

# “It Looks Good on Paper, But It Was Never Meant to Be Real”: Mixed-Gender Events in the Paralympic Movement

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Although the Paralympic Games have been around for over 60 years, women remain underrepresented in almost all aspects of the Paralympic Movement. It has been suggested that a way to increase women’s involvement is through the implementation of mixed-gender events. On paper, this approach makes sense. However, when it comes to the implementation of mixed-gender opportunities for women, it is less clear how effective these events are in increasing participation by women in Para sport. Through document analysis and interviews with athletes and organizers of mixed-gender Paralympic sport, we explore the various strategies that four mixed-gender sports have used to address the issue of gender parity. Using critical feminist theories, we illustrate how larger social, political, and cultural ideas about gender influence women’s experiences within these events and discuss the potential of using mixed-gender initiatives to address gender parity within the Paralympic Movement.

**Keywords:** Para sport, disability, gender parity, IPC

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For instance, women accounted for 42% of all athlete delegates at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Summer Games and comprised a mere 24% of all competitors at the recent Beijing 2022 Paralympic Winter Games. Issues regarding gender (im)balance are rife within the Paralympic Movement<sup>1</sup> more broadly, where women account for only 20% of National Paralympic Committee (NPC) presidential roles and have limited representation on many key committees and boards (Houghton et al., 2022). To address the imbalance, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) established a 30% goal for women within its leadership structures in 2003 and increased this to 50% at the 2017 General Assembly. The IPC, however, took back their commitment in 2021 stating this target was a “non-mandatory preference” and that “skills and experience” should be the primary criteria for consideration when forming committees. This action from the IPC was labeled a concerning development by the American organization, Women’s Sport Foundation, given that prior research has demonstrated women are more likely than men to be viewed as inexperienced outsiders to sport (i.e., lacking in skill and experience) and nonmandatory minimums limit women’s ability to rise through sport organization structures (Pape 2020; Houghton et al., 2022).

The IPC’s strategies for increasing the number of women athletes have been critiqued for being vaguely defined and without clear targets and timelines (Houghton et al., 2022). Foremost among these strategies are the use of “coed,” “sex-integrated,” or what the IPC refers to as “mixed-gender” events in the Paralympic program. In these events, men and women compete with and against each other, and have been touted by the IPC as a means of achieving gender parity.

On one level, the use of mixed-gender events to increase women’s involvement within the Paralympic Movement makes sense. IPC President Andrew Parsons made an announcement on the eve of the 2022 Beijing Winter Games stating that “the number of female Para athletes has grown tremendously, reaching record levels” and that “much work still needs to be done to achieve gender parity but having increased female participation significantly at the Winter Games in the last 20 years, shows we are heading in the right direction.” A fact check of this statement shows that the number of women competing at the Winter Games has increased by 51 athletes from the 2002 Games to the 2022 Games, and during that same time, more nations have come on board and places for male athletes have increased as well. To put it differently, in 2002, women accounted for 21% of athletes at the Games, and over 20 years, this increased to 24%. Hardly tremendous growth! In fact, in their 2022 report, the Women’s Sport Foundation wrote, “at the current rate of increases, [gender] equity would not happen until 2066, assuming little or no increase in the number of male athletes competing” (Houghton et al., 2022, p. 7).

President Parson’s statements make sense if gender balance is interpreted not as the number of women athletes but rather as the number of “medal opportunities” for women athletes at the Games, and it is within this context that mixed-gender sports become relevant. The same press release that included Parson’s statements stated that there were 78 medal events including 39 for men, 35 for women, and four mixed events (Para ice hockey, wheelchair curling, and two mixed relays in Para Nordic skiing). It is by using these numbers, rather than focusing on the 76% of men competitors, or that 15 nations (out of 46) did not send a single female athlete, that the IPC is able to claim they are “heading in the right direction” regarding achieving gender parity. However, as we demonstrate in this paper, not all mixed-gender

events are providing equal opportunities for women and, in some events, may be further entrenching gender imbalances. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore how different mixed-gender sports in the Paralympic Games have contributed, or could contribute, to achieving gender parity within the wider Paralympic Movement.

## Mixed-Gender Events and the Paralympic Movement

Globally, women are more likely to experience a disability than men ([World Health Organization, 2011](#)); however, women with disabilities are unrepresented within sport settings and are less likely to be encouraged by healthcare professionals to pursue sport ([Brittain, 2016](#)). It has also been reported that over 93% of women with disabilities are not involved in sport ([United Nations, 2023](#)). This gap is notable considering that previous research has found that sport and physical activity for people with a disability can offer potential health benefits and can serve as a space where skills are developed and social networks are formed ([Martin, 2013](#)). Yet, simply getting involved in sport and Para sport for women is not necessarily a straightforward process and is laced with many social, cultural, and economic barriers ([Dean et al., 2022](#)). For instance, attitudes toward women's participation in sport, societal expectations regarding childbearing and other family responsibilities, and cultural and religious norms surrounding how women access and occupy public spaces present barriers that that women with disabilities regularly encounter that men with disabilities do not ([Clark & Mesch, 2018](#); [Dean et al., 2022](#); [Smith & Wrynn, 2014](#)).

Although women are more likely than men to experience a disability, the Paralympic Game's program only includes a relatively small number of impairment types, which limit who can and cannot participate in the Games ([Howe, 2008](#)). Even between the impairments eligible for the Games, there are discrepancies in how many sports and events are offered. For instance, athletes with intellectual disabilities can currently compete in three sports within the Games, whereas those with reduced muscle power (due to spinal cord injury) have 22 sports available to them. In addition, the types of impairments included in the Paralympic Games are themselves "gendered" in ways that further constrain women's participation. For example, the Paralympic Games started as a competition between injured World War II veterans in rehabilitation hospitals and has always included many events for those with spinal cord injuries and limb amputations—common impairments among war wounded ([Legg & Steadward, 2011](#)). Even today, spinal cord injuries are more frequent among men than women. Conditions that are more likely to affect women than men (such as multiple sclerosis, arthritis, and rheumatism) are less likely to be included in the "classifiable" impairments that qualify someone to participate in elite Para sport and are more likely to occur later in life with other comorbidities and chronic illnesses that make a sport career less likely ([Dobson & Giovannoni, 2019](#)). This means that even though rates of disability are higher among women compared with men, the types of impairments and sports that are included in the Paralympic Games tend to privilege men's participation and exclude large numbers of women.

Considering the various challenges that women encounter when getting involved in Para sport, the IPC, NPCs, and disability sport organizations have all taken aim at addressing the issue of gender parity. It has been postulated that one

way to create more opportunities for women in both the Olympic and Paralympic Movements is through the offering of mixed-gender sport events. Previous research examining able-bodied sport has illustrated that mixed-gender sports can foster new friendships between men and women and can offer the unique opportunity to learn and compete against each other within a sporting environment (Henry & Comeaux, 1999; Wachs, 2002). Some scholars have illustrated that those involved in mixed-gender events have been able to challenge gender stereotypes regarding ideas of male superiority and female inferiority and found that gender-integrated teams often espoused more open and inclusive gender perceptions (Pavlidis & Connor, 2016; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014). Following similar lines, work from Cohen et al. (2014) examining the relatively new sport of quidditch highlighted that the sport and its participants not only actively promoted gender-inclusive practices but prided itself on being “one of the only true co-ed sports” (p. 220). Quidditch, for instance, has no gender-based rules or modifications which, according to the authors, makes gender a less salient feature within the sport. Their findings illustrated that both men and women had positive sporting experiences which led to an increased desire for inclusivity and equality, reduced stereotypes, increased self-confidence, and pride among women participants. Given the newness of this sport, quidditch does not have the long history nor culture of male dominance that other, more traditional sports have. Therefore, it could be theorized that new sports, with less entrenched (masculine) sporting cultures, may be well positioned to support mixed-gender settings that are equal for both men and women.

Against these claims, however, researchers have also discussed some of the gendered complexities of participation in mixed-gender events. Adams and Barnes (2019) argued that mixed-gender events may just as easily reinforce, rather than challenge ideas about gender difference and gender inequality. In examining able-bodied recreational mixed-gender events, they revealed that mixed-gender events often adopted regulations that inherently treated men and women differently and emphasized gender asymmetries. Some of the modified rules included: allowing additional women athletes on the playing field, having a required or minimum number of women athletes on the playing field at any given time, giving women additional points for scoring, and/or allowing larger roster sizes if the roster included women. Though these rules may have been well intended, Adams and Barnes argued that the implementation of these gender-based rules only further entrenches sexist gender ideologies that frame women as weaker than men. These findings further reiterate what Wood and Garn (2016) found in their study of mixed-gender flag football where they found that gender-based rules often created divisions and role differentiation between men and women. Such rules led some women to feel added pressure to perform given that their actions counted as more, while others dismissed women athletes all-together. Wood and Garn came to argue that these gender-based rulings could be considered what they called “benevolent sexism,” whereby the implementation these rules, though well intended, seemed to have an opposite effect, and instead of promoting ideas of inclusivity between men and women, further reinforced existing gender stereotypes.

The work before us has collectively presented mixed messages about the effectiveness of mixed-gender events in addressing issues related to gender parity and gender inclusion within sport. Though previous research has focused on

able-bodied sport and only examined participants' experiences within recreational, mixed-gender sport, there are reasons to believe that the effectiveness of using mixed-gender events to increase women's participation in the Paralympics is also up for debate and has different considerations across different sports. For example, Para equestrian is a mixed-gender sport and is currently the only sport in the Paralympics where women consistently outnumber men—comprising 77% of all participants at the 2016 Rio Games and 72% at the 2020 Tokyo Games. However, when it comes to other mixed-gender sports, including wheelchair rugby and Para ice hockey—women athletes make up a small fraction of the participants or do not compete at all. For instance, women only accounted for four of 96 competitors in wheelchair rugby at the 2020 Tokyo Games and <1% of all athletes in Para ice hockey at the 2022 Beijing Games.

## Theoretical Perspective

We draw upon both critical feminist theories and the work of feminist sport scholars to theorize our research design and findings. Like those before us—DePauw (1997) and Hargreaves (2000)—we were interested in exploring and exposing how underlying social, cultural, political, and historical factors influence women's experiences and participation within Para sport. Sport often operates as an institution, whereby the binary between sex and gender is reinforced and maintained (Travers, 2008). Earlier work from Rubin (1975) called this process the sex/gender system and described it as a “set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity” (p. 159). In other words, this cultural process involves taking sex (biological reproductive capacity) in its most basic form and transforming this marker into gender (expressions of masculinity or femininity). This classifying process remains rife in today's world—with sport being a prime site where this sex/gender system is maintained and reinforced to a point where “sport without sex difference is almost inconceivable” (Adams & Barnes, 2019, p. 129). One of the most common ways that sex and gender are maintained in sport is through the segregation of athletes based on their sex. According to Adams and Barnes, sex segregation in sport is often maintained in two separate ways: (a) by having separate events for men and women where men and women seldomly compete against each other, and (b) through the gendered understandings that some sports are more appropriate for one sex over the other—commonly known as sport typing (Kane & Snyder, 1989). The process of sport typing can be a dangerous way of thinking that not only relies on deeply entrenched gender ideals about what sports men and women *should* perform within and how one *should* act within certain spaces but also can lead to exclusionary and discriminatory practices that lead potential participants to shun the sport.

Other feminist scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which sport plays a key role in constructing and reproducing hegemonic masculine ideas (Connell, 1990). Guided by the work of Antonio Gramsci, Connell came to conceptualize the term hegemonic masculinity to refer to the “idealized form of masculinity” (p. 83). Hegemonic masculine ideals constitute ideas about what a man should look like and act like and sit atop of the hierarchy of various gender identities. Hegemonic

masculinity, according to Connell, not only helps secure patriarchal power but also relies upon the subordination of women and other men (and masculinities) that do not fit into the rigid typology of an ideal man (i.e., strong, muscular, tough, competitive, and cisgendered). Connell (1995) argues that sport could be considered “the leading definer of masculinity in mass culture” (p. 54), whereby men who are not athletic lose access to key markers of masculinity and are subsequently viewed as less masculine than those who exhibit and display characteristics of the idealized forms of masculinity. In displaying and accruing the right image, personality, attitudes, behaviors, and performances, men and boys often strive for this unattainable form of masculinity and, in the process, subordinate those who do not fit within this idealized image.

## Methods

Several incidents that raised our awareness of the gender imbalance in the Paralympic Movement prompted us to want to explore the topic in more depth. These incidents included watching the Games and seeing statements by the IPC and media stories about the “tremendous growth” of women in Paralympic sport. These claims seemed to contradict our own observations that women were still very much underrepresented in the Paralympic Movement and led us to further explore publicly available data regarding the composition of IPC leadership teams and committee members, and the representation of women in other Paralympic stakeholder positions, including NPCs at the Games (delegation size, gender composition, and number of nations) and more. It was the discrepancy between how the IPC and Paralympic stakeholders were representing women’s “progress” in the Movement and the actual number of women competing at the Games and serving in various leadership and administrative roles that led us to embark on a research project.

To begin, our interest was broad but centered around the aim of understanding what constrains and facilitates the participation of women in the Paralympic Movement. With this focus, we designed a study that would include the analysis of a wide range of documents and also interviews with individuals who participate in the Paralympic Movement. Document analysis has been described as a systematic procedure that involves reviewing, evaluating, analyzing, and interpreting documents both in print and digital form (Bowen, 2009). For us, this process involved summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and engaging with and analyzing official documents and statements from the IPC, NPCs, and related (disability) sport organizations. Consistent with the summative content analysis approach, we started with some keywords drawn from our readings of literature, our early reading of the IPC’s strategic plans, and team discussion and scoured the documents to identify if, where, when, and how these keywords and specific types of content appeared. For example, we looked for any instances where female, women, male, men, or gender appeared in documents related to athlete selection, team composition, or events/program schedule. We also identified and made note of the use of the terms gender balance, gender equity, or gender parity. Equally important to this approach was being attentive to where keywords do not appear. For example, taking note of any documents that used the word “athlete” or

“competitor” exclusively instead of referencing male/female or women/men athletes.

In addition, we collected data on participation rates and medal counts for each Games. By way of document analysis, we were able to identify moments in the history of the Paralympic Games where there were particular policies, events, or initiatives that increased or decreased opportunities for women. At the same time, we were able to identify individuals involved in the Paralympic Movement who were in a position to comment on these initiatives or whose own sport participation had been impacted as a result of these policies and initiatives. We decided to use semistructured interviews (Smith & Sparkes, 2016) to expand upon points of interest identified throughout document analysis and to further explore the lived experiences of women athletes and organizers to provide us with insights that were not available through archival record alone.

Our approach at the start was exploratory, and throughout this process, the research team had regular meetings to discuss what we were reading and hearing all centered around trying to make sense of how gender equity was being conceptualized and operationalized within the Paralympic Movement. It was a team discussion about the strategies being used to address the gender (im)balance specifically *at the Games* compared with those strategies that were more focused on women’s participation *throughout the Movement* (i.e., developing national pathways for women in Para sport, women in coaching, and/or leadership) that the research team made the decision that each of these areas warranted more in-depth consideration.

This manuscript focuses explicitly on “the problem of gender (im)balance at the Paralympic Games” and how mixed-gender sport emerged as a response to that problem. The findings pertaining to the second topic of women’s participation throughout the Movement are published in another manuscript (see Dean et al., 2022). While each manuscript addresses different facets of the project, they are the outputs of the same program of research, draw on the same data sets (documents and interviews), and are underpinned by the same theoretical framing.

## Participants

We started with a list of potential interviewees that largely consisted of members of committees tasked with advancing gender equity initiatives, women leaders in the Paralympic Movement, and women athletes who were the “first” in some way (first women to compete in a sport, first women from their country to win a medal, etc.) and others who had spoken publicly about gender-related issues in the Paralympic Movement. Following institutional ethical approval, the research team began recruiting participants. We employed the use of purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011) and contacted potential participants through email and private messages on social media (Twitter) starting with those whose contact information was publicly available or whose account settings allowed for direct messages and then subsequently asking interviewees to put us in touch with others who could speak to the topics discussed in the interview. From the Fall of 2017 to the Summer 2019, 29 participants were recruited and interviewed. Participants were labeled as either “athletes” or “organizers.” Athletes included current and past Para athletes who competed in the Paralympic Games, while organizers were defined as individuals

who either represented the IPC, an NPC, a sporting organization, or were, in some capacity, decision-makers within the larger Paralympic Movement—this category also included coaches.

## Data Analysis

Interviews ranged between 20 and 160 min and averaged over 60 min. All interviews were conducted over video calls and, with permission, were audio recorded. Recordings were then transcribed verbatim, and the research team engaged in a reflexive thematic analysis of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). According to Braun and Clarke, reflexive thematic analysis is an iterative process where the researchers not only analyze the data and develop themes from the data set but account for the ways in which their own paradigmatic positions shape and influence the data. For us, this consisted of hosting regular team meetings throughout the data analysis process where we would discuss how our own positionalities and experiences influenced the ways in which we were interpreting the data. By way of this process, and using a critical constructionism approach, that was attentive to the intersections of power relations, individual experiences, and the construction of knowledge (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020), we attempted to make sense of our data using critical feminist theories and made efforts to account for and reflect upon the ways in which our own positionalities influenced our own interpretations of the data.

As previously stated, when we initially began data analysis, we took an exploratory approach to the data set making note of anything that could help us answer the question: “What facilitates and constrains women’s participation within the Paralympic Movement?” Over time, we developed an interest in the different ways that the “problem of gender (im)balance” was being defined by various stakeholders and in different contexts (i.e., at the Games vs. within national structures). It was at this point that we started to see mixed-gender sports being proposed as one of the “solutions” to the problem of gender (im)balance at the Paralympic Games. Our interviewees spoke both positively and negatively about the mixed-gender sports and the potential of these sports to create more opportunities for women. With the aim of wanting to better understand both the limitations and potential of mixed-gender sport, we identified four specific “cases” of interest within our broader data set—wheelchair curling, Para ice hockey, Para equestrian, and wheelchair rugby. These four sports were selected to include two winter and two summer sports and because they offered different approaches to how they included women on NPC team rosters. Of the 29 participants interviewed, 13 had either competed or held an organizational role in one of the four mixed-gender Para sports. In total, 10 women and three men took part in the study. Eight were involved in wheelchair rugby, two in Para ice hockey, one in wheelchair curling, and two in Para equestrian. It is the interviews with these 13 participants as well as the results of the summative content analysis of documents pertaining to these four sports that provide the data set for this paper.

Hodge and Sharp (2016) describe a case study as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a *particular* person, group, community, project, policy, program, or system in a bounded



context” (p. 63). A collective case study, on the other hand, can be understood as the process of studying several cases concurrently in efforts to investigate and better understand a particular phenomenon (Stake, 2005). Through the examination of several cases at the same time, it has been argued that researchers are able to gain a better understanding and theorizations of the phenomenon being explored (Hodge & Sharp, 2016). With this context in mind, the results below are broken into four separate cases that reflect the four mixed-gender Para sports examined within the study. Following the presentation of the cases, we then connect our findings with existing literature and use critical feminist theories to theorize and address what is currently being done by mixed-gender Para sports to create opportunities for women within the Paralympic Movement. At the same time, we carve out space in the discussion to address what initiatives and strategies *could* be implemented moving forward to create more opportunities for women within mixed-gender sports and the wider Paralympic Movement.

## Cases

### Wheelchair Rugby

Wheelchair rugby, known colloquially as “murderball,” was developed in Canada in the 1970s. The sport is governed by the International Wheelchair Rugby Federation and combines elements of able-bodied rugby, basketball, and handball. The sport was first trialed at the Atlanta Games in 1996 and made its Paralympic debut at the Sydney 2000 Games. This sport has been offered to men and women since its Paralympic inauguration and remains a mixed-gender event today. Yet, despite broadcasting itself as a mixed-gender event, no woman competed in the Paralympics until the 2008 Games. At those Games, three women competed alongside 85 men. The following Games saw a slight drop, where only two women competed in both the London (2/90) and Rio Games (2/96), while numbers from the Tokyo 2020 Games increased again, with four women competing out of the total possible 96 positions.

Athletes in wheelchair rugby are classed into one of seven categories, depending on their functionality. These classes are given a numerical range from 0.5 to 3.5. Players with “higher functional levels” are classed at the top end of the scale, and the least functional players are classed at the bottom. According to the International Wheelchair Rugby Federation’s Website (2023), to be eligible to compete in wheelchair rugby athletes “must have an impairment which affects the arms and legs.” The IPC rules that those with a spinal cord injury must have impairment in three limbs, while athletes without a spinal cord injury must have an impairment in all four limbs. As a result of these rules, wheelchair rugby is one of the only team sports for what the IPC classifies as “athletes with high support needs.”

Teams are composed of 12 athletes and can have four athletes on the court during play; however, the combined classification value of the athletes on the court may not exceed eight points. This competition-based point system, according to the Canadian Paralympic Committee (2023), was implemented in efforts to ensure that teams “play a mix of athletes with a range in functional levels.” Though the combined classification on the court may not exceed 8 points, 0.5 is deducted from

the assigned “points” for every female athlete. For instance, if a woman is classified as a 1.5, when they are on the court, they would compete as a 1, thus allowing the team to effectively have 8.5 points on the court. This rule, according to many athletes and organizers, has been useful in getting more women involved in the sport, as wheelchair rugby organizer, Ralph stated:

They also play half a point down in terms of classification. So, what we’ve found with that is, we’ve actually had a lot more women coming onto national teams.

According to some, not only has this rule influenced women’s involvement in the sport, but it is now being used strategically by teams to gain an advantage within play, as Liam illustrated:

The big trend in our game right now is being able to find that 0.5 female, that’s going to be a legit player. As far as I am concerned, the difference really [is] going to be, who is going to develop the best female athlete that contributes to the team’s success and is not just a pylon on the floor.

While it is difficult to determine the full implications of this gender-based rule, interviews with women athletes, including Olivia, detailed how their experiences within wheelchair rugby have been overwhelmingly positive and supportive:

Even though at first, I was the “lady” on the team it didn’t take me much time to be a part of the team as a woman and it wasn’t actually that difficult. There were times that I was better than those that were [in] the same class as me and I filled their positions. So, I didn’t feel like I was the woman on the team.

These positive experiences aside, women still only make up a fraction of the athletes involved in wheelchair rugby. One reason for this dearth, according to participants, maybe a direct result of the impairment types that are eligible to compete within the sport, as organizer, Jacob stated:

Statistically people that are eligible for wheelchair rugby are quadriplegic people. They are young, male, age sixteen to twenty-two that get injured doing something stupid—So, from the get-go, we are not starting with a 50-50 overall population type of pool to go with. It’s already biased, just by the nature of the disability.

In addition to these points, a few participants, such as Olivia, argued that one of the reasons why few women participate in wheelchair rugby may be because of its masculinized sporting culture:

Well, it’s a contact sport, so from the get-go I guess females might have been a little reluctant to engage in the sport. Although it has changed quite a bit with time, but male athletes are more inclined to contact sports than their female counterparts.

Considering these points, some organizers, like Avery, discussed the possibility of creating and developing a women-only event, separate from the men:

I think we've already changed the rules to create some equality, but I think the next step for wheelchair rugby is to try segregation. I think there are a lot of women involved right now, but they have to be women that can put up with men.

However, many participants expressed opposing opinions and were of the belief that wheelchair rugby should remain a mixed-gender event, as Sophia outlined:

It gives more females the opportunity to be involved in Para sport, like that's the way it is. Because if you wanted to say, "Okay, you know what, we are going to separate it—women's separate from men." There wouldn't be a women's [team]. Or, if there was going to be a women's wheelchair rugby sport, there would be absolutely no depth.

Rather than creating a separate women-only game, many participants preferred to get more women involved within wheelchair rugby through the creation of mentorship programs, funding opportunities for women, and the creation of more women-only development camps both at a national and international level. To an extent, these camps already exist at an international level. For instance, a women-only tournament has operated out of Paris, France, every second year since 2011, where women wheelchair rugby athletes from around the world are invited to participate, network, and develop their skills within a women-only context. Yet, according to participants, due to the lack of funding, many women are unable to attend. Some organizers, including Avery, noted how the creation of women-only development camps at a national level could be a fruitful way to get more women involved:

On a national level I think that there could be female-targeted player clinics or camps, but some initiatives targeted for female athletes-only. They are the ones that are going to rehab[ilitation centers] and talking to the sixteen-year-old lady that just got out of a car accident and that lady could identify more to a female athlete than she would to [a] two-hundred-and-twenty-pound with massive shoulders, twenty-five-year-old, male and that could be massive in the overall recruitment of female athletes.

The development of these women-only camps at a national level may not only garner the interests of new athletes but, as a result, may create more women ambassadors and role models. Many of those involved in wheelchair rugby also suggested that one practical way to get more girls and women involved within the sport would be to have more women in leadership roles, as Elma stated:

It comes back to awareness and education and having females involved to showcase to other females what can be done. We need women coaches [and] we need more women on the sidelines.

According to this participant and others, having women in leadership roles, such as coaches, board members, staff, and referees, is important for the development of women in wheelchair rugby.

## Para Ice Hockey

Para ice hockey, formerly known as “ice sledge hockey,” was founded in the 1960s in Sweden and made its Paralympic debut at the 1994 Lillehammer Games. The sport is organized by World Para Ice Hockey and falls under the governance of the IPC. To be eligible to compete in this sport, participants must have an impairment in the lower part of their body that would prevent them from competing in “standing” ice hockey. As outlined by the IPC, impairments may include amputated legs, stiffness of the ankle or knee joint, muscle weakness in their legs due to paraplegia, or a leg length difference of at least 7 cm.

Although this event has been cast as a mixed-gender event since its Paralympic debut, to date, only three women have *ever* competed at the Paralympic Games. At the Beijing 2022 Games, seven nations competed and were allowed to field a maximum of 17 eligible athletes—unless they included a woman on the roster. If so, their maximum team size was 18. In total, this meant that there were 126 potential spots for athletes and *at least* seven spots reserved for women. However, the reality was that only one woman (Yu Jing of China) competed in Beijing.

Despite these stark gender discrepancies, efforts are being made to generate more opportunities for women to play the game at the highest level. As outlined above, gender-based rules have been implemented within the sport to allow teams an additional roster spot if that player is a woman. Though this rule may have been implemented with good intentions, those that we spoke with not only viewed this rule as tokenistic but also described it as a hindrance to the development of women players in Para ice hockey. For example, one participant spoke of the implications of this rule for the players on her women’s Para ice hockey team:

For a while there we had our captain and an up-and-coming player. They were both quite good, and quite skilled, and quite young, and we thought “Okay, if they keep going like this, they can really turn some heads,” but then I thought, “Well, only one of them can keep going like this because only one of them is technically allowed to roster as that eighteenth person on the [national] team.” So, if you’re gonna be good, you gotta be the best if you’re female gendered.

Though there is no rule that currently limits the number of women athletes on a team (technically a nation could send 18 women), as demonstrated in the above quote, the “extra spot” for a woman athlete is frequently interpreted in practice as the “only spot” for a woman athlete. Even then, it is rare for teams to make use of the 18th spot. The marketing of this sport as a mixed-gender event, according to Pauline, gives the appearance that this sport is creating opportunities for women but in practice, almost never pans out:

They make it seem like the door is open and that they are there, but then they don’t really follow through. I don’t think it’s a viable option, really. They are listing it as “mixed” why isn’t money going toward the women’s team, or the women’s development? So, I just think it looks good on paper, but it was never meant to be real.

In addition to these challenges, a few participants expressed how negative, sexist, and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors toward women within the sport

had deterred them or could deter other women from get involved in the sport. For example, Eva detailed her negative experiences of trying out for a team:

They hadn't had a woman on the team for four years. Going back, it was awful, honestly. That particular team, their culture took steps backward and to be the only women there—I don't cry at hockey camps, but I cried the first night on Saturday night in my hotel room. I was bawling my eyes out at how awful I felt being there. Like it was rough, it felt like I was invading some boys club type of thing.

Moreover, Pauline expressed how negative experiences and attitudes from organizers such as coaches made it difficult for many women to advance within the sport:

We've had a lot of difficulties with hypermasculinity. We have a coach that's quite intimidating to our females and there's like the "hockey mentality" where you get yelled at. That individual that's coaching in that capacity has trouble understanding why a female might be missing practice, or why she might cry on the ice if she gets yelled at in that capacity, and then; therefore, starts to put different restrictions on them.

Fueled by these negative experiences, many have advocated for the development of the women-only game within Para ice hockey. Yet, according to Pauline, in order for the women-only game to develop, it needs buy-in and support from all levels of Para sport:

It's like a catch twenty-two, cause people don't want to invest in women's sledge hockey until it's a medal sport, but we can't get funding or anything until it's a medal sport, so we're trying to do it all on our own.

The development of the women-only side of Para ice hockey appears to be handcuffed now, as it is not an official IPC-sanctioned event, and as a result, there is no incentive for NPCs to invest in programs to develop girls and women. Despite these woes, discussions with participants detailed that several grassroots development programs for women have begun to emerge in several different nations and have been successful in attracting more women to the sport, as Pauline noted:

We've just started [a women's-only program] this year, and so far, it's been really positive. It was interesting because we had thirteen women come out, and half of the women were brand new—had never tried the sport before—and the other half had said they had tried the sport at some point but didn't like the atmosphere that the sport was done.

Eva made similar comments about her experiences at a women-only development camp:

It was a great experience! It was so cool being in a room with not just men. I remember that being super awesome and you know, [it] was so cool to be playing with women that were close to my age as well . . . so it was really great to be with like actual peers, like women my age that are passionate about

hockey. I remember like after that women's team experience, I started going to tournaments more, like I saw more women in the sport and from different cities and different clubs and I just remember that really ignited things.

In addition to these advances, there have also been a few international events and development programs that have been rolled out to get more women involved in Para ice hockey. In part, these developments were catalyzed by the creation of the "Women's Para Ice Hockey Cup" and development camp through funding from the Agitos Foundation.<sup>2</sup> Through this support, over the course of 4 years, five official events were held in three of the five IPC recognized regions, including the first ever "Woman's Development Camp" held in Chuncheon, South Korea. According to Eva, the event was not only empowering but was a great networking opportunity and chance for more established Para ice hockey nations to help support women from less established Para ice hockey programs:

I got to go over to South Korea and meet women from all over the world and help teach. We were able to demonstrate and teach and give the knowledge that we have gained over the last decade, and it was great. 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 that was just unreal!

Others who attended these women-only events expressed how they were empowering and inspiring and noted how they hoped that similar events would continue moving forward. Many of the same athletes who participated in these events also competed at the inaugural Para ice hockey Women's World Challenge held in the United States in 2022. This event included three national teams (Canada, the United States, and Great Britain), and "Team World" comprised of athletes from many nations.

## Wheelchair Curling

Wheelchair curling was first introduced to the Paralympics at the 2006 Turin Games. This event has been offered to both men and women since its inauguration and remains a mixed-gender event today. The event is currently operated by the World Curling Federation, which works independently from the IPC, but maintains the rule that all teams competing in the Paralympics must be comprised of *both* male and female competitors. Teams are comprised of five eligible athletes; of which, one must be an athlete of the opposite gender. To be eligible to compete within the event, an athlete "must have an impairment affecting their legs" and can include those with a spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, or double-leg amputation. However, it is also recognized that athletes may also have impairment in their arms including impaired muscle power, hypertonia, and ataxia. In addition to meeting this minimum impairment criteria, all athletes must use a wheelchair during competition, even though some may not use a wheelchair in everyday life.

Currently, the sport is practiced in 24 different nations—with 11 represented at the Paralympic Games in Beijing 2022. Numbers from these Games illustrate that of the 55 participants that competed in the event, 37 were men and 18 were women (32.7%). This number was slightly up from the Turin Games (27.5%) and

Vancouver Games (30%) and was slightly below the number of women represented at the Sochi Games (38%) and PyeongChang Games (33%). Yet, despite the event being available to both men and women, there has not been a nation that has ever sent a woman-majority team to the Games.

Though rates of participation for women in wheelchair curling range between 20% and 40% of all competitors, these numbers, when compared with other mixed-gender events, are relatively high. As one former wheelchair curler, now wheelchair curling organizer, Nora noted one of the reasons why more women may compete within this mixed-gender event may be because of the lack of physicality within the sport:

I think that in curling there's not that big of a difference [between gender] because it is not that physical as other sports. I have been on mixed teams in wheelchair basketball and if you have a man and woman who are the same classification, training the same amount and [the] same intensity at the same level, the woman, is at a physical disadvantage and you don't have that in curling.

It was also noted that one of the reasons why participation rates among women may be higher in wheelchair curling is a result of the fact that each team is required to field at least one member of each gender. Furthermore, as Nora detailed, the rules regarding the composition of teams have been in place since the sport was introduced to the Games rather than added retroactively as is the case with some other mixed-gender sports:

Curling is a newer sort of wheelchair sport [that] immediately made "mixed teams" and I think the fact that they went with "mixed teams" right away ensured women's participation.

However, the same participant also questioned the extent this gender-based rule could also prevent women from getting involved and noted that many view this rule as a minimum requirement rather than a maximum opportunity:

With curling, because you [must] have men and women on the team, it forces the country to find those women and men, but usually what happens is that it's easier to find the men for whatever reason, and they just support the men more. Then they have to work hard to get the women. So, it ensures their participation, but on the other hand, that country might just be satisfied with like, "Okay, we've got one team and we've got mostly men, [and] a couple of women and that's it."

Recognizing these gender-based discrepancies, participants addressed a few potential ways that wheelchair curling, the NPC, and the IPC could create more opportunities for women in the sport. One potential strategy would be offering the event separately to both men and women rather than offering it as a single mixed-gender event:

I don't know if they have had a conversation about splitting it to men and women. I can see that as a logical move on the Winter Games program side. I think curling is probably closer from a numbers perspective to being able to

split [because] of the number of countries that have a good number of women playing the sport.

Accordingly, since many women are already involved in the sport, it may be worth thinking about the potential to create separate men's and women's events in wheelchair curling.

Along with this strategy, Nora noted that one way to get more women involved within the sport would be to create a more inviting sporting environment where women are not only welcomed but offered leadership and organizational opportunities within the sport:

If truly [the goal] is to increase women's participation [in wheelchair curling], then I would probably be looking at creating a community environment for young girls and women to get out [and] play with one another. To have appropriate competition, quality coaches, a great environment for them to play in and developing. That, rather than the token one or two [woman athletes] within a more dominate male construct.

It was also interesting to note that while some participants felt that it was time to create separate events for men and women in wheelchair curling, in the able-bodied version of the sport, the trend appears to be going the other way with an increased interest in "mixed doubles" events—with one man and one woman competitor. The event was added to the Olympic program in 2018 and, since its inclusion, has witnessed tremendous growth in the discipline.

## Para Equestrian

Para equestrian made its Paralympic debut at the 1996 Atlanta Games. The sport is managed by the International Federation for Equestrian Sports, which currently operates as the international governing body for all equestrian sport. One notable ruling implemented by the Federation for Equestrian Sports across both the Olympic and Paralympic program is the decree that forbids separate gender events to occur within sport. As outlined by the IPC's Website, the sport is open to both men and women with physical and visual impairments. Women athletes have outnumbered men in every Paralympic Games since its debut—ranging between 68% and 77% of all competitors.

Participants of Para equestrian stated that one of the reasons why many women are involved in the sport could be a result of the fact that a rider's gender does not really matter within competition. As Ima simply put it, "the horse doesn't mind whether you're a man or a woman" (laugh)." Instead, participants noted how focus is drawn toward the rider's ability to control, operate, and instruct the horse that they ride, rendering the gender of the rider irrelevant.

Other participants noted that the equestrian events included on the Paralympic program could have something to do with the large number of women participants. Whereas the Olympics includes three equestrian disciplines: dressage, show jumping, and eventing; Para equestrian events only include dressage. Jonna noted how Para equestrian is equated with dressage, which, according to many, is viewed as more "feminine" than the other events, and as a result, may entice more women to compete within these events based on these gendered beliefs:



I think dressage is perceived as a more “feminine” sport compared with say, show jumping or polo. As much as I’d like to see more male participants in Para dressage, I think because dressage is seen as the “ballet of the equine world,” it has that more feminine appeal compared with other disciplines.

The composition of teams at the Olympics would seem to support Jonna’s statement. Thirty-six percent of the equestrian athletes at the 2020 Olympic Games were women, but this number rose to 60% in the dressage events.

Furthermore, while the topic was not raised by our participants, there is an extensive body of literature on the “feminization” of equestrian sport (Plymoth, 2012). This literature speaks to ways in which the relationship between horse and rider is often framed within narratives of care (caring for each other), and in highly emotional terms, and is an example of the previously discussed “sport typing.” Many stables also offer therapeutic programs designed for those with a variety of impairments (Michalon, 2013), and while data on the number of girls and women who participate in these programs compared with boys and men are not readily available, there is clearly room to further explore how the high rates of participation by women in Para equestrian might relate to feminized constructions of both the sport and disability.

## Discussion

In this study, we explored the strategies being used by four mixed-gender Para sports to address the issue of gender parity within their sport and within the larger Paralympic Movement. Guided by critical feminist theories, our study demonstrated that these Para sports employed a range of tactics to address gender parity each with varying degrees of success and different implications. For instance, the mixed-gender events of wheelchair rugby, wheelchair curling, and Para ice hockey all implemented gender-based rules in efforts to attract more women to their sports. These gender-based rules created hypothetical opportunities for women and allowed the sport governing bodies and the IPC to claim that gender balance had been achieved, even though, in practice, these rules have had little to no effect on women’s participation rates in either wheelchair rugby or Para ice hockey. These gender-based rules were not only tokenistic but particularly hindered women’s development in the two contact sports that are traditionally seen as a male preserve.

If women wanted to compete within the mixed-gender events of wheelchair rugby or Para ice hockey at the Paralympic level, they not only had to be the best in their nation but must handle playing with, and against, men both physically and, perhaps more importantly, socially. In both Para ice hockey and Para equestrian, the gender-based rules pertaining to team size and composition were largely viewed, by those in charge and sometimes by the participants themselves, as minimum requirements rather than maximum opportunities for women. These participants reported that little effort was put into finding or developing women athletes once the minimums were met. In both instances, these findings reiterate what others have reported in able-bodied mixed-gender sport settings, where instead of promoting ideas of inclusivity for women, the implementation of gender-based rules often reinforce sexist gender ideologies that frame women as

weaker and in need of modifications to compete with and against men (Henry & Comeaux, 1999; Vanzella-Yang & Finger, 2021; Wood & Garn, 2016).

Conversely, when it came to Para equestrian (which has no gender-based rules), women riders outnumbered men. It seems plausible to suggest that the lack of gender-based rules is not seen as necessary in this sport because dressage, the only event in the Paralympics, is associated with the esthetic elements of the sport and so seen as consistent with traditional views of femininity. At the same time, however, conversations with participants from Para equestrian also detailed that because so much of the participant's performance is based off the horse's performance, there are no inherent sex-based advantages for either men or women in the sport. In this sense, the horse can be viewed as an "equalizer" that makes gender a less salient feature within the sport (Dashper, 2012; de Haan et al., 2016; Plymoth, 2012). These findings echo what Cohen et al. (2014) found in their examination of quidditch, where they illustrated that, due to the lack of gender-based rules within the sport, women were not only accepted into the sporting culture but were given equal opportunities to compete within the sport. Based on our findings, it appears that mixed-gender Para sports with no gender-based rules or requirements, and less entrenched masculine sporting cultures, offered the most fluid and accepting entrance for women when compared with mixed-gender Para sports that have gender-based rules in place.

When it came to discussions about what was needed to provide more opportunities for women in the three sports where they had limited representation, there were conflicting views as to whether the sports should stay mixed gender, pursue segregated opportunities for women, or some combination of both. Participants of wheelchair curling explained that due to the already relatively high rate of participation among women in the sport, the creation of separate men's and women's events may not be that difficult to achieve and could be an opportunity for more women to get involved. Doing so could create more teams and, thus more competition for both men and women and even lead to events where men's and women's teams compete against each other.

Those that we spoke with from Para ice hockey voiced similar ideas and were advocates for the creation of a separate women-only game within the sport. However, as the participants disclosed, to develop a women-only game, more support and recognition are needed from *all* levels of Para sport including grassroots organizations, NPCs, and the IPC. Moving forward, our recommendation is that it would be beneficial for these entities and WPIH (World Para Ice Hockey) to have conversations about the ways in which they could foster and support the development and growth of the women's side of Para ice hockey—including by ensuring that women had chances to build their skills and gain competitive experience while also playing with men. We suggest that measures to ensure that women have real opportunities to compete in the mixed-gender event while simultaneously building the women's teams is necessary. This could entail initiatives to ensure that all stakeholders understand that the "additional" roster spot for a woman does not preclude women from being named to the other 17 roster spots. Our participants also spoke to the extreme pressure and loneliness that came from being the only women on the team (and sometimes the first women teammate the men had ever had) and even sometimes competition between women athletes to secure the only spot (they perceived) to be open to them. A strategy to address this

would be to divide both the men and women across the teams so that each team has a few women athletes. This would create more playing opportunities for women, ensure that no woman is the only woman on a team, and ensure that more men competing alongside and against women.

The idea of creating a separate women-only game within wheelchair rugby seemed to be the next logical move, with participants arguing that the creation of a women-only game would not only ensure women's participation in the sport but would also offer an opportunity to get more women involved within the larger Paralympic Movement. Accordingly, participants expressed that the creation of a separate women-only game would provide the opportunity for girls and women who do not feel comfortable competing within a hypermasculinized sporting culture comprised primarily of men (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). We should acknowledge that since we first started this research, there have been some strides made in this direction. The previously mentioned women-only tournament in Paris has grown, and the most recent event in 2023 saw several countries sending teams or smaller contingents of athletes to play on the "international" team for the first time. Moreover, the development of a women-only side within wheelchair rugby would also yield the opportunity to get more women athletes with high support needs involved within the larger Paralympic Movement, as currently, wheelchair rugby is one of the only team events on the Paralympic program that offers opportunities for athletes with high support needs. This point is notable considering that the IPC and scholars alike have placed greater emphasis on getting both more women *and* athletes with high support needs involved in the larger Paralympic Movement (International Paralympic Committee, 2019; Slocum et al., 2018). Therefore, the creation of a separate women-only event in wheelchair rugby could be a fruitful opportunity to address the issue of gender parity within the larger Paralympic Movement and get more women with high support needs involved.

The desire to create separate events for men and women in wheelchair rugby was not held by all those that we spoke to. Arguments from both athletes and organizers in the sport voiced that while the intent to create a women-only game may be good, they believed that there would not be a big enough pool of women to draw upon due to impairment types eligible to compete in the sport. This point has some merit to it, in that men are more likely to experience a spinal cord injury than women (Lee et al., 2014), and the smaller pool of eligible women could result in a limited number of players or teams and limit the opportunities for true competition. Yet this sport is not exclusive to those with a spinal cord injury and is available to those who have cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, amputations, polio, or other neurological conditions with full or partial paralysis of the legs or arms and greater investment in recruiting across the spectrum of eligible impairments could in part address the gap. There is some evidence that the strategy currently employed within wheelchair rugby to create meaningful opportunities for women within the mixed-gender events via adjustments of the points classification is having the intended impact. The 2022 Wheelchair Rugby World Championships included 13 women players across all the teams—the highest number of women to ever compete—and many more women appear on the rosters at regional tournaments. It is our recommendation that building segregated opportunities for women athletes to gain experience and develop their skills while simultaneously continuing to

explore how the classification system can be used to create fair and competitive opportunities for women on mixed-gender teams will be important.

Participants from all sports spoke to some recent initiatives by the IPC, NPCs, and disability sporting organizations regarding women-only development camps and mentorship programs. Those that we spoke with who attended these camps explained that these programs were not only empowering but provided an opportunity for them to network with other women. Despite positive experiences, a few women expressed that attending these events was not a straightforward process and required many to fund their own way. This financial stipulation evidently meant that many women could not attend these events. Another barrier was that these events and opportunities required some level of “development” of women’s Para sport at the regional or national level to have women to send. One solution would be through the allocation of additional funds for women-only events, both nationally and internationally, to support these programs and the costs associated with traveling to and from them (see [Smith & Wrynn, 2014](#)).

## Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our pool of participants for this project was relatively small and while the combined use of document analysis and interviews provide a rich and nuanced data set that does help to better understand how mixed-gender sports are being employed in the Paralympic Movement to address gender parity, there is much more research to be done. Those working and researching in Para sport know the “pathways” from grassroots to elite can be very short with some athletes simultaneously competing internationally, and on their local, and regional teams. Actions by the IPC and international sport governing bodies, such as including a new event or eliminating one, have very immediate repercussions at the local level. Understanding how mixed-gender events are being used at all levels and the function of these events in recruiting and retaining women athletes is critical. It will also be important for future research to engage with male athletes within these sports to understand their perspectives and experiences and how they might best be engaged to support women in Para sport.

Several mixed-gender events have been added to the Olympic program in recent years (including “mixed relays” in sports that are traditionally segregated), and there is very limited scholarship on how these events will shape women’s participation in the long term. By studying sports across the Olympic and Paralympic programs, researchers may be able to identify commonalities, pitfalls, and potential strategies for getting more women involved in both the Olympic and Paralympic Movements. Furthermore, while we took a sociological and feminist approach to the topic, we appreciate that research from other disciplinary and theoretical lenses would yield different and important insights. For example, there is a growing body of social psychological research informed by social identity theory and self-categorization theory that explore intergroup dynamics on sport teams, how athletes develop a sense of “us,” and subsequent effects on continued participation ([Beauchamp, 2019](#)). This line of inquiry could be beneficial to understanding the different opportunities afforded by gender-segregated and

gender-integrated Para sport programs. Finally, it would be beneficial for future research to explore women's experience within other mixed-gender Para sports to gain a more holistic and nuanced understanding of how mixed-gender Para sports are addressing gender parity within the Paralympic Movement.

## Conclusions

Findings from our study reiterate much of what has been found in recreational, able-bodied mixed-gender sporting contexts, where it has been illustrated that mixed-gender events often (re)produce stereotypical gender asymmetries that further marginalize or discourage women from participating in them. While the idea of mixed-gender events may look like a promising strategy on paper, our findings highlight that, in practice, these sports provide little to no opportunity for women to get involved in the wider Paralympic Movement. In part, this lack of opportunity stems from larger social, political, and cultural ideas regarding gender and is a result of lack of support, direction, and measurable targets from various levels of Para sport including the IPC, NPCs, and various grassroots sporting organizations. Collectively, this begs the question of whether these sports should continue to be marketed as "mixed-gender" sports or whether more time, money, and resources should be put toward developing legitimate pathways and opportunities for women athletes and organizers to get involved within these sports and the wider Paralympic Movement.

## Notes

1. We use the term "Paralympic Movement" to refer to the extensive networks of individuals, organizations, and other stakeholders involved in delivering Para sport. The IPC's own communications include the closing statement: "The IPC is the global governing body of the Paralympic Movement. It coordinates the organization of the Paralympic Games and the Winter Paralympic Games."
2. The Agitos Foundation, according to their Website, is the official development arm of the IPC. The Foundation provides resources, funding, and expertise to "parts of the world where they are needed the most" and deliver and design programs that "address common worldwide issues."

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