Where We’ve Been, Where We Are, Where We’re Going: Girls and Women in Sport and Physical Activity

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The journey towards gender equity has been long and ongoing for girls and women in sport and physical activity. Efforts towards gender equity in sport have been plentiful, and are continually ongoing as more girls and women participate and play in sport at both the high school and intercollegiate levels. Further, women continue to work their way towards more management and leadership positions.

Numerous strategies and initiatives have been created to eliminate gender discrimination, promote opportunities and to ensure gender equity in sport and physical education for girls and women. However, from the early efforts of female physical education instructors and the women of the AIAW, women are still fighting some of the same stereotypes, myths, and issues that their foremothers faced. Minimal participation was attributed to traditional gender roles, medical myths, and the notion that women were inferior to men (Ladda, 2007; Rintala, 2001; Swanson & Spears, 1995). Eventually some women began calling for more participation and more organization (Ennis, 2006; Swanson & Spears, 1995). This led to the formation of several groups included the National Association for Girls and Women in Sport (NAGWS) and the CIAW (Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women) and eventually the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) as well as others. The women of these groups had very specific ideas as to how they wanted sport and physical activity run for women, and they were steadfast in avoiding some of the problems and scandals that men’s sports and physical activity had been experiencing (Chepko & Courtier, 2001; Rintala, 2001).

With the passage of Title IX in 1972, more and more girls and women began participating and women worked towards obtaining positions in management and leadership. According to the National Federation of State High School Associations (2010) 3,114,091 girls are playing sports compared to 294,015 in 1971-72. Further, at the intercollegiate level, participation levels are close to an all time high (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). Title IX has created many positives in addition to more girls and women participating in sport. These include both psychological and physical benefits. However, there are still some issues and concerns that need to be addressed with this growth.

Inevitably with change and evolution, there are going to come some growing pains. For advocates of girls and women in sport and physical activity it is important to pay attention to those pains and some of the issues facing girls and women. For example, the media continues to sexualize female athletes, if they get any coverage at all (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Messner, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996). Further, Stoll (2005) continues to study and monitor the decreasing levels of moral reasoning for athletes. For girls and women, the levels continue to drop and Stoll predicts
that those levels will be as low as male athletes within 5-10 years. Additionally, violent incidents between female athletes have been well noted in the press lately, and incidents of hazing continue to get more extreme. Furthermore, girls and women in sport continue to face sexist language and negative perceptions. These perceptions include ideas about women’s gender roles and the incongruency that is often seen between “athlete” and “female” (Burton, Grappendorf, Henderson, Field, Dennis, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Traditional gender roles and stereotypical expectations of what women “should” be have hurt both female athletes and those women seeking positions in sport leadership (Burton et al.; Eagly & Karau)

This presentation addressed the history and progression, along with barriers and victories of girls and women in sport and physical activity. A brief overview of the early struggles for women in sport and physical activity was provided along with a current status update. Finally, future issues and areas of concern for those involved with girls and women in sport and physical activity were addressed. These issues are crucial to discuss as the movement towards gender equity continues.

References


