Gender Parity, False Starts, and Promising Practices in the Paralympic Movement

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Although women have been a part of the Paralympic Movement since its inauguration, they remain underrepresented in almost all aspects of parasport. Noting these gender-based discrepancies, the International Paralympic Committee and several National Paralympic Committees have made commitments to address the issue of gender balance across the movement. Guided theoretically by feminist and disability sport scholarship, this article explores the various initiatives and strategies implemented by the International Paralympic Committee and National Paralympic Committees to address the issue of gender parity. Through 29 qualitative interviews with Paralympic athletes, organizers, academics, and journalists, our study illustrates that initiatives and strategies implemented by these organizations have affected women differently based on a range of social, cultural, and political factors.

Women have been a part of the Paralympic Movement since the first games for people with disabilities (PWD) were held at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in the United Kingdom in 1948 (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). However, there are growing concerns that women’s progress within the Paralympic Movement has stalled, with women athletes making up just over 40% of all participants at the most recent Summer Paralympic Games in Tokyo, Japan (IPC, 2021). Women’s participation rates from the PyeongChang Winter Paralympic Games fared even worse, accounting for only 23% of all competitors. Notably, of the 49 countries represented at the Winter Games, 19 (38%) of the delegations did not send any women athletes and only four of 49 countries included at least 10 women (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2018). In addition to an imbalance of men and women in competitive roles, women are also underrepresented within leadership roles in the Paralympic Movement and face ongoing social and cultural barriers, including difficulties gaining entry to a traditional, male-dominated domain, navigating expectations of childbearing and childrearing, and working in areas of the world where women’s lives are less valued and minimized through an array of intersecting arrangements of power and privilege (Itoh et al., 2017).

In 2003, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) acknowledged this gender gap and established a 30% threshold goal for gender parity in its leadership structures. Yet, to date, only four of 14 (28%) IPC Governing Board members are women and only 29 (16%) of 173 listed National Paralympic Committees’ (NPC) presidents are women. Despite not meeting the 30% threshold that was created almost over two decades ago, the IPC (2019), in its most recent strategic plan, made further commitments to “promote gender balance in leadership positions across the Paralympic Movement” (p. 11). Moreover, commitments toward inclusivity, diversity, and social change appeared in all five priority areas of the most recent strategic plan, illustrating that addressing gender-based discrimination, at least on paper, is at the forefront of the IPC’s political agenda.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to explore the various strategies that have been implemented by both the IPC and NPCs to create more opportunities for women and to interrogate the implications of these initiatives on women’s involvement within the Paralympic Movement. Building on the work of feminist and disability sport scholars (and feminist disability scholars), we offer up this space to think about what strategies could be implemented moving forward in order to generate more equal and equitable opportunities for women in the Paralympic Movement.

Disability and Parasport for Women With Disabilities

It is estimated that more than one billion people in the world experience some form of disability (World Health Organization, 2011). However, the prevalence of disability among girls and women remains higher than in boys and men. One reason for this discrepancy, according to Gill et al. (2013), could be the fact that women, on average, live longer than men and are more likely to experience age-related disabilities. Yet, as the most recent United Nations Women’s Report (2018) reminds us, this population of...
girls and women is not homogenous but, rather, comprises multiple and intersecting identities and backgrounds. This nexus between gender and disability has led scholars to suggest that women with disabilities face a “double discrimination” (Slocum et al., 2018). In fact, research illustrates that women with disabilities are at a higher risk for gender-based violence, physical and sexual abuse, and exploitation, have higher rates of illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment, and collectively have poorer health compared with able-bodied women and men with disabilities (Clark & Mesch, 2018).

Research also shows that over 90% of girls and women with disabilities are not active in sport or physical activity and are less likely to be encouraged to participate in sport (Brittain, 2009). These numbers are striking considering that sport and physical activity can not only improve the physical and mental health of PWD but can also offer the potential for “positive subjectivity, a changed self-understanding, and increased sense of personal empowerment” (Huang & Brittain, 2006, p. 372). In this regard, sport for PWD can be viewed as a potential driver for positive change on both a personal and institutional level (Fitzgerald, 2018). Yet the pathway for getting involved in parasport is not necessarily a straightforward process for women and is often influenced and shaped by several larger social, cultural, and political factors.

The work of Hargreaves (2000) and DePauw and Gavron (2005) reminds us that women with disabilities have been marginalised and given limited access to sporting opportunities when compared with men with disabilities. Barriers to sport participation for women with disabilities include, but are not limited to, issues surrounding attitudes, communication, language, culture, (sporting) environment, religion, and social beliefs (see Clark & Mesch, 2018; Fuller, 2018; Smith & Wynn, 2014). Moreover, research has illustrated that women with disabilities face several structural barriers, including lack of access to proper equipment, facilities, and trained practitioners, and face ongoing challenges regarding funding and accommodations in comparison with men with disabilities (Clark & Mesch, 2018). Relatedly, research has shown that PWD’s geographical location influenced their opportunities to get involved with parasport (French & Hainsworth, 2001). This is not inconsequential given that a sizable number of women with disabilities live in regions that have been termed part of the “developing world” (Kim, 2013). Considering the development context, Britain (2019) has illustrated that PWD within developing nations are likely to be even more restricted and given fewer opportunities to get involved with sport than those living in more developed nations where there are more resources. In fact, Britain’s study found that the higher the inequality-adjusted human development index ranking of a nation, the more likely the team was to be larger and win more medals at the Paralympic Games. Notably, Britain demonstrated that larger teams were also more likely to have more women on the team and were more likely to win medals because of these athletes. This work illustrates that the development of a nation does matter when it comes to creating opportunities for women at a national level and is indicative of women’s success both internationally and within the broader Paralympic Movement.

Scholars such as Slocum et al. (2018) have illustrated how women with disabilities must continually contend with prevalent societal attitudes and beliefs that equate athleticism and athletic performances as masculine attributes that require particular embodiments and physiques to compete and be accepted within sporting cultures. These hegemonic masculine ideals (Connell, 1995) about what an athlete should look like, act like, and perform like, in turn, can affect how women with disabilities come to understanding their own athletic identity by virtue of their gender and physical impairment. In addition, work from Slocum et al. (2018) and Wickman (2007) has illustrated how gender, alongside the type of and severity of one’s impairment, can impact one’s opportunities within parasport and heighten issues of internalized ableism and the ways in which athletes understand themselves and the world.

Theoretical Framings and Methodology

Given our interest in exploring the intersections between gender, disability, and parasport, we drew on prior empirical and theoretical studies by scholars of sport, particularly feminist sport studies, to explore how imposing social, cultural, and political forces impact women’s experiences and participation within sport (see DePauw, 1997; Hargreaves, 2000). We also engaged with a body of research frequently termed critical disability studies (CDS). For us, CDS is work that seeks to describe and track the sociopolitical constructions of disability (and other social markers) and attempts to expose the impacts of those constructions upon the lives of PWD (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2016). As Goodley (2016) noted, CDS “demands intersectionality” and attentiveness to the ways in which intersecting factors influence people’s experiences within society. Therefore, we drew upon the analytical framework of intersectionality and the work of feminist and critical race scholar Crenshaw (1990). As Crenshaw (1990) detailed, intersectionality highlights the “multidimensionality” of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences and draws attention to the ways in which one’s subjectivity is constituted and mutually shaped by intersecting social vectors, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. Guided by our CDS framework and its attentiveness to the ways in which social vectors intersect and influence one’s everyday experience, we used the analytical framework of intersectionality to help guide and underscore both our methodological approach and theoretical application throughout this piece.

Although CDS remains a broad, interdisciplinary field, an element that unites much of the scholarship labeled as CDS is a commitment to research that exposes how ableism shapes the experiences of disability and engages in activism or advocacy that promotes affirmative ways of understanding disability and more just social arrangements (DePauw et al., 2012). Ableism, according to Wolbring (2012), can be described as “prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors toward persons with a disability . . . [and hinges on] one’s understanding of normal ability and the rights and benefits afforded to persons deemed [to be] ‘normal’” (p. 78). Ableist ideas can manifest in many ways and can be produced at both a structural and personal level. As a result of these discriminatory policies, attitudes, and behaviors, PWD are often devalued and given limited opportunities to fully engage with and within society and cultural spaces, such as sport. Unfortunately, as Campbell (2008) illustrated, many PWD internalize these stereotypes and negative beliefs about themselves, which, in turn, not only affects their mental and physical health but can also lead to even further marginalization within society through a process known as internalized ableism.

In drawing upon the lived experiences of PWD, CDS scholars and activists use personal experiences to transform the social, political, and cultural circumstances that oppress individuals (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2016). These commitments to intersectionality, lived experiences, and an activist orientation are also cornerstones of feminist scholarship, and some have deftly woven feminist theories with CDS to provide nuanced analyses that account for how intersecting factors influence and shape people’s lives, decisions, and opportunities (see Campbell, 2009; Garland-
Thompson, 2002). As Garland-Thompson (2002) wrote, “disability—like gender—is a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment” (p. 4). Through these words, we can consider how ideologies circulating around notions of disability, gender, and ableism are (re)produced within societies and cultural spaces, such as sport. It is by building on previous studies of women in sport, disability sport, and feminist disability studies that we aim to illustrate and expose the many ways women with disabilities have been undervalued and discriminated against within disability sport and offer information that can be used to better inform sporting strategies moving forward.

Methods

We employed document analysis and qualitative interviews to help answer the project’s overarching research questions: How have women been included/excluded from the Paralympic Movement? And what strategies can contribute to greater gender parity within the Paralympic Movement? Document analysis can be understood as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27) and can engage both print and digital materials. Our process entailed examining publicly available official documents and statements from the IPC and NPCs and involved collecting raw data on Paralympic Games’ participation rates, medal counts, representative nations, and various strategic plans. Using this data, the research team was able to outline and make sense of women’s involvements within the Paralympic Movement up until the most recent 2020 Paralympic Games and identify several trends, initiatives, strategies, and developments to be further explored through qualitative interviews. As Smith and Sparkes (2016) detailed, interviews can invite participants to “tell stories, accounts, reports and/or descriptions about their perspectives, insights, experiences, feelings, emotions and/or behaviors in relation to the research question(s)” (p. 103). Through interviews, we were able to further explore whether and how intersecting social factors affected women’s involvement within parasport and how IPC- and NPC-based initiatives impacted women’s involvement within the Paralympic Movement.

Following institutional ethical approval from the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board, the research team began recruiting participants based on information collected through our document analysis. Potential participants were identified because of their current or past role(s) within the Paralympic Movement, and emphasis was placed on recruiting women who had participated in the movement at key moments—being the “first” women in a particular field, members of committees tasked with promoting women’s participation, or outspoken advocates for women in parasport. Using purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011), the research team identified potential participants and reached out to these individuals via email or private messages on social media.

It should be noted that one of the results of the document analysis was the decision to focus our attention moving forward on “gender balance” and “gender parity” by which we mean the number of women compared with the number of men in similar contexts (men athletes and women athletes, men’s and women’s events, and the number of men and women on governing boards). This decision was not taken lightly in that we are very aware of the political work that is done in reducing gender to a binary of men/women. More progressive approaches to advancing gender equity and gender diversity in sport would certainly point to the limitations of this approach and how it obscures the experiences of those whose identities are not so easily captured within binary categories of gender. We agree. When first undertaking this work, it was our hope, as well, to be able to interrogate more broadly how gender is constructed, understood, and enacted within the Paralympic Movement. We had many discussions as a team about the value of “counting the women.” However, as the research progressed, it became clear to us that although the IPC and other stakeholders made aspirational statements about commitments to diversity, inclusion, and social justice in high-level strategy documents, the documents that spoke of specific initiatives and strategies referenced much more limited concepts, such as gender balance and gender parity, and reported on items such as increasing the medals available to women at the Games. Thus, aligned with our aim of understanding how women have been and are currently positioned within the Paralympic Movement and evaluating existing strategies and initiatives, we focused our analysis on gender balance and gender parity while at the same time remaining attentive to any signs that the Paralympic Movement is or could be advancing to more transformative understandings of gender and gender equity.

Participants

Twenty-nine participants were interviewed. The interviews took place between the fall of 2017 and the summer of 2019. The interviews ranged from 20 to 160 min in duration with an average of just over 60 min. All interviews were conducted over computer-mediated technologies, including Skype, FaceTime, and Zoom, and were audio recorded. Out of the 29 participants, 26 identified as women and three identified as men. Six of these participants were recruited through referrals, whereas 23 were identified and recruited through our document analysis (identified because they were the “first” woman in a particular context, had been a key member of a committee tasked with promoting women in parasport, or had been outspoken advocates for women). The participants, collectively, represented 10 different parasports and had held various positions locally, nationally, and internationally within the Paralympic Movement. Fifteen different nations were represented, and all five “regions” recognized by the IPC—Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania—were included. We organized the participants’ roles into three separate categories, including organizers, athletes, and academics and journalists.

Organizers were individuals who represented the IPC, an NPC, or were either board or committee members who were in some capacity decision makers within the Paralympic Movement, including coaches. Athletes were made up of both current and past para athletes (with several participants holding dual roles as both athletes and organizers), whereas academics and journalists included researchers and journalists who have written or continue to write about women in the Paralympic Movement. Similar to the participants of our study, the members of our research team also came to this project with differing degrees of involvement in and experiences of (para) sport that undoubtedly shaped our understanding of the topic, our methodological decisions, and our analysis. The research team included a senior, a mid-career, and two early-career academics all with sustained involvement in research pertaining to disability, sport, and gender. Two team members had long-term engagement with the Paralympic Movement in multiple roles that included athlete, volunteer, coach, and organizer, and two had experience working in sport journalism. One author identified as experiencing disability and two identified as women. All identified as White and resided in North America. In addition to the data collected, these
experiences and our own positionalities were discussed in team meetings and influenced the ways in which we interpreted and understood the data.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, then analyzed through a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2019) conducted in NVivo12 software (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia) to facilitate the sharing of codes, annotations, and notes for developing themes between team members. Although thematic analysis has been described as a method used for “identifying patterns (‘themes’) in a data set, and for describing and interpreting the meaning and importance of those [themes]” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 191), RTA, according to Braun and Clarke (2019), requires greater reflexivity from the individual(s) analyzing the data. As recent work from Trainor and Bundon (2020) detailed, RTA is “not about working through a series of steps” (p. 2) but is, rather, an iterative process that requires attentiveness to one’s own philosophical and theoretical underpinnings. In practice, this meant that we were guided by our positioning within CDS, critical feminist literature, underlying theories and key concepts, and a critical constructionism approach. This approach is consistent with CDS and critical feminist work as critical constructionism is also underpinned by a focus on the intersections of power relations, individual experiences, the construction of knowledge through discourse, and social action (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Taken together, this meant that the research team used RTA to not only further develop themes within the data set that answered the research questions but also, at the same time, used the theories and concepts of intersectionality, ableism, and internalized ableism as well as previous critical feminist and disability sport literature to draw attention to, guide, and underpin our theoretical analysis of women’s involvement within the Paralympic Movement. Through these theorizations and the application of these ideas, we were able to further illuminate issues of inequality and inequity faced by women with disabilities within parasport and were able to explore how disability was perceived to intersect with other identities and shaped by larger social, cultural, and political forces.

In what follows, we highlight the themes that were developed across our data set and use material from our document analysis alongside excerpts from interviews to articulate our findings. The findings are broken down into two predominant categories to illuminate how the issue of gender parity has been addressed within the Paralympic Movement. Section one highlights initiatives and strategies implemented by the IPC, and the second section outlines various initiatives and strategies taken by several NPCs.

Findings

IPC Initiatives and Strategies

In 2003, the IPC General Assembly activated the Women in Sport Committee to address the sparse number of women athletes and women in leadership roles within the Paralympic Movement. In their inaugural year, the committee adopted a policy on gender parity that stated that “all entities belonging to the Paralympic Movement shall immediately establish a goal to have at least 30 percent of all offices in their decision-making structures be held by women by 2009” (IPC, 2020, para. 4). This goal was not met in 2009 and remains unfulfilled almost two decades later. Despite not reaching this threshold, the IPC’s Women in Sport Committee has noted that it continues to “advocate for the full inclusion of women at all levels of parasport, to identify barriers that restrict participation, to recommend policies and initiatives that address these barriers, and oversee the implementation of initiatives to increase participation” (2010, p. 4). These aims from the committee have manifested in a few different capacities, including the creation of the IPC Women in Sport Leadership Toolkit (2010) and the Women in Sport Committee Strategy 2019–2022, which outlines strategies to be implemented at various levels of parasport.

The IPC has also worked with partnership organizations, such as the Agitos Foundation, to develop different initiatives to address the issue of equality between women’s and men’s participation within the Paralympic Movement. One such initiative was the WoMentoring program that operated from 2014 to 2016. The impetus of this program was to help achieve the aforementioned 30% threshold of women in leadership positions within the Paralympic Movement. In the official announcement of the program, then IPC President Sir Philip Craven noted how the program “aim[ed] to develop stronger female leadership within the Paralympic Movement.” The goal of the project hoped to provide dedicated support to potential women leaders and to get them to reflect upon and undertake activities related to professional development. Women mentors and mentees from several IPC regions took part in this pilot program. However, despite the program’s good intentions, according to a representative from the Agitos Foundation, the program did not transpire in the ways in which they anticipated:

We weren’t so happy with the outcomes. Well, the objectives weren’t super clear, so therefore the outcomes weren’t super clear, and we decided maybe we shouldn’t repeat this until we get [to know] what it is that we want to achieve.

Discussions with both IPC and Agitos Foundation representatives alerted us to other “women events” that also aimed to connect women within the movement. For example, in 2017, the Agitos Foundation hosted the first ever international women’s para ice hockey training camp in South Korea. According to one female athlete who attended, the program was quite successful in connecting women athletes and organizers from differing regions:

I got to go over to South Korea [to] meet women from all over the world and help teach. I met coaches and I think that it was beneficial for them to see what level we could get to, because we are only really exposed to the lower, like grassroots level of women’s sledge hockey. We had on-ice sessions and we had classroom sessions and it was really cool for me to see that there were that many women playing, like I had no idea there were women in Croatia playing sledge hockey, like that was just unreal. So, for me that was such a rewarding experience, getting to meet and hopefully inspire them to like train and work hard and not give up and yeah, it was a really great experience!

Conversations with other attendees affirmed similar experiences and stated that the event was both empowering and a great networking space for women athletes and organizers, illustrating that sport-specific initiatives could be a fruitful avenue to pursue moving forward. The development of sport-specific strategies for women echoed what Slocum et al. (2018) have advocated for in suggesting that instead of focusing on top-level initiatives, greater attention should be placed on creating sport-specific initiatives at various levels of development.

Another strategy initiated by the IPC was to make several program changes to the Summer and Winter Paralympic Games. One such ruling was to increase the number of available athlete
quotas for women in some events. For instance, a few events at the Rio Paralympic Games increased the number of women delegates to exceed 40% participation rates, and in some cases, 50% quotas were implemented within events. Events such as goalball increased women’s participation rates by almost 10%, whereas equestrian increased the number of women to 77%, making it the only paraspport where women currently outnumber men (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2017).

Although some paraspports have gradually increased their quotas for women, the IPC has applied more unique structural changes in other paraspports and events and has implemented what is commonly referred to as “gender-free quotas.” Events that implement gender free quotas either have no restrictions on the number of men and women allowed to compete within an event, such as wheelchair rugby or boccia, or alternatively, have allocated spots for both men and women plus the addition of a gender-free category wherein any athlete of any gender can qualify to compete. For example, Paralympic shooting not only has designated quotas for men and women but also has an additional gender-free category wherein an athlete’s skill, rather than gender, grants them an opportunity to compete at the Paralympic Games. According to one woman within Paralympic shooting, the implementation of gender-free quotas within her event has resulted in more opportunities for women to compete:

... back in the day it used to just be male and female quotas, right? So, there used to be 100 for male, 50 for women, but now because they are getting more women involved, they have actually added a gender free quota. I think at the moment, it’s quite good because the female quotas will all fill up quite quickly, but in saying that, the gender free one’s given them an extra chance, cause even though there [is] more involvement with females in the sport, it doesn’t stop the male athletes coming through either. So, having the gender free [quotas] ... means that anybody can win it.

However, the implementation of a gender-free quota has not had the same effect for women in other paraspports as this strategy does not explicitly protect spots for women. For example, the coed paraspport of wheelchair rugby has a gender-free quota yet has one of the lowest participation rates from women across the Paralympic Movement with women accounting for only 2% of all wheelchair rugby athletes. Some have speculated that the reason for this is that there is a greater number of male quadriplegics in the world and, thus, a larger pool of individuals to draw from (Lee et al., 2014). However, others have argued that one of the reasons for the lack of women within hypermasculinized sporting contexts, such as wheelchair rugby, could be attributed to the fact that from an earlier age, women are often discouraged from participating in “dangerous,” “risky,” or masculinized sporting contexts that may lead to quadriplegia in the first place (Brittain, 2009). These ideas would seem to hold true in the context of wheelchair rugby where the sport has been widely discussed among scholars and represented in media as an “aggressive,” “hypermasculinized” sporting environment wherein hegemonic masculine ideals are (re)produced (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). Given these points, it is also important to consider the ways in which gender ideologies, in addition to athlete quotas, influence women’s involvement within traditionally masculine sporting contexts, like wheelchair rugby.

Alongside these initiatives, the IPC has introduced new events to the Games’ programs in recent years with gender balance being a stipulated criterion for petitioning sports. For instance, two new events were added to the Summer Games for Rio (triathlon and canoe sprint), which each had 50% participation rates from women in their Paralympic debuts and an equal number of medals for men’s and women’s events. The IPC has also added two new events (badminton and taekwondo) to the program for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games with the same 50–50 gender parity built in from the start. The addition of these events to the Paralympic Games illustrates that the IPC is willing to create some added opportunities for women within the Paralympic Movement. Unfortunately, the requirement of gender balance has not been applied to paraspports already on the program as there are still events within the Paralympics that are only available to men (i.e., five-a-side and seven-a-side football). These two events alone comprise 176 spots that are not available for women.

It appears that one simple solution to increase both the absolute number of and relative percentage of women athletes within the Paralympic Movement would be for the IPC to increase the number of events and entries per event for women athletes. Yet, this process is not as straightforward as it may seem. The overall athlete quota is effectively set by the International Olympic Committee through a joint agreement with the IPC (Legg, 2018). Therefore, to increase numbers in one event, you must also decrease numbers elsewhere. Logically, cutting slots for male athletes and relocating those slots for women would be the quickest way to achieve gender balance within the existing limits for total participant numbers. However, this process would also require ensuring that the women’s version of the event is sufficiently developed internationally to ensure this move does not result in a decrease in the standard of competition or the number of nations able to field competitive teams. Therefore, to increase women’s involvement within the Paralympic Movement, there needs to be supported structures, pathways, and funding put in place by the IPC and NPCs to ensure the development of women athletes and leaders from all different regions and nations.

NPC Initiatives and Strategies

Some strategies created by the IPC to address the lack of women within the Paralympic Movement have direct implications for NPCs and have incentivized NPCs to create initiatives of their own to advance gender parity. However, throughout the interviews, it became clear that initiatives created by the IPC have impacted NPCs and women quite differently depending on both the degree of development and establishment of the NPC and the nation that the NPC serves. For example, nations that have consistently sent large delegations to the Games have also tended to be the nations that bring the most women delegates to the Paralympic Games, whereas smaller and less developed NPCs tend to bring fewer women (Brittain, 2019). Conversations with the president of a smaller and relatively new NPC spoke to this point, illustrating that although the issue of gender parity was important to their NPC, at their stage of development, they were more concerned about simply getting any athletes to the Paralympics:

I think mostly because we are just, you know, trying to get up and running and we don’t have a huge population to work with, so for us its more about, you know, getting at least one or two athletes to the Games—that is already a big accomplishment for us.

To be clear, this is not to say that all smaller and less developed NPCs and their constituents have disregarded the issue of gender parity. In fact, in some cases, the opposite could be argued, with some NPC representatives noting that due to the relatively “new status” of their NPC, they had the unique opportunity to get more
women involved within leadership roles from the start. As one, female NPC president stated,

I don’t feel like our female athletes have been excluded from any benefits that the male athletes have gotten and so, if the male athlete got recognition for something, then the female athlete also got it. And I think it has to do mostly with us, the board, promoting and motivating both male and female athletes to have equal benefits in all regards.

In considering this quote, it appears that, in some cases, developing NPCs were not only actively addressing the topic of gender parity within their own national programs by creating opportunities for women in leadership roles (i.e., board members) but were actively creating equal opportunities, funding, and competitions for women athletes. At the same time, however, representatives of newer NPCs voiced that they were not able to capitalize on the incentives offered by the IPC, such as increased quotas for women or new events for women, because they simply did not have the pathways built into their national programs to send full teams in the first place.

In recognizing the developmental discrepancies between NPCs, one strategy that the IPC could implement moving forward, according to Smith and Wrynn (2014), would be to provide added support and training to less developed NPCs on how to generate more opportunities for women within the Paralympic Movement. Although we agree with Smith and Wrynn’s proposed strategy, we would add that this support needs to be very targeted at the specific needs of the individual NPC and the sociopolitical context in which they are operating. Furthermore, these types of strategies should be positioned to simultaneously include efforts to increase opportunities for women within the region and the ongoing development of the NPCs’ activities because strategies solely focused on increasing women’s participation will fail if the region does not also have systems of programs, sport competitions, and athlete pathways for the women to enter. Simply speaking, NPCs may not even be able to apply to granting opportunities offered by the IPC to develop women athletes or women in leadership positions if they do not have the structural support for the ongoing development of women within their own sporting infrastructure.

Throughout our data analysis, it became clear that more established and larger nations often had pockets of funding to both access and create internal programs for advancing opportunities for women in parasport. For example, in 2018, the Federation of Irish Sport created a 2-year initiative titled 20x20 to champion women’s involvement in both able-bodied sport and parasport. The initiative had three main goals: 20% more media coverage of women in sport, 20% more female participation, and 20% more attendance at women’s competitions and events. Although it is still unclear whether these goals were met, according to the 20x20 website, “Since 20x20 launched in 2018 records have been broken, hearts have been reached and action has been inspired” (Federation of Irish Sport, 2020, para. 8). One female Paralympian from Ireland spoke about the early successes of this initiative when it was first rolled out:

... [it’s] a really good initiative because it’s just taking off! This is brilliant! I think three years ago, when we play[ed] our sport in the Irish Wheelchair Association, they had a “girls active” [initiative], or something like that, but it wasn’t very well pushed. Whereas this 20 x 20 thing is whew, it’s out there, its flying and it’s not just able-bodied, its disabled bodied, its everything, you know.

The tagline, “If she can’t see it, she can’t be it,” was used by this initiative to highlight the importance of visibility for women with disabilities competing in sport. Interestingly, the topic of visibility was an underlying strategy for many NPCs. These efforts are aligned with published literature that has illustrated that increased visibility of parasport over the last several decades has led to increased participation from women with disabilities and athletes with high support needs (Darcy & Appleby, 2011). Discussions with organizers and athletes from established NPCs illustrated that many had attempted to make women Paralympians more visible nationally through various techniques. For example, some NPCs were focused on creating more visibility within school systems by inviting women athletes and organizers to give talks about the Paralympic Movement to students. The NPCs with more funding were also able to produce media content that featured women Paralympians for distribution on television and through social media. These different tactics used by NPCs to make women more visible have, according to one journalist, resulted in a “slow” yet “positive shift” within the Paralympic Movement that has drawn attention to the successes of women in parasport while cultivating new interests from girls and women with disabilities. However, as Slocum et al. (2018) noted, although the visibility of women with disabilities should be a top priority within the Paralympic Movement, this visibility should advocate for the inclusion of athletes from all diverse backgrounds, parasports, and different impairment types. This advocacy for the visibility of more diversified bodies within the Paralympic Movement yields the potential to make women of color, different nationalities, ages, parasports, and impairment types more visible. It also offers the opportunity for young girls with disabilities to be exposed to women role models, disability sport, and the Paralympic Movement more generally from an early age and catalyzes their participation (Anderson, 2009).

When asked about strategies that they had observed or contributed to, several participants spoke about efforts to identify potential women athletes. Foremost among these was the pursuit of affiliations with rehabilitation centers and military programs whereby NPCs would send representatives to these centers to inform individuals with acquired injuries about opportunities within parasport. Several organizers from established NPCs noted that they were using rehabilitation centers to recruit more women to parasport, and many of the athlete participants reported that their own initiation into parasport happened at a rehabilitation center. Using rehabilitation centers as sites for athletic recruitment is not “new” within the Paralympic Movement and dates back to the inaugural Stoke Mandeville Games wherein sport was used as a rehabilitation tool for military personal. This form of recruitment, according to Brittain and Green (2012), has acted as a “vehicle” for military personal who have endured life-changing traumas. However, although participants did feel these strategies had potential for increasing women’s participation in the Games, we would note that the spaces they are describing have their own considerations for gender and gender equality. As described by Bundon (2019), the close ties between the Paralympic Movement, military programs, military hospitals, and rehabilitation centers is one of the reasons for the imbalance between men and women as it is largely men who are injured in military combat. Furthermore, one must consider that parasport, within these contexts, has widely been described as a means for injured men to “reclaim” their masculinity and raises questions about how these collaborations might reproduce hegemonic masculinity within the Paralympic Movement and further marginalize and/or deter potential women from getting involved.
Although we highlight a few different initiatives and strategies that were and are being implemented by NPCs to facilitate more opportunities for women with disabilities in the Paralympic Movement, conversations with participants also detailed how social and cultural views and perceptions toward PWD affected or hindered women’s participation in parasport or proved to be a barrier to further action. Specifically, it was stated that women with disabilities, in many different contexts, faced even greater marginalization and negative attitudes toward them than men with disabilities did in the same context, thus creating unique challenges for women to gain access into the Paralympic Movement. As the president of an established African NPC stated,

I will tell you something, maybe because of their disability. Maybe because of when the woman is disabled, or she has any impairment, she feels shy to come out of her house. The family, you know, the family. If they have a girl who has any problem or any disability, they don’t encourage her to become part of the society.

Although we recognize that this illustration only reflects the cultural views of one context, similar ideas were discussed across the sample and were noted by representatives of all five Paralympic regions. This finding confirms what previous research has reported, that women with disabilities face even greater barriers when getting involved within disability sport because of the linkages between gender and disability and socially constructed ideas about these two intersecting social factors (Clark & Mesch, 2018; Fitzgerald, 2018; Fuller, 2018). Huang and Brittain (2006) detailed that because of this double discrimination, oftentimes women with disabilities must cope with feelings of inadequacy and weakness associated with disability while simultaneously dealing with masculine values that subordinate and view them as the weaker gender. These beliefs can lead to what Campbell (2008) described as internalized ableism whereby negative views and beliefs about oneself, one’s disability, and one’s gender can lead to further marginalization within certain social contexts, such as sport. These views, in turn, can result in girls and women with disabilities not actively pursuing sporting opportunities due to these internalized negative beliefs and perceptions about their own bodies and gendered identities (Brittain et al., 2020; Huang & Brittain, 2006).

Conversations with participants also illustrated that in many contexts, women with disabilities not only had to focus on training for their sport but often also had to juggle and navigate several different social roles and expectations that men with disabilities did not necessarily face. For example, many organizers noted how it was difficult to get young women involved in the Paralympic Movement due to prior commitments to school and education, whereas others noted how, because of the lack of funding, many women athletes had to work in addition to their Paralympic training to support themselves and their families. A few women athletes and organizers noted how cultural ideas about motherhood and the expectation of women having to be child bearers hindered many women from getting involved within parasport or forced them to cut their Paralympic careers short. For example, a representative of a larger, African NPC spoke about some of the cultural pressures that women with disabilities faced within their nation:

In general, women remain women, and in her sport career there will come the day when she will think about the future, about getting married, about having children and it’s then that they will break from sport. A female athlete might also be married already and then she can get pregnant and that can upset everything! There are other countries who don’t see women sport, in public or in their stadiums — their religion or their beliefs do not allow for this kind of participation.

McGannon et al.’s (2018) work on able-bodied mothers’ sporting experiences similarly found that many women had to juggle motherhood (and the expectations associated with motherhood) alongside their athletic pursuits. This juggling of different roles, as described by McGannon et al., meant that many women athletes struggled to find balance between their constructed roles and responsibilities as both mothers and as athletes. With regard to our study, and in drawing upon our CDS perspective and the work of Crenshaw (1990) and her idea of intersectionality, it was clear that many women athletes with disabilities had to juggle various roles, identities, and gendered expectations. These findings illustrate that, for many women with disabilities, their involvement within parasport and society more generally remains contingent on and mediated by various cultural perceptions, views, and attitudes toward disability and women.

Conclusion

For some women, the initiatives rolled out from the IPC and NPCs have helped encourage greater involvement within the Paralympic Movement. Although the document analysis illustrated an ongoing commitment by the IPC and other stakeholders to advance gender parity, our RTA of qualitative interviews with those “on the ground” told a story of false starts and objectives not yet achieved. The rhetoric of gender balance is there, but the practice is not. One of the more frequent strategies used by the IPC and partner organizations was to connect women already involved in parasport through mentorship programs and sport-specific women’s camps and tournaments. These initiatives were positively received by those in attendance, and many expressed that they appreciated the opportunity to meet other women also working within or competing in parasport; yet, the lack of a clear path to use these initiatives to advance women’s participation within the broader Paralympic Movement was disheartening. Moreover, it is unclear how these networking and mentoring initiatives are intended to increase the number of women participating in the Paralympic Movement as they target those already involved. Similarly, the introduction of new events with equal opportunities and the instigation of gender-free quotas did increase the number of women competing in some parasports but was less effective in events where the imbalance between men and women athletes was already well entrenched. Finally, when it came to initiatives and strategies at a national level, the overwhelming conclusion was that not all NPCs were equally positioned to act on gender equity or to take advantage of the IPC’s initiatives to promote gender balance. Although most interviewees spoke of the importance of the “visibility” of women athletes, they understood that this strategy would only be successful in recruiting new women with disabilities to sport if their “inspiration” were matched with pathways into sport and to the Games — this was particularly a challenge for those NPCs that had fewer resources and a shorter history of participation in the Paralympics. Many smaller and newer NPCs struggled to commit the resources to developing opportunities specifically for women with disabilities when they were still trying to establish any sort of sustainability for disability sport programming.

Researching from a critical feminist perspective and guided by the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Karen DePauw, and Jennifer Hargreaves, we were mindful to not homogenize all
women’s experiences as one and universal but, instead, attempted to draw attention to the various social, cultural, and political barriers that prevent women with disabilities from fully engaging in elite-level parasport and the Paralympic Movement. As outlined earlier, for the Paralympic Movement to address the issue of gender balance, these entities must tailor their strategies to account for and address how larger intersecting social, cultural, and political factors may influence girls’ and women’s participation within a particular context (i.e., a particular nation or geographic region) or particular parasport (i.e., women’s event or coed event). For feminist and disability scholars, this is not a new consideration. For example, in her discussions of disability within a global context, Erevelles (2011) illustrated that concentrating just on disability fails to acknowledge the relationships between disability and capitalism, gender, race, sexuality, socioeconomics, and so forth. In the context of this work, acknowledging the intersectionality of disability means considering that not only will some initiatives not work in some contexts (work in the sense that they will not achieve the desired outcome of increasing opportunities for women) but also that some strategies applied from the IPC and NPC, without careful attention to broader sociocultural context, may reproduce and further entrench existing inequities, such as sexism and (internalized) ableism. Furthermore, we must also address what some might call the inherent flaw of attempting to use sport, and specifically parasport, to advance issues of equity and more socially just societies. Although the Paralympic Movement has long claimed to be a catalyst for change and committed to advancing social inclusion, many have pointed out the contradiction of using sport, based on ableist notions of athleticism, to do disability advocacy (Wedgewood, 2014). As Braye (2019) stated, although sport may be empowering for some individuals, the road to empowerment requires one to distance oneself from a devalued disabled identity to claim a valued athletic identity. Indeed, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that the potential of disability sport to advance progressive and affirmative understandings of disability, as called for by disability advocates and CDS scholars, is limited by ideological assumptions that enable sport participation for the most able of the disabled while continuing to oppress others (Howe, 2019).

In closing, we would like to return to our earlier statements about our intent to explore how ideologies around notions of disability and gender are (re)produced in the context of disability sport. As stated in our description of the theoretical framing, our work was informed by critical and feminist disability scholarship that “demands intersectionality” and seeks to draw attention to the ways that “subjects are multiply interpellated” (Garland-Thompson, 2016, p. 362) through intersecting categories of gender, ability, race, class, and more. We reported that we were disappointed to find that aspirational statements about contributing to more “inclusive societies” were reduced in practice to “gender parity” in subsequent documents and, thus, limited the types of actions that were considered to those aimed at increasing the number of women to match the number of men in like contexts. This narrow framing of gender reproduced the gender binary in sport and led to the foreclosure of more progressive and radical understandings of what gender-equitable disability sport might look like. It also reinforced a binary between disability and ability and reaffirmed a very ableist sport structure. This ableist sporting structure, as we argued, not only further perpetuated ableist ideas but also worked in ways to further marginalize women with disabilities within the Paralympic Movement. An attentive reader would note that early in the article, we discussed how women with disabilities face “double discrimination” and the need to create more opportunities for these individuals specifically. However, in the findings, the conversation typically centered around two types of initiatives—those intended to recruit and support women athletes with disabilities and those intended to recruit and support women in leadership roles. The result was that programs intended to address the gender imbalance in leadership roles were conceived of and discussed as a separate issue from increasing the number of PWD in decision-making circles of the Paralympic Movement. In this way, actions to reach gender parity simultaneously reinforced the notion that disability sport is for people with disabilities but organized and delivered by people without disabilities (Howe, 2008). For the Paralympic Movement to deliver on the vision of a more “inclusive world through para sport” (IPC, 2019, p. 5), it will require committing to actions that do not reduce individuals to singular categories of identity but that seek to create opportunities that are inclusive of multiple and intersecting identities.

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Notes

1. The inequality-adjusted human development index, as Britain (2019) explained, is a ranking index system, developed by the United Nations, that takes into account a country’s health, education, and income and accounts for how these achievements are distributed among its population. Using a formula, countries are then placed into one of four categories of development: very high (lowest inequality), high, medium, and low (highest inequality). It is meant to capture the development and levels of inequality present within a nation at a given time.

2. The Agitos Foundation is the official development arm of the IPC. The Agitos Foundation aims to deliver programs to support the IPC’s vision “to make for an inclusive world through sport.” To help support the IPC and this goal, the Agitos Foundation delivers programs based on four priorities: pathways, awareness, representation, and ambassadors (Agitos Foundation, 2021).

References


