HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SPORT

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ABSTRACT

Controversies surrounding the involvement of women in sports date back to thousands of years i.e. during the time of Hummurabi and Plato there was no evidence of women's participation in organised sport, except in Ancient Sparta, which was one of the Greek City states where women exercised in squares under women trainers. The influence of asceticism and later that of scholasticism coupled with medieval concept of chivalry suppressed the participation of women in sport. It was not until the Renaissance period that women started participating in sport. During the seventeenth century women participated in "the gender " sport. Later the Turnverein movement, which was sponsored by Jahn and the Ling gymnastics movement accepted women into their organizational plans. Many scientific articles were presented claiming that women were biologically inferior to men and should avoid any competitive sporting events. This paper discusses those biological and biochemical differences between men and women.

Key words: Historical perspective, sex difference, sport, women.

INTRODUCTION

Controversies about the involvement of women in sports date back to thousands of years. Although the code of Hummurabi does specify that “all the people shall participate in exercise”, there is little or no reference to any organised sports activities for women until the ancient Greek era. According to Plato in his ideal state, “men and women should have the same sport of gymnastic training”, but this was not the case except in Sparta, which was one of the Greek city-states where women exercised in squares under women trainers. The influence of asceticism and later that of scholasticism coupled with the medieval concept of chivalry suppressed the participation of women in sport. It was not until the advent of the Renaissance that women started to participate in sport, although child bearing and rearing were their major occupation. Throughout the seventeenth century women participated in " the gentler sex" sport such as handball, archery, club ball etc. Later, the Turnverein movement accepted women into their organization plans.

It was not until 1899 at the Conference on Physical Training that the recognition was given to women’s sport in United States. Later in 1917 the
American Physical Education Association through Dr. William Burdick appointed a Committee on Women's Athletics. Before then, there were committees for soccer, track and field, hockey and publicity. By 1932, all these committees were incorporated to form the National Section for Women's Athletics.

One of the main objectives of these committees was avoidance of injuries since it was widely believed that there existed sex differences between men and women and women were considered to be very prone to injuries. Menstrual cycle was of great concern because it was assumed that during menstruation women should avoid emotional or physical strain. Many scientific articles were presented claiming that women were biologically inferior to men and should avoid any competitive sports participation. It was not until 1920's that objective research work on sex differences supported the thesis that some differences may be attributed to sex. However, subsequent studies of human behaviour and functions established that these differences act as guide in organising women sport in that it is the understanding of these differences, which fosters sound and intelligent planning of sports for women.

ANATOMICAL DIFFERENCES

Genetics

The union of two X chromosomes results in female embryo while the union of X and Y-chromosomes leads to male embryo. The double X chromosomes give the female embryo a higher chance of survival. However, if one X chromosome has a defective recessive gene, the other dominant X chromosome has a normal matching gene, which may block the negative effect of the defective gene. On the other hand if there is a defective gene in X chromosome of the male embryo, there is no matching gene since the other one is Y chromosome. This results in miscarriage, abortion or genetic imperfection (Scheinfeld, 1939). This gives XY, a perfect union, which means a superior male.

Skeletal and Biochemical Differences

There are marked skeletal differences between men and women, which begin at birth. The knee joint of women is wider and more stable than that of men of comparable size (Harris, 1972). The bone length of an average adult male is greater than that of a female which seems to have less bone mass. This may partly explain the fact that men have heavier muscles and consequently the pull on the bone is greater resulting to heavier and more massive bone development than women (Edwards, 1947; Bradbury, 1949).

Men have broader shoulders than women while the female's pelvis is relatively shallower and broader than males. In female this, coupled with surplus deposition of adipose tissue on the hip necessitate a greater
inclination of the femur, which result in a greater risk of fractures and a
greater lateral sway in locomotor activities (Harris, 1972).

Cotton (1933) observed that the mean centre of gravity in the female is
about 0.6 percent lower than that of male. This difference is due to male's
greater height, broader shoulder width and narrower hips. The average
male foot, lower leg and arm are longer than the female's. The chest girth of
the female is greater than that of the female of the same height while,
female's abdominal cavity is larger than male's. All these structural
differences give the male athlete an upper hand over the female counterpart
in performing strenuous competitive sports activity.

PHYSIOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

The structural composition of an individual to some extent dictates his or
her functional patterning.

Cardiorespiratory Differences

The high proportion of muscle tissue in males, which demand better
circulation than the contrasting portion of adipose tissue in females, may
have contributed to males' larger heart. Zoethout and Tuttle (1952) have
suggested that the faster hear rate in females may be due to heart size
differential. The average red blood cell count in female is 4,500,00 per cubic
mm compared with males', which is 5, 000, 000 per cubit mm. Ellis (1929)
noted that the specific gravity of male blood is higher than females and the
male blood has about 8% more haemoglobin. The female respiratory rate is
higher than males due to her smaller thoracic cavity. As a result of her
smaller size and lower metabolic rate, the female requires less oxygen and
consequently, her breathing capacity is lower.

GYNAECOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Chances of gynaecological injuries have been a major concern in athletics
for centuries (Wilmore, 1977). In the past, medical conceptions suggested
that females should refrain form strenuous activities such as jumping,
running or activities involving body contact to avoid injuries to the uterus
and other reproduction organs. However, presently it has been recognised
that injuries to the female reproduction organs are rare. Physiologically
unlike males, female reproductive organs are internal and well protected.
The only organ, which are vulnerable are the breasts but serious injuries are
rare. In the pregnant female, there are many structural and functional
changes, which tend to affect the pattern of her activities.

PSYCHOSOCIAL DIFFERENCES

Currently, there is no concrete evidence to support any psychological
differences between male and female. However, where such differences exist
social factors rather than actual sex factors are accountable. Some psychological attributes such as endurance to stressful situation, intuition, vacillation are associated with female while attributes such as positive emotional control, logical thinking, tenacity etc. are associated with males. Scientific evidence does not support such sexual differentiations. Therefore, cultural conditioning rather than sex-linked attributes seem to account for such differences. Contrary to old beliefs that the female is submissive, restricted, protected etc., the modern female is aggressive, competitive and unrestrained.

CONCLUSION

Males have an upper hand in sports where the outcome is largely determined by strength, endurance and power. To ease the results of disproportionate contests, women should compete against women and men against men. This would provide women with equal co-recreational and challenging activities. There are psychosocial gender differences, which are not as pronounced as biological differences. These behavioural differences are in a constant state of change, which is dictated by the dynamism of prevailing socio-cultural environment. However, these changes are difficult to define.

It is imperative to interpret sexual differences in their proper perspective such that biological differences do not have psychosocial interpretation and vice-versa for the psychosocial differences. Depending on physical and psychosocial needs of a particular sport or activity women will undoubtedly continue to participate in sports. It is most probable that known and most likely unknown biological and culturally derived differences will dictate the type of sports and other physical activity programs designed for women.

REFERENCES:


