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GENDER EQUALITY AND THE OLYMPICS

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Introduction

For the first time in its history, the Paris 2024 Olympics will have full numerical gender parity of athletes on the field of play. (International Olympic Committee, 2023) Thus, there will be an equal amount of male and female athletes competing for the first time, marking a significant step forward for gender equality in sport. This step forward sits within a movement and a period of time in which women's sport is becoming increasingly popular. For example, the final of the Women's World Cup was the most watched women's sport event on TV in 2023 with 38.4m viewing hours, whilst the latest visibility research showed that women's sport had a broadcast reach of 46.7 million people. (Women's Sport Trust, 2024) This viewership is also coupled with success in terms of equal treatment and increased sponsorship, with the FIFA 2023 women's cup providing equal treatment with what their male counterparts that competed in Qatar 2022 received. (FIFPRO, 2023)

The number of sponsorships in women's sport has increased by more than 22% year-on-year. (Sponsor United, 2024) This positive movement, particularly that of gender parity at Paris, should however, be viewed with caution and a holistic view of the women's sport landscape historically and generally in terms of gender equality, where much work remains to be done. In terms of Paris specifically, there are still areas in which gender equality remains an issue, particularly with continuing gender differences in sport, representation in terms of coaches and officials, and the potential for controversy in regard of the kit in which male and female athletes are provided.

A History of Gender Equality at the Olympics

Gender equality at the Olympics has been somewhat of a slow process. In the ancient games, women were banned from participating and entering stadiums. It was not until the 1900 Paris Games that women were allowed to compete, and even then, only in a handful of 'female appropriate' sports, including tennis, golf, sailing, croquet and equestrian. Only 22 women competed, and Charlotte Cooper made history by becoming the first woman to win an Olympic medal in an individual event. (International Olympic Committee, 2024) These numbers grew steadily throughout the years and at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, women represented 23% of participants. By London 2012, dubbed, 'the Women's Games,' 44% of athletes were women, and for the first time, every participating country had women athletes representing their team. (Forum, 2024) Tokyo 2020 had 47% of female athletes, and Paris will make history by having an equal share of male and female competitors. (Forum, 2024)



This movement towards gender equality has been on the IOC agenda for a number of years. In 1991, the Olympic charter was amended to prevent discrimination on the basis of sex and thereafter, in 1994, the International Working Group on Women and Sport was established. This group developed the 'Brighton declaration,' which is an international declaration which contains to support a fairer and more equitable system of sport. The IOC are a signatory of this declaration. (The Olympic Studies Centre, n.d.) Today, the Olympic Charter states that "discrimination of any kind against a country, private person or group of people on account of race, skin colour, ethnic, national or social origin, gender, disability, language, religion, political opinion or any other opinion, wealth, birth or any other status, sexual orientation or any other reason is strictly prohibited and punishable by suspension or expulsion." (FIFA) This commitment and movement towards gender equality is no doubt positive, and Paris 2024 represents a milestone for female participation at the Games, but there is still much to do in terms of complete gender equality, and issues which we must focus and acknowledge still exist as Paris 2024 commences.

Parity not Equality

The number of athletes competing may represent gender parity, but not gender equality. The IOC's commitment to gender equality should be viewed with caution, as their approach is somewhat numbers based rather than focused on full equality. To elaborate, when men and women compete in the same sports, differences such as the length of races, equipment sizes, judging and rules remain. For example, in gymnastics floor events, women's routines are performed with music and dance elements, whilst the men's do not. Moreover, when performing the same skills, the eligible scores for men are lower than women. (The Conversation, 2023) Similarly, when sports are gender differentiated, women's sports are often designed to be 'lesser' than men's. The races are shorter, there are fewer weight categories, or sometimes, women are simply not allowed to compete. For example, women cannot compete in wrestling, whilst conversely, only women can participate in rhythmic gymnastics. Perhaps more interestingly, and evidencing the focus on parity and not equality, is the fact that the IOC have modified the 50-kilometre walk, which was previously reserved for men, to a mixed relay race and there are still more events reserved for men's sports than women's in the upcoming games. (EuroNews, n.d.) Thus, it is important to remember that although numbers may be equal, inequality remains.

(Un) Equal Representation of Officials

Another area of concern to be aware of at Paris is the unequal representation of officials. Numbers may state that Paris is the first gender equal games, but this is simply not true in terms of officials such as coaches and referees. For example, only 40% of technical officials will be female in Paris, which is an improvement from the 30% at Tokyo 2020. (Media, 2024) At London 2012 and Rio 2016, only 11% of coaches were female, and this number only increased to 17% In Tokyo 2020. (Statista, 2018) It is expected that the number of female coaches at the Paris Olympics will only be 25%. In terms of those involved in the Olympic decision-making processes,

female's represented only 33% of the IOC board, and only 40% of the organisations membership are women. (International Olympic Committee, 2023) These stats are somewhat concerning, particularly given the occurrence of the IOC hashtag #GenderEqualOlympics (International Olympic Committee, 2024) and it is important to look beyond the headline of gender equality in terms of athletes, and acknowledge the remaining issues.

Differences in Uniform

A further area of concern is the differences in the uniforms which National Olympic Committees give to their athletes. The most obvious example here is the controversy caused by Nike's Team USA attire caused. The 'sneak-peak' of the track uniforms, was met with criticism. The men's uniform was a compression tank-top and mid-thigh length shorts, whilst the women had a bodysuit which was cut somewhat high on either leg. (Forbes, 2024) Former US national champion Fleshman stated, "If this outfit was truly beneficial to physical performance, men would wear it. This is not an elite athletic kit for track and field. This is a costume born of patriarchal forces that are no longer welcome or needed to get eyes on women's sports. ... Stop making it harder for half the population." (Guardian, 2024) This is not an isolated incident, and research has shown that 70% of women saw girls drop out of sport at school due to feeling 'sexualised' by the clothing they were forced to wear. (Guardian, 2024) Thus, when the focus is on gender equality at Paris, it is important to continue to pay attention to these sorts of outdated 'norms' and the issues which female athletes continue to face surrounding their competitive attire in 2024.

Concluding thoughts

It is no doubt a positive movement that Paris will be the first Olympic games where female and male athletes will enjoy equal representation on the field of play. This is a monumental step forward in terms of gender equality in sport but is it important to remain cautious. There remain a number of issues, and there is still a lot of work to be done in order to achieve full gender equality in sport. We must be aware of the differences in competitions and sports in which females compete, the underrepresentation of women in official, coaching and IOC board posts, as well as the over-sexualisation of females in terms of the kits they are issued. By viewing and understanding gender equality from this holistic perspective, rather than from a purely numerical lens, the IOC and sport more generally, can continue to push for full female equality in the sporting world.

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