

Gender equality in sport for improved public health



In the 2016 *Lancet* Series on physical activity,¹⁻⁴ published to coincide with the 2016 Rio Olympics, authors consider developments in our understanding of relations between physical activity and human health since the 2012 Olympic Games in London. One notable event for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in this quadrennium was the adoption of their Olympic Agenda 2020, which reaffirms the IOC commitment to work with International Sports Federations and National Olympic Committees, as well as the UN, to increase the participation of girls and women in sport. The goal is for 50% of Olympic participants to be women by 2020.⁵

After a slow start from 1900 to 1972, when the proportion of female participants increased from 2.2% to 14.6%, there has been good progress towards this target. By the 2012 London Summer Olympics and the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, 44.2% and 40.3% of participants were women, respectively (figure),⁵ indicating relative participation rates of men and women of 1.26:1 and 1.48:1.

In light of the data on physical activity presented in this Series, the gender gap is not surprising. As reported by James Sallis and colleagues,³ men are more active than women in 137 of the 146 countries for which data are available. Moreover, WHO global estimates show that the prevalence of physical inactivity is 35% higher in women than men.⁶ But these data are based on time spent in the domains of occupational and transport activity, as well as in leisure pursuits (including sports). Hence it is not surprising that in nine mostly low-middle-income countries, such as Indonesia, where women still have high rates of occupational activity, they are slightly more active than men.⁶ However, data on leisure time activity from 34 low-income and middle-income countries show that the mean time spent in leisure activities is almost twice as high in men (25.3 min per day) as it is in women (13.7 min per day).⁶

One way to increase leisure time physical activity in these countries could be to improve participation of girls and women in sport, by ensuring equal access to opportunities for their involvement with sport. Increasing female participation in sport is important, not only because of the health benefits of sports participation, but also because involvement in sport

enhances mental wellbeing and social interaction, and can contribute to economic development in different geographical, cultural, and political contexts. The UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace recognises that mass participation in sport is a powerful strategy, not only for health promotion and disease prevention, but also for education, peace building, trauma relief, and economic development.⁷

Gender differences in activity are not, however, confined to low-income and middle-income countries. Some of the highest levels of physical inactivity among women, and the greatest gender differences, occur in Middle Eastern countries. In line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality, and empowering all women and girls to achieve equal access to opportunities in all walks of life,⁸ the IOC has been lobbying Middle Eastern countries to allow women to participate in the Olympic Games. As a result, the IOC moved towards its equal participation target at the 2012 London Summer Olympics, which was the first to have all participating teams include women.⁹ Brunei, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia had women in their teams for the first time in 2012, and Muslim women from many countries were allowed to participate, wearing clothes that complied with their religious principles. It will be interesting to see whether this change encourages greater participation by women and girls at the grassroots level in these countries.

Even in high-income countries, such as Australia, the UK, and the USA, where there are fewer cultural barriers to women's participation, data show surprisingly high relative differences in the inactivity rates of women

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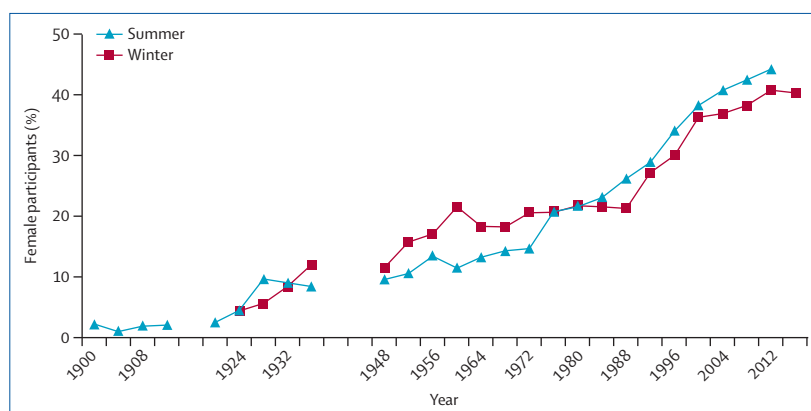


Figure: Women's participation in the Summer (1900–2012) and Winter (1924–2014) Olympic Games
 Data are from International Olympic Committee.⁵

and men (UK, 1·31; Australia 1·37; USA 1·55).⁶ In England a nationwide campaign, This Girl Can, which aims to address the gender gap by “getting women and girls moving, regardless of shape, size and ability” was launched in 2015 and is already showing signs of success.¹⁰ National mass media campaigns like this, as well as initiatives by the IOC and the UN, which aim to support gender equality and greater sports participation by women, may play a part in achieving the WHO’s goal of a 10% reduction in the prevalence of physical inactivity across the world by 2025.¹¹

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