

The Olympics, Paralympics, and Gender: Participation of Female Athletes and the Principle of an Inclusive Society

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Introduction

The Paralympic Games often promote the social participation of people with disabilities and can be a catalyst for raising public awareness of the social inclusion of people with disabilities. To discuss the social inclusion of people with disabilities, however, it is important to review the history of the social inclusion of women, who have historically been a target of discrimination and social exclusion.

To consider this issue particularly in relation to the Paralympics, we must first ask how women's participation in the Olympics has progressed, on what basis objections were raised against women's participation, and what factors helped to promote their participation. Based on these points, we can examine how and to what extent female athletes' participation in the Paralympic Games has been realized.

One of the principles of the Paralympic Movement is to realize the social inclusion of people with disabilities, and this means that an important principle in the Paralympic Games is the inclusion of women and people with various forms of disabilities. Furthermore, given that the Paralympics follows the path of the Olympics in many ways today, it is important to examine how the concept of inclusion has been realized in the Olympics. This paper will focus its analysis on the participation of female athletes, although historically, the issue of inclusion in the Olympics has also involved the inclusion of social classes, such as the participation of the working class.

There are also other gender-related issues that have become important, such as female representation in the administration of sports organizations and sex verification in sports. However, this paper will concentrate on analyzing athletes' participation, specifically in the Paralympic Summer Games, to highlight points which need further examination, lessons to be learned, and issues which need to be

discussed from the point of view of today's Paralympics.

A) Participation of female athletes in the Olympic Games

In the early days of the modern Olympics, female athletes met deep-rooted opposition to their participation in the Games. Even today, when the overall female representation among athletes has grown and is comparable to the number of male athletes, many problems remain at the level of individual countries and sports. The historical development of female participation reflects issues which also have implications for the future relationship between the Paralympics and Olympics.

1. Opposition and negative attitudes to female athletes' participation in the Olympics

Negative opinion towards including female athletes in the Olympics was expressed by the founder of the modern Olympics, Coubertin. It was also prevalent among many people involved in the Olympics and in competitive sports in Europe and America almost until the Second World War. The reasons for the negative opinion can be summarized as follows.

- (a) There was a general perception in society that women's role in society was to be domestic keepers and raise children, and that women engaging in competitive sports, except in the form of exercise for leisure or refreshment, did not conform to this social role.
- (b) This was also related to the fact that the perception of the female body, its physical functions, and women's activities was strongly influenced by male perspectives. This was further reinforced by the media, and encouraged the opinion that women's participation in strenuous competitive sports activities was against the social norm and had little positive value. There were some women who also approved of this opinion¹.
- (c) There was a perception that men who engaged in physically demanding competitions and sports such as those of the Olympic Games should be praised only by women, like the male figure in medieval chivalry, and for this reason, there were those who wanted women to be "spectators."²

- (d) In parallel to these perceptions and opinions, some thought that because competitive sports involve physical contact, sports such as triple jump, pole vault, boxing, and weightlifting in particular, could easily harm female reproductive organs³.
- (e) Later, after it had become the norm for female athletes to participate in the Olympics, despite the fact that it was still limited to a number of sports, there were negative opinions about their participation based on the idea that the Olympics should be slimmed down, and that a further increase of female athletes should be suppressed⁴.

The summary above has focused on the perspectives of Coubertin and people associated with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) of the time. An example of the Japanese perspective, in 1924, is that physical education instructors voiced the opinion that allowing female students to compete in physically demanding competitive sports, such as jumping, swimming races, and indoor baseball, might compromise “the feminine dispositions of their psychology.”⁵

What implications or lessons can be drawn from the negative opinion towards female athlete participation that can be useful today for the coordination between the Olympics and Paralympics? What significance is there for the participation of athletes with disabilities in the Olympics?

First, there is the fact that the acceptance of female athletes in the Olympics was significantly influenced by the male perspective on women which formed the basis of social norms, as well as the male perspective on men themselves, that lay behind it. To put this into the context of the relationship between the Olympics and Paralympics and the concept of an inclusive society today, we must ask whether the perception of para sports tends to be determined by the mainstream, in other words the perspective of able-bodied people, and examine to what extent the perspectives and thoughts of people with disabilities are being reflected.

If in the past, the fact that the majority of the spectators were men added to the problems for female participation in the Olympics, we must study the proportion of people with disabilities among today’s Olympics and Paralympics spectators (including indirect spectators who watch the Games for example on television). We need to address the question as to whether today’s Paralympic Games are in fact

primarily “for able-bodied people” in its social significance, in the same way that the Olympic Games were mainly “for men.” To examine this further, we must also ask whether the Olympics and Paralympics mainly reflect the logic and tendencies of able-bodied people, especially as both Games lean strongly towards a performance-based ideology and towards commercialism.

We must also consider that if underlying the promotion of female participation in the Olympic Games was the idea of making women “as strong as men,” whether today’s Paralympics are based on an implicit premise of making athletes with disabilities “as strong as able-bodied people,” and furthermore, consider how this relates to the principle of an inclusive society.

2. Women’s Olympic Games

While there was widespread opposition to female participation in the modern Olympics, and an underlying disapproval of women’s sports activities in general as outlined above, there was a momentum to promote international competitive sports for women beginning at around the time of the First World War. One example was the Women’s Olympic Games, organized by the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI) between 1922 and 1936, and renamed the Women’s World Games from the second games in 1926. Several factors were involved in the realization of these Games:

- (a) In Europe, the first national-level athletics (“athletics” will be used to refer to track and field) competition for female athletes was held in 1918 in Vienna, Austria, and several European countries had emerging female athletes in athletics. Against this backdrop, the French rower Alice Milliat negotiated strongly for female athletes to be allowed to participate in the Olympic athletics events. The IOC and International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) refused. This led to the inauguration of the FSFI in 1921 to organize an Olympic Games exclusively for women, comprised solely of athletics events with the exception of the exhibition events⁶.
- (b) The Women’s Olympic Games were organized as a contender to the modern Olympics, which had refused female athletes’ participation in athletics events, but its purpose may also have included showcasing women’s sports to

society. This is evident in the fact that the first Olympics for women (Olympiades Féminines) held in 1921 in Monte Carlo, Monaco—the predecessor of the aforementioned Women’s Olympic Games and Women’s World Games—included the exhibition event “rhythmic gymnastics” (a combination of gymnastics and dance), which was not in the modern Olympic Games, and created something that was different from “male-centric, militaristic and stiff gymnastics.”⁷

- (c) There was a theory that strengthening the abdomen through sports and nurturing the body and mind would help create good mothers, and in order to make this widely known, Alice Milliat also supported the national policy of boosting the birth rate in post-WWI France⁸.
- (d) Inspired by these developments, some female athletes became stars and gained public attention, which contributed indirectly to the momentum to support the Women’s Olympic Games. Examples include the American swimmers Gertrude Ederle and Sybil Bauer, and the Japanese athletics athlete Kinue Hitomi who were active in the 1920s. In particular, some held records that surpassed those of male athletes: Ederle in the English Channel swim, and Bauer in the 400-yard backstroke. The emergence of female athletes who were not inferior to men in their performance record, also contributed indirectly to the Women’s Olympic Games⁹.
- (e) In Europe (especially in France) at the time, women did not have the right to vote, and advancing the participation of women in politics was believed to bring with it the acceptance and recognition of women’s competitive sports¹⁰.

Table 1 Women’s Olympics/World Games

Year	Name	City	Number of participating countries	Number of athletes	Number of events
1922	Women’s Olympic Games	Paris	5	77	11
1926	Women’s World Games	Gothenburg, Sweden	9	100	12
1930	Women’s World Games	Prague	17	200	12
1934	Women’s World Games	London	19	200	12

Source: compiled by the author using data from Parčina, I., Šiljak, V., Perović A. and Plakona E., 2014, “Women’s World Games,” *Physical Education and Sport Through the Centuries*, 53- 55, 57. The events varied slightly depending on the Games. The Paris Games (1922) for example, included the 60-meter, 100-yard, 300-meter, 1000-meter, 4 x 110-yard relay, and 100-yard hurdle races, as well as long jump, standing long jump, high jump, javelin, and shot put. The exhibition, introduced at the Prague Games (1930) , included basketball, handball, fencing, archery, and canoeing, while at London (1934) , the exhibition included basketball, football, and handball.

Today, the significance of the Women's Olympic Games is not limited to their role in initiating the introduction of women's athletics in the male-centered modern Olympic Games, and in the creation of rules and organizations for female competitive sports. They also raised public awareness about what makes female sports different, and developed and promoted sports that were uniquely for women. This is comparable to today's Paralympics, which are held as its own event, separate from (although working together with) the Olympics, and plays a role in promoting and developing para sports, as well as being as an opportunity to highlight what attracts people to sports, specifically for people with disabilities (such as goalball, boccia, and wheelchair basketball). In the future, there also needs to be a discussion on whether sports that have been "developed" for athletes with disabilities may become official Olympic sports, just like sports that are only open to women, such as artistic swimming, are included in the Olympics, and what significance this would entail. This may generate discussions on the significance of evaluating abilities other than physical competence (such as artistic expression and entertainment value) especially in highly competitive sports. Finally, some argue that sports which add rules to create an equal condition for all players (such as football 5-a-side and goalball) should be referred to as "adapted sports" rather than para sports. This could have an impact on removing the boundary between para sports and able-bodied sports, as well as the boundary between men's and women's sports.

In parallel to these international developments, in Japan, a national event for female competitive sports began under the name Japan Ladies' Olympic Games. The background to this event is as follows.

In 1912, for the first time, Japan sent athletes to the Olympic Games. This became a turning point, and the move to organize national sports competitions gained momentum, resulting in what was named the Japan Olympic Games. At the second Games (held in Osaka in 1915), several athletics events were unofficially organized for women (for example, the 50-meter, 100-meter, and 200-meter races, 400-meter relay, long jump, high jump). This was the background to the first Japan Ladies' Olympic Games, which were also held in Osaka, in June 1924¹¹.

The Ladies' Olympic Games were a result of two separate developments. One was that the men's Japan Olympic Games had been organized, which became open to women participating on an unofficial status. The other was the movement to organize

comprehensive sports competitions for women, which led to the first Osaka Women's Union Sports Competition and the first Japan Female Athletics Championship in 1922¹².

Behind these developments were the currents of society at the time. As Japan was modernizing and becoming a stronger nation, the public celebrated healthy and strong mothers ("kenbo"). This is epitomized by the fact that the Kenbokai (literally meaning a group for healthy and strong mothers) was one of the organizers of the first Japan Ladies' Olympic Games. The "kenbo" ideology was that women were the "mother" of the nation, and that it should be a national priority to improve their health and strengthen their bodies¹³.

It is significant that the Japan Ladies' Olympic Games went beyond the objective of promoting women's physical exercise through the "healthy and strong mothers" ideology, and aimed to build more awareness among the general public, and men in particular, of promoting women's sports. The Games were organized not only to encourage sports activities among women, but also to add competition to women's sports with the aim of establishing them as spectator sports, and in turn, increase social awareness. This is reflected in the slight difference between the events included in the Ladies' Olympic Games, and those included in a separate competition a few years earlier. The Japan Female Athletics Championship of 1922 included events such as indoor baseball throw and basketball throw, in which competition was less emphasized, whereas the Japan Ladies' Olympic Games of 1924 were focused on more competitive events¹⁴.

Among the men who aimed to promote women's sports activities, however, there were those who insisted that women did not have to reach the same level as men, and that women should "feminize" the exercises they engaged in¹⁵. Thus, there seem to have been differences in opinion on what it meant to introduce as much competition as possible in women's sports to make them sports "to show" to spectators.

If we consider today's Paralympics in relation to the sequence of events just outlined, they highlight the issue of identity among female athletes participating in sports competitions. In the historical context discussed above, it was considered desirable for female athletes participating in major sports competitions to maintain a "female" identity that differentiated them from male athletes. This also meant that it

was better if their identity as athletes did not erode their identity as women. Today, female Paralympic athletes have three different identities: as athletes, as people with disabilities, and as women. It could be a delicate balancing act to determine which identity to assert or emphasize, and where and how to do so. For each identity, there are different points of view to consider: as athletes, those of spectators and supporters; as people with disabilities, of able-bodied people and of other people with disabilities; and as women, of men and the general public. Just as we observed in the case of the Ladies' Olympic Games, the true significance of women's participation in competitive sports today cannot be determined by simply focusing on the quantitative progress of the number of female participants.

3. Female athletes' participation in the Olympic Games

Let us now turn to the number of female athletes in the history of the modern Olympic Games. To start with, the first Games in Athens in 1896 had no female athletes. The second Paris Games in 1900, however, accepted female athletes in golf and tennis¹⁶. There were two possible reasons. First, the Games (taking place over five long months) were organized originally as part of the International Exposition in Paris, in which women often had a central role, especially in cultural events. Second, the organization and management of the Paris Games reflected the bourgeois society of the time, while Coubertin's ideology was more reflective of the aristocratic class, and as a result, there were often conflicts between the organizing committee and Coubertin. Being the president of the IOC at the time, Coubertin joined hands with the aristocratic members among people associated with the Olympics, and admitted women in tennis and golf. These were two sports that had a tradition of being played by the European upper-class, and which women had been playing at an early stage.

Subsequently, the following sports were added for women: archery at St Louis (1904), competitive swimming at Stockholm (1912), fencing at Paris (1924), and athletics and gymnastics at Amsterdam (1928)¹⁷ (although the number of sports did not constantly increase, as some sports were changed).

The table below illustrates the changes in the number of sports that were open to female participation, from the first Games in 1896 to the 32nd Games in 2021.

Table 2 Changes in the number of Olympic sports open to female athletes

Year	City	Total number of sports	Sports open to female athletes
1896	Athens	8	0
1900	Paris	16	2
1904	St. Louis	16	1
1908	London	23	2
1912	Stockholm	15	2
1920	Antwerp	23	2
1924	Paris	19	3
1928	Amsterdam	16	4
1932	Los Angeles	16	3
1936	Berlin	21	4
1948	London	19	5
1952	Helsinki	18	6
1956	Melbourne/Stockholm	18	6
1960	Rome	18	6
1964	Tokyo	20	7
1968	Mexico City	19	7
1972	Munich	21	8
1976	Montreal	21	11
1980	Moscow	21	12
1984	Los Angeles	21	14
1988	Seoul	23	17
1992	Barcelona	25	19
1996	Atlanta	26	21
2000	Sydney	28	25
2004	Athens	28	26
2008	Beijing	28	26
2012	London	26	26
2016	Rio de Janeiro	28	28
2021	Tokyo	33	33

Source: compiled by the Paralympic Research Group using data from IOC, 2020, Factsheet: Women in the Olympic Movement; and the Japanese Olympic Committee official website

As seen in Table 2, the number of sports open to female athletes did not grow very much between the two world wars, and even after World War II, did not change significantly until the 1990s. It was well into the twenty-first century when the number of women participating became comparable to that of men.

The shift in the total number of sports events open to women, however, should not be the sole index for evaluating the representation of women and its significance. For example, there were no cycling events for women until the 1984 Games despite women holding superior records than men in that sport. This is a point to consider when analyzing the underlying causes that made the participation of female athletes difficult¹⁸.

Meanwhile, the number of female athletes participating began at zero in the first Athens Games (1896) but steadily increased until World War II, as shown below in Table 3. A consistent growth in the number also continued after World War II.

The Melbourne (1956) and Moscow (1980) Games had less female participants than the preceding Games. However, both Games also saw a decrease in the number of male athletes, suggesting special factors (for example, political reasons).

Table 3 Number and ratio of participating female athletes (overall)

Year	City	Number of female athletes	Ratio of female athletes
1896	Athens	0	0%
1900	Paris	22	2.2%
1904	St. Louis	6	0.9%
1908	London	37	1.8%
1912	Stockholm	48	2.0%
1920	Antwerp	63	2.4%
1924	Paris	135	4.4%
1928	Amsterdam	277	9.6%
1932	Los Angeles	126	9.0%
1936	Berlin	331	8.3%
1948	London	390	9.5%
1952	Helsinki	519	10.5%
1956	Melbourne/Stockholm	376	13.3%
1960	Rome	611	11.4%
1964	Tokyo	678	13.2%
1968	Mexico City	781	14.2%
1972	Munich	1,059	14.6%
1976	Montreal	1,260	20.7%
1980	Moscow	1,115	21.5%
1984	Los Angeles	1,566	23.0%
1988	Seoul	2,194	26.1%
1992	Barcelona	2,704	28.8%
1996	Atlanta	3,512	34.0%
2000	Sydney	4,069	38.2%
2004	Athens	4,329	40.7%
2008	Beijing	4,637	42.4%
2012	London	4,676	44.2%
2016	Rio de Janeiro	5,059	45.0%
2021	Tokyo	5,457	48.7%

Source: compiled by the Paralympic Research Group using data in IOC, 2021, [Factsheet: Women in the Olympic Movement](#).

As for the number of female athletes from Japan, they first participated in the Amsterdam Games (1928), and as seen in Table 4, the number continued to grow until the Atlanta Games (1996), with the exception of the Helsinki Games (1952) when Japan was amidst post-WWII reconstruction, and the Tokyo Games (1964) when Japan was the host country. After the Atlanta Games, the number seems to have plateaued over the medium term (the 1980 Moscow Games and the 1984 Los Angeles Games are being considered an exception here, because of the boycott of the Moscow Games and its lingering political effects).

As a point of reference, the number of male Japanese athletes levels off over the long term after the Rome Games (1960) (depending on the analysis, it can be described as decreasing after the 1990s) with the exception of the Tokyo Games

(1964). The number of female athletes also levels off after the Atlanta Games (1996), and the number of female athletes participating from Japan may have reached its saturation point, with the Tokyo Games (2021) being an exception since Japan was the host country.

Table 4 Number and ratio of female athletes in the Olympics (Japan)

The Japanese team (male athletes only) first participated in the Olympics at the Stockholm Games (1912) while female athletes first participated at the Amsterdam Games (1928).

Year	City	Number of female athletes from Japan	Ratio of female athletes in the Japanese team
1928	Amsterdam	1	2.3%
1932	Los Angeles	16	12.3%
1936	Berlin	17	9.5%
1948	London	No participation from Japan	–
1952	Helsinki	11	15.3%
1956	Melbourne/Stockholm	16	13.4%
1960	Rome	20	12.0%
1964	Tokyo	61	17.2%
1968	Mexico City	30	16.4%
1972	Munich	38	20.9%
1976	Montreal	61	28.6%
1980	Moscow	No participation from Japan	–
1984	Los Angeles	53	22.9%
1988	Seoul	71	27.4%
1992	Barcelona	82	31.2%
1996	Atlanta	150	48.4%
2000	Sydney	110	41.0%
2004	Athens	171	54.8%
2008	Beijing	169	49.9%
2012	London	156	53.2%
2016	Rio de Janeiro	164	48.5%
2021	Tokyo	276	47.4%

Source: compiled by the Paralympic Research Group using data from the Japanese Olympic Committee official website

A simple comparison of the numbers in the male-female ratio may, however, be misleading when analyzing the significance of the proportion of female athletes. Together with the overall numbers and trends, we must also observe and analyze differences in individual sports, to find if there are some sports which have considerably less female participation. The ratio of female athletes in different sports at the Rio de Janeiro Games (2016) is listed in Table 5 below. It shows that nine out of twenty-eight sports had either a 40% or lower ratio of female athletes: boxing, canoe, cycling, equestrian, judo, rowing, sailing, shooting, and wrestling.

Table 5 Number and ratio of female athletes at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games (Olympics)

Sports	No. of female athletes	No. of male athletes	Total	Ratio of female athletes
Archery	64	64	128	50.0%
Athletics	1,085	1,183	2,268	47.8%
Badminton	86	86	172	50.0%
Basketball	144	144	288	50.0%
Beach Volleyball	48	48	96	50.0%
Boxing	36	250	286	12.6%
Canoe/Kayaking				
-Sprint	91	156	247	36.8%
-Slalom	21	62	83	25.3%
Cycling				
-Mountain	29	49	78	37.2%
-Road	68	143	211	32.2%
-Track	82	98	180	45.6%
-BMX	16	32	48	33.3%
Equestrian	74	125	199	37.2%
Fencing	124	121	245	50.6%
Football	219	294	513	42.7%
Golf	60	60	120	50.0%
Gymnastics				
-Artistic	98	98	196	50.0%
-Rhythmic	96	0	96	100.0%
-Trampoline	16	16	32	50.0%

Event	No. of female athletes	No. of male athletes	Total	Ratio of female athletes
Handball	177	178	355	49.9%
Hockey	194	196	390	49.7%
Judo	153	237	390	39.2%
Modern pentathlon	36	36	72	50.0%
Rowing	215	331	546	39.4%
Rugby Sevens	148	152	300	49.3%
Sailing	163	217	380	37.6%
Shooting	150	239	389	38.6%
Swimming				
-Diving	68	68	136	50.0%
-Marathon swimming	26	25	51	51.0%
-Synchronized swimming	104	0	104	100.0%
-Swimming	413	483	896	46.1%
-Water polo	104	156	260	40.0%
Table tennis	86	86	172	50.0%
Taekwondo	64	62	126	50.8%
Tennis	91	105	196	46.4%
Triathlon	55	55	110	50.0%
Volleyball	144	144	288	50.0%
Weightlifting	103	150	253	40.7%
Wrestling	112	234	346	32.4%
Total	5,059	6,178	11,237	45.0%

Source: Women's Sports Foundation, 2017. Women in the Olympic and Paralympic Games: An Analysis of Participation, Leadership, and Media Coverage, 28, Table 8.

Analysis of the inclusion of women in the Olympics must also consider individual events within each sport. For example, at the Amsterdam Games (1928), many athletes in the women's 800-meter race collapsed after crossing the finish line, which was widely reported in the media. This strengthened the opinion that female athletes were physically unsuited to long-distance events, and subsequently, women were not allowed to participate in long-distance athletics events until the 1960s. However, historian Lynne Emery later reexamined the 800-meter race and argued that since all finalists had completed the race, the IOC members' decision at the time to eliminate the event was unjust¹⁹.

Not only did the level of female participation vary across events, but it also varied significantly across countries. For example, the number of countries whose teams had no female athletes was 34 in 1992, 11 in 2000 (Botswana, the British Virgin Islands, Brunei, Kuwait, Libya, Monaco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Yemen), and even in 2016, there were five (Iraq, Monaco, and Nauru, Tuvalu and Vanuatu)²⁰.

The reasons for these countries having low female participation need to be considered individually or by region. First, countries such as those in Africa and Southeast Asia that are the poorest among developing countries, can face many difficulties in sending athletes to the Olympics. Countries with smaller populations, such as island nations, would naturally have smaller teams. Therefore, an analysis of female athletes' participation may need to focus on the gender ratio of national teams that have more than for example, 10 athletes. With this in mind, we reviewed the London Games (2012) and the Rio de Janeiro Games (2016), analyzing the gender ratio in teams of countries represented by at least 10 athletes. Table 6 below shows the 10 countries whose national teams had the lowest female representation.

Table 6 Female ratio in the teams of 10 countries with the lowest levels of female representation (Olympics)

London 2012				Rio de Janeiro 2016			
Ranking	Country	Number of female athletes	Ratio of female athletes'	Ranking	Country	Number of female athletes	Ratio of female athletes
1.	Gabon	2	7.7%	1.	Iraq	0	0.0%
2.	Eritrea	1	8.3%	2.	Honduras	1	4.0%
3.	Pakistan	2	8.7%	3.	Qatar	2	5.4%
4.	Uruguay	3	10%	4.	Eritrea	1	8.3%
5.	Honduras	3	10.7%	5.	Algeria	10	15.4%
6.	Saudi Arabia	2	12.5%	6.	The Seychelles	2	20.0%
7.	Georgia	5	14.3%	7.	Croatia	19	21.8%
8.	Iran	8	15.1%	8.	Armenia	7	22.6%
9.	Armenia	22	15.4%	9.	Bulgaria	22	23.5%
10.	Tajikistan	3	18.8%	10.	Azerbaijan	14	24.1%

Source: Women's Sports Foundation, 2017, *Women in the Olympic and Paralympic Games*, 25, and *Media Coverage*, 27, Table 7.

Table 6 also shows that the countries are dispersed across the world, from the Middle East to Central Asia, South America, and Africa, and are not concentrated in one region. Furthermore, apart from Eritrea, Honduras, and Armenia, none of the countries are in the top ten in both 2012 and 2016. Therefore, we cannot easily conclude that low levels of female participation are the result of social or political factors specific to a country or region, and a careful, chronological examination of developments in a specific country or region is necessary.

While there are differences in the levels of female athlete participation in the Olympics across countries and events, the overall representation has been constantly improving. Historically, however, women themselves were not always unanimous in their strong support for female participation in the Olympics, and there are examples

of women taking a more cautious approach.

One example involved the restriction on competitive events which were open to women. Some argued that if women are only allowed to participate in certain events, participating on those terms would mean accepting the restrictions, and that therefore, it would be better if women did not participate at all in the Olympics. Indeed, female athletes from Britain boycotted the Amsterdam Games in 1928 in protest against the extremely few athletics events for female athletes²¹. Later, when the issue of female participation in the Olympic Games of 1936 was discussed at the IAAF congress meeting in 1932, an FSFI official declared that they “wished to introduce a complete program of track and field athletics ... and if the IAAF was not prepared to implement this demand, then the FSFI preferred to have no women’s events at all.”²² It is possible that in this context, there was a tug-of-war taking place between the IOC and FSFI over the control of competitive sports for women.

Meanwhile, even in the 1960s, there were women who were reluctant to support female participation in events such as shot put and discus because they thought showing women compete in these two sports at the Olympics would hurt the general image of women²³. The progress in the inclusion of female athletes has been a result of overcoming many arguments, including from women themselves.

If we think about this in relation to today’s Paralympics, it raises the question of whether bringing the Paralympics closer to the Olympics would be truly beneficial for promoting the social inclusion of people with disabilities, as the Olympics become increasingly commercialized and transform into a large-scale entertainment event.

B) Female athletes’ participation in the Paralympic Games

The ratio of female athletes to male athletes in the Paralympic Games shows that the number of female athletes is steadily increasing (almost in line with the Olympics), as shown in Figure 1 below.

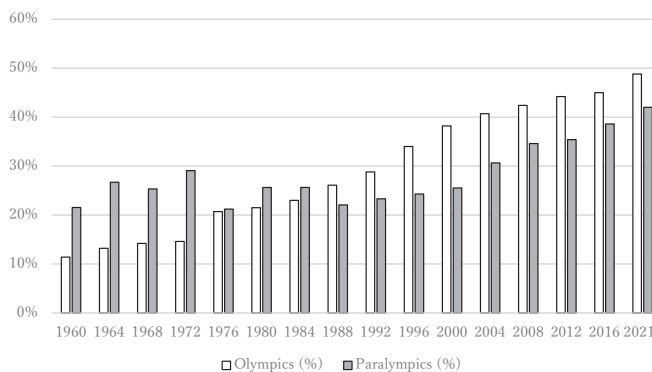


Figure 1 Ratio of female athletes (Olympic and Paralympic Summer Games from 1960 onwards)

Source: compiled by the Paralympic Research Group using data from IOC, 2020, Factsheet: Women in the Olympic Movement, and the IPC official website and database

Between 1968 and 1984, the Olympics and Paralympics were held in different cities, and this may have contributed to the significant fluctuation in female athletes' participation rates in that period (since 1988, the ratio of female athletes in the Paralympics has been constantly increasing, as with their ratio in the Olympics).

The overall ratio of female athletes is either equal to or remains lower than the ratio of male athletes, and has yet to surpass it. This can be explained by the extremely low level of female participation in some countries. The number of teams with less than a 10% ratio of female representation was four at the 2012 Games, and there were still two at the 2016 Games.

Table 7 Female ratio in the teams of 10 countries with the lowest levels of female participation (Paralympics)

London 2012				Rio de Janeiro 2016			
Ranking	Country	Number of female athletes	Ratio of female athletes	Ranking	Country	Number of female athletes	Ratio of female athletes
1	India	0	0%	1	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1	7.1%
1	Rwanda	0	0%	2	Lithuania	1	7.7%
3	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1	8.3%	3	Malaysia	2	10.5%
4	Iran	7	8.9%	4	Iraq	23	15.4%
5	Kenya	2	15.4%	5	India	3	16.7%
6	Austria	5	15.6%	6	Serbia	3	18.8%
7	Iraq	3	15.8%	7	Iran	23	21.3%
8	Argentina	10	16.7%	8	Czech Republic	14	21.6%
9	Cuba	4	18.2%	9	Austria	6	22.2%
9	Lithuania	2	18.2%	10	Azerbaijan	5	22.7%

Source: Women's Sports Foundation, 2017. Women in the Olympic and Paralympic Games, 32, Table 11, and 33, Table 14.

Very low female ratios are observed among developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America, but also in European countries such as Bosnia, Austria, Lithuania, Serbia, and the Czech Republic. This indicates that female participation is not necessarily connected to a country's level of economic development.

A study of each country is necessary to analyze the factors that contribute to low female participation: for example, whether there are issues with women's participation in sports in general, or whether there is a gender difference in the number of people with disabilities as a result of a presence of wounded war veterans.

As for the Japanese national team, the ratio of male to female athletes is as follows.

Table 8 Number and ratio of female Paralympic athletes (Japan)

Year	City	Men	Women	Ratio of female athletes
1960	Rome	0	0	0.0%
1964	Tokyo	14	2	12.5%
1968	Tel Aviv	40	7	14.9%
1972	Heidelberg	23	5	17.9%
1976	Toronto	30	4	11.8%
1980	Arnhem	24	6	20.0%
1984	Stoke Mandeville/ New York	27	10	27.0%
1988	Seoul	109	34	23.8%
1992	Barcelona	54	22	28.9%
1996	Atlanta	58	23	28.4%
2000	Sydney	111	40	26.5%
2004	Athens	106	54	33.8%
2008	Beijing	97	64	39.8%
2012	London	89	45	33.6%
2016	Rio de Janeiro	86	46	34.8%
2021	Tokyo	148	106	41.7%

Source: compiled by the Paralympic Research Group using data from the IPC Historical Result Archive

The number of female athletes from Japan shows an overall increase from 1964, but has levelled off after the 2004 Athens Games, with the exception of the Tokyo Games (2021) hosted in Japan, despite the growth in female participation globally, and still remains an issue.

The shifts in the number of Paralympic sports and in female athletes' participation by sports show the following, as summarized in Table 9 below. In several Paralympic Games, there were no female athletes in football, goalball, judo, powerlifting, snooker, sitting volleyball, wrestling, and weightlifting, whereas the Tokyo Games had no sports, except football 5-a-side, that excluded women. This suggests that restrictions on the number of sports open to women no longer have a significant impact on the participation of female athletes.

Table 9 Changes in Paralympic sports open to female athletes

Sports	Rome 1960	Tokyo 1964	Tel Aviv 1968	Heidelberg 1972	Toronto 1976	Arnhem 1980	Stoke Mandeville & New York 1984	Seoul 1988	Barcelona 1992	Atlanta 1996	Sydney 2000	Athens 2004	Beijing 2008	London 2012	Rio 2016	Tokyo 2021
Number of Sports Open to Women / Total Number of Sports	6/8	6/9	8/10	8/10	9/13	9/13	12/18	12/18	11/16	15/19	15/19	17/19	18/20	18/20	20/22	21/22
Archery	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Athletics	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Badminton																●
Basketball ID																
Boccia							●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Canoe																●
Cycling							●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Equestrian							●			●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Football 5-a-side																
Football 7-a-side																
Dartchery	●	●	●	●	●	●										
Goalball							●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Judo												●	●	●	●	●
Lawn Bowls			●	●	●	●	●	●		●						
Powerlifting											●	●	●	●	●	●
Rowing													●	●	●	●
Sailing										●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Shooting					●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Snooker																
Swimming	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Triathlon															●	●
Taekwondo																●
Table Tennis	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Volleyball												●	●	●	●	●
Wheelchair Basketball			●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Wheelchair Fencing	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Wheelchair Rugby										●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Wrestling																
Weightlifting																
Wheelchair Tennis								●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

The symbol ● indicates that the sport included women's or mixed-gender events. White cells indicate that the sports were not included in the program. Source: compiled by the Paralympic Research Group using data from the IPC Historical Result Archive

The above statistics make it clear that there is a marked gender disparity in the

Paralympics both in the number of sports with female participation and the number of female athletes. One possible reason is that the negative attitudes towards supporting female participation in competitive sports was stronger toward women with disabilities than women in general. If this is the case, for a woman with a disability, the balance between their identity as a woman and their identity as a person with a disability is a complex issue, just as the issue of identity for able-bodied women is complex. This leads to the possibility that there is a difference between men and women in how their disability is seen in relation to their identity as individuals, a point that requires further study.

Summary

By reexamining the transitions in women's participation in the Olympic and Paralympic Games, there are several things we can learn that are relevant for the promotion of the social inclusion of people with disabilities through para sports, and for the realization of an inclusive society.

First, we must note that finding a balance between ensuring gender equality and maintaining female individuality, or empowering female identity, was closely related to finding a balance between ways to increase opportunities for women to participate in the Olympics, and creating and promoting alternative opportunities such as organizing Women's Olympics and developing competitive sports specifically for women.

Given that being a woman and being a person with a disability are both aspects of an individual's identity, it is not sufficient to achieve equal treatment between men and women, or between people with disabilities and able-bodied people. These are not the only goals for the social significance of women's participation in sports or for the promotion of para sports. It can be socially significant if there is, at the same time, a development of sports for women such as artistic swimming, where female identity can be a part of the sport, and a development of "adapted sports" such as goalball and wheelchair basketball.

Second, we must note that it was necessary for women to form their own organizations for sports to promote female participation in sports competitions. Similarly, in order to promote para sports activities, it may be important for people

with disabilities to organize sports associations on their own initiative.

Third, although today, the number of female and male athletes in the Olympics is almost equal, this is not the case with the Paralympics. To further evaluate female athletes' participation in the Paralympics, we will need to examine their participation by country and by sport.

Fourth, female participation in competitive sports has developed almost in parallel with the commercialization of competitive sports. It can be argued that this has also increased the "commercialization of women's bodies."²⁴ In the same way, "commercialization" of the bodies of people with disabilities is an issue that needs to be considered, as we see the participation of people with disabilities in competitive sports events and the public's interest increase, and more sponsors become involved.

Fifth, when female athletes increase their presence in competitive sports, and as (or the more) they achieve remarkable results, attention is often drawn away from their identity as athletes and focuses instead on for example their physical appearance. Similarly, athletes with disabilities often receive more attention for "being a person with a disability," and how they have overcome difficulties or have been supported by others, instead of for their results in competitions. This point requires further discussion in the future.

Finally, one of the purposes of promoting female participation in competitive sports was to raise public awareness that women can enjoy competitive sports and achieve results just like men. Underlying this is a merit-based system, which ultimately, is also the basis of the Paralympics. We must carefully study to what extent the achievements of athletes in the Paralympics have contributed to the promotion of sports activities among people with disabilities in general, in the same way that we could question to what extent the participation and achievements of female athletes helped to increase women's participation in sports activities in general²⁵.

While this paper has focused on the participation of female athletes, it is also necessary to study the significance of women as spectators. For example, the Stockholm Games (1912) are considered a watershed in increasing the number of female spectators. One reason is that tennis and equestrian, which were added to the Olympics in Stockholm, were both sports that were popular among upper-class women, and that this contributed to the increase in female spectators²⁶. Although studies of the number of female spectators and their attitudes as spectators are not

easily found, future studies could benefit from an analysis of the number and attitudes of female spectators and their impact on the Olympics and Paralympics.

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