



Crossing the Finish Line

A Discrimination-Free Olympics

THE INSTITUTE FOR GULF AFFAIRS

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- Convenes conferences in Washington, where informed analysts debate major issues concerning the Gulf countries and US-Gulf Relations.
- Conducts independent research and investigations, reports of which are posted on our website.
- Fosters a deeper understanding of the Gulf countries among Washington policymakers and members of the press corps by providing them with up-to-date and exclusive information, and by putting them in contact with reliable analysts.
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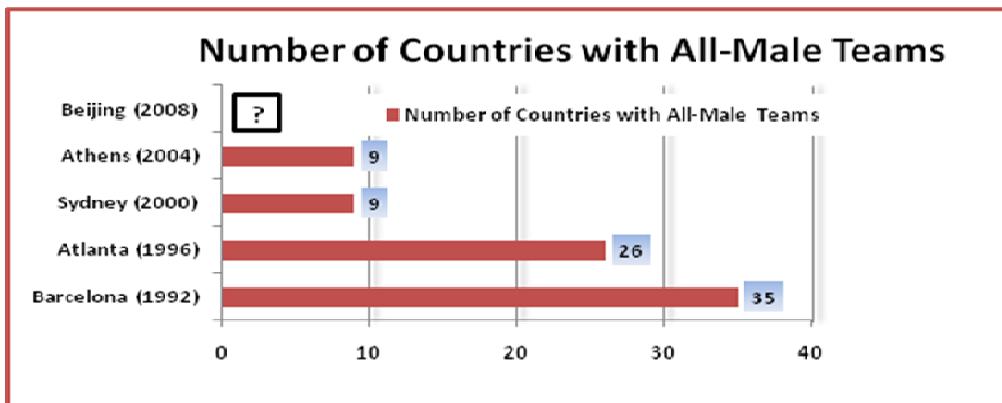
Katie Ike

INTRODUCTION

In a few short weeks all eyes will turn to Beijing when thousands of athletes representing approximately 200 countries as well as millions in audiences worldwide will once again share the Olympic spirit of celebrating unity and joy of competition without borders. Fittingly, the slogan of the 29th Olympic Games is “One World One Dream” – a simple but profound expression of common aspirations for equality, peace and harmony shared by all members of the global community regardless of color or creed.

Indeed, the International Olympic Committee charter states that “any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, sex or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement”¹. It is the very core of the Olympic spirit that the joy of competing with the world’s best should be accessible to every deserving athlete, and the only bar to participation should be meeting the standard set by the Olympic-level competition.

However, the International Olympic Committee is falling behind in adhering to its own standards of nondiscrimination by enforcing some and ignoring others. For example, South Africa was excluded from the Olympic Games in 1964 for its apartheid policies, but the IOC continues to allow participation in the Olympics of countries who do not allow women on their Olympic teams. Another example is that of Afghanistan, which under the Taliban was banned from the 2000 Olympics, at least in part due to its treatment of women.



Compiled by the Institute for Gulf Affairs from various sources 2008

GENDER DISCRIMINATION ON DECLINE BUT FAR FROM ERADICATED

Although the number of countries with all-male teams has been shrinking steadily from thirty-five all-male country teams in Barcelona in 1992 to twenty-six in Atlanta in 1996 to only nine in Sydney in 2000, and the same number in the last Olympics in Athens in 2004, the IOC should do more to eliminate the policies of discrimination practiced by its members in direct violation of the charter they committed to follow upon joining². To bring this number down to zero, the IOC must take a strong position that countries precluding and/or restricting women from participation in the Olympic Games should be suspended from the Olympic community until they allow women equal opportunity to participate.

Of the fifty-seven member countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, only the nations of Brunei and Saudi Arabia ban women from participating in the Olympics. According to their respective governments, women are barred from Olympic participation for “cultural and religious reasons” due to the Islamic ethics that prize modesty and conservative clothing incompatible with most competitive Olympic sports. For some countries, women’s clothing mandated by the conservative interpretation of religion precludes their participation in most sports – for instance, Iran’s female Olympians were limited to pistol- and rifle-shooting at the Barcelona, Sydney and Athens Olympics^{*}. In many others, like Saudi Arabia, women are discouraged or outright banned from exploring their athletic potential by the government that follows the lead of ultraconservative Wahhabi clerics. Though unsanctioned women’s sports activities have begun to appear in the kingdom, women are banned by the Saudi government from participating in international competitions³. Though there have been some, very small, private attempts at women sports, three prominent Saudi Clerics recently issued a fatwa against women’s sports in the kingdom declaring that, “Banning the opening of these sports centers is not a ban on sports. A woman can practice sports at home, and there are many ways to do that, or she can race her husband in a deserted area, like the Prophet Muhammad -- peace be upon him-- who raced with his wife Aisha twice.”⁴



Achievements of Muslim Women Athletes

- **Nawal Al-Moutawakel** (Morocco), gold medalist, 400 meters, 1984 Olympics
- **Hassiba Boulmerka** (Algeria), gold medalist, 1500 meters, 1992 Olympics
- **Nezha Bidouane** (Morocco), World Champion in 400 m hurdles, 1997, bronze medalist, 2000 Olympics
- **Farkhondeh Sadegh and Laleh Keshavarz** (Iran), first Muslim women to climb Mount Everest (2005)
- **Hasna Benhassi** (Morocco), silver medalist in 800 m race at 2005 World Championship and 2004 Olympics
- **Sania Mirza** (India), professional tennis player
- 2004 - Female athletes included on Olympic teams representing Kuwait, Bahrain, Palestine, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan in the Athens Olympics



^{*} Incidentally, Nassim Hassanpour, who represented Iran in 10-m air pistol event at the Athens Olympics, excelled in gymnastics but was forced to turn to shooting as the only sport she would be allowed to pursue internationally without violating the Islamic Republic’s dress code.

Qatar, while not outright banning women’s physical education, has yet to send a woman athlete to the Olympics. In fact, while Qatar did make overtures during its Olympic bid, such as hosting the co-ed Asian games in 2006, it has yet to formally break the gender barrier for its international Olympic squad. Some countries that previously discriminated in this manner have recently broken their gender barrier and will be sending women to the next Olympics, such as the UAE, who will be sending Maitha Bint Mohamed Bin Rashid al-Maktlom, the daughter of Dubai ruler, to the Olympics to compete in taekwondo. Oman has also revised its stance on women’s participation in sports since the last Olympics, and has formed several female athletic teams that participated in international competition.

There are many countries where the predominantly Muslim population and competitive sports coexist peacefully. Susi Susanti became the first Olympic athlete to win a gold medal in badminton for Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim nation in 1992, and the majority-Muslim Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union impose no restriction on female participation at all. In Athens (2004), Egypt’s 96-member delegation included 15 women, and Pakistan’s Olympic team featured a 13-year old female swimmer and a female runner. Even Afghanistan sent a female runner to compete in a 100-meter dash (she competed in long trousers and a short-sleeved top). Algeria’s Hassiba Boulmerka, though forced into exile after her gold medal win in the 1,500 meter race in 1992 for wearing contemporary running shorts, set an example for thousands of girls and women across the Middle East and North Africa.

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“Women’s participation in sport is a reflection of the position of women in society in general. The entrance of women into these sporting spaces often coincides with women’s entrance and active participation in civil society and politics.”

Nawal El-Moutawakel, the Moroccan Olympic champion in 400 m race, interview with the Swiss Academy for Development

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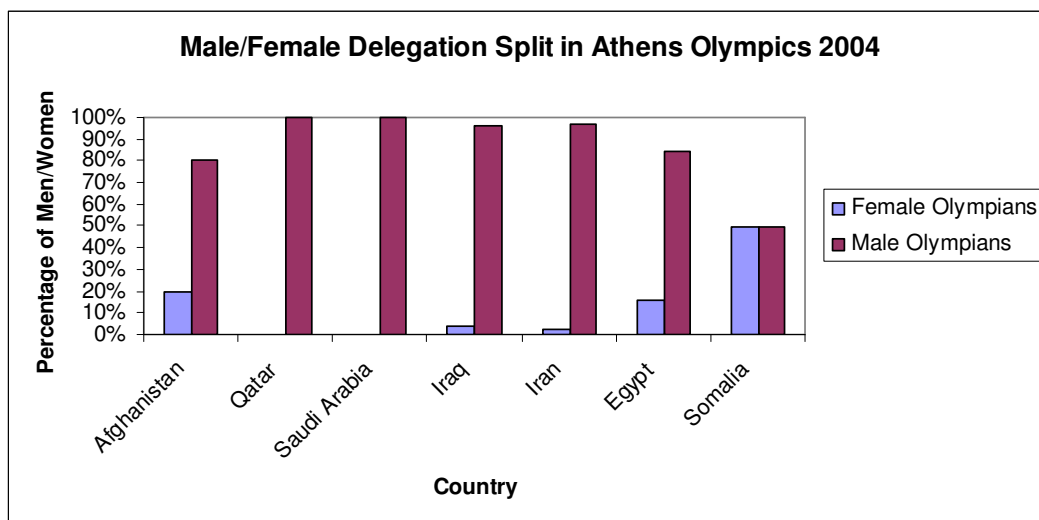
INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

For the last fifteen years, many international non-government organizations worldwide have been trying to lobby the IOC for better enforcement of its own laws banning gender discrimination by member countries. After the 1992 Olympics, a French-Belgian group Atlanta/Sydney Plus took the lead in reaching out to IOC in an attempt to increase participation of women in the Olympic Games and Olympic sports in countries that didn’t send women’s delegations⁵. The Women’s Sports Foundation has also called on the IOC to screen its member countries for gender discrimination policies and suspend those who fail the screening. And while their efforts did result in increasing numbers of women Olympians, the IOC has to date been reluctant to take a strong position and threaten the discriminating countries with suspension or expulsion from the Olympic family⁶.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT NEEDED FOR FEMALE ATHLETES

Because participation in the Olympic Games is a pinnacle of athletic achievement that takes years of dedicated training, the IOC must insist that its member countries increase their efforts to provide adequate facilities and financial support for sports education and competition for their women athletes.

This is important because countries that preclude participation of women athletes in the Olympic Games frequently have inadequate or overly restrictive physical education policies that result in very low numbers of women able to realize their athletic potential. For instance, Saudi Arabia has no national bodies charged with oversight of women’s athletics, and it banned physical education for girls of all ages and grade levels. In Iran, proposals to build a women-only sport stadium with 12-foot walls were stalled when critics claimed that, despite the barriers, women could still be seen from jetliners taking off or landing at the airport⁸.



Compiled by the Institute for Gulf Affairs from various sources including (IOC)2008

EVENTS BILLED AS OLYMPIC ALTERNATIVES DO NOT COMPARE TO OLYMPIC STANDARDS

The only international alternative currently available to women athletes in conservative Islamic countries is the Islamic Women’s Games held every four years in the Islamic Republic of Iran^{*}. While this event offers some relief to Muslim women athletes who otherwise may not be able to compete internationally, it does not begin to compare to the Olympic Games in prestige, recognition and caliber of participating athletes⁹. Islamic Women’s Games do not receive any media coverage, do not admit any male spectators (not even family members) and employ all-women staff including judges, janitors and security. Therefore, commendable achievements of Muslim women athletes remain virtually unknown to the rest of the world. But most importantly, they do not attract top-caliber athletes or teams from countries where women have the option of competing in the real Olympics¹⁰.

^{*} Pan-Arab Games allowed female athletes to participate only in December 2007, but not all participating countries allowed women to join their teams (Saudi Arabia still sent no women athletes). No women were allowed to participate in Islamic Solidarity Games which started in 2005 in Riyadh except as spectators, although the committee in theory “welcomes female participation in future tournaments.” (Islam Online, 4/10/05)

INCLUSION OF WOMEN IN SPORTS EQUALS SOCIAL PROGRESS

Removing the obstacles for women's participation in athletic competition and sports in general creates a more inclusive and progressive society that ensures equal rights for all its citizens. It comes as no surprise that countries that do not allow women to compete internationally, whether in such events as the Olympics, FIFA, or the Asian Games, are likely to practice other violations of women's rights and restrict women's participation in public life in other ways. Nawal El-Moutawakel, the Moroccan Olympic champion in 400 m race, has put it best in an interview with the Swiss Academy for Development,

"Women's participation in sport is a reflection of the position of women in society in general. The entrance of women into these sporting spaces often coincides with women's entrance and active participation in civil society and politics."¹¹ Therefore, the international community and civil society organizations must join their efforts to bring about a more open and fair social environment by ensuring that women everywhere have access to developing and expressing their athletic potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy options are available to the IOC. Should they follow them, other international sporting organizations such as FIFA, ITF, and FIBA, along with regional tournaments such as the Asian games and Africa Cup, might follow suit.

- Conduct an audit of all countries in the Olympic family to identify those who ban or restrict women from participation in individual or/and team sports for reasons of race, religion or gender;
- Suspend participation from the Olympic Games of countries who do not allow female athletes to compete;
- Suspension is not the only option. The IOC can strip non compliant countries of voting privileges for internal matters such as awarding the hosting of the Olympics, chairing committees, hosting meetings, or hosting tournaments;
- Prohibit countries without an active, developed women's Olympic program from bidding to host the Olympics. The IOC erred when it allowed Doha to proceed with its Olympic bid.
- Adopt and issue a strong policy statement emphasizing the incompatibility of gender discrimination with the Olympic charter;
- Work with its member countries to encourage equal treatment of male and female athletes with regard to financial support, training facilities, and access to international competition.;
- Ensure that countries found to be non compliant with these recommendations make real changes to deal with the issue prior to reinstatement. The IOC must guarantee that these countries do more than just initiate measures that please the international community, yet do nothing for their female population.

ENDNOTES

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7. "Women Athletes in 11th Pan-Arab Games," Arab News, 12/7/07.
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