

# From Zero Participation in Athens 1896 To Fifty-Fifty Participation in Tokyo 2020: Gender Equality Through Olympics

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## Abstract

Globally women have endured a massive struggle against gender discrimination in all walks of life. Modern Olympics the biggest spectacle of gender equality also has a history full of instances of severe gender discrimination. Throughout the Ancient Olympics (776BC - 394AD) and even in the first edition of modern Olympics (1896) women were made to stay out of the games on the pretext of being weak and unfit for the games. Only after the protests from many quarters women were granted a nominal presence in the 1900 Paris Olympics. Until the 1928 Olympics women were denied participation in the games like Athletics which were considered too strenuous for women.

Taking it as a humiliation to womanhood, Alice Milliat of France founded the Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale (FSFI) in 1921 to oversee international women's athletic competition. Those games became so popular parallel to the Olympics that the IOC and IAAF felt threatened by the popularity of those games. Finally, from 1928 onward IOC permitted women in Athletics in the Olympics and IAAF started negotiations to absorb FSFI into it. In the years to come, the number of women kept growing in the Olympics. From the 2012 London games onward IOC also made it mandatory for all participating Nations to send women also for the games. Female participation in London 2012 was 44.2% which rose to 45.6% at the 2016 Rio Games and in the Tokyo 2020 female participants grew nearly 50 percent at par with men. To promote gender diversity Tokyo 2020 also hosted 18 mixed-gender events. Respecting women's power, the IOC is committed to continuing this pro-women trend. In a true sense, Sport empowers women and contributes to global gender equality as an investment in girls and sport has a significant role in raising the standards of overall human life.

**Keywords:** Zero Participation, Gender and Gender Stereotype.

### Introduction

Gender inequality is an age-old deeply rooted menace in all societies across the world which still continues to haunt humanity. Though in many parts of the world specially in Europe and America societies and governments have become sensitive and liberal towards the issues of gender equality but in many parts of the world, especially in third world countries of Asia and Africa gender inequality still remains to be an issue which is least talked about.

Gender inequality is discrimination on the basis of sex or gender causing one sex or gender to be routinely privileged or prioritized over another and most of the time male is the most privileged or prioritised gender in all parts of the world.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and that right is violated by gender based discrimination. Gender disparity starts in childhood and is right now limiting the lifelong potential of children around the world – disproportionately affecting girls.<sup>1</sup>

Due to prevalent gender discrimination in the societies across the world the status of health, nutrition, education and desires for economic, religious, social and emotional liberties of the female population stays compromised. Most of the time they are left at the mercy of the male dominant patriarchal social setup.



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**Gender and Gender Stereotype**

Gender is not simply a matter of having a specific type of biological and physical characteristics; it's an inclusive term which refers to the socially constructed social and cultural attributes and norms associated with being male or female known as gender identities.

Besides biological attributes there are socially and culturally constructed gender specific attributes, norms, values and responsibilities which men and women are expected to remain devoted and adhered to. Over time these socially imposed norms become the gender specific code of conduct and most of the time these code of conduct helps the societies to tighten its grip over the women's privileges and liberties.

A gender stereotype is a predetermined set of attitudes and behaviors that is believed to be typical of all men or women. Gender stereotypes are one-sided and exaggerated images of men and women which are deployed repeatedly in everyday life. Society expects males and females to adopt, believe in, and fulfill specific gender roles and stereotypes that have been established.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as the sex of a newly born child is known the stereotypes treatment with child starts according to its gender. They are dressed in either blue or pink, given gifts of trucks and guns or dolls, and referred to as strong or delicate. The new kids have to encounter these gender stereotypes throughout their lifetime. Traditionally, females have been expected to wear dresses, cook and clean, raise children, maintain a beautiful and delicate body, and remain passive, moral and pure. Women have been stereotyped as being feminine and attributes like being attractive, physically delicate, kind hearted, quiet and obedient, well behaved, emotional, submissive, nurturing are considered symbols of femininity.<sup>3</sup> On other hand males are expected to demonstrate certain characteristics and behaviours that are "masculine", they are expected to be strong, independent, born leaders, decisive, and athletic.

Society demands compliance to the enforced gender order and violations of these gender norms are considered a threat and challenge to the social gender order especially in many third world countries and India too is not an exception.

Since ages women have been the subject of many types of gender discriminations in the social systems across the world. Violators of traditional and prevailing social gender norms are ridiculed and discouraged, in the worst case they are seen with great hate and scorn and even honour killings take place in some cases.

While "traditional" gender stereotypes have remained fairly constant over the past few centuries, they have also been challenged and confronted by many women and feminists.

**Gender Inequality A Global Phenomena**

Gender inequality has been a matter of serious global concern for a long long time. In most of the parts of the world women are denied the liberties, privileges and authorities which are enjoyed by the males. Even developed countries also have a dark history of gender inequalities.

Despite being half of the world population women are not represented adequately neither in the governance system nor at places of work.

It's bizarre that even in the US, the strongest country of the world, women were kept deprived of voting rights for more than a century after they got independence in 1783. There is evidence that when women have the right to vote, spending on child welfare and public health increases. For example, in the year 1920 in the US, within one year of women getting the right to vote, public health spending increased by 35% leading to decrease in childhood diseases and childhood mortality going down by 8-15%.<sup>4</sup>

Gender inequality is not confined to the boundaries of homes only. At work places, jobs, institutions or in salaries, education, judiciary, politics and sports also discrimination with women is very evident.

In this age also there are many places and societies in the world where women cannot own land or inherit money, have no legal protection from domestic abuse, are prohibited from taking a job if their husband opposes and can't own a business or apply for a passport without the consent of a male guardian, they are forced to follow a strict dress code imposed by the self proclaimed male religious custodians<sup>5</sup>. At such places life is like hell for women.

**Why World Need Gender Equality**

Isn't it unfair to deny the due respect, rights and authority to the 50% population of this planet which it truly deserves.

The statement of Kofi Annan, the former UN general secretary, "There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women," is enough to tell the necessity of women empowerment. How can almost 50% of the world population be denied their basic rights? Why their talent and capacities should go unutilized for the welfare of themselves, their families and communities. Forced inequalities between men and women harm development and prosperity of the nation.<sup>6</sup>

All pro-people bodies must do something seriously to bridge the gender gap to make this world a better place to live for all.

Everyone benefits from gender equality. Gender equality helps prevent violence against women and girls and makes our communities safer and healthier. It is a human right and it is good for the economy.

Unequal societies are less cohesive. They have higher rates of anti-social behaviour and violence. Countries with greater gender equality are more connected. Their people are healthier and have better wellbeing.<sup>7</sup>

**Sports as a Tool to Promote Gender Equality**

"Sport has a crucial role to play in the efforts of the United Nations to improve the lives of people around the world. Sport builds bridges between individuals and across communities, providing a fertile ground for sowing the seeds of development and peace," said by Wilfried Lemke, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace (2008) indicates the potential of sports for igniting peace and development for humanity.

Sport has the power to change lives. The ability to drive gender equality by teaching women and girls teamwork, self-reliance, resilience and confidence. Sports open many new dimensions for women, it helps women to defy gender stereotypes and social norms, helps women to become inspiring role models and show men and women as equals.

Sports have the power and attraction to pull and bring the world together for a common cause and in the present world nothing can be bigger or stronger than sports. Sports seems to be a strong and valuable medium to bring about many social and cultural reforms across the world as sports has an universal presence followed and practiced by countless people world over. 'Sports' is a great school of human values in itself, it can provide the solutions for many prevailing social issues, gender inequalities is one of them.<sup>8</sup>

Today sports seems to be a perfect solution for the issue of gender inequalities but in sports also things were not like this. History of sports also is full of many dark chapters of racism and gender inequalities. At one point of time restriction on women's participation in Olympics used to be considered as a legitimized phenomenon.

**Gender Inequality In Olympics**

The sport is as old as the human itself on this planet and it has been an integral part of all cultures across the globe and it is one of the oldest forms of human social interaction.

Ancient Olympic Games (776BC - 394AD) can be considered as the benchmark for earliest documented organized form of multi-sports competition in the history of mankind. The Olympic Games are the modern world's biggest sports show. Sports is always known for its unique potential to bring all together for a common cause and participating in sports and games helps in nurturing the human values and virtues like sportsman spirit, leadership quality, respect for the authority, team spirit, physical and mental tolerance capacity etc.

Ancient Olympic too have a history of gender discrimination and gender inequalities. In the Ancient Olympics the main theme was separation of genders. Only male athletes were allowed to participate in the Olympics. Women were not allowed to participate in the games, they were not allowed to enter the stadium also. Greeks were so concerned to not let women participate or witness the games that athletes used to participate naked in the games to ascertain only male participation in the games.

Women were extremely discouraged to participate in sports and extreme laws were in effect to stop women from attending the Olympics. If a female participant was caught in the Olympic stadium, the city of Elis stated that they were to be thrown into the river from Mount Tylaion.

This law, while harsh and possibly lethal, was never recorded as being enforced and in fact there is a story of women who have violated the Olympic games law and social norm. Kallipateira, from a noble family disguised herself as a trainer to watch her son fight and win the Olympic prize for boxing during the award ceremony, Kallipatria rushed out to greet her son and congratulate him. Due to her status she went unpunished but because of her actions at every Olympics after trainers also had to enter naked (to prove their gender). Not every woman was barred from Olympics though, as maidens were allowed to attend in order to facilitate these women in finding a male as a husband or lover. No women were allowed to participate in the sporting events of the Olympics.<sup>9</sup>

### **Separate Game For Women**

Greeks being the sports loving civilization, later realized the need to have sports culture for females also. Later they instituted separate games for females. The Heraean Games, the first recorded competition for women in the Olympic Stadium, were held as early as the 6th century BC after the beginning of Olympic games.

The Heraea was an ancient Greek festival held to honor the Greek mythological goddess Hera in which young girls competed in a series of athletic events. Just like the Olympic games, the Heraean Games were held once every four years at Olympia.<sup>10</sup>

In the late 4th century Greece was overpowered by the barbaric Romans. They demolished everything created by Greeks. Theodosius the Roman king abolished the Olympics and since then the Olympics stayed lost in oblivion for about one and half millennium.

### **Revival of Olympics**

After staying in oblivion for more than a millennium with the Renaissance, Europe began a long fascination with ancient Greek culture, and in the 18th and 19th centuries some nations staged informal sporting and folkloric festivals bearing the name "Olympic Games."

Impressed by the principles of ancient Olympics, in 1892 a young French baron, Pierre de Coubertin, proposed reviving the Olympics as a major international competition that would occur every four years. Finally on April 6, 1896, the Olympic Games, a long-lost tradition of ancient Greece, were reborn in Athens. Since then Olympic games have been held at a regular interval of every 4 years.

### **Zero Women Participation in First Modern Olympic**

First Olympic in 1896 held without any female participants as de Coubertin felt that their inclusion would be "impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and incorrect." Writing in the Olympic Review in 1912: Coubertin defined the Games as "the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism, with internationalism as a base, loyalty as a means, art for its setting, and female applause as reward". According to the sport historian Mary Leigh, he believed that "a woman's glory rightfully came through the number and quality of children she produced, and that as far as sports were concerned, her greatest accomplishment was to encourage her sons to excel rather than to Games, seeking records for herself. With such strong feelings on the part of Coubertin, it is not surprising that women were excluded from the first modern-era Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1896.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century and during the beginning of the twentieth century, industrialization and the impact of social reform through the women's movement changed the passive role of women to an active one.

**Struggle of Women to be a Part of Olympics**

Journey of women participation in the Olympics has been full of struggle. Considering women's exclusion from the maiden Olympics a humiliation to womanhood, women had to run their global struggle their way into the Olympics. In 1900 women were finally allowed to compete in tennis and golf and soon afterwards in archery, gymnastics, skating and swimming. These developments occurred as a result of pressure put on the IOC by national sporting bodies and federations and not because of any positive action by the IOC.

Until 1928 women were forced to stay out of Athletics in the Olympics on the pretext of being unfit and vulnerable.

Taking the exclusion of women from track and field in the Olympic as a humiliation to the womanhood, Alice Milliat of France founded the Fédération Feminine Sportive de France (FFSF) and Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale (FSFI) in 1917 and 1921 respectively to oversee national and international women's athletic competition.

In 1922, in Paris, to counter the irrational decision of the IOC to delegitimize women participation from Olympic, the FSFI organised the first Ladies' Olympic Games in 1922 in Paris, parallel to Olympic Games. These games were conducted every four years until 1934, and in which the number of participating countries and athletic events rose as high as 19 and 15 respectively in London 1934 games .

Success and international acceptance of Ladies' Olympic Games and FSFI started threatening the international domination of the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) as the 1924 Women's International and British Games were attended by 25,000 spectators.<sup>12</sup>

Threatened by the popularity of these games IAAF started its efforts to collaborate with FSFI, in fact IAAF proposed to absorb FSFI and agreed to allow women compete in the Athletics in the IX Olympiad in Amsterdam in 1928. But the negotiations for absorption of FSFI into IAAF continued for 14 years. It was a huge struggle of FSFI to counter the powerful male dominated IAAF which was pre decidedly against the participation of women in the Olympics. It is the result of struggle and efforts carried out through centuries that today women are sharing equal amounts of opportunities and glory in the field of sports. But still issues and challenges remain to be addressed regarding gender equalities.

Apart from athletics in other games also which were considered only men's business, women made their debut in the Olympics at different times. Today in high power and high endurance games like hockey, football, weightlifting, judo, taekwondo, karate, wrestling, boxing, rugby and sports climbing also women are proving their credentials. It is a big boost in breaking gender stereotypes and it's a big leap towards women empowerment across the world.

**Women in Olympics**

Women participated for the first time at the 1900 Paris Games in only lawn tennis and golf. Only 22 women out of a total of 997 athletes competed in the Paris Games.

Female participation has increased steadily since then, with women accounting for more than 45 percent of the participants at the 2016 Games in Rio, compared with 23 per cent at the Games in 1984 and just over 13 per cent at the 1964 Games in Tokyo. But in the journey towards gender equality in Olympics there have been some interesting milestones and turning points like Women swimming in Olympics started in 1912, but from America there was no participant as in America female athletes were not allowed to compete in events without long skirts.

Qatar, Brunei and Saudi Arabia all sent female participants for the first time in their history under the pressure of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to the London 2012 Olympic Games. Now every national Olympic committee will have to send women to the Olympic Games. With the addition of women's boxing at the 2012 London Games, there are men and women competing in all Olympic sports.<sup>13</sup> However, there are still two sporting disciplines that are solely for women: synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics.

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics has been the most gender-equal games in terms of participants with numbers of male and female participants being almost fifty-fifty.

According to the International Olympic Committee, the numbers of female athletes at London 2012 were 44.2% which rose to 45.6% at the 2016 Rio Games. In the Tokyo 2020 of about 11000 plus athletes the number of female participants was nearly 50 percent. From the point of view of promoting gender diversity Tokyo 2020 hosted 18 mixed-gender events in archery, athletics, badminton, equestrian, judo, sailing, shooting, swimming, table tennis, tennis and triathlon. The Tokyo 2020 games can be termed as the most gender diverse and gender balanced games in the history of the Olympics.<sup>14</sup>

### **India's Women Power in Recent Olympics**

In 2016 Rio Olympics India's two medals were won by women. P.V. Sindhu won silver in Badminton and Sakshi Malik won bronze in Wrestling. The 'only women' victories lifted a nation's spirit, it gave India a reason to celebrate, creating a sense of national pride. In Tokyo 2020, India's out of 7 medals 3 were won by women. India's girls nearly missed the bronze of hockey. Imagine what India, a nation of more than 1 billion people, can do with sustained investment in sport? And what India's women could do if they received an equal amount of that attention and investment?

### **Objective of the Study**

From zero participation for women in Athens 1896 to fifty-fifty participation in Tokyo 2020, has been a fascinating and enduring story of women's struggle and perseverance. It is one of the most welcoming things which could have happened for the good of humanity in the present world. It is not only an ultimate insignia to restore the democratic values and a gesture of respect for women power but it is also a big leap to make this world a better place to live for everyone. Better and bigger opportunities for women mean more peace, health and prosperity for societies across the world.

### **Conclusion**

Girls who have attended the schools and got a chance to engage in sports are likely to have better health and they also have better employment prospects with higher wages. Enhanced exposure of women to education, sports and labor force ensures better economic growth of the nation with improved success prospects in Olympics. It also enhances society's perception about women which can be a potential catalyst in bringing positive changes in framing policies for women.

Prolonged regular exposure of girls in sports nurtures leadership qualities like resilience and discipline, teamwork, persistence, celebrating victories, surviving losses and recovering from downs in them. Encouraging more and more women in sports is not only good for women and for the economy but it is also useful for the overall development of the country. It will also help in nurturing human values in societies across the world. The IOC's commitment to ensure the presence of more and more women in the Olympics will definitely improve the prospects of human values in the world. The whole of mankind will be its beneficiary.

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