

The Lack of Female Perspectives Reflected in the Olympics

Yanying Wong^{1,*}

¹Faculty of Social Sciences, the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

*Corresponding author: u3605779@connect.hku.hk

Abstract:

With the recent Olympic Games in Paris 2024 coming to an end, the status of women is becoming more and more significant, with the ratio of male and female athletes competing reaching 1:1. Meanwhile, even after reaching gender parity, the female perspectives in the Olympics is still lacking. This paper will analyze the history of women's struggle to participate in the Olympic Games as a starting point, by using literature research method, the final results show that: although women's power is gradually displayed in the audience's vision, they are still facing many difficulties in the sports arena. At the same time, it needs to be admitted that the Olympic Games do provide a way for women to show their power, and to some extent, bring benefits to women. However, the restrictions wrapped up in these benefits have always had a component that full of male gaze, involving the categories of dressing and career planning.

Keywords: Olympics; feminism; male gaze; patriarchal society; power.

1. Introduction

With the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, female power is also on display. Compared to 1900, when women were first allowed to compete in the Olympics, the proportion of female athletes participating in the Games is gradually increasing. Even in Paris 2024, the Olympic Committee has pledged to achieve equal participation of men and women [1], which is also the theme revealed by many Olympic Games and feminist research institutes, that is, women's equality is gradually reflected in some specific areas in the Olympic Games. In the short history of women participating in the Olympics, it is indeed remarkable that women's rights, feelings, and power can be seen and considered. They have gotten the chance to show

that they can do what men can do. However, this paper will not repeat too much in this aspect, but want to look at the relationship between feminism and the Olympic Games from another Angle. As what has been mentioned earlier, women's power and women's rights are growing in the Olympic Games. While female athletes struggle and show themselves on the field, they are still subjected to the stares and judgments of people other than themselves. This type of gaze is immersed in the patriarchal social structure of this group of people, and throw this kind of masculine and disciplined gaze at female athletes. Take the Paris 2024 Olympic Games as an example, the coverage or focus around female athletes is always relevant to their clothes, makeup and other topics that have nothing to do with their achievements and

strength. In the event, female athletes dress to emphasize their body shape, eroticizing their bodies, and try to add sexual attributes [2]. In addition, this kind of gaze is also shown by focusing on females' gossip. For example, the Chinese female badminton player, Huang Yaqiong, was proposed to by her boyfriend after winning the mixed doubles title. In such cases, women's triumph is overshadowed by personal matters or gossip. Related news media reports also emphasized the fact of "being proposed to", and undermining women's achievements is just another form of objectification. In this article, the lack of female perspective in Olympics will be argued in the way of radical feminism. In the first part of this article, it will introduce the development history of female participating in Olympics. The second part aims to talk about the benefits that Olympics brings to females, while the third part will be about the loss of women's invisible power in the Olympics.

2. Literature Review: The Changes of Women's Participation in the Olympics

2.1 The Original Exclusiveness of Females in the Olympics

The article, *Women and the Olympic Games*, written by Ripa, illustrates the process that women fought for their participation rights in the Olympics [3]. This part will introduce the changes of women's participation and also analyze them. At the very beginning, the Olympics was refounded in 1894 by Pierre de Coubertin to praise men's spirit that is combined with brain and muscles, which refers to masculinity [3]. In that case, women were not the target audience and participants of the Olympic Games from the beginning, instead, they were excluded because they were considered to be delicate and not cater to the "power" that people wished. Also, it can be considered as the loss of power from the root. Although in 1900, there were 22 women participating in the Olympics, they were only allowed to participate in the sports that fit in the concept of femininity, such as tennis, figure skating and so forth. It is pathetic that women's power and what they can do well need to be recognized and determined by men. They are not even thought to know themselves as well as men do. Just as the concept that were mentioned in *The Second Sex* [4], men as the first sex can define women, which is the opposite of masculine definitions, such as masculinity and femininity mentioned earlier, which correspond to strong and weak. This is the main condition for the exclusion of women from the Olympics. They are trapped in the invisible condition of male shaping, which

prevents them from stretching out their hands and feet to show themselves. Therefore, women's participation in the Olympic Games was not approved at the beginning, and even if they were allowed to participate later on, they could only participate in so-called "femininity" events, pointing out that the female exclusivity of the Olympic Games is obvious.

2.2 Women's Struggle to Compete in the Olympics

The more women there are at the decision-making level, the more women's perspectives will emerge and see the dilemma of women. Alice Milliat, a very significant women in the history of women participating in the Olympics, was the president of the women's sports centre *Femina sport* in 1912 and the treasurer of the *Fédération française du sport féminin* in 1917 [3]. She fought for women's justice and called for all women should be involved in the all Olympic games, especially in track and field athletics and other sports that were listed as "inappropriate" games for women because that might harmful for their fertility and too overwhelming for them [3]. Typically, this is a kind of terminology in the guise of being good for you, but actually taking away your power. After the Olympic Committee rejected the feminization of track and field, Alice founded the *International Women's Sports Federation* and organized the *Women's Olympic Games*, where women achieved excellent results in track and field. However, women were still rarely seen in the Olympic Games, and it was not until 1928 that women officially entered the Olympic audience's sight. Meanwhile, There were still a lot of oppositions to women's participation in the Olympics, especially from the new Olympic Committee president and from the sports and press circles. They believed that women were weak and poorly trained, so they were not qualified to compete. Their rhetoric is full of the arrogance of the first sex, they always put women in the position of the second sex, looking down on their bodies, thinking that they are not strong enough, or that they are trained by the patriarchal society not to pursue strong. They also fail to take into account how difficult it is for women to get adequate professional sports training. How women seek the same training opportunities and conditions as men while facing all kinds of prejudices about their inadequacy in track and field events? That was very tough at that time. These opposition voices led to a fierce resistance among women to the Olympics, and the women's Olympics were re-organized at a later time.

2.3 The End of the Women's Fight to Qualify for the Olympics

However, in the process of women's struggle, Milliat, the

most important figure, withdrew from the struggle movement, which caused the slow progress of the feminization of the Olympic Games to a certain extent. In the 1970s and 1980s, the United Nations recognized that sport was good for women's health and called for women's active participation in the Olympic Games [3]. Since then, the proportion of women participating in the Olympics has gradually increased, until this year's Paris Games reached the first ever gender parity. Women's struggle process is difficult and slow, in this process, there are constantly different countries, different races, different positions of women to join, women's struggle is not only a single, but global and intersecting issue. Nowadays, women are still facing a lot of dilemma in the Olympics and press circle which has produced a huge promotion and influence role with the development of technology and social media. This will be the main point to discuss in the remaining parts of essay.

3. The Benefits that the Olympics Brings to Females

3.1 Women's Invisible and Soft Power that Brought by Olympics

Through the persistence and hard work of women from different backgrounds, different cultures and different positions, women have earned their place in the Olympic Games. Even the father of the Olympic Games spent his life opposing women's participation in the Games, but it still could not stop the wave of female resistance and awakening [3]. In many cases, their efforts have proved to be powerful and have reversed stereotypes about women in sporting events. Before that, people always held the prejudice that women were not fit to participate in sports, because they were considered to be weak, elegant, and not able to work as hard as men to achieve their goals. However, after women won the qualification to participate in the Olympic Games, the previous stereotype was deeply hit. They are ambitious, sweating it out on the field, and showing others that women can also be strong. This does not conform to the social norms for women at that time, but they do not care and take the opportunity to break it.

In addition, the huge influence of the Olympics can bring additional income and business value to women, letting them take control of their economic power. In the previous time, the ways that women can earn money is restricted, which means that they have fewer opportunities to earn money than men. In many areas, for example, some industries that require strength to make money are mostly dominated by men [5]. In this context, the new opportunity of economic income provided by the Olympic Games

for women is very valuable, allowing women to master a new economic initiative. There are two main means for women athletes to earn money. Athletes who win medals can receive money through the Olympic Committee or local government agencies to show their recognition. Besides, influential athletes can get sponsorship and even endorsement from brands [6]. It follows that women are gaining new sources of income for themselves through sporting events, not just male-dominated industries. At the same time, their huge exposure can also make more women change their views and attitudes toward sports, leading more and more women to enter the sports industry, and expanding the living space of women to a certain extent.

3.2 The Visible Power that Brought by the Olympics

Speaking of women's living space, the presence of women in the decision-making level is very important. We don't just need female athletes, we also need female leaders or managers at the decision-making level. Alice Milliat, as mentioned in the part two, was at the forefront of decision-making, fighting for women's right to participate in the Olympics. Although she withdrew from this struggle for various reasons in the following time, her pioneering role cannot be ignored. Thankfully, the International Olympic Committee has also recognized the importance of the role of women in decision-making area. In 1996, the International Olympic Committee issued a policy that at least 20 percent of sports decision-making structures should be women, and organized women's seminars to enhance women's leadership [7]. This initiative will not only provide more women's perspectives on the Olympics, but also make policies that benefit women's sports development on this basis. On the other hand, these women who have received leadership training can also demonstrate their management and negotiation skills in other areas and achieve success [7]. Even though the Olympic Committee has made a lot of efforts for the status of women, it is far from enough. Under the cover of these benefits, the plight of women is not easily perceived. For the reason that, in essence, the female perspective is still lacking in a patriarchal society, this feature is also applied to the Olympics.

4. The Embodiment of the Male Gaze in the Olympics

4.1 The Loss of Female Athletes' Choice of what to Wear in Competition

For a long time, women seem to be unable to truly transcend the patriarchal social norms and male gaze angle to achieve real "freedom". They are coerced by society

into choosing options that dress up as “freedom,” saying to themselves, “I’m doing this of my own free will, and I like it.” This feature is also reflected in the Olympic Games. Let’s use beach volleyball as an example to specifically analyze why women’s choice of clothing is lost in the game. At beach volleyball matches, we always see two extremes of dress (Fig.1). Some of the women wear short tank tops that barely covered their breasts and briefs that exposed most of their hips. At the same time, other women cover themselves up so as not to show a shred of skin.



Fig. 1 The contract of dressing between women from different countries [8]

They wear tight long sleeves and trousers, and even wear scarves to tightly wrap their hair. Then what kind of cloth-

ing reflects a woman’s freedom of choice? The answer is probably neither. The former’s open dress and large areas of bare skin do not mean that this is the true freedom or liberation of women’s clothing. Not to mention the risk of showing off. The latter protective dress mostly comes from religious reasons, and women need to abide by the dogma because of the Muslim faith, embedding their own dress standards into the dogma. Obviously, this is not true freedom either. True freedom should be characterized by comfort. Muslim female athletes wrap themselves up in the heat outside, their clothes clinging to their skin with sweat. What’s comfortable about this? In addition, some people questioned whether female athletes really like to wear sportswear similar to swimsuits, most people said they did not mind, and they believe that beach volleyball originated in the seaside, swimsuits can not only be a good symbol of the historical origin of the sport, but also to prevent sand from entering the clothes and rubbing the skin [9]. However, in the male beach volleyball competition, the audience has never seen a male athlete wearing a swimsuit like a female athlete, only covering their private parts of the clothing (Fig.2). Men as the first sex, they do not need to dress ornamental, instead, the only thing they need is comfort. On the other hand, they also do not need to be bound by religion to wrap themselves up in hot weather. When women think that they are free enough, and think that they are genuinely like to make a choice, it is better to look at the first gender’s situation.

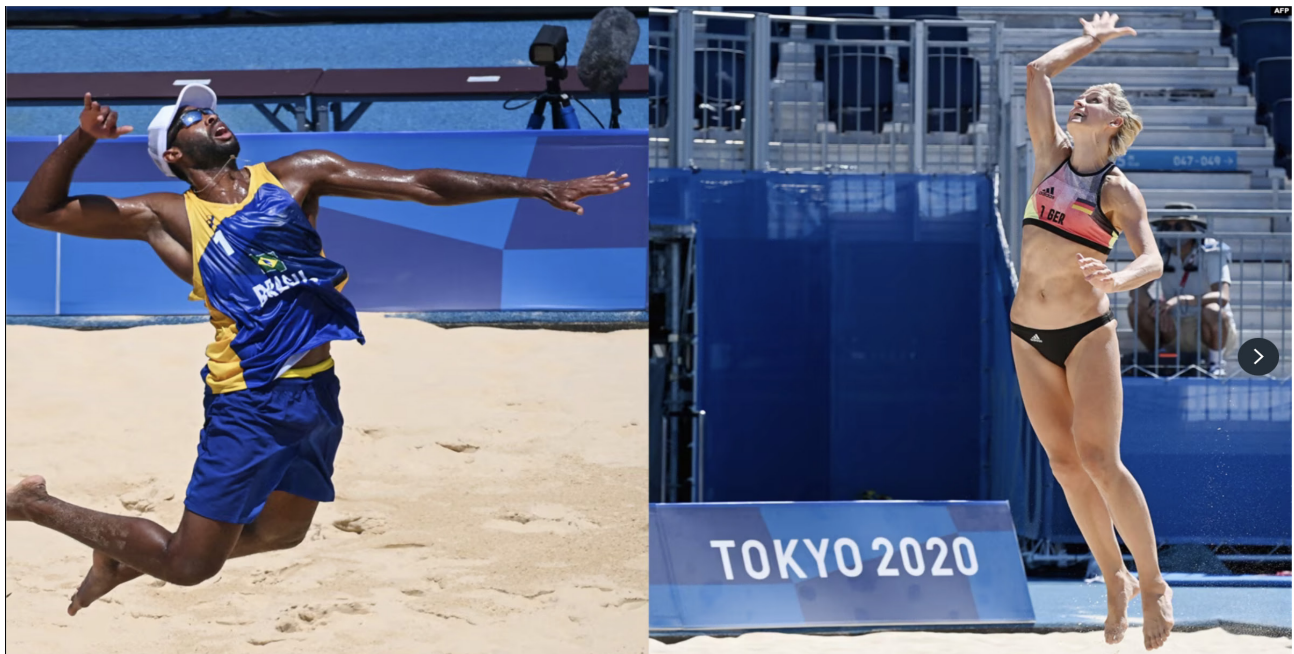


Fig. 2 The contract of dressing between women and men [10]

Women’s minds and perspectives have been so deeply shaped by the patriarchal society over the years that they

now see their dress choices as visceral and free. The male gaze has always influenced the way women see them-

selves. For female athletes of the Muslim faith, covering their bodies is perceived as a sense of security and protection from the male gaze [11], but is it not another product of the male gaze? It is not that looking at things from a woman's angle is fitting for a woman's perspectives, but it is able to see what women really need from a woman's situation, and it needs to be completely free of masculine elements and patriarchal influences. It can be seen that women's choices in dress are not fully in line with women's perspectives, and their choices are given in the context of patriarchal society, rather than jumping out to find options that truly meet women's needs.

4.2 The Disappearance of Female Athlete's Subjectivity in Career Planning

In the era of the rice circle culture, fueled by social media, the privacy of sports celebrities has been invaded. China's athletes Sun Yingsha and Wang Chuqin won the mixed doubles table tennis event at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. After that, their modes of getting along and their actions were noticed by the audience and they were considered as "couple" [12]. Fans can even be seen on social media using Photoshop to transform Sun Yingsha's short hair into long hair, gradually adding what they think women should look like. At the same time, increasingly "extreme" rhetoric has also emerged. Fans hope that Sun Yingsha will marry Wang Chuqin after retirement and support his ping-pong career behind him. From the comments of fans on the social media, Sun Yingsha's subjectivity is completely disappeared. She was first and foremost viewed as an object, and fans deemed her insufficiently "feminine" and imposed on her what they considered to be "female" standards. On the other hand, fans kill her career vision directly and pin her achievements on men. She is not seen as someone who has a high career ambition like Wang Chuqin, even though her achievements in table tennis are very high. It's like telling other people that no matter how high your achievements are, your ultimate destination is to get married. Marriage seems to be an inescapable topic. People also tend to use romance to cover up what really matters. After Huang Yaqiong and her partner won the mixed doubles badminton competition at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, her boyfriend proposed to her [13]. It is very strange that almost all reports juxtaposed winning the gold medal with being proposed to, and almost no reports even went into detail about how they prepared for the competition, what the process was like, and how they felt afterwards. Some of these reports even focus on the marriage proposal process. A man proposing to a woman in her highlight moment is like using or stealing her thunder to help him with what he's about to do. On the other hand, in a sense, there is a

feeling of "even if you win the championship, but I get you and you still need to marry me". This romantic gossip easily eclipses the achievement of winning a gold medal, and women's career paths seem to be cut off to the eternal end: marriage.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing the history of women's struggle to participate in the Olympics as a lens, the plight of women is still not completely solved. By its very nature, the Olympics were created for men. Therefore, the lack of a female perspective is also obvious. There is no denying that the Olympic Games have brought many benefits to women, breaking the stereotype of the female body, and giving women more power and ability. However, this is not enough. The history of women's struggle is not over. Even though women have struggled for so many years, the purely female perspective has not been well applied in the context of a patriarchal society. Through the analysis of the beach volleyball match as an example, women do not have the freedom to dress in the game from a female perspective. Their clothes are ornamental, or they internalize the discipline of patriarchal society and choose to wrap themselves. These choices are used under the guise of "freedom" to trick women into choosing among them, but what women really need is to create their own new and even more diverse choices. In addition to dress, the male perspective also pervades women's career planning, overlaying it with romantic overtones. Women's subjectivity is ignored, as if their achievements are high, but also to the end of marriage. Most importantly, the female perspective is not to listen to the opinions of women, but to be able to see the situation of women, and not contaminated with patriarchal and male condensation.

References

- [1] Gender Equality Through Time: At the Olympic Games. International Olympic Committee. 2024. <https://olympics.com/ioc/gender-equality/gender-equality-through-time>
- [2] Fornari, L. F., Lourenço, R. G., Fonseca, R. M., Santos, D. L., & Egry, E. Y. Gender Perspective in reports on women athletes in Rio 2016 Olympic Games. *Texto & Contexto - Enfermagem*, 2019,28. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-265x-tce-2018-0170>
- [3] Ripa, Y. Women and the Olympic Games. *Encyclopédie d'histoire numérique de l'Europe*. 2020. <https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/gender-and-europe/gendered-body-women-and-olympic-games>
- [4] Beauvoir, S. de. *The Second sex*. Vintage Classic. 2015.
- [5] Carpenter, J. Some industries are still overwhelmingly male-dominated. here's how women can get in. CNN. 2019. <https://>

edition.cnn.com/2019/03/08/success/women-male-dominated-occupations/index.html

[6] Morse, B. Do olympians get paid? everything you need to know about prize money - for some -at Paris Games. CNN. 2024. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/16/sport/olympics-athletes-compensated-medal-spt-intl/index.html>

[7] Chidhakwa, E. (n.d.). Olympic value-based education for gender equality and women's empowerment. Articles of the Olympic Academy. <https://www.ioa.org.gr/post/olympic-value-based-education-for-gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment>

[8] <https://www.indiatimes.com/trending/social-relevance/this-viral-photo-from-the-paris-olympics-womens-beach-volleyball-match-is-all-about-what-they-are-wearing-639291.html>

[9] VOA.Competitors explain beach volleyball clothing. Voice of America. 2021. [https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/](https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/competitors-explain-beach-volleyball-clothing/5981024.html)

[competitors-explain-beach-volleyball-clothing/5981024.html](https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/competitors-explain-beach-volleyball-clothing/5981024.html)

[10] <https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/competitors-explain-beach-volleyball-clothing/5981024.html>

[11] AI Islam. Do Muslim women have to wear veils?. Islam Ahmadiyya. (n.d.). <https://www.alislam.org/question/muslim-women-wear-veils/>

[12] Wu, W.China fans see olympic table tennis champs sun, Wang as more than on-court pair. South China Morning Post. 2024.<https://www.scmp.com/sport/paris-olympics-2024/table-tennis/article/3273749/paris-olympics-fans-see-chinas-table-tennis-champs-sun-yingsha-wang-chuqin-couple>

[13] Giannotto, M. Love and badminton: China's Huang Yaqiong gets olympic gold medal and marriage proposal. USA Today.2024. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2024/08/02/huang-yaqiong-2024-paris-olympics-marriage-proposal-badminton-liu-yuchen/74647992007/>