International* to expose and prevent sexual harassment and abuse in sport; many individual countries, including Canada, Australia and The Netherlands have now set up codes of ethics and practice around anti-harassment strategies, Canada leads the way in attempting to transform the values base of sport and the Council of Europe is about to commission work in this area;
- scientific and advocacy work, again by WSI and others, to draw attention to and eradicate the life-threatening effects of the Female Athlete Triad (osteoporosis, amenorrhea and disordered eating); with some notable exceptions, the practical effects of stress and burnout have not been dealt with effectively by many individual sport organisations;
- intensive lobbying at the Beijing world congress on women and through a joint WSI/IOC Medical Commission symposium to develop objectives for women's exercise and health; other successes include the adoption of targets on women's exercise and health by the UNESCO Women's Commission in November 1998 and the 4th World Health Organisation International Conference on Health Promotion in 1997;

- pressure to abolish the infamous, ridiculous and scientifically invalid Femininity Verification Test (once called the Sex Test). The IOC remains the only major international body to cling on to this test now, despite abundant medical evidence against it;
- scientific and political work to prevent female masters athletes on hormone replacement therapy from being caught in the trap of IOC dope testing regimes and banned from competition;
- work to identify and prevent male violence, homophobia and racism in sport, with both practical projects (such as the 'Kick Racism Out of Sport' campaign and the Gay Games being two examples) as well as extensive academic research.

### **Learning from the international scene**

There is a now wide range of international groups with an active interest in developing women's participation in sport. We might locate these groups along a continuum from those exclusively voluntary sector organisations or pressure groups at the one end - known in the business as NGOs - to those exclusively governmental at the other. Fortunately, we not only have active international representation across the whole spectrum today but also benefit from initiatives in which governmental groups and NGOs collaborate. Perhaps the most important collaboration for our purposes today has been the Brighton Declaration, a ten point set of principles for women's sport which emanated from the 1994 Brighton international conference on women and sport and which offers us an excellent framework of issues facing women's sport today:

- Equity and equality in society and sport
- Facilities
- School and junior sport
- Developing participation
- High performance sport

- Leadership in sport
- Education, training and development
- Sports information and research
- Resources
- Domestic and international competition

Since its publication in 1994, The Brighton Declaration has been adopted in over 70 countries by an amazing 200 organisations. These include: the IOC; the Commonwealth Heads of Government; the Arab Ministers of Youth and Sport; Asia Women and Sport; the International Archery, Badminton, Hockey, Sailing and Squash Associations; the Olympic Committees of Jamaica, Bolivia, Uruguay, Switzerland and the Cook Islands; government ministries of Algeria, Indonesia, Albania, and, of course, both Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Rather than lead you through a catalogue of the major international sporting bodies and how they differ from each other, I will now focus here on some of the key issues that I believe still face us, despite the progress since the Brighton Declaration was formulated in 1994.

### **Performance and participation**

Sport and education: this remains the base of participation and excellence and, as such, should draw our support and resources. With our sporting eye on the excellence ball because of Lottery support there is a danger that Physical Education and recreational sport – traditional strongholds for women and girls - will remain the poor relations.

Sport and identity: whilst commercial sport is enjoying a boom and sport features strongly in the identity of many young people, there are conflicting views about what constitutes a 'cool image'. Research by Ken Roberts (1997) and his team at Liverpool University indicates that the old continuities remain and that young peoples' leisure is still segregated along traditional lines of social class and sex. Sport may be more popular

amongst girls than it was in my childhood but it is still rigidly sex segregated.

### **Leadership and management**

Physical education teaching: for many leaving school with higher education in mind, whether female *or* male, the attractions of teaching in secondary education appear to be overshadowed by the attractions of leisure management or sports development. Good Physical Education requires effective and committed teachers yet the career rewards for teachers currently act as a disincentive to join the profession.

Coaching: things look somewhat brighter for coaching as there is a strong shift towards professionalism here and a fast expansion of opportunities accompanying the increases in Lottery funding. However, coaching is still very heavily male-dominated, especially at the upper levels. Also, many aspiring coaches see only the bright lights of elite sport and find the hard slog of junior or intermediate level work less appealing: frequently it is women who end up doing the bulk of the introductory, foundation and chaperoning tasks. Notwithstanding the laudable work of the NCF, the lack of a career structure for coaches of both sexes remains an issue. Many prefer the security of part-time coaching as part of a portfolio of work and, ironically, this option suits many women better than men.

Refereeing and administration: as we have seen with rugby and cricket, the shift into professional status of many players has not been matched by equivalent professional development for referees and administrators. This has given rise to some serious dissatisfaction and disputes. Both officiating and administrative roles tend to be horizontally segregated, with men and women rarely crossing into the sports of the opposite sex, and vertically segregated, with men operating at the higher levels and women at the lower.

Leisure management and sports development: These career paths have enjoyed a boom in recent years but there is a suspicion amongst those of

us training the young graduates that there may not be enough jobs for them all in the future. Certainly, the industry still has a wide base and a vary narrow pinnacle: if the free market works then this should ensure that the quality of our managers increases significantly in the next few years. A recent gender equity audit of the industry, carried out by my research Unit (Aitchison *et al.* 1998), has found that many women in leisure management and sports development are enthusiastic and happy in their jobs. However, we also found that they take on wide responsibilities for relatively poor pay and are naïve and ill-informed about their career progression prospects, which are poor.

Overall, we might (adapted from Costa & Guthrie 1994: p.362) summarise the main aspects of cultural struggle facing women in sport in fairly familiar ways, as *social justice* issues:

- patriarchal privilege (sexism & male violence)
- unrestricted capital accumulation (classism)
- white skin privilege (racism & sectarianism)
- compulsory heterosexuality (homophobia)
- reproduction of privilege (social exclusion)

## **Conclusions - Learning from best practice**

The Government has recently published proposals for 13 quality of life indicators that will be measured and publicised on a regular basis: they are committed to sustainability, politically, socially and environmentally. If sports development programmes are to adopt the same aspiration, then we need to learn from past mistakes and to share best practice. So, where has most effective progress been made?

- Where *leadership training*, rather than being ignored or added as a remedial afterthought after participation rates start to drop has been *designed in from the start...*
- Where, rather than having formulaic approaches handed down from on high, *women have developed their own models of working....*
- Where, rather than sabotage through apathy, inertia or active opposition, there has been a *strong base of support from significant external groups* (councils, community groups, NGBs and men in power)...
- Where, rather than narrow sectarianism, there has been *celebration of diversity...*
- Where, instead of adopting traditional conceptions of male and female, and of appropriate sports for males and females, there has been a *focus on human potential....*
- Where, rather than being isolated islands of activity, sports development programmes and initiatives have been designed to fit within *and compliment the wider social and political fabric of women's and girls' lives....*

None of these criteria for sustainable best practice in women's sport is distinct, locally, nationally or internationally. All apply to *every* level of participation from foundation to excellence, and *every* role, from club treasurer, to team captain to elite coach.

Towards the end of her life, in 1953, Lottie Dodd was invited to comment on the modern game of women's tennis. She said (Pearson 1988: p.93): "How can one compare the periods of the horse, steam engine, electric motor and aeroplane?"

She added: “ Many of the women of (my) day volleyed quite well but not severely enough.” Perhaps these comments are also metaphor for all of us involved in pushing for improvements to women’s sport today - we press quite hard but sometimes, not quite hard enough.

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