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Mateos Padorno, Covadonga; González Molina, Antonio; Sánchez Mosquera, Ana María; Martínez Vidal, Aurora; Martínez Patiño, M<sup>a</sup> José  
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### Review Article

## AN APPROACH TO THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE ATHLETICS IN THE OLYMPIC GAMES

Covadonga Mateos Padorno<sup>1</sup> , Antonio González Molina<sup>1</sup>, Ana María Sánchez Mosquera<sup>2</sup>,  
Aurora Martínez Vidal<sup>2</sup>, M<sup>a</sup> José Martínez Patiño<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain. <sup>2</sup>Universidad de Vigo, Spain.

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### ABSTRACT

This article will evolve around the subject of female integration and participation in athletics in the Olympic Games, analyzing the initial difficulties they encountered, the role played by sports institutions as well as international federations and the Olympic International Committee.

**Key words:** female, athletic, Olympic, game

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**Corresponding author.** Covadonga Mateos Padorno. Departamento de Educación Física. Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Edificio de Educación Física, Campus Universitario de Tafira, 35017 Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain.

Phone: +34928458866 /Fax. +34928458860

E-mail: rreboredo@def.ulpgc.es

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### **The background of modern athletics without the presence of women**

During the 18th century, and most of the 19th century, track athletes, better known as pedestrians, competed in Great Britain, Scotland and the United States for the sake of money and they themselves were also subjected to the dynamics of bets that were held at the time. To compete for the sake of money or cash was not an uncommon practice, and races were amongst the most popular in athletics competition (Paish, 1976). The length or distance of the races was of a wide range, between 50 yards and 1000 miles, but it was the race in itself what was invariably popular almost towards the end of the 19th century. The so called “athletics era” on track emerges at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in British public schools as well as athletic schools, universities and clubs where it was mainly developed as Harris (1975) quotes and Great Britain itself decides to establish athletics as part of the school curriculum.

These activities were very much admired by the deans of public schools as an integrating part of the physical and moral development of the boys. Upper and middle class boys would not compete against those of lower classes as stated by the social standards of the times. Working-class members were utterly excluded from the 19<sup>th</sup> century emerging athletics clubs; these restrictions were equally spread to the participation of women in sports.

Women athletes were not very well seen as a popular slogan of the times reflects “a horse sweats, a man perspires, but a woman glows”, and it was, indeed, an overspread belief that for a woman to sweat was highly inadequate. She was expected not to strain herself too much, to dress adequately, and although her participation in sports was accepted, it was not seriously taken into account as Simri (1983) mentions.

The restoration of the Olympic Games by Pierre de Coubertin was a turning point for the popularization of athletics. The games promoted the expansion of athletics all over the world but also the first conflicts in which women were also involved appear. Initially, as there was not an organism to effectively rule the athletics programme, disarray and chaos ensued. Equally, not many countries had a programme of athletic events and proceeded independently by not only establishing their own legislation and rules but also a stating a list of their own records.

### **The incorporation of women in athletics. Difficulties inside the sport institutions themselves.**

The long way ahead for the integration of women in the world of athletics, not lacking in difficulties, dates back to the times of baron Pierre de Coubertin, the reviver of the Olympic games, bitter opponent to the presence of women in athletic disciplines, the real crafter of systematic opposition to the participation of women under the aegis of the very International Olympic Committee.

In July 1912, a Conference is held in Stockholm in order to create an International Federation of Amateur Athletics and amidst its regulations it does not include the possibility of incorporating women in regulated athletic events in more than 17 countries represented at the conference (Germany, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Egypt, United States, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Norway, United Kingdom, Russia and Sweden).

Not until 1924, and due to the pressure of creating a parallel federation, -International Women Sports Federation-, the Congress of Paris authorizes five women categories in the Olympic Games held in Amsterdam (1928); this presupposes a start to pave the way for their participation in the 100 metres, 800 metres, high jump, discus, relay race 4 x 100. They were the first Olympic Games in which women could participate in the athletic events.

The press of the time and public opinion were reluctant to the presence of women in stadiums: “it was in those Olympic games in Amsterdam and particularly thanks to the 800 metres category that it actually presupposed the establishment and development of women’s athletics” Cruz (1999). Some women fainted on the track when the race finished and the British newspaper “Daily Mail” pointed that women will age sooner if they underwent categories over 200 metres. The most vitriolic sections of criticism against the inclusion of women in athletics supported the idea of totally banishing any women categories from Olympic events. The 800 metre category would not be held until the Olympics in Rome, thirty two years later.

The origins of female athletics must be traced back to the *Vassar Collage in Poughkeepsie, New York, USA, on the 19th of September 1895*. It is in this date in which a private competition is held only for women either on track or on the terrace. As Quercetani (1992) points the girls at the time used to wear culottes, white sweaters which were baggy enough in order to hide their curvy bodies, but not their broad shoulders. Their attire also included black stockings, canvas shoes with rubber soles but no high-heels. The youngsters did not wear hats and refused raincoats and umbrellas in spite of the fact that at 11 o’clock in the morning the drizzle turned into a deluge. Five categories were contested: 100 yards, long jump, 120 yards hurdles, high jump and 220 yards.

In spite of these origins in the United States, the fight for women to become part of athletic competitions was really staged out in the old continent. In 1917, the French Alice Milliat founds *Fédération Sportive Femenine* of France, and she demands the Olympic International Committee the inclusion of female athletics, but this petition was rejected in 1918. In her struggle, she finds the necessity to spread this organization to other countries and in 1921, the *Fédération Sportive Femenine International* (F.S.F.I.), formed by France, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Great Britain, the United States and Spain becomes into an institution. The first World Women Games were celebrated in the Stade Pershing in Paris, covering events of 11 categories and an audience of 20,000 people.

In spite of the incorporation of women into the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928, female athletics was disengaged from the International Federation until 1936.

### **Gradual recognition of the participation of women by sport institutions**

As sport institutions started to shape and consolidate on an international basis, the opposition to the participation of women gave way to a gradual recognition of her abilities as an athlete.

The first obstacle to overcome was intrinsically connected with the social and ruling beliefs of the times, Victorian standards had not been surmounted yet and, therefore, neither their social and cultural barriers as Leigh and Bonin (1977) points. Not only did Victorian standards reject but they also banned women from sports alleging that it was dangerous not only for the mother but also for the child. These theories contributed to Courbetin's categorical opposition who claimed that sports should only be circumscribed to men.

The first challenge against this radicalization emerges on the part of the Alice Milliat, creating the International Sports Federation with the only aim of integrating women in sports. From 1921 to 1930 Milliat led the fight for the incorporation of women in the Olympic Games due to the increase of women that had started to participate in the athletic events and as Simri (1983) points "due to her belief in the ability of women to participate in sports only reserved for men".

This initiative is submitted in the way of a formal petition to the International Olympic Committee in order to incorporate women in the sport events, specially in athletics. As the superior institution had rejected this request, Milliat's reaction was instilled in the creation of an exclusive sports federation for women which will regulate women's sports. Milliat plans to organize Olympic Games only for women in spite of the stated opposition of Courbetin and the institution he represented.

In 1922, amidst a crowd of spectators, the first Women's Olympics is celebrated in Paris. The outcome was a successful participation and a **turning point** for the International Olympic Committee and the International Federation of Athletics to acknowledge the desire of women to compete in international sports as well as represent their countries in the same way men did in the Olympic challenge.

Thanks to this sports event, the Olympic institution felt the urge to deal with the issue of women's participation in competitions, although as Pfister (1996) claims "the main target of the International Olympic Committee and the International Federation of Athletics was to exert control on athletics for women".

Equally, women's participation was limited by an overall claim that they should not carry out any activities that presupposed an intense effort and they were expected as Simri (1983) points "that they will expose themselves with sensitivity, fragility, modesty, decency and prudishness". Medical opinion corroborated this strand of belief by manifesting that physical activity could actually damage the female reproductive organs. Gradually, women started to permeate the academic world by attending schools and universities, but parallel to the world of sports, there was also a great objection on the part of society to allow women in the high spheres of education. The first official world championship of women's athletics is held in Austria, and in spite of the fact that athletic competitions were held in different countries in the 20s, sport leaders such as Von Halt from the CIO stated that "struggle suits man, but not female nature, therefore, she is

alien to athletic contests” (Simri, 1977). These statements highlighted the belief that for sport leaders, athletics was circumscribed to the domain of the male athlete.

The French baron, according to Mitchell (1977), thought that the women who carried out straining physical activities will subject their charms to spoil, and he even claimed that women’s participation in sports will lead to the decline and derision of the sports in which they might supposedly participate. A train of thought that as spoken out by Samaranch (2003) “reflected the feeling and thinking of a time, in which Courbetin thought that sports were not the domain of women, and if we look back to the past century many other shared his thoughts”.

Courbetin worked in order to protect male exclusivity in high competition sports, where the Olympic games stood for the manifestation of male sports based on international-acknowledgement, loyalty, art and the admiration of women as a reward; and although these ideas on the participation of women in athletics were a shared belief, he found the way to publicly corroborate this train of thought among sport leaders.

It is necessary to highlight that the strong arguments on the presence of women in athletic competitions are closely connected with the stereotypes of the times on the nature of women and the myth-making of “female weakness”.

### **The gradual incorporation of female athletic categories**

Post-1938 period, when the first championships were celebrated in Europe and in which women participated in exclusive female categories, marked the period of an emerging equity in the athletic sphere. Nevertheless, there are some drawbacks as far as it refers to some clear differences in athletic events that have gradually and unevenly undergone some changes throughout the years: whereas male categories in the different events have not changed in the last 20 years up to date, women’s chances to participate in the different Olympic categories have been gradually and unevenly done.

We must highlight that all the 24 male categories that constituted the Olympic schedule were established in London Olympic Games in 1948. As far as women are concerned, a lot of categories had to be previously carried out in national and international competitions, and all of the categories had to be consolidated on different occasions in World and European Championships until they would be definitely established in the Olympic Games. Thanks to this, women would have gradually achieved total equity with men in connection with their participation in the different scheduled Olympic categories.

An arduous process of more than 80 years, full of windings, started in 1922: the first scores in the 100 metres, 200 metres, 400 metres, 800 metres, high jump, long jump, javelin and relay race 4 x 100 were accepted as records.

Marathon race category underwent special difficulties in its process of being consolidated; indeed, women were banned from this category until the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984. The American runner Joan Benoit was awarded with the gold medal in the first Olympic marathon for women, with a personal best of 2 hours 24 minutes 52 seconds which would have

meant a victory in 11 of the 20 Olympic marathons which had been held so far in male categories and which had been banned to women. Cruz (1999) points that women “were not only marginalized in competitions of 42 kilometres and 195 metres, but they were also banned from this category”.

The definition that baron Pierre Coubertin provided in *Revue Olympique* in 1912, “the solemn and periodical elation of male athletics with internationality as a departing point, loyalty as a means, art as a frame and female admiration as reward” evidences not only the feeling of renewal of the Olympic games but the popular strain against the participation of women in sports. Unsurprisingly, this train of thought makes it not questionable that women had been excluded from the Olympic Games in Athens in 1896.

Coubertin firmly believed that female success depended on the number and the quality of the children she delivered, and as far as sports were concerned, her main achievement was to encourage her children to outstand as Leigh and Bonin (1977), sports historian, describes on the origins of women in the Olympic movement. It is important to highlight that there is a turning point towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: industrialization and the impact of social reformation backed by the feminist movement as Defrantz (1997) points, turned the passive role of women into an active role that will positively influence the world of sports and her incorporation into Olympics.

### **The role of the Olympic Committee in the incorporation of women into athletics**

The first women’s Olympic Games held in Paris in the stadium of Pershing on the 20th of August, 1922 presupposed the official baptism of women in the international concurrence of athletics. In the opening ceremony, Alice Milliat words inaugurating the first women’s Olympic Games in the world presupposed the beginning of the confrontation between the CIO and FSFI as they did not agree with the event. Milliat and her female Games had also been charged with the accusation of “abuse and excess of the rights of women (Boulongne, 1994), in spite of the fact that they actually acknowledged women’s desire to participate in sports in their own countries.

Milliat’s attempts to approach the CIO in order to include female athletics in the Olympic Games in Paris in 1923 are rejected, and her application must be readdressed to I.A.A.F. The CIO’s underlying intentions ran in the direction of the International Federation of Athletics: the latter should be liable for female athletics, limiting and controlling the increasing female participation in these sports as Leigh and Bonin (1977) point.

The CIO’s attitude heralded the idea that if sports contributed to improve women physically and morally, it would be, consequently, reasonable to suggest that the international federation should organize female athletics adequately in such a way that they would only compete in those categories which might be adequate to their sex. Once again, we might envision the interest the CIO placed not only in exerting control over the women that participated in athletics but also in establishing the categories to which they should be ascribed.



The Olympic Committee's suggestion to lead female athletics is accepted in the VI Conference of the International Federation of Athletics held in Paris on 23rd of July, 1923. In this conference, there is not a total consensus about the incorporation of female athletics, and especially, some of the representatives, such as the Norwegian Falchenberg, opposed the idea by stating that medical specialists in his country affirmed that sports were hazardous for women's health.

Due to the emerging controversy, the very I.A.A.F. Board is commissioned with the responsibility of setting the rules and conditions that will apply to female athletics. The so called regulations will not be ratified until the following conference in July 1924. The final conclusions of the intense debates held in this conference can be substantiated in the following proposals:

- Female athletics must be ruled by the International Federation.
- Elaboration of specific regulations of female athletics.
- There should not be athletic categories for women in the Olympic Games.
- The managing Board of the I.A.A.F will be entitled to appoint a special committee in order to control female athletic categories.

Similarly, a special board is appointed in order to negotiate with the F.S.F.I. those issues related to female athletics, specially because it tracked back the desire of women to participate in the Olympic Games.

The continuous pressure of the F.S.F.I. ensues in the elaboration of its own Games and the plan of organizing women's Olympic Games every four years; this stands for its firmness and seriousness before the eyes of popular support. All this action turned out, after arduous negotiations among the three institutions, into the inclusion of five athletic categories out of the requested ten in the Olympic Games of 1928, just *as an experiment*. This not presupposed a complete approval of women on the track of the Olympic stadium, but rather its authority to control female athletics as Simri (1983) states.

In spite of the approval of female athletics in the Olympic Games of 1928, the CIO still keeps a grudge against the participation of women in categories which were considered anti-feminine and against all virtue and purity. It is interesting to highlight that women were accepted as athletic contestants in 1926, a year after Coubertin resigned his post as a president of the highest Olympic institution.

Under the new rule of the Belgian count Baillet-Latour, a more liberalizing atmosphere among the members of the CIO started to sprout out. Far from the truth, women's consolidation on the field of athletics will still take up several years of intense and difficult agreements.

The outdated attitudes among the members of the CIO at the time reflected the heated arguments around the issue of female athletics. The Swedish Edström, as a member of the I.A.A.F. and of the Olympic Committee was, undoubtedly, a valuable person since he used his influence to tighten up his support on female athletics. We must highlight his participation in the debates



carried out in the executive meetings of the CIO in 1926 in order to include five female categories in the Games. He defended his ideas in spite of the confrontation of other members of the CIO, such as the Finnish Pikhala, who deemed him as an opponent to the Olympic philosophy: athletics means a struggle in which endurance plays an important role, such as it is the case of all those sports inspired in the idea of fight, and it is only to this endurance that men are called not women.

His decision to back the participation of women was obvious in the meetings of the international federation of athletics to which he attended. He equally overcame all the obstacles that sprang from some of the misgivings the members of the CIO had, such as the fact that if there was an interest to limit events in the Olympic Games, including female athletics will unavoidably bring practical difficulties.

Summer 1928 presupposes a historical moment for female athletics in Amsterdam (Holland) thanks to the participation of women in the Olympic Games. More than 100 athletes of 18 different countries competed in five authorized categories, among which the United States and Germany were represented with the widest number of athletes, 19 overall. Belgium, Holland, France, Canada, Italy, Sweden, Poland, Austria and Hungary, among other nations, except for Great Britain as the latter had voted against the participation in all the athletic events. Spain did not partake of this historical turning point either in spite of its weak support to the creation of the F.S.F.I.; it will have to wait almost half a century, until the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976, for the presence of female Spanish athlete in one of the Olympic categories.

A record was beaten in each of the contested categories and the 800 metres race constituted a touchstone in the progress of the female athletic events in the subsequent years against what Pikhala had said about the fact that “athletic competitions for women were just a fashion parade, and that this kind of sports was not suitable for them” ([Simri, 1977](#)).

The 800 metres race was a very contested race as the first three athletes broke the world record. The contestants collapsed as they crossed the winning post. The press of the times and the criticism on the part of the detractors had again a negative effect among the members of the C.I.O. Once more the issue broke into controversy.

In the aftermath of the Olympic Games, in a meeting held in Lausanne in April 1929, the attempt to totally banish women’s participation in the Olympic Games was again one of the issues to discuss. Before making a final decision, Edström suggests that the issues to be dealt with should be formerly discussed in international federations.

His proposal was accepted and it is in a meeting held in July in Vittel, France where female participation in athletics is dealt with. The president of the International Olympic committee suggests that women should only partake of the more “aesthetic” categories, trying, therefore, to constrain her participation to the categories of gymnastics, swimming, fencing and tennis ([Boulongne, 1994](#)). This way female athletics was totally banished from the Olympic events. This proposal headed its way to the Conference of the CIO held from 25th to the 30th of May 1930.

Prior to the meeting of the Olympic board, Edström informs the I.A.A.F Conference that female athletics was going to be unfortunately suppressed from Olympic events and action should be taken just in case this would be fulfilled.

Should women be banned from the athletic events, Kirby, representative of U.S.A in the I.A.A.F., threatens with the withdrawal of men from the same categories in the Games of Los Angeles 1932.

Berlin's conference held in May 1930 deals once again with the issue of female participation in the Olympic Games: women should only participate in gymnastics, swimming, tennis and skating. These sports are accepted but fencing and athletics are also included. In spite of this decision, taken due to the importance of athletics in the Games, the consolidation of female athletics and its incorporation in the Olympic events was somehow weak at first.

Female categories were again discussed in the following session of the International Olympic committee held in Barcelona in 1931. In this meeting held in our country, the idea of keeping athletics as part of the Olympic events was supported; this presupposed the permanent but limited incorporation of female athletics. Consequently, the FSFI, until its dissolution, kept on negotiating an athletic programme equal to that of men in the upcoming Olympic Games.

The incorporation of women's athletics in the Olympic events was not an easy task. Male leadership in sports stated that women should not partake, arguing that it was not only unattractive and unsuitable for women but also because it presupposed a danger against the health of the reproductive system. On the other hand, the fact that women would participate in the so far considered sphere of men presupposed a challenge to a competitive culture from a physical and athletic point of view.

### **Evolution of the female athletic programme**

If we analyze the evolution of the athletic events from the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, 1932, where it is agreed that women can participate without any impediment in Olympic athletics, to the Olympic Games held in Athens in 2004, we can observe some difficulties on the part of women to even numbers with men in some of the athletic categories in which they can contest.

Between 1932 and 1960, there were only two more categories in female athletics, 200 metres and shot put in the Olympic Games of 1948.

If we compare the slow but continuous evolution of female athletics with regard to that of males, the latter has been stilled since the Olympic Games of Stockholm in 1912.

Along the 80s women have incessantly struggled to compete in the same athletic categories as men. Gradually, they had to show their abilities to run a marathon or carry out a triple jump, which was initially damaging for women, or discus which had never had the same athletic representation as in the case of men.

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