



SPORT AND WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Dr. Chidanand Prabhuling

**Sports Trainer , Central University of Karnataka ,
Kadaganchi Gulbarga ,Karnataka , India.**

ABSTRACT:

Sports and physical activities are ideal fields to study gender construction. Much research aims at shedding light on these processes. Women involved in 'male' sports have been extensively studied, and mixed-sex activities have sometimes been used to support these studies, but research has rarely focused on populations of disabled athletes. Yet, the phenomenon of gender construction takes on a particular meaning in the context of disability, insofar as the relations between sports, gender and disability raise the issues of production and negotiation of bodily norms in a specific way. We will try to understand this gender construction phenomenon through the study of ten French powerchair football players, with whom we conducted a participant observation over two and a half years, as well as in-depth interviews. We will pay particular attention to the case of three sportswomen who competed in an almost exclusively male championship. We will see that these women are confronted with a dilemma: going against the stereotype of the asexual Paralympian female athlete while performing masculinity to gain legitimacy in a men's world. These sportswomen thus 'play the game' of masculinity through a set of discursive, behavioral and clothing strategies in order to find a place in powerchair football, while still preserving some of their 'femininity.'

KEY WORDS: Women, sport , gender , disabilities.

INTRODUCTION:

Participation of disabled women and girls in physical education and sport has increased in recent years but nevertheless remains lower than participation by non-disabled women and girls. Limited access to resources and activities leads in many countries to significant health disparities between women and girls with disabilities and those without. A recent study in the United States indicates



that 93 per cent of women with physical disabilities report engaging in no physical activity, compared with 43 per cent of women without disabilities.

The study also reported that the prevalence of chronic health conditions such as arthritis, diabetes and high blood pressure was 3 to 4 times higher in people with disabilities. Recreational sport not only has a positive effect on disabled women's and girls' overall physical activity, but also contributes positively to their empowerment. Participation of women and girls with disabilities in sport not only challenges gender stereotypes but can also challenge prejudices about disabilities and impairments.

The low level of participation by disabled women is in part a reflection of the double discrimination that disabled women face, both as disabled persons and as women. Greater physical and communication barriers are faced by disabled women, such as the lack of access to appropriate facilities and technological aides, including sporting wheelchairs, prostheses, special materials for blind women such as tandems, ringing balls and sign language interpretation. The lack of equipment and accessible training facilities can be linked to negative attitudes towards women and girls with disabilities. In order to reduce the marginalization of disabled women and girls, their specific needs, for example for accessible infrastructure and suitable sporting equipment, should be taken into account in local, national and international sport programmes and initiatives.

Practical interventions must ensure that locations, facilities and equipment are accessible to women and girls with all types of disabilities, that is, by ensuring that those who use wheelchairs can access buildings, locker rooms, bathrooms, and activity or meeting areas; that those who are deaf or hearingimpaired can have access to sign language interpreters; that those who are blind or have low vision have tactile access and visual activities or images described to them; and that women and girls with learning disabilities can access safe, adapted sport environments. Guthrie and Castelnuovo (2001) observe that “in order to produce the greatest good for the greatest number, more opportunities for women with disabilities in both sport and exercise must be made available, and those that do exist must be made more accessible and accommodating”.

The lack of research and data on women with disabilities in sport hinders efforts to develop programmes and initiatives which take into account their needs and priorities. It is, for example, difficult to assess the global situation of women and girls with disabilities in sport at recreational and competitive levels. The empowering effect of sport on women and girls with disabilities should be further investigated. Increasing research and data collection must be given priority.

Externally funded sport projects for disabled persons in developing countries do not always reach disabled women and girls. There is seldom sufficient attention to gender perspectives in projects and, as a result, disabled men and boys benefit to a greater extent than women and girls. Sport development programmes in developing countries should incorporate specific attention to gender perspectives and disability in order to ensure that they reach disabled women and girls

In terms of participation of disabled women in international competitions, 47 per cent of the nations competing in the 1996 Paralympic Games brought no women athletes, compared to 13 per cent of nations that brought no women athletes to the Olympic Games. In 2004, a record 31 per cent of participants in the Summer Paralympic Games in Athens were women, but this was still below the 40 per cent participation of women in the 2004 Olympic Games.

The Women in Sport Committee of the International Paralympic Committee provides advice and consultation on issues of gender equality in Paralympic sport. The role of the Committee is to: advocate for the full inclusion of women and girls at all levels of Paralympic sport; identify barriers that restrict participation; make policy recommendations to address these barriers; and oversee the implementation of initiatives.

CONCLUSION:

In recent years mainstream governing bodies of sport have begun to consider issues related to disability sport, often stimulated by Sport England funding. However, the response has been varied. While some national governing bodies of sport have embraced disabled people's needs within their existing national and regional structures, others have allied themselves to new disability, sport-specific governing bodies, and others have encouraged the traditional generic disability sports organisations to retain responsibility. The pattern of response reflects the varying levels of expertise, confidence and commitment within mainstream governing bodies of sport. The current emphasis within Sport England on mainstreaming is problematic.

The rationale for mainstreaming, that is providing access to services typically provided by, and generally only available to, able-bodied people, seems to be (a) that resources controlled by mainstream

sports organisations are greater, and (b) that able-bodied sport is the norm to which disabled athletes should aspire. With regard to the latter, it seems that the policy and practice of sport for disabled people are primarily concerned with the extent to which we can or should, integrate groups or individuals who are considered as outside of the main body of society, into the mainstream. In most cases the discussions of mainstreaming are based on an implicit assumption that integration is necessarily desirable. This perspective is logical in so far as it is mainstream non-disabled society that has constructed definitions and public perceptions of disability. However, if integration is about equality, it can be argued that integration can only be achieved by deconstructing what is considered as 'normal'. That is, rather than categorising people into normal and abnormal groups, and then seeking to integrate the disabled or abnormal in with the non-disabled or normal, perceptions of what is 'normal' may need to change.

REFERENCES:

1. Berger, P, Luckmann, T (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books. Google Scholar
2. Bourdieu, P (2001) *Masculine Domination*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Google Scholar
3. Connell, RW (2000) *The Men and the Boys*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Google Scholar
4. De Beauvoir, S (1949) *Le deuxième sexe*. Paris: Gallimard. Google Scholar