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Introduction

Eligibility has been a key site in women's struggles for inclusion in sport. The *Olympic Charter* stipulates when, how, and why the Olympic Games take place. When read in conjunction with the rulebooks of the IFs that participate in the Olympic movement, one can determine the eligibility requirements athletes must fulfill to compete at the Olympic Games. Eligibility rules restricting who could participate in the Olympic Games date back to the first meeting of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894, when the IOC gave itself the authority to set eligibility parameters for the first modern Games. The IOC needs to reflect upon its eligibility rules and contrast what the current eligibility criteria *are* with what the eligibility criteria *ought* to be. Before positive action can take place, problems and areas of concern must be identified.

Drawing on feminist perspectives that contend gender equity requires the removal of systematic bureaucratic barriers (Hoerber, 2008), documents, policies, and rulebooks that mandate sex and gender distinctions without justification require evaluation. Rules and language that function to normalize the privileging of men's sports over women's sports remain in several rulebooks. Problematic areas that reinforce the differential treatment of women and men involve an inequitable offering of events and qualifying positions, and gender-exclusive language that reinforces men's events as superior to women's events.

Methods

A content analysis of the rulebooks and policy documents from a representative sample of International Federations (IFs) produced concrete examples of how individual IFs interpret and apply the eligibility rules outlined by the IOC in the *Olympic Charter*. The sample included team and individual sports, winter and summer sports, and traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine sports, as well as sports not associated with a specific gender, and the content analysis rendered a list of rules that stipulate the differential treatment of female and male athletes. The analysis included the eligibility rules of the:

- International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF)
- Association Internationale de Boxe (AIBA)
- Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG)
- International Biathlon Union (IBU)
- International Skating Union (ISU)
- International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF)
- Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB)
- Fédération Internationale de Luge de Course (FIL)



Sport Eligibility Rules and Olympic Participation

Eligibility rules serve the purpose of specifying the conditions athletes must meet in order to participate in a game or sport. Examples of eligibility rules include regulations specifying uniform requirements, professional or amateur status, training hours or techniques, and banned substances and methods (Meier, 1985). Organizers can implement eligibility rules to restrict a competition to certain individuals and exclude others from participating (Lumer, 1995). Given that eligibility requirements affect potential participants differently, these rules have always been a source of intense debate.

By the late 1970s the IOC voted to change Article 29 of the *Olympic Charter* to state, "women are allowed to compete according to the rules of the IF concerned and after the approval of the IOC" (IOC, 1979). The IOC's decision to bestow upon the IFs the authority to determine women's participation presented the IFs with not only more decision-making responsibility but also the task of eliminating sex inequality in the Olympic Games.

Gender-Exclusive Language

Gender-exclusive language involves expressions and phrases that unnecessarily differentiate between women and men. The use of false generics in rulebooks and codes involves using masculine words such as "he" and "mankind" to refer to all people, rather than writing "he or she" or "humanity" (Cameron, 1990). In the early years of the IOC, gender-exclusive language was not only accepted but was the norm in official and academic writing. Very few policy documents at the beginning of the twentieth century addressed women as autonomous individuals or applied directly to women, which enabled language reflecting the masculine gender exclusively to flourish uncontested in the *Olympic Charter*.

A note in the introduction of the current *Olympic Charter* acknowledges the use of the masculine gender throughout the rules and by-laws contained therein:

"the masculine gender used in relation to any physical person (for example, names such as president, vice-president, chairman, member, leader, official, chef de mission, participant, competitor, athlete, judge, referee, member of a jury, attaché, candidate or personnel, or pronouns such as he, they or them) shall, unless there is a specific provision to the contrary, be understood as including the feminine gender" (IOC, 2010).

Similar statements appear in many IF's rules.

Exclusive and biased language is problematic because it can trivialize women and treat female athletes as "others" trespassing in a male domain rather than as autonomous adults (Cunningham, 2008). Systematic exclusion of one gender from formal statements and policies perpetuates the linguistic and cultural privileging of men over women (Kramarae and Treichler, 1990). Regardless of whether the authors intend to discount women or do so inadvertently, out of habit, or to save space and words, disturbing implications arise. Prior to the nineteenth century the use of the singular "they" in both speech and writing was widespread and accepted by grammarians. Consequently, it was grammatically correct to refer to a person as "they" rather than "he" or "she", which rendered the use of sex-based distinctions unnecessary in written English. In opting to rule that the singular "they" was no longer correct, nineteenth-century English grammarians justified the change with an appeal to logic, elegance and accuracy; however, an objective rationale for the decision is lacking (Bodine, 1998). Proposed reasons for the change include the "androcentric worldview" associated with grammarians at the time and their beliefs that without confirmation of the contrary people were men. Suggestions that the use of generic "he" is an immutable part of the English language often fail to acknowledge the usage is a modern convention created by male grammarians (Cameron, 1990).

Masculine Generics

Problems arise when official rulebooks, codes, and policies use predominantly gender-neutral language but revert to masculine generics and terminology to refer to positions of power and prestige. For example, the IBU includes the statement "the president directs the IBU: he is responsible for the work done by the Executive board [and] he shall represent the IBU in public." Similarly, the IAAF refers to medical professionals as "he" in the same clause that references athletes neutrally in stipulating that the "Medical Delegate shall also have the authority to arrange for the determination of the gender of an athlete should he judge that to be desirable." Gender-exclusive language is troubling because it reproduces, and continues to normalize, the faulty assumption that if a person is a president, medical director, referee, or holds a similar position of authority in the sports world, that person must be a man. Hierarchical terms of this nature deny that women can fill the same roles equally well and support the stereotype that women are incapable of excelling in authoritative roles.

Gender Markers

Other forms of sexist language in sport include using gender markers to distinguish women's teams and events but failing to do the same for men's teams. It remains common to hear reference to "hockey" and "women's hockey" when discussing men's and women's ice hockey, respectively, or referring to "basketball players" and "lady basketball players" when speaking of male and female basketball players (Schulz 1990; Kramarae and Treichler 1990). Instances of this type of sexist language are present in the rulebooks of several IFs. For example, the ISU stipulates that a male skater who wins a championship earns the title "World Allround (or European) Speed Skating Champion" or "World Speed Skating Champion" whereas the female skaters who win the corresponding competitions earn the titles "Lady World Allround Champion" or "Lady World Speed Skating Champion." Language of this nature contains and upholds the assumption that male achievement is the norm (Spender 1990). Some scholars argue that the significance of sexist language is lost when it becomes familiar and conventional (Cameron, 1990). Trivializing comments about female athletes and the constant use of gender markers for women's sports often reinforce sexist attitudes and assumptions about women's sport. The rulebooks and charters that govern sport have immense power and influence in perpetuating the views contained within their pages as correct and acceptable. The gender-exclusive language found within the *Olympic Charter* and the rulebooks of several IFs participating in the Olympic Games is more than regrettable and must be changed or eliminated.

Gender Specific Rules

Several disciplines on the Olympic program do not offer equivalent opportunities for women and men to compete. For example, the athletics, canoe-kayak, rowing, freestyle wrestling, and shooting disciplines, among others, still include women's and men's events but offer additional men's events without including an equitable option for female competitors. Focusing on the absolute number of events offered does not guarantee equitable representation at the Olympic Games. An Olympic program that offers an identical program of women's and men's events does not ensure equal numbers of men and women will participate; nor does it ensure that women will be able to compete in events of their choice:

- the IAAF allots 1100 entries for men but only 900 entries for women, and does not offer the longest racewalk event, the 50 km walk, for women
- the IIHF's tournaments include 276 men and 160 women hockey players
- the FIL administers luge events for 40 men, 30 women, and 20 doubles that almost exclusively consist of pairs of two men
- the two longest women's speed skating events cover 3,000 and 5,000 m whereas the two longest men's races cover 5,000 and 10,000 m
- the ISU mandates different length programs and different required elements within women's and men's figure skating events
- all of the women's biathlon events organized by the IBU are 2.5 to 5 km shorter than the men's events at the Winter Olympic Games.
- the distance between the start and finish lines of the luge run must be between 800-1050 m for the women's singles and the doubles event but must measure 1000-1300 m for the men's singles event.

A program of events that includes women's events that are shorter in duration and distance than the men's events implies value judgments about women's skill and fitness (Postow, 1980).

Sport influences some people's assumptions about women's value as human beings, and the organization of sports can create and amplify gender differences (McDongagh and Pappano, 2008). A consequence of social inequality is women's internalization of inferior status, which makes it difficult to identify when discrimination is occurring and to repeal the corresponding injustices (Wenz, 1985). Offering shorter events for women perpetuates the assumption that women are weaker and therefore inferior to men (McDongagh and Pappano, 2008).

Recommendations

Rules found in the *Olympic Charter* and the rulebooks of eight IFs function to mandate and normalize the differential treatment of women and men by stipulating disparate eligibility requirements and offering incongruent opportunities for athletes. Sports organizations need to eliminate all instances of unnecessary gender-exclusive and biased language from their rulebooks and policy documents. A consequence of continuing to reproduce social conventions that ignore or overlook the use of male pronouns and false generics is that people perceive this type of language to be acceptable and appropriate. Linguistic change can serve as a step in reducing instances of gender inequality in sport by no longer accepting outdated practices that continue to reinforce oppressive and patriarchal views of women athletes. Constant pressure from feminist groups seeking equal and equitable opportunities has led to the removal of gender-exclusive language from several constitutions and laws. However, the removal of gender-exclusive language alone is not sufficient because non-sexist rules and laws can be applied in sexist ways. The goal ought not to be to achieve an acceptable level of political correctness in recognizing and respecting all athletes, but instead needs to be to change people's underlying attitudes to acknowledge that female athletes deserve equitable opportunities and respect in sport.

Eliminating outdated and unjust rules and language that unnecessarily differentiates men's athletic experiences from women's experiences contributes to achieving gender equality in sport. Progress can be made by eliminating rules in charters, rulebooks, and policy documents that mandate dissimilar requirements and expectations of women and men athletes participating in similar events. The IOC and IFs ought to eliminate differences between men's and women's sports that contribute to reinforcing biased and inaccurate assumptions about the differences between male and female athletes and that privilege men's events.

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