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No Olympic Gold in inclusivity for Tokyo 2020

The Olympic Games in Tokyo have demonstrated that sexism and racism in sport are far from being yesterday's news

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics has shattered *some* long-standing Olympic inequalities, but what have been the realities for women at 'the most gender equal games'?

Tokyo 2020 was expected to come the closest to gender parity with 48.8 per cent of athletes said to be women. Women's representation in new action sports including skateboarding, sport climbing, and surfing are poignant representations of how gendered participation barriers and norms are being dismantled. The continued rise of mixed gender relay events on the track and in the pool are further exemplars of a shifting Olympic narrative:

'The mixed events are truly important because they really embody the equality of male and female athletes on the field of play,' said Kit McConnell, the IOC Sports Director. 'There is nothing more equal than a male and female competing as one team on the same field of play towards the same sports performance.'

Despite these and other strides, the rhetoric and the realities remain miles apart. Women must fight tooth and nail; to compete, to render their voices and lived experiences heard and most notably, to be valued.

Trouble off the field and at the top

Starting at the top, we have observed how women on the executive committee are treated with barely concealed disrespect. The former head of Japan's Olympic committee, Yoshiro Mori said: 'If we increase the number of female board members, we have to make sure their speaking time is restricted somewhat, they have difficulty finishing, which is annoying'.

While Mori lost his position and was replaced with a woman, his sexism is reflective of wider gender inequities in Japan. The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2020* rank Japan the lowest amongst advanced economies at 121 out of 153 countries.

His further remarks highlight the challenges women navigate at the executive level: 'We have about seven women at the organising committee, but everyone understands their place.'

A bloody big deal: menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, and abortion

Perhaps if women had a consequential role in decision-making, the Olympic committee would not make arbitrary and ill-informed rules that ban all athletes from bringing their families to the Olympic village. This policy ignored the experience and legitimate needs of breastfeeding athlete's and while ultimately retracted after criticism, the response is vexing: 'After careful consideration of the unique situation facing athletes with nursing children, we are pleased to confirm that, *when necessary*, nursing children will be able to accompany athletes to Japan'.

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Canadian boxer Mandy Bujold was allowed to compete in the Tokyo Games after appealing a decision that she was ineligible because she was pregnant and postpartum in 2018 and 2019. Bujold originally planned her pregnancy around the pre-pandemic Olympic schedule. Prior to her maternity leave she had been ranked second in the world, while ultimately triumphant, her fight was not without an emotional cost.

A woman of colours' experience was sidelined when Olympic champion Briana McNeal received a five year ban for missing a drug test while she was recovering from an abortion. McNeal has not been accused of doping, but due to a discrepancy of 24 hours between when she said she had the abortion and when the abortion took place, McNeal faces a five-year ban and will miss not one, but two Olympic games.

Menstruation is a part of female athlete's experience that often remains ignored and hidden. Open discussion about its effects on women's lives and sport performance is characteristically rendered taboo. Dina Asher-Smith, a UK athlete fed up with the silence wrote a column highlighting that an athletes menstruation can be pivotal to their performance. Asher-Smith points out that although the minutia of athlete's lives are regularly

raked over, periods are rarely discussed. There are few exceptions, for example China's Fu Yuanhui who told the world she was on her period after exiting the pool in visible pain at the Rio Olympics. And New Zealand athlete Kayla Imrie who has shared her decade long struggle with menstruation and the impact it's had on her performance on the Olympic website.

From hormones to uniforms and everything in-between

Competition uniforms in gymnastics and beach handball have been much discussed. The German gymnastics team have been widely lauded for their full-length unitards, pushing back against skimpier, less practical competition attire. In the lead up to Tokyo, the Norwegian beach handball team, who defied sexist regulations wearing shorts instead of the mandated bikini bottoms have received global applause and an offer from American musician Pink to pay their fine. However, the gold medal in inclusivity must go to Badminton, who have changed their rules since coming under fire in 2012 for insisting on skirts during competition so their athletes were 'feminine and attractive'. Athletes competed at Toyko 2020 in skirts, shorts and hijabs dictated by the athlete's choice.

The International Swimming Federation have banned a swimming cap designed to accommodate the hair of black athletes.

Due to her naturally occurring testosterone levels, South African runner Caster Semenya was denied the opportunity to defend her title at Tokyo 2020. And there are more women of colour who have fallen foul of the World Athletic Federation Rules. Namibian track and field stars Christine Mboma and Beatrice Masilingi – who have achieved four of the top five women's 400m times in the world this year are barred from competing for the same reason.

The International Swimming Federation have banned a swimming cap designed to accommodate the hair of black athletes. Research from 2016 in the United States finds that 64 per cent of African American children can't swim. The makers of the 'Soul Cap' released a statement: 'How do we achieve participation and representation in the world of competition swimmers, if the governing body stops suitable swimwear being available to those who are underrepresented?'

In spite of unrelenting online sexist abuse aimed at her short haircut and speculation over her status as a feminist, South Korea's An San has made history at the Tokyo 2020 Games, becoming the first woman since 1904

to win three golds in archery at the same Olympics.

Safe spaces still wanting: physical and mental health costs

Women's failure to comply with normalised feminised ideals and their acts of resistance often come with significant costs. Some of these we see in the experiences of female athletes who have openly talked of their struggles with mental health – most recently, US gymnast Simone Biles and Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka. While both have received outpourings of support, they have also faced scathing criticism. In Biles' case, she was said to 'bring shame on her country'.

In stark contrast to the above-mentioned banning of black athlete Briana McNeal, Alen Hadzic, a white male US fencer was allowed to compete at the Tokyo Games despite three accusations of sexual impropriety and an initial ban. Hadzic has a history of sexual misconduct having been suspended from Columbia University after an investigation involving sexual consent. Taking this into account, Hadzic was not permitted to stay at the Olympic Village or travel with other athletes. The decision to allow Hadzic to compete was met with criticism from his teammates who wore pink masks to protest his inclusion and show solidarity with female fencers.

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And then there was the slap. The International Judo Federation condemned coach Claudiu Pusa for slapping German judoka Martyna Trajdos, stating that: 'Judo is an educational sport and as such cannot tolerate such behaviour, which goes against the judo moral code'. Trajdos defended her coach and said based on the result – 'this was not hard enough'. Irrespective of the consent between Trajdos and Pusa, the act on an international stage is complex and could be interpreted as implicitly condoning violence against women. The salience of this act sits against continued reports of pervasive, protracted, and systematically covered up institutional abuse in sports such as gymnastics. Indeed, the host nation's track record when it comes to abuse of young athletes remains gravely concerning.

The media can and should do better

A report has analysed the media coverage of the first week of Tokyo 2020. While it's positive that women received 59.1 per cent of primetime coverage, women are still more likely to be visually objectified by the camera. Women are seven times more likely than men to be referred to by a diminutive such as 'girl'. Eight out of ten Olympic commentators are men. This is consistent with findings analysing the media coverage of the Rio Games conducted by Cambridge University: men dominated reporting, women's aesthetics rather than athleticism were too often the focus of the discussion and women's achievements were infantilised or trivialised.

It's not just athletes. Footage of a press conference went viral showing the Australian Olympic Committee president John Coates berate Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk after it was officially announced that Brisbane Australia will host the 2032 Olympics. The comments were diminished as a joke, but for many women watching, the powerplay felt all too familiar.

The Olympics' official values are excellence, friendship, and respect. The IOC claims 'the Olympic Movement builds its activities to promote sport, culture and education with a view to building a better world.' To date, this better world has not been for everyone, with significant systemic sexism and racism still present today, remaining an overlooked part of the Olympic tradition. Numbers matter. But: if we focus solely on data, and celebrate the *almost* achievement of gender parity too much, it is easy to overlook the human stories and lived experience that tell us about the exclusion, the mental load and fight that it takes to be a woman, a mother, or a woman of colour, and not 'just an athlete' at the Olympics.



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