

Sociology (of Sport)

Choose a group which faces barriers in terms of participation in sport and leisure and discuss.

The group I shall be looking at is that of 'women', though women are one of many disadvantaged groups in the world of sport and leisure.

Like with many of the other disadvantaged groups, women don't just suffer in terms of equality and provision, of sport, but in life, society generally too, (as I shall be discussing) both have been common features from the past centuries.

I shall be throughout this assignment looking at why women have suffered lower participation levels and discrimination in terms of equality. I will be looking at what has been said on this area, with the aid of the 'feminists' perspectives. I will then be looking at ways in which steps can be made forwards in overcoming and developing women's sporting experiences.

Still today the fight for equal rights, equal pay, equal power, 'equality' continues, though women have caught up considerably, there is still a way to go.

When discussing women's participation in the field of sport and leisure, we are given figures which highlight a massive gap between men and women's participation rates.

When looking at women's participation rates, we mustn't be misguided into believing that women are content with the current situation. We should try to understand the reasons for why levels of participation fall comparatively lower with that compared to men's, and why opportunities and horizons fall short too.

The current participation rate of women in sport has been reported during the past few decades, during the 1980's and in 1986, the General Household Survey (GHS), recorded that seven million women had regularly participated in sport. This as a percentage of the female adult population represented 37.2%. This according to the GHS is an increase of 1.9 million women since 1977.

Elaine Burgess reports that the increase over the past quarter century isn't reflected in areas of women holding leadership positions in sport such as officials, coaches or administrators. (Paraphrased from an article in 'Sport & Leisure' July/Aug 1990 page 3).

Women are under represented at all boards of senior levels of society, which is to say that, there are few MP's, few Judges, and few Chairpersons of major companies who are women. This under representation is carried through to sport, many would argue that this is so in sport because there is less access, less access for training and that there is a lack of provision, especially for women with families and stereotypical views have hindered entry for many.

Sporting experiences often tend to represent and reflect society, in terms of class for example, in terms of religion and in terms of race, and this can and does determine entry and types of sports participated in. So this is the case for women, many women see sport for men only, that they shouldn't be involved.

Women have generally been seen by men as (in a stereotypical way) weaker and easily damaged, this kind of attitude is believed to have limited women's access into sport.

Though women are catching up in the realms of society, as seen many more women now work and even make up 49 per cent of the workforce, though it must be noted that they only receive a quarter of the total wages, there is still a gulf between themselves and men in society as well as sport.

The current patterns of participation of women are still infrequent and are often specified in to certain sports, below are the top sports women in the UK participated in, on one or more occasions during the previous four weeks prior to questioning. (Data compiled from the GHS of 1990.)

Walking 38%, Keep fit / Aerobics 16%, Swimming 13%, Cycling 7%, Snooker 5%, Darts 4%, Badminton 3%, Ten Pin Bowls 3%, Jogging 2%, Golf 2%, Weight Training 2%.

From looking at the GHS data, it can be reported that where women's activities have increased, there appears to be a health-related factor here, (swimming, jogging, aerobics), accounting for the reported 2.5 million increase in women's participation in a sports activity between 1987 and 1990. (GHS 1990). Exercise became fashionable. It became the 'in thing', the thing to be seen to be doing during the late 1980's and early 1990's.

Pinpointed for the reason of why women's sports participation is radically lower fundamentally points to history and the developments of sport as we know it. Early forms of sport were completely dominated males and 'women were constrained by images of themselves as physically limited' (p14 Sport & Leisure July/Aug 1990).

Though few women did partake in some forms of sport, women's sport had a 'strong middle class character, due to the fact that few working class women had the time, money or energy to participate in sport of any sort', (paraphrased from as above but page 15).

Women's clothing during this era played a significant part in putting off women. The lavish clothing worn, disabled women from participation. Sports that women played during this period (the nineteenth century), included such events as croquet, skittles, quoits, and mild forms of badminton and tennis.

Sports for the elite (women) such as hunting, riding, rifle shooting and cycling were considered desirable, as long as they didn't, 'undermine a women's innate disposition.' (p16 as above issue.)

Cycling achieved extraordinary popularity amongst both working class and middle class women. But this popularity was challenged by those who believed that cycling was an 'indecent practice which would destroy the sweet simplicity of a girl's nature and which might cause her to fall in to the arms of a strange man' (p16 Sport & Leisure July/Aug 1990).

There was also a belief that cycling could 'transport a girl to prostitution.' (p16 as above).

Sure women did take part on some sports but they were to remain feminine and graceful at all times, acceptance, Jenny Hargreaves believes acceptance depended on a public display of traditional feminine behaviour, she highlights a quotation which was made to a Headmistress about the behaviour of her cricket team, 'your girls play like gentlemen and behave like ladies.' (p17 same issue as above).

Over the years attitudes and world wars have limited the growth of women's sports. In 1984, at the Los Angeles Olympic Games we saw the first official running of the marathon by a women,

this came 'only' 88 years after Baron De Coubertin's brainchild was realised, the reason being for this was due to much opposition, even stating that it was dangerous for women to compete. This ethos was a key issue which restricted many women from sports for years.

Over the course of history we have seen women fight their way in to many areas of society, and so to in sport. The current participation rate reflects past centuries of discrimination and torment. What I have mentioned here are key factors which have slowed the process of women's sport, the attitudes (of biological determinism) and the misconceptions of science, and moral standings of many, that women are supposed to be the homemakers, child bearers, that women generally have had much less disposable income to spend on sport and leisure activities.

When discussing what light sociological theory sheds on the pattern of participation and provision for women, I tend to initially call upon the feminists, who better to tell of how women feel they've been treated and what they want to see happening, (though we must realise that not all feminist are women, and not all women are feminist).

Feminist believe in a main reason for a low participation rate in sport and leisure and this is they see sport and leisure as a form of 'patriarchy', this is where women feel they are being controlled by men, this leads to repeal.

The feminists have/ can be categorised in to three groups, they are the Liberal, Marxist and the Radical feminists, all have varying views on feminism and the role of sport, the Liberal feminist who as a matter of fact accept capitalism, feel that there is a need to change the ideas about leisure, this can be related to a pluralist perspective.

They believe that women don't participate because they feel, that men do the real work and that they deserve the leisure time and that their domestic work and child bearing/ caring is not as important, and they point out that how women feel guilty if they have free time, that they should be servicing the man and child's/children's needs, not their own. The Liberal feminists believe that women who reject the so-called 'natural role' think it means they are seen as uncaring. (Eappen: Lecture Notes).

They have seen 'sexist' schooling practices as a reason for a possible low participation rate, and the media portrait of women in terms of sport has been a hindrance. 'Liberal feminist have argued that it is cultural conceptions of femininity, rather than any inherent limitations of women's bodies, that present the major obstacles to their full participation in physical activity.' (p240 Pininen).

Then there comes the Marxist feminist, who don't accept capitalism, far from it, and believe that it is not possible to achieve total equality under capitalism, especially so in terms of gender, and then as far as sport is concerned equality is impossible.

An argument they put forward for the low rates of participation is that women do most of the housework (women without paid employment) it has been reported at an astonishing 77 hours per week, this is equivalent to about 10.1 hours per day, where is the time for leisure? They also call for domestic work to be paid work. They see women accepting restriction of leisure interest, if this is so then why the need for provision of sport.

The final group of feminists the Radical feminists see the main roots to oppression being

'patriarchy' as the cause of low patterns of participation. They state that women are controlled, physically, economically and ideologically by men, if this is so then sport and leisure has remained elusive for women. They also see the 'old boys network' as being influential in putting women down and reducing their chances of higher positions in society and sport.

Radical black feminists feel that women face problems in terms of access in to 'male' sports, as they tend to be controlled by male organisations with male ideologies, this they believe has dented women's levels of participation accordingly. They also put forward that a main reason for lower rates is that as men and women's biology's are different, and that there is a need for different sports because of this, women tend not to participate cause of this.

Radical feminist call for separate sports provision for women and believe participation would be increased if so, Radical sports feminist in the UK and the USA have created women only activities. (p245 Pirinen).

According to Pirinen, 'women's participation in new sports had been undermined by prejudice, lack of training facilities and limited opportunities to compete.' This represents the many barriers faced by women another hurdle recognised is that being unequally treated in competitions for being an off-putting factor too.

Pluralist views are much the same as the Liberal feminists. Marxists tend to lend their support to Marxist feminists. They see 'hegemony' as a key reason for lack of women's provision.

With regards to future developments, the way forward seems to indicate that changes are essential, essential for increasing women's participation levels in sport and leisure.

If participation rates show an increase, more provision will be necessary. Targets must be set, clear goals and objectives outlined.

A key area which many believe can help change the way women's sports are perceived is the media and its portrait of women's sports, currently we see very little in the way of coverage of women's sport reported in our daily newspapers. In western society men's participation in sport has been seen by most as a natural phenomenon, when we read the sports pages of many newspapers we read about how good, how well men have done.

There is an argument for less patronising and sexism in sports reporting, as well as more coverage for women's sport. Extended coverage within our papers can help raise the profile of many sports for women, it will help in the creation of role models, which is critical if many of our women's sports are to take off in a big way.

If you pick up today's newspapers you can almost guarantee that there will be little or no coverage of women's sports, increasing this surely should be an area which needs rectifying if awareness is crucial to increased participation.

I mentioned patronising reporting, this Pirinen has mentioned has been an issue, she says that 'one recurring strategy used by sports journalist to trivialise and marginalise sportswomen is to concentrate on the way they look.' (p245 Pirinen). This kind of reporting can be degrading and often off putting there must be a new focus to how reporting should be carried out.

I mentioned media, another form of media which has extraordinary power is that of television, television has the power to make or break a sport, Steve Barnett, reports that, 'it's difficult to appreciate the enormous impact that even a fleeting television appearance can have on attendance and participation.' (p48 Sport & Leisure July/Aug 1990).

He also mentions a pattern which occurred in the USA, he reported that when a four-year regular televised volleyball slot was introduced, club membership for this sport rose by nearly 500 per cent (compared to), when regular televised coverage of table tennis was abruptly halted, the number of table tennis players fell by more than a third from 3.2 million to two million players. (This happened over a period of time during the 1970's and 1980's.)

The power of television is scary, it can increase the exposure a certain sport receives, the point I'm trying to get across here is that television has a major role in increasing awareness and opportunities to women and women's sports. If sports such as table tennis and volleyball were so dramatically affected by television coverage (in the states), surely it seems to suggest that increased women's coverage on our televisions will result in increased participation rates of certain sports for women, this is an area action groups etc... need to fight in. We need more coverage of women's major sporting events on our televisions like Channel 4's coverage of some of the Women's F.A Cup.

Another area which can be looked at is that of PE, games in schools and how and who teaches them. Many children at school get pushed in to activities which they don't like, this then can put them off for life. Many PE teachers or coaches in schools have tended to be male, this can be a damming thing, as male teachers, teaching mixed classes tend to more attentive towards male pupils and their successes, this is the thought of Anne Flintoff. (p18 Sport & Leisure July/Aug 1990.)

Radical feminist have called for separation of boys and girls' sports, separate provision. Maybe we need to review the current situation and the current National Curriculum and look at widening the choices of activities. As mentioned Radical feminist call for separate provision this they say is to avoid the male domination, they want total separation of the sexes in school sports, they report that girls do better on their own.

Many believe that a lack of women in high powered positions within sports organisations has been a factor for lagging involvement by women. The current Great Britain women's hockey team is coached by a man for example. Also, only seven out of 167 Olympic Presidents are women.

Elaine Burgess reports that The Sports Council believes 'it is important that women are given the opportunity and encouragement to achieve the highest positions of influence in sport, sport as a whole can benefit from the particular abilities and qualities women offer.' More initiatives are needed to help increase the number of women going into this direction, but how, through more targeting strategies and action such as the UK Action strategy, which has commenced on a UK Sports Council policy and action plan on women's leadership in sport, more initiatives and strategies at a national level are crucial.

Other areas for future development include increasing the number of women entering and graduating from further and higher education courses in the sport and leisure scene. This will then mean more qualified women at a higher level.

Continuing work from the Women's Sport Foundation in increasing awareness and opportunities is important. The key to all this argument points to role models, role models for women at all levels of the sporting agenda will surely help lift participation rates.

Liberal feminists also believe that the government has some responsibility in doing something.
(Lecture notes)

The turn of the century saw women's involvement in competitive forms of sport limited to just a few appropriate sports. Though over the past couple of decades the number of sports now open to women has expanded greatly, but the fight for equality is far from won, as current levels of participation show, but with the help of the possible future developments and ways forward that I have mentioned we might see women coming closer than we ever imagined.