

# Review of "Report: Women Participation at the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad: Athens 2004: Statistics". February 2005. 134 pp.

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After the completion of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Department of International Cooperation and Development deemed the competition a "great success" for women (5). In the report "*Women Participation at the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad: Athens 2004*," the IOC describes the increase in women's participation in all facets of the Olympics from the athletes and flag bearers to the administrators and National Olympic Committee (NOC) leaders. The report consists of three sections of statistics (Olympic Programme Evolution, Gender Representation, and Olympic Solidarity Programme) demonstrating the increased presence of women in comparison to the 2000 games in Sydney, Australia. The following are a few examples. In Athens, women competed in 26 out of 28 sports (boxing and baseball are men-only), and in 135 events (45% of events, including mixed). Women comprised 40.7% of all participating athletes in Athens, compared to 38.2% at the Sydney games. Only 9 out of the 201 NOCs in attendance had no female competitors, and 2 NOCs had no males. The Olympic Solidarity program awarded 35% of its scholarships to women. In the brief "Introduction" to the report, the IOC uses overwhelmingly positive language to describe the success of the Athens games for women with phrases such as "impressive overview," "encouraging result," and "comforting assurance" (5-6). While the IOC has focused on highlighting the gains female Olympic athletes have made, it is also important to look at the more troubling statistics in order to fully understand how far women athletes have come and how far they still have to go.

In order to understand the IOC's position on these statistics it is important to look at this particular report within the context of the IOC's overall goals and motivations. In 1994 the IOC identified increasing women's participation in the Olympic Games as a goal and established a Women and Sport Working Group in 1995. In 2000 the United Nations cited as one of its eight Millennium Development Goals to "Promote gender equality and empower women."<sup>1</sup> The IOC believes that this goal can be partially achieved through sport, and

in March 2004 the Women and Sport Commission was created just in time for the Athens Olympic Games.<sup>2</sup> The report on women's participation in Athens focused heavily on positive aspects in order to demonstrate that the newly formed Women and Sport Commission was, and is, beneficial to the IOC and the sports community as a whole. Solely comparing the numbers from Sydney and those from Athens painted a bright picture for the future of the Olympic Games. Because the primary purpose of the statistical analysis by the reports publishers was to praise the continued increase in women's participation, some of the lower statistics were not fully scrutinized. The remainder of this manuscript will provide critical analysis in hopes of illuminating the nature of the struggle for women to achieve equality through competition at and administration of the Olympic Games.

*"Women Participation at the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad: Athens 2004"* utilizes the third section (Olympic Solidarity Programme) to demonstrate the number of athletes, both women and men, who benefited from the Olympic Solidarity programme. In Sydney, 472 athletes received scholarships. This number rose 19% to 583 athletes in Athens. While the statistics demonstrate the programs success at increasing the amount of participants, the numbers also reveal that only 204 women, or 35%, received scholarships in Athens. In 2008, the IOC released a progress report entitled *"From Marrakech to the Dead Sea: Tangible Progress for Women in Sport"* presented at the fourth IOC World Conference on Women in Sport, held in Jordan. In this document the IOC reports that for the 2008 Beijing Games, 333 women athletes were awarded scholarships; 31% of the total number of scholarships. This disparity between the amount of female and male scholarship holders does not originate from the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) because this very same document cites that NOCs must submit an equal number of male and female athletes from their delegations. It seems that although the IOC has increased outreach to women, the Olympic Solidarity Programme still maintains a male bias. This issue needs to be further examined and steps need to be taken to ensure women receive a more equitable distribution of scholarships in order to ensure the parity the IOC is ultimately seeking.

Another startling statistic was presented in the table "Gender representation in NOCs delegations by continent" (9). In this table, the amount and percentage of female and male athletes are broken down by their continents of origin. These are the percentages of

female participants in order from greatest to least: Asia (45.6%), Oceania (43.1%)<sup>3</sup>, Americas (42.7%), Europe (39.2%), Africa (33.7%). Europe had by far the most participants 5,342 out of a total 10,568 (50.5%) yet, it was the continent with the second to lowest percentage of female participants. Since Europe contains the bulk of countries that are considered 'First World'/'developed', one might assume that these nations strive for higher social equality and would value sending an equal amount of women and men to the Olympic Games. Not only does this statistic contradict this assumption, but, according to *"From Marrakech to the Dead Sea,"* out of the five continental associations, Europe is the only one without a Women and Sports Commission (25). This report claims that European women athletes and Olympic administrators seem to be flourishing without a commission dedicated to women's involvement. "President Patrick Hickey of the European Olympic Committee (EOC) attributes this success to historical equal treatment of women in everyday life" (26). However, President Hickey seems to ignore that the only country that sends a lower percentage of women to the Olympics is Africa, a continent that is taking many steps to increase women's participation including having the most female NOC presidents - five in all (22). Simply stating that women have always enjoyed equality within Europe does not make it true, nor does it seem to be helping women excel within the Olympic body. If the percentage of women who compete in the Olympic Games is to eventually equal that of men, Europe needs to acknowledge the disparities within its NOCs and start taking active steps to remedy them.

Overall, *"Women Participation at the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad: Athens 2004"* contains statistics trending towards parity in participation that women, athletes especially, can feel positively about. It is encouraging that reports like this exist and that steps continue to be taken by the IOC and many NOCs towards women's fuller inclusion in the Olympic Games. However, upon finding the aforementioned disparities within the statistics, it is important that the reasons why the percentage of Olympic Solidarity scholarships for women is lower than those for men and seems to be falling is further researched. Also, Europe needs to be probed as to why they have yet to commit to a Women and Sport Commission and whether they see women's equality as an important goal within the sporting world. As an Olympic gold medal is still considered one of the greatest sporting achievements and the Olympic Games literally plays to a world stage, it is crucial that women be represented

equally. Although representing gender equally in sport will not eliminate sexism, achieving equality in one realm makes it more possible in others. All in all, it is necessary to continually analyze the statistics put forth by the IOC to ensure that women athletes and administrators continue on the path to Olympic equality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> International Olympic Committee. *Progress Report: From Marrakech to the Dead Sea: Tangible Progress for Women in Sport*. Proc. of 4<sup>th</sup> IOC Conference on Women and Sport, 8-10 March 2008, Dead Sea, Jordan. International Olympic Committee: February 2008..

<sup>2</sup> International Olympic Committee. *The Women and Sport Commission website, 2009* [<http://www.olympic.org/en/content/The-IOC/Commissions/Women-and-Sport/>] (26 June 2010).

<sup>3</sup> I have corrected this number from the percentage printed in the report, 56.9%. This percentage is the amount of male participants.

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