

Women and the Olympics: Research, Activism, and an Alternative View

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, Professor Emerita,
University of Toronto, Canada

The theme of Women and the Olympics can be interpreted in a number of ways, depending largely on the particular feminist theoretical approach that is employed. Given the relatively short history of women's sport studies in general, it is not surprising that most contemporary analyses of women and the Olympics echo the dominant themes of the earlier liberal feminists' sport research and activism: equality, equality, equality.

In my own work over the last 15 years, I've developed a radical, socialist feminist approach in critiquing the Olympic industry and, more recently, I've applied transnational feminist analysis (Lenskyj, *Olympic Industry and Women*). I use the term 'industry' to draw attention to the profit-making goals of the Olympics and to challenge the pseudo-religious terms that are central to Olympic rhetoric: Olympic movement, Olympic spirit, Olympic family, etc. (Lenskyj, *Inside the Olympic Industry; The Best Ever Olympics; Olympic Industry Resistance*). In order to set the stage for these alternative analyses, I'll begin with some general observations concerning the study of women's sport in western countries.

Much has changed since 1981, when as a Ph.D. student I wrote my first paper on women and sport. At that time, the body of literature on this topic was so slim that a researcher could probably read and digest it in a matter of days. In short, sport was *not* a feminist issue. The pioneering efforts of feminist activists and scholars that began in the 1960s in western countries focused on the 'big' equality issues - reproductive rights, health, education, and employment. For many feminists, sport was irredeemably male-dominated territory, not worthy of serious attention. These women were, of course, correct in viewing sport as a key force in the nurturing of machismo and hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, however, it was unwise to ignore the central role of sport in entrenching power relations based on gender, class, race/ethnicity, ability, and sexuality (Eitzen), or to dismiss the potential of sport and physical activity as sources of empowerment for girls and women (Lenskyj, *Out on the Field*).

With the low priority accorded to sport within (western) feminisms, feminist sport scholars often found themselves marginalized in women's studies circles as well as in male-dominated sport studies, specifically sport sociology and sport history. This situation gradually changed as scholarly research on women and sport became increasingly recognized and visible in both women's studies and sport studies journals and conference programs. The study of lesbians and gay men in sport also gained some legitimacy in sport studies circles. In my own experience as a public intellectual writing and talking about lesbians in sport since the 1980s, I found that overt expressions of homophobia were rare, perhaps because of liberal academics' reluctance to appear (too) prejudiced. Ironically, while feminist sport scholars in the first decade of the 21st century no longer have to fight for recognition in women's studies or sport studies, those of us who are Olympic critics *and* feminists often find ourselves in a similar position to the feminist sport scholars of the 1980s. We're barely tolerated within sport sociology, *persona non grata* in liberal feminist sport circles, and pariahs in Olympic studies contexts!

As various western countries, often belatedly, enacted legislation prohibiting gender discrimination in sport, sport feminists, activists and researchers began to attract more interest and support from their (non-sport) feminist counterparts. The fitness industry of 1980s, as well as burgeoning women's health movements, also contributed to these changes. However, as I documented in *Out on the Field: Gender, Sport and Sexualities*, the dominant approach to gender issues in sport has long been a liberal feminist one: their recipe is to "add women and stir" rather than to examine what's in the bowl before throwing in the women! The emphasis continues to be on removing barriers in order to maximize female participation and attain gender equality, while the significant flaws in the sporting system locally, nationally and internationally are largely ignored. Specifically, liberal feminist sport scholars and activists have rarely addressed the ways in which sport as presently constituted entrenches global systems of oppression, extending beyond sexism. Focusing on issues of gender in western countries, they have tended to conceptualize a universal 'woman' who merits equitable sporting opportunities. In the context of high performance sport, the emphasis for decades has been on lobbying for more sports and more events for women, unbiased media coverage, greater financial support, more sponsorships, improved career paths, better coaching, and so on, while the organization of international sporting

competitions that culminates the Olympic Games remains unchallenged.

Transnational feminism, in contrast to liberal feminism, offers contemporary feminist scholars the most relevant theoretical perspective for examining women's issues in the context of *global* Olympic sport. A transnational feminist approach identifies the central role of colonialism in women's oppression globally. It calls for western feminists to avoid the trap of western superiority and to recognize the serious problems arising when a western feminist 'product' is exported to the rest of the world. For example, an initiative that has its origins in the mainstream American women's movement is not necessarily meaningful to women in developing countries, or even to women in other western countries like Canada, Australia or the UK. Women in developing countries have their own critiques of Western modernity and their own traditions of resistance, and many distance themselves from Western feminist ideas and practices that do not reflect their own realities (Davis 72). And so, for the majority of women in the global context, the right to enjoy a basic level of physical recreation with its resulting social and health benefits may be a more important goal than the right to equal Olympic opportunity. But although western feminists may recognize the need for universal physical recreation for girls and women, most persist in measuring achievement by the Olympic yardstick, thereby supporting Olympic industry hegemony. For example, success stories of individual Olympic sportswomen appear on a regular basis in feminist publications as well as in the mainstream media: feel-good accounts of the one Muslim sportswoman who wins an Olympic medal, or the one Indigenous woman who gains a place on the national team. In combination with the predictable role-model rhetoric, this individualistic approach leaves colonialism and global capitalism—trademarks of the Olympic industry—unchallenged and unchanged.

Furthermore, in analyzing women and the Olympics, liberal feminist sport scholars have tended to neglect the extensive critical literature on sporting mega-events (also known as hallmark events), the Olympics being the most salient example (see, for example, Hall; Horne and Manzenreiter; Syme, Shaw, Fenton and Mueller). This literature, dating back to the 1980s, focuses specifically on the impacts of mega-events on widespread social problems, including homelessness, human rights abuses, poverty, and environmental degradation—all obviously women's issues as well as human issues. Since the 1980s, as I've documented in my three Olympic books, there has been a global network of grassroots activists, female and

male, who have resisted the Olympic industry. Among them are housing and anti-poverty activists, community workers, academics, lawyers, environmentalists, students, current and former homeless people, even former Olympic athletes. Based my own experience and knowledge of these activists in Canada, the United States, Australia and Europe since the 1900s, I can attest to the fact that they are working towards social justice for women and children, Indigenous peoples, and all other disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, frontline workers in urban neighbourhoods could not fail to notice the ways in which gender, class, race/ethnicity and disability interact to exacerbate the problems of disadvantaged peoples. Based on the mega-event literature and on my own research, I presented a summary of negative Olympic impacts in my 2008 book, *Olympic Industry Resistance: Challenging Olympic Power and Propaganda*:

- evictions of tenants from low-rent housing, particularly in Olympic precincts and downtown areas, to make way for Olympic tourists
 - evictions resulting from gentrification and beautification of low-income areas
 - significant decrease in boarding house stock
 - artificially inflated real estate prices
 - unchanged or weakened tenant protection legislation, resulting in rent increases and evictions without cause, a problem for low-income tenants in particular
 - the criminalization of poverty and homelessness through legislation increasing police powers over homeless and under-housed people in public spaces
 - temporary or permanent privatization of public space
 - temporary or permanent suppression of human rights, particularly freedom of assembly.

There is no dearth of research dating back several decades that documents the social, economic, and political oppression experienced by women *qua* women globally. Therefore, I argue that a thorough critical analysis of sporting mega-events, including the Olympics, should examine how global capitalism increases the gap between haves and have-nots. It should address the gender-specific impacts of hosting the Olympic Games on women who are homeless, or unemployed, or sole-support mothers, or sex trade workers, to name just a few of the vulnerable groups. In light of this evidence, the prospect of exacerbating the plight of already

disadvantaged women through the hosting of a sporting mega-event such as the Olympics should galvanize all feminists into action to oppose Olympic bids and to monitor Olympic preparations in prospective host cities.

Of course this does not happen. Rather, most liberal feminists who research, write and teach about sport in the university, or hold sport leadership positions, or belong to women's sport advocacy organizations, give their unqualified support to the Olympics. When critical voices are raised, they usually focus on the sporting events rather than the social impacts, and reflect a rather simplistic notion of gender equality, as evident in calls for equal treatment. If there are ten events for men in this sport, they argue, there should be ten events for women; sports journalists don't hypersexualize male athletes, so they shouldn't hypersexualize female athletes. Disturbingly, the popular malestream injunction to keep politics out of sport and out of the Olympics appears to have influenced the thinking of many liberal feminists, who avoid looking at the global geopolitical picture in order to keep intact a decontextualized view of pure Olympic sport and the pure Olympic athlete. But no human activity, including sport, operates in a social or political vacuum, and international sporting mega-events are by definition political.

In a current example, Canadian sportswomen and their supporters are focusing their attention on the exclusion of the women's ski-jumping team from the 2010 Winter Olympic program in Vancouver, noting, correctly, that this is a human rights violation. They fail to recognize, however, that the International Olympic Committee's Charter unequivocally states that the IOC is "the moral authority for world sport" and the "supreme authority" over the staging of the Olympic Games. The fact that the IOC's exclusion of women's ski-jumping appears to be a breach of Canadian human rights legislation is simply irrelevant to this "supreme" body. To put the struggle over women's ski-jumping in the Vancouver Games in a broader socio-political context, consider these facts: Vancouver is the city where draconian pre-Olympic legislation has given a green light to police and security personnel to harass homeless women and men, sex trade workers, and other 'undesirables'. It's the city where homeless women and men live and die on the streets, the city where middle-class residents are attempting to close down shelters for homeless people in their neighbourhood. These are all human rights issues, and they are issues that involve thousands of disadvantaged women, men and children every day of their lives, and not just for two weeks in 2010.

As recently as 2008, I was asked to review a proposal for an anthology on an aspect of women and the Olympics; all contributors were feminist scholars. As I wrote in my evaluation, the entire project appeared to be based on assumption that the Olympics were 'a good thing'. Although I recognized the names of many critical scholars in the list of contributors, none proposed a thorough critique of the Olympic industry, and many seemed firmly positioned in the liberal feminist camp. Furthermore, none took up the challenge that I put forward eight years earlier, in my first book of Olympic critique, *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics and Activism*, calling for the dismantling of the Olympic industry. So-called Olympic reform efforts since 2000 have not changed my commitment to this position:

I would argue that people who enjoy sport and value democracy would be ill-advised to support any aspect of the Olympics, and that their energies and talents would be better directed towards other regional, national, and international sporting competitions that are currently conducted in more ethical and less exploitative ways (*Inside the Olympic Industry* 195)

While I find the dominant liberal perspective on the Olympics within feminist circles disappointing, the overt hostility that I've experienced in broader academic and professional contexts is a significantly bigger problem. At the risk of appearing self-indulgent, I want to give an example of a personal attack that involved an anonymous reviewer of the first draft of my manuscript, *Best Olympics Ever?* I'm doing so not to draw attention to my own struggles, but because I believe that my silence simply gives a green light to Olympic sycophants and gatekeepers to continue shoring up Olympic industry hegemony by whatever means possible, including bullying and personal attacks on critics.

This anonymous reviewer, apparently an American social scientist, provided a small amount of constructive criticism amid several pages of outraged indignation. Amongst his largely unsubstantiated characterizations and accusations was the claim that my work was a "diatribe or advocacy journalism" (as if they were synonymous terms), that there were numerous instances of "special pleading, unsupported innuendo and score-settling," and that my "tendentiousness" in citing a university colleague's research "would be somewhat laughable were it not for the fact that

he is also [dean]...at the same university where the author teaches in an attached institute. It's my understanding there's a history here."

Apart from the obviously inappropriateness of this comment, it was public knowledge that my colleague and I had developed very different positions on Olympic issues since the mid-1990s. Our opposing views had been widely aired on the pages of newspapers and university publications, on radio and television, in university forums and on public platforms where we had debated the issues at length. Indeed, the implication that I had hidden motives was, to use the reviewer's term, laughable. Finally, the reviewer reported that there were "odd and tendentious attacks on researchers who share many of her convictions and have tried to help her." I found this sexist, patronizing and unprofessional. Having made dozens of presentations on my Olympic research at Australian and Canadian universities since 1992, I am familiar with the hostility, overt and covert, that my critique evokes; constructive criticism is rare. (The fact that the majority of Olympic scholars around the world are male seems to exacerbate the problem). This reviewer implied that unnamed colleagues had been attempting, apparently in vain, to provide me with much-needed "help" for my own good. I cannot imagine that a male Olympic scholar—a full professor with a similar research and publication record—would be characterized in this manner, that is, as someone who needed but rejected collegial "help".

Here, and elsewhere in the report, it appeared that the anonymous reviewer's comments not only reflected his own complaints, but that he had also solicited other academics to tell him of their encounters with my alleged recalcitrance. Thus his review gave the impression of being a collaborative effort to accumulate evidence against me. In my response to the SUNY editor, I suggested that another reviewer, whose feedback had been more positive, might be justified in also soliciting comments from his colleagues in order to present a collective positive review. (SUNY subsequently solicited two additional reviews, which recommended acceptance and provided constructive criticism; the book was published in August 2002.)

Where does this leave feminist research and activism relating to the Olympic Games? My own position is no doubt clear, but I cannot expect many sport feminists to share it. However, I think it's fair to recommend that, in examining the issue of women and the Olympics, you ask yourself two key questions: Who benefits? Who suffers?

References

- Davis, K. *The Making of Our Bodies Ourselves: How Feminism Travels Across Borders*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Eitzen, S. "Classism in sport: the powerless bear the burden." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 20/1 (1994): 95-105.
- Horne, J. and Manzenreiter, W., eds. *Sports Mega-Events: Social Scientific Analysis of a Global Phenomenon*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.
- Lenskyj, H. "More than games: Community involvement in the Toronto bid for the 1996 Olympics." In R. Barney and K. Meier, eds. *Proceedings of the First International Symposium for Olympic Research*. London: University of Western Ontario, 1992. 78-87.
- Lenskyj, H. *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics and Activism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000.
- Lenskyj, H. *The Best Ever Olympics: Social Impacts of Sydney 2000*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002.
- Lenskyj, H. *Out on the Field: Gender, Sport and Sexualities*. Toronto: Women's Press, 2003.
- Lenskyj, H. *Olympic Industry Resistance: Challenging Olympic Power and Propaganda*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008
- Lenskyj, H. "The Olympic Industry and Women: An Alternative Perspective." In H. Lenskyj and S. Wagg, eds. *Olympic Studies Handbook*. London: Palgrave, forthcoming 2011.
- Wagg, eds. *Olympic Studies Handbook*. London: Palgrave, forthcoming 2011.

Helen Jefferson-Lenskyj, "Women and the Olympics: Research, Activism, and an Alternative View", *thirdspace* 9/2 (2011)