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## WHEN GIRLS BECOME WOMEN: SPORT SOCIALISATION IN SINGAPORE

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The enduring colonial tradition that women in Singapore seldom participated in sport has been slow to dissolve. However, the nature and rate of positive change in the values that guide decisions about involvement has become more pronounced in recent times. Women are becoming more active and some would say even more successful than men in the competitive arena. The formalisation of Physical Education, as part of the school curriculum, has stimulated greater awareness and facilitated greater exposure for girls to a domain that had otherwise been neglected. Women have become more prepared to enter sports usually characterised as male dominated, for example contact team sports. This paper examines the shift in prioritisation of values amongst Singapore's sporting females. Information gained from a small-scale survey and two interviews with sportswomen in national contact sport teams, provides a framework to explore these trends and the process of empowerment of females in sport. This paper provides an insight into the motivating factors for women's sports participation, the significance of the school sports experience and the accompanying implications.

### 1 Introduction

Girls and women in Singapore have benefitted from a widening of opportunities and greater exposure to sport. The formalisation of Physical Education (PE) as a compulsory non-examinable subject in the Singapore education system has helped to encourage increases in the number of girls and women participating in sport. In 1987, only 22% of women engaged in regular sports participation, compared to 34% for men. This figure rose to 28% in 1997 and then to 42% in 2008. The figures for men also increased: from 40% in 1997 to 58% in 2008. Although a larger proportion of women now engage regularly in physical activity, statistics still show some disparity between the physical activity levels of the average Singaporean man and woman.

This paper examines three important aspects of female participation in sport: (1) How Singaporean women's social status has changed with time; (2) How Singapore has provided for female sports participation; and (3) How Singapore's schools act as agents of socialisation into sports for women.

To find out how school experience has impacted women's participation in sports, most recently, an exploratory survey was conducted with a random sample of 20 women

in their twenties and thirties. They had all experienced the initial phases of PE and sports programmes during the 1980s and 1990s. Also employed are sections from two interviews which reflect how PE and co-curricular activities have impacted women's journey in sports and the reasons for increasing sports participation amongst women.

## **2 Herstory**

As Singapore evolved as a patriarchal society, the images and roles of all women were largely predetermined by the men. Song Ong Siang (1896) judged that women were seen as the 'weaker sex' and inferior to men in all aspects. Women were encouraged to be passive as they were 'too weak for physical activity' and women who participated in sports were seen as 'unfeminine'.

Women were usually no more than spectators on the sidelines. The New Year Land and Sea Sports, in full swing by the 1880s were traditionally 'brightened' by the presence of European ladies along the quayside and in the confines of the second floor of the Singapore Cricket Club – if the weather was bad. The British, as colonial masters, discouraged women from participating actively in sports. European and Eurasian women had only occasional opportunities to participate in 'womanly sports' such as tennis. It was only in 1883 that women secured a venue for tennis away from the men. The first girls-only sporting club only emerged in 1929 when the Goldburn Sports Club was established near Serangoon Road for Eurasian girls who wished to play team game like hockey (The Straits Times, 31 July 1929, p.17.) The first school to introduce netball was Raffles Girls School during the same year.

It was not until 1962 that the Singapore Women's Netball Association was officially registered. Cheang (2004) indicated that the process of achieving full status for netball was long and arduous, with issues relating to harnessing financial resources, encouraging volunteers to contribute to the cause and fighting for access to suitable playing facilities being major constraints.

Since the beginning of women's quest for gender equality, sport has become a platform for women to strive for equal status. Bryson (1990) asserts that in the feminist movement, more and more women have been empowered to challenge male hegemony. Women have been encouraged to participate and excel in sports, while their involvement and achievement in other aspects, such as work and education, is also becoming increasingly notable.

The governance and administration of sports-related matters was not always as structured as it is today under the leadership of the Singapore Sports Council (SSC). Before independence in 1965, people's involvement in sports was very much a reflection of their individual association with schools and clubs – there were few community-based activities and facilities. Only wealthy or educated girls were fortunate enough to have the opportunity for physical activities.

Athletes like Singapore's first female Olympian Tang Pui Wah, who attended Nanyang Girls' High School, and Janet Jesudason, a convent girl and a track athlete,

were two such sportswomen in the 1950s. Their journey to sport excellence was largely driven by personal motivation with limited support from schools and clubs (Aplin, 2000).

The 1970s and 1980s provided evidence that the government was giving more support and emphasis to sports as a nation-building tool. The SSC introduced the National Accreditation of Physical Fitness Award to 10-18-year-old students as a form of assessment. With awards like 'Sportsboy and Sportsgirl of the Year', the government accorded equal recognition to sportsmen and sportswomen. The 1990s and 2000s have witnessed a proliferation of sports facilities and events, materialising SSC's aim to develop a sports industry in Singapore.

Sport has been made accessible to women and has quickly become a way of life for a larger population of Singaporeans. Although these policies were targeted at Singapore population as a whole, women have directly benefited from these implementations.

### **3 Other Initiatives**

While sports were being promoted as a key element of a healthy lifestyle for all age groups, the government also placed greater emphasis on PE and the younger generation. In 1984, the College of Physical Education (CPE) was established to train PE specialists. Physical Education and Sports Science (PESS) now functions as a department under NIE to provide for sports-related training and research, including PE, sports sciences and sports studies.

In 1999, Singapore also held its first women and sport conference "Women and Sport: New Horizons," witnessing the collaborative effort under the leadership of Annabel Pennefather, currently Vice President of the Singapore National Olympic Council. Since then, organisations like [womenandsports.org](http://womenandsports.org) and Amore Fitness have been set up to provide sport services exclusively for women. This also resulted in a series of women events such as *Great Eastern Women's 10K Race* and the publishing of women sport and wellness magazines like *Shape*.

### **4 Women's Experiences in PE and Sport**

This paper now examines women's experiences of PE and sports Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs). This discussion examines the impact of changing values on sports participation and the empowerment of women through PE and school sports.

With the passage of time, Singaporeans have expressed fewer expectations that women should engage solely in 'feminine' activities. It seems that most people have accepted that women should be given opportunities in other life pursuits beyond the roles of wife and mother. All participants in this study commented that the change in social perceptions of women played a huge part in the increasing female sports participation. All the participants in their 'twenties' strongly disagreed when asked if it was true that 'women are expected not to do sports.' Only 50% of the participants in their thirties gave the same response, suggesting that the process of change has been rapid.

Andrea is a national handball player in her mid-twenties. She first tried out the sport in her varsity days. She judged that handball was not a typical sport for women as it

involved physical aggression and body contact. Yet, more and more young women were in the scene and that showed that the mentality of females nowadays has changed tremendously. She revealed that the sense of achievement and satisfaction had been her main source of motivation. She acknowledged and valued good plays, but she played to win and was not afraid to admit it.

Serena is a physical educator, a rugby coach and a national rugby player in her early thirties. She agreed that the scene was evolving. She said that it was encouraging to see that more girls are picking up the sport although it was not a recognised CCA in schools. Most of the girls started off with touch [rugby] but once they got hooked on the adrenaline rush of contact [rugby], they start attending more training sessions. When asked about the reason for more girls getting into contact rugby, she mentioned how girls nowadays are more '*garang*'.

Before the change of attitude towards women playing contact sports, activities such as rugby and handball were very much forbidden territory for the Asian women. Kunalan (1999) found that more than 50% of both men and women agreed that women should not be involved in contact sports. The perception today suggests a change as there are greater numbers in female handball and female rugby.

With this paradigm shift, men's perceptions of women have also changed. Kunalan (1999) discovered that 65% of women and 84% of men found "feminine women are more attractive than masculine women." In the context of Singapore, it is assumed that 'femininity' referred to ladylike appearance and behaviour. Andrea offered a more contemporary perspective when she said that sweet and demure girls used to be the popular ones, now it's the sporty and outgoing ones that get all the attention – the ones who are toned and tanned – your typical sportsgirl.

Andrea also noted the prioritisation of personal pleasure and self-direction in girls who participate in sports. She suggested that sporty girls are popular not just because of their appearance. They are also confident and fun to be with. They have their own minds and are not afraid to speak up. According to Andrea, more and more men are attracted to sportswomen, especially in universities.

Despite this newfound independence and confidence in modern females, Andrea observed that many girls still need affirmation from their peers. She suggested that girls are more people-centered and who they play with is very important. Girls appear to value teamwork more than boys. When a boy scores a goal, he looks to the crowd for cheers. When a girl scores a goal, she looks to the teammate who passed her the ball and says 'good pass'.

Based on her coaching experience, Serena also suggested that girls may still display the need for security and conformity despite participating in sports. She asserted that girls participate in sports for slightly different reasons than boys. Girls are motivated by different things. There was no doubt in her mind that there are competitive girls who have a strong desire to win, but there will also be a group of girls who will only participate if their friends are involved too.

## 5 Capital and Empowerment

Through compulsory PE, girls have become better equipped with the necessary knowledge and exposure to engage in physical activities. This knowledge acts as a form of *cultural capital*, defined by Bourdieu as “cultural resources like educational and artistic knowledge” (Giulianotti, 2005). For women, this exposure, since young, allows them access to a form of education which was not previously made open to them.

Serena experienced PE lessons conducted by a non-PE trained teacher. In the early to mid-1980s, teachers adopted the ‘roll out the ball’ approach and the students had the entire PE period to regulate their own playing. The lessons were fun but there was no structured learning involved.

Andrea, who started formal education in the 1990s, had an entirely different experience. She indicated that they went through a different sport unit every 10 week term. There were even had ‘imported’ teachers who were sport specialists in basketball or badminton for example. This was a crucial period for girls like Andrea who had the chance to see if they liked a particular sport. By developing fundamental sport skills in primary school, they were assured higher success rates later on when the games became more complex.

While it may not be representative of the nation, the difference in school experience may be due to the different types of schools that they attended. Andrea was fortunate enough to be in a system which placed much emphasis on holistic education, hence the resources for a better PE programme. Fortunately for Serena, her lack of exposure to sport earlier on was compensated for with her track and field experience during secondary school days. Being a thrower in her school track and field team, she had her first experience as a competitive athlete. Serena’s coach adopted an ‘old-school’ style. He believed in hard physical conditioning and it was not easy for a team of girls to take that kind of training. Some of Serena’s teammates told her that they could not endure that approach. Subsequently they did not pursue other competitive sports.

However, for girls like Serena, who liked that sort of training, there was the realisation that they liked the competitive component of sport and enjoyed driving themselves to their limits. That was how she found rugby.

Andrea, who had a more substantial foundation from her primary school days’ PE, also found CCA a useful platform to build up girls’ interest in sports. She represented her primary school in track and field and secondary school in softball. She commented that her softball experience in secondary school was an eye-opener as her coach exposed her to the sport scene beyond school level with combined training, club softball. The club coach was an important role-model who trained under the hot sun with the team. He was a fatherly figure, who exposed them to external leagues and tournaments under. It was through such tournaments that social networks and a foundation for participation were established.

Thus CCA not only helps to build up females’ cultural capital in terms of sport knowledge and skills, it also empowers women with *social capital*. Serena confirmed this as she revealed that it was not uncommon for coaches to bring their students out for club

training and tournaments. Andrea also brought up the significance of varsity sports in determining whether a particular individual would continue to participate in sports in adulthood. She reflected that when people graduate and start to work, it is difficult to look for opportunities for sport participation as clubs are often involved in competitive leagues that only involve the best players. Although Andrea herself was active in university, she perceived that other girls may not have the same experience. She suggested that once some girls have started university life that they enter a 3 to 4 year period of non-participation in sport.

When some women start work, they may feel that they have lost touch for too long. There is no obvious path back to involvement in sport. For men, re-establishing sporting links is easier. Andrea was fortunate in that she sustained her interest and contacts during tertiary education through inter-hall and inter-school games.

## **6 Conclusion**

The heightened recognition given to PE and CCA has given Singapore's females a better chance of socialisation into sport. However, this cannot be done solely via schools. Other agents like peers, family and community play equally important roles to ease females' entrance into the sport scene. Whilst socialisation into sport is introduced in school, the challenge is to sustain the effects long after these girls graduate into adulthood. After all, this is a relatively new arena for women after a long history of subordination for this 'fairer gender'. Certainly, it takes time to alter perceptions and biases. Yet many changes have taken place since the 1999 women and sport conference. As Singapore continues to progress towards elevated status in sport, its women can only expect more possibilities of sport participation and sport excellence.

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