

Position statements - 4. Gender and sports participation, 1998

FEPSAC Position Statement # 4

Gender and sports participation

The last few decades have shown a rise in levels of participation in new and existing areas of sport. Many sports have been, and still are, 'gender stereotyped'. That is they are commonly held to be more appropriate for one or other gender. One of the consequences of this has been to restrict opportunities for self development for both men and women.

Gender Differences in Sport

Self perceptions, for example perceptions of physical competence, are central psychological resources. In most published works males have shown more positive perceptions of physical competence than females. The amount and type of physical activity undertaken may be important determinants of perceptions of physical competence. Physically active groups typically show more favourable perceptions than sedentary groups. Girls, on average, being less physically active than boys, may show lower levels of physical competence. Furthermore, as self perceptions are strongly linked to motivational behaviour in exercise settings, this may further depress female participation levels. Thus a cyclic relationship develops, in that better perceptions of self and one's abilities lead to enhanced effort, persistence and achievement, which in turn benefits self-perceptions. This suggests that it would be important to discover ways of enhancing the opportunities afforded to girls and women to be more vigorously and more continuously active.

Gender differences in males' and females' sports careers have been shown in some studies. Normally it is found that females have an earlier start, culmination and end to their sports careers compared to male athletes competing in the same events. In general it has been found that male athletes display greater achievement motivation and drive to succeed in sport, as opposed to female athletes who show higher levels of motivation to avoid failure. For female athletes these tendencies are more balanced. In the final stage of their careers sportsmen continue to display high levels of the drive to succeed, whereas sportswomen are more inclined to be preparing their retirement from top level sport. It would also appear that for sportsmen their relationships with teammates are paramount, whereas for females, relationships with their coach are more significant.

Males and Female in Sport - Positive Outcomes

The positive outcomes of sport involvement for both males and females are many. Sport has been shown to be an important avenue for self actualisation and personal development including the provision of career opportunities. It can structure leadership training which develops life skills for young people, and encourages them to strive towards and to achieve, personal goals, and possibly national and international status. The benefits are not confined to elite levels of sport. Many recreational sportspeople also realise social, personal and health-related benefits of sports involvement. A lifelong habit of sport and exercise has long been held to provide physiological and psychological benefits to the individual.

Males and Female in Sport - Possible Issues

Problems occur when 'invisible barriers' to sport prevent individuals from taking part to the full extent of their abilities and wishes. Many sports, particularly those involving bodily contact and great physical exertion, are characterised as being 'masculine' in nature. For many women this means that involvement is problematic and too frequently impossible. The woman who chooses to ignore societal norms, and often male disapproval, can find herself in a difficult position as she seeks to rationalise and justify her involvement. For male involvement such 'invisible barriers' are frequently found in sports and activities which are of an expressive rather than instrumental nature. Thus men who wish to participate in activities such as ballet and ice dancing often have to overcome similar barriers.

A number of studies have indicated that a huge proportion of television time, and newspaper inches, are taken up with reporting men's sport, and with discussing male sports personalities. It has also been shown

that the coverage of female sport differs qualitatively as well as quantitatively from male sport. Male sport tends to be reported factually and constructively, while female sport, and sportswomen themselves, are often reported more in terms of their appearance and sexuality than their sporting prowess.

The professionalisation of sport in many countries, together with the sale of television rights, has meant increased funding for some activities, at the expense of others. In many instances, (for example, athletics, and horse riding) these sports have involved both men and women, in the vast majority they have not. It is therefore the case that many elite women's national squads are faced with self funding, both for training and for international representation, whereas their male counterparts are not. In many sports this funding differential applies to competition prize money also. Again, this is a subtle message that devalues the currency of women's sport and thus the psychological well-being of the female athlete.

An involvement with sport does not only concern participation, it concerns coaching, administration and sport science support. Studies have shown that at elite level there are fewer female than male coaches. This is not necessarily the case at lower levels of involvement, but it appears to be a pyramid effect. The higher one goes, the fewer women are involved even in women's squads. This is unfortunate as it means not only fewer opportunities for women coaches to achieve at elite levels, it means that elite female athletes can rarely choose whether they wish to be coached by a woman or a man. Again a subtle message about the competence of males and females is issued.

Recommendations

1. Organisations should work towards making all sporting opportunities available to all individuals regardless of gender. This statement is not to be taken to mean that all sporting contexts should be mixed. All providers of sport and recreation facilities should recognise that there may be occasions when men and women may need to participate in single sex groupings.
2. All involved with the provision and promotion of sport opportunities should recognise there may be psychological barriers and work towards overcoming them.
3. All involved with media presentation of sport should work towards the production of positive images of sportswomen and men.
4. Resource allocation in sport should show evidence of gender equity.
5. Opportunities for employment and professional development in coaching, management and sports science should be equally available to all individuals regardless of gender.
6. Organisation should work towards the aim of all individuals having the right to choose to be coached or advised by someone of their own gender. This is intended to include the provision of sport psychology consultancy facilities.
7. It should be recognised that the needs of male and female sports participants may be different in some respect and similar in others.
8. Providers of sport should recognise that participation is influenced by the range of activities available, and that they should make every effort to promote activities which meet the needs of both men and women.
9. Research is held to be fundamental, and should not be 'gender blind'. It should take into consideration the needs and aspirations of girls and boys, men and women.