

London 2012 makes history for women's sport

Olympic women through the ages, from the male-only ancient Olympics to London 2012.

Every Olympic country sent a female athlete to compete for glory in the London 2012 Games. It is a historic first – but gender equality in sport might still be a distant goal.

When the first Olympic Games took place in 1896, there was a notable absence. In the line-up of the most outstanding athletes in the world, no women were present. The possibility of their inclusion in the Games had been deemed, by Olympic founder Pierre de Coubertin, 'impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and incorrect'.

Today, the sporting world is a very different place. This year, Qatar, Brunei and Saudi Arabia sent their first women to the Olympics, making London 2012 the first time all participating countries are represented by female athletes. Thanks to the new addition of women's boxing, it is also the first year that every Olympic sport has been open to girls.

Getting here has not been easy. When the first female **Olympians competed in 1900**, they were only able to compete in such 'ladylike' pursuits as croquet, lawn tennis and golf. As time went on, more sports were opened to women, but obstacles still stood in the way: American ladies, for example, could not swim in the 1912 Olympics because they were required to wear long skirts when playing sport.

Some breakthroughs have been remarkably recent. In Britain, women's boxing was banned until 1996. The reason? Authorities believed that **premenstrual syndrome** made women too unstable to fight.

Now, women actually outnumber men on some 2012 teams, including the USA and Canada. But some girls still face an uphill battle.

Wojdan Shaherkhani was dismayed when judo authorities refused to let her fight in her **hijab**. Eventually, a compromise was reached – and she became Saudi Arabia’s first female Olympian.

This, however, was the last of Shaherkhani’s problems. In Saudi Arabia, physical education for girls is banned, and sport is a men-only domain. When the country entered its female athletes – under intense pressure from Olympic authorities – the girls were subjected to abuse and ridicule from some compatriots.

That might seem disturbing. But the state of global women’s sport is shocking in other ways. Outside the Olympics, just 5% of sports coverage is of women’s competitions – and in the UK, a tiny 0.5% of sponsorship goes to the girls.

Olympic breakthrough?

Some think this exposes a shameful hypocrisy of London 2012. The world will cheer on women's sport for two weeks, then spend the next four years ignoring it. By treating this Olympics as some sort of breakthrough, we risk becoming complacent about the real problems in women's sport.

Of course there is much to be done, others reply. But London 2012 *is* a breakthrough moment. Women's sport has come phenomenally far; if we treat this Olympics with the optimism it deserves, it will only continue to thrive.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is there a crisis in women’s sports?
2. How could the status of women's sports be improved in your country?

ACTIVITIES

1. In groups, discuss what you think can be done to encourage more women and girls to get into sport and exercise. Put together a three point plan for expanding female sport.
2. Write a profile of one of the female athletes of London 2012.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“Women's sport will never match the status of men's.”

What do you think?

Q & A

I’m no Olympian. How does this affect me?

Girls’ participation in sport has been in the spotlight for a while. According to a survey last year, just 12% of 14-year-old girls in the UK are doing the recommended amount of exercise – compared to half of boys.

What's the problem?

Part of it is thought to be down to particular issues in PE lessons – as anyone who has been forced to run around a freezing hockey pitch in the rain probably guessed. But other issues – like the perception of getting sweaty being ‘unfeminine’ – also seem to play a role.

What to do about that?

Moves to tweak the selection of sports that are available in schools to things like dance or yoga can have a positive effect – as can good female role models in sport such as this year's Olympians.

WORD WATCH

Premenstrual syndrome

PMS refers to the moodiness or anxiety that some women experience before their period. The vast majority aren't inhibited by the symptoms in any significant way, but throughout history PMS has been used to cast doubt on women's abilities.

Olympians competed in 1900

The second Olympics took place in Paris in 1900. Women took part in some sports, but because the competition was so badly organised few of them realised they were Olympians – they believed they were taking part in another contest.

Hijab

The hijab is an Islamic headscarf, worn by Muslim women to cover the hair and neck. This year, Judo authorities argued the scarf was unsafe as it could have posed a choking hazard in the wrestling-based sport. Instead, Shaherkhani wore a tight skull-cap to cover her hair.

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