

NIGERIAN WOMEN AND PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

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Abstract

This paper highlights women and sports participation in Nigeria.. Effort was made to define sports and trace the historical background of women participation in sports in Nigeria. Some reasons that enhance women participation in sports were also addressed. This included health and fitness movement, Federal government legislation and new opportunities. Some recommendations were also made to enhance women's participation in Nigeria sports. Such as provision of adequate female coaches, incentives scholarship to female athletes and the general education of the public on the need for female participation in sports.

Introduction

An analysis of participation in sports in Nigeria indicates that men constitutes the greater number either as players, coaches, referees or as sports administrators. The low involvement of women in sport and games is not due to the lack of interest in sports and games by women alone. It is due to the discrimination resulting from the mind-set from childhood that sports is meant for boys alone, that it affects their physiological construct and development by making them masculine and, that it also adversely affects their ability to procreate. Females who participate in sports are also seen as people who are socially and sexually too exposed and as such unfit as faithful housewives (Coakley 1984). If Nigeria is to fulfill her aspiration of being amongst the fore runners in sporting activities in the world, the issue of women participation in sports and games must be successfully addressed.

Women and Sports Participation in Nigeria

According to Coakley (1984) sports is amusement, fun and activity engaged in especially outdoors, for amusement and exercise. It can also be defined as one of the mass duties of the machine age. Bucher (1979) defined sports as a pastime, a division and it is synonymous with fun. Sports is also any game played according to rules and regulations of the governing bodies (Omoghele, 1989).

Sports were also seen to have come into Nigeria through the colonial masters and western education. The Empire Day provided the first opportunity for formal and recorded competition. The first recorded organized sport was in 1910. Women's participation in competitive sports was however traced under the following headings-post-independence era (1960 - 1966), post first republic military regime (1966-1978), the second republic (1979-1983) and women in sports to date (1984-date). These periods witnessed a steady rise in women's participation in sports in Nigeria. (NTI, 2007).

Throughout history, men's sport participation has been greater than that of women. Dalen and Bennett (1971) explained that historically, women have never been expected to participate in any vigorous physical activities. In the ancient Athens, according to him, boys took part in active physical education while girls stayed indoors to help their mothers in domestic work. They sang song of praise to the heroes, presented their gifts and dance to celebrate the victory. But in Sparta, girls participated with boys in the processions and at certain festivals danced and sang in the presence of young men, praising the courageous and making fun of the coward. Regular exercises made the Spartan girls attractive specimen. According to NTI (2007) women had to fight for political and professional emancipation, they also had to fight for the right to be physically fit and compete in athletics. It is

argued that women's anatomy should not determine her destiny. This is consequent upon the fact that the traditional role of the female is changing.

Nigerian women are constantly setting records at National and International levels. At the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, Nigeria athletics won one gold, one silver and two bronze medals for the country. The soccer skills displayed by Nigeria female teams remained long after the games. An analysis of gold medals won by Nigerian in All African Games since it started showed that while Nigeria men won twenty eight (28) gold medals, their female counterparts won 57 medals (Audu, 1999).

There has been a steady rise in Women's Participation in Sports in Nigeria in recent times. Many factors may have contributed to the awareness. Among them are the introduction of the Better Life For Rural Women by the former First Lady, Maryam Babaginda and the birth of the National Women Commission. The aims of the two bodies were to encourage women to participate fully in political, economic and social life of the country. This awareness motivated the First Lady to donate the First Challenge Cup for the Women Soccer in Nigeria. Some of the female soccer teams in various states are the Obasogie Babes of Benin, the Ufoma Babies of Warri, the Queens of Bendel, etc. The women have not only made other mark in local competitions, they have been able to make their impact felt internationally by defeating their Cameroonians and Guinea counterparts to win the soccer cup competition.

The Nigerian women have made their mark in other sports such as tennis-table or lawn where we have Victoria Onyebochia and Nosa Imafidon. Nigeria was also represented at the Common Wealth Under 18 Handball Championship held in Delhi, India where the Borno Girls defeated their Indian counterparts 16 -11 Goals. In athletics, women have also made their mark. An example is Mary Onyali who took part in the World Malmo Athletics meet held in Sweden on 5th August, 1991 and won silver.

Reasons for Increased Participation in Sports among Females

The following factors are responsible for the increased participation in sports among women.

- A. Pressure from the Federal Government in form of Title ix legislation.
- B. The Women's Liberation Movement
- C. The health and fitness movement.
- D. New opportunities
- E. The visibility of the athletic role models.

Pressure from the Federal Government in form of Title IX legislation: The Federal Government of United States does not want any discrimination in sports. To achieve this, laws were passed abolishing sex discrimination in any organization receiving Federal Government financial assistance. Consequently the Title IX legislation was passed and enforced. Stated that "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" and that those organizations including the vast majority of schools at all educational levels, have to show proof that they have provided enough opportunities for male and females.

The Health and Fitness Movement: Since physical education is a process of training, the body and mind through a well selected physical activities. Sports too also help to build the body and mind. Women now feel that sports too can help to develop their body hence the increase participation by women.

The Visibility of Athletic Role Models: The advertisement of women star athletes on the television, radio etc. made them role models and their professional activities help to encourage women in sports. As role models, they have reinforced the female folks' interest in sports and this has brought to reality the definition of sport as a human activity rather than strictly a male activity.

The Women's Liberation Movement: The women's movement has traditionally emphasized the idea that females are enhanced as human beings when they have opportunities to be competent and able. This idea has encouraged many women of all ages to pursue their interest in sports.

New Opportunities: The major factor underlying the growth of sport participation among females is an increase opportunities. Before the mid 1970's many girls and women did not participate in sports for one simple reason: teams and program did not exist. Today some students may not be aware of this fact, but few of their parents had any of the opportunities they have today. Recently formed teams and programs have uncovered and cultivated interest ignored in the past. Budgets are still not equally distributed among males and females, but increased participation has clearly gone hand in hand with the investment of new resources in women's program (Coakley, 1984).

Reasons for Low Level of Participation by Women in Sports

Women have not been involved in sports on a much large scale because societies have discouraged women from competing in sports by dwelling on several myths : (Adeyanju, 1993). These myths included:

- a. The inability of women to remain feminine while participating in athletics. Men regarded women athletes as masculine because sports require some degree of development of muscular strength.
- b. The inability of women to engage in strenuous physical activities.
- c. The belief that physical activities are harmful to the gynecological process such as child conception and birth.
- d. Psychological inability of the female to deal with the stresses of competition.
- e. Cultural factor is another phenomenon that had inhibited the dimension of women participation.
- f. Religious reasons.
- g. Domestic responsibility of women folk which tended to describe them as purely home keepers.
- h. Media coverage of men sporting events is more pronounced compared to the women.
- i. Non awareness by women of the gains of participation in sports. (Coakley, 1984).

Sex discrimination has been a major feature in sport programs in the vast majority of United States of America and Nigeria. It became so pronounced in 1990 in the USA that researchers started looking into the problem. This was so obvious in the facilities and equipment that women were made to practice in old gymnasium with old facilities where ultra modern stadia were built for men with modern or recent facilities and equipment. Women were not given training care where and when men took airplanes, women were made to take buses.

Most often, male coaches were made available to coach female athletes. This is not too good because he would not understand and be sensitive to the problems and needs of female athletes; and also they would not be disposed to revealing their problems to him (Coakley, 1984).

Men athletes were given more publicity than female athletes. When any record is set by any male, all media houses carried it for a very long time whereas if it is a woman, the publicity was less. Sports men were often used to advertise products than women athletes.

Governments budget more money for men sports than women's and fewer event or programs are made available to women than men. This tells much on the morale of sports women as it tends to demoralize sports women. This is a noticeable development in all international competitions.

Conclusion

Summarily those factors which hinders women in sports especially in the area of leadership, policies, structure, programmes, budgeting, training, publicity, welfare and health issues must be eliminated. The attainment of gender equality in sports will afford Nigeria the opportunity to actualize the vast potential that Nigerian Women constitute. Women had to fight for political and professional emancipation; they also had to fight for right to be able to compete in athletes. It is argued that women's anatomy should not determine their destiny, this is consequent upon the fact that traditional role of the female is changing. New opportunities for women in sport are continually increasing. The past fifteen years witnessed great changes that had occurred in sports and in particular high level competitive sports in which more opportunities are now made available for women. This is evident in their participation in those activities mentioned earlier such as women soccer, track and field, various ball game e.t.c.

Recommendations

- 1 **Female Coaches:** More women should be encouraged to take up coaching job, since they would understand the female athletes problem better than the male. This also would go to disabuse the minds of parents against the men coaches defiling their wards.
- 2 **Equipment and Facilities:** For every sports, appropriate and adequate program facilities and equipment should equally be made available for both the male and female sports.
- 3 **Training Schedule:** Equal opportunities and programs should be made available to both men and women to afford them equal opportunities for training for effective performance.
- 4 **Incentives:** Scholarships and other incentives of equal weightings should be given to outstanding female athletes in schools; and those out of school should be given job opportunities and when retiring from active sports, pensions should be granted.
- 5 **Education:** This has to do with enlightening and informing the general public on the need for women participation in sports. This medium of approach should be through jingles on radio, television, and newspaper advertisement. Schools should also organize seminars for parents and the general public about the need for women participation in sports.
- 6 **Publicity:** Equal publicity should be given to both men and women athletes for this would engender the interest of the female folks in sports participation.
- 7 **Budgets:** The same amount of money should be budgeted for both men and women sports in order not to negate the principles of equity and justice.
- 8 Female Athletes should be given comprehensive insurance because of the associated sports hazards.

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