The Engagement of Women in Sport: The Strategies Adopted by the International Olympic Committee

Alcides Vieira Costa, Lusíada University of Lisbon
Maria José Carvalho, University of Porto

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Throughout the history of the Olympic Movement there were many positions against the participation of women in decision-making structures and in the Olympic Games. However, the reality shows that the engagement of women in the Olympic Movement decision-making structures as well as in the Olympic Games has grown considerably (Oliveira, 2006; Devide, 2005; Carvalho & Cruz, 2007; IOC & ISLP, 2004; IOC, 2012). In 1894, the founding session of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had no female participation, as well as the Olympic Games in Athens (1896). Nevertheless, starting in the Paris Olympic Games, held in 1900, the participation of women has grown from 2% to 10% in Amsterdam (1928), and to 43% in Athens (2004) and Beijing (2008). In the London Games (2012) all 204 delegations had female athletes. Concerning the decision-making structures of the sport worldwide, women are now part of approximately 20%. What is defended is that this gradual evolution is a result of a number of organizational strategies adopted by the IOC. An organizational strategy can be considered the determination of long-term objectives and the adoption of the necessary actions and resources to achieve them (Slack & Parent, 2006). According to Drucker (1993) the strategic process reflects the organizational thinking and the direction the organization wants to take. When properly structured, strategies put in order the operations of an organization (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lambel, 2009). However, the strategic process must be studied in its complexity. If a strategy is analyzed separately from the organizational process that formed it, a reliable assessment will be compromised. Currently, the IOC provides a structure of ideas, beliefs and concepts that determine the strategic direction to be followed, providing the necessary guidance to ensure coherence between efforts and results of the Olympic Movement and the IOC itself. In this sense, this study aims to present the main IOC organizational strategies which culminated in a better female engagement in decision-making structures of the Olympic Movement and increased their participation in the Games.

The methodology adopted to reach the aim of this study was a documentary research in a qualitative socio-historical approach (Freitas, 2003). The research paradigm aimed to investigate facts and changes that have occurred throughout the history of the IOC. To identify the organizational strategies adopted through the years, the Minutes of IOC Sessions were taken as reference. These documents were used due to the fact that the IOC meetings bring together the strategic apex of the institution and the members representing it in their own countries. Furthermore, at the IOC sessions, decisions are taken and important issues discussed shaping the development of Olympic sport worldwide. The data analyzed consisted of 77 IOC Session minutes from the 47th Session, held in Helsinki, 1952 to the 123rd held in Durban, 2011 and it was collected at the Olympic Studies Centre in Lausanne, Switzerland. This time frame was determined as before the Avery Brundage presidency in the 1950s the main theme of the study was not much discussed in the Sessions, and the last minute analyzed was the 123rd since this was the last one available for public access when the research was being conducted in the Olympic Museum archives. To achieve the aim of the study, the documents were analyzed through content analysis. The topics covered by the IOC sessions were categorized and classified according to their occurrence and relevance, evidencing some of the main organizational strategies of the IOC.

The results indicate that in the 1950s there were already concerns about women’s participation in the Olympic Games, despite still incipient and suffering from prejudice. Besides, there was no evidence of the participation of women in decision-making structures of the Olympic Movement until the end of the 1960s. In 1973 the first organizational strategies of significant impact emerged, such as allowing the entry of women as IOC member, being the first elected only in 1981. The Olympic Congress of Varna (1973), Baden-Baden (1981) and Paris (1994) were landmarks in the development of organizational strategies. As a consequence, many strategies were adopted through the years, as for example: the creation of a specific Working Group; the target of 10% women in decision-making structures of the Olympic Movement until 2000 and 20% by 2005; the organization of World Conferences and
Regional Seminars; the rectification of the Olympic Charter; the involvement of the Olympic Solidarity; and some important changes in the Olympic Programme. As a result, women's participation reached 38% in the Sydney Olympic Games (2000) and 43% in Beijing (2008). Concerning the women engagement in decision-making structures, in 2006 only three International Federations (IFs) and six National Olympic Committees (NOCs) had no women in its organizational structure, however, the IOC had not reached its own goal. In 2009, the number of women on NOCs Executive Boards had increased although their presence on the IFs boards had decreased. Finally, it is concluded that the IOC effectively took responsibility for the implementation of organizational strategies to increase women's participation in the Olympic Games, although their engagement in decision-making structures was still incipient in 2011, even with the election of three more women as IOC member. In this regard, it highlights the need for further studies to evaluate the effectiveness of each of the strategies adopted.

References:


