

Etes-vous pret? Partez! – The Late Start of Women Rowers

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

Anna Alliquander^{1 A-E}, Tímea Tibori^{2 A-E}

¹*Semmelweis University Institute of Public Health, Hungary*

²²*Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Social Research Centre, Institute of Sociology*

ABSTRACT

The aim of our study is to show the development of women's rowing and competition, as well as the reasons for its slow spread, taking into account the so called decisive era, the social environment, which, although in various ways, has greatly influenced it all over the world. One of the major research methods for collecting data was document analysis: we used the volumes of Gusztáv Götz's legacy¹ found in the sports history collection of the Hungarian Rowing Federation, whose spirit we also tried to preserve. In these volumes we found and analysed congressional reports, resolutions made by the national rowing federations, professional articles on rowing and papers on sports medicine. In addition, we studied the relevant literature, namely, studies dealing with the era from sociological, sports sociological and sports historical perspectives. Moreover, via membership in the Traditionalist Committee of the Hungarian Rowing Federation we had the opportunity to meet the great Hungarian female rowing champions of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and we prepared structured in-depth interviews with them. Meeting most often with Anna Domonkos¹, Ágnes Bán¹, Zsuzsanna Rakitay¹. The results show that the international rowing society was divided, the social and medical discourse differed from each other in the assessment of women's sports, sports historical traditions varied country by country and international sports politics also played a decisive role in the delay. With the results, our paper is intended to give a more thorough picture of the reasons why women's competition in rowing has expanded so slowly than the previous analyses did.

KEYWORDS

women's rowing, women's rights, rowing history, modern rowing sports

Introduction

From the start, male rowing featured at the modern Olympics, and the first men's European championship was organized in as early as 1893. The French-language commands in the title (to which the racing ladies had long wanted to start) were used by starters at international rowing competitions until 1990. In 1991 the International Rowing Federation (FISA – Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d'Aviron) switched to the English-language start command (Are you ready? Go!). "Late Start" in the title refers to the fact that women's competition in rowing was only recognized as late as in 1954 when, as a result of persistent and lengthy battles, a European Championship could finally be organized also for them. For a long time

afterwards, it was not possible to step any further. It was only in 1974 that the first world championship was held, where women's racing events were also on the agenda and the first such Olympic Games took place in 1976. Our study aims to present the social, healthcare, historical and political background for this "delay". The paper is based on our research which focuses on female rowing and competition in rowing in England, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland and the former "Soviet bloc", with special regard to Hungary.

Methods

For collecting the data we used the volumes of Gusztáv Götz's legacy, found in the sports history collection of the Hungarian Rowing Federation for content analysis. Besides the congressional materials of FISA available in these volumes we found the accounts on the opinions of certain national federations, articles on rowing history and on sports medicine. We also gained a lot of information from "witnesses" that drove us to explanation about the reasons for the slow development of women's rowing. As former rowers and members of the Traditionalist Committee of the Hungarian Rowing Federation, we had the chance to meet the great champions of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and to prepare structured in-depth interviews with them (N=10). Besides, the Hungarian text of millions of pages from "Arcanum Digitális Tudománytár" (Arcanum Digital Science Collection) made it possible for us to study the writings on women's rowing of the printed resources of our past. The works of sports historians researching women's rowing in the countries listed in the introduction, the studies of sports sociologists studying the era, the examination of documents revealing the history of individual rowing clubs and associations and the analysis of personal stories and narratives also proved to be valuable sources.

Research context: The Decisive Era

In the process of modernization social changes have contributed to changes in sports but the development of modern sport has also influenced social processes. As a result of modernization and economic change, the people's values and their quality of life have changed. As the main element of the modernization process, industrialization has influenced most elements of society and had both a social and cultural consequences, since educational levels have increased, gender roles have changed (Inglehart & Backer 2000).

Since the end of the 19th century, the birth of the Olympic idea has served not only the spread of modern sport but also the spread of modernization worldwide (Dunning 1994). With the development of modern sport, it was possible to lay down and unify rules, as well as to fund national and international sports associations (Elias 1986). Women's ability to join modern sport used to be very different in the past, depending on each country's history, society, culture and healthcare. It was natural for "the fair sex" that certain areas of social life were not "for them". This was also the case for sports, not fitting into the traditional home-making, maternal or wife roles. The pursuit of equality started in the field of education and employment, as well as obtaining the right to vote. Subsequently, it was possible to adopt new patterns of women's behaviour, which also created the possibility of women practicing sports. In the Hungarian weekly magazine "Új Idők" ("New Times"), Dr. Ferenc Mező, Olympic champion of the 1928 Amsterdam Art Olympics wrote the following about the beginning of the relationship between Hungarian women and physical culture:

"In 1877, our cultural government made teaching physical education obligatory in the Hungarian teacher training schools. Following this beneficial regulation, briefly afterwards, every girl's school welcomed physical exercises among its tools of education. For a while, there is a great deal of opposition. Mothers harshly oppose of their daughters doing gymnastics, because they do not want to educate them to become circus rope-dancers or horsewomen. There are even mothers who regard gymnastics as a frivol comedy".⁴

Initially, there were the men who suggested some forms of beneficial exercise to women. Their goal was actually to teach traditional female roles, enhance feminine qualities and prepare women for the maternal role

⁴ Új Idők (New Times). Literary and art weekly magazine, critical review. Edited by: Ferenc Herczeg. 1933, 39(25), p. 779.

with the help of exercises (Bodnár, 2005). Not many have questioned the patriarchal character of modern sport as well as its role in the maintenance of male hegemony and if so, they have only come as far as to raise the issue in the subject of discrimination of women in the field of sport, without theoretically clarifying the forms of male dominance in sports and its changes (Dunning, 2002). In our study, we present the changes occurring in rowing, and the women's gaining ground there. At the same time we point to the inner causes and agents of slowing the progress, as well as to the latent factors that still hinder the conflict-free realization of women's equal opportunities.

Results

Women and the beginnings of modern rowing Sports

Modern rowing sports developed in England during the 18th century and then spread rapidly first in the Anglo-Saxon countries (the United States, Canada and Australia) and later throughout Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, France and Italy). A female rower did not fit into the traditional upper middle-class rowing men's idea of female identity and, in particular, they did not consider them competent to take part in a race. The ideal woman was shy, weak, and dependent on others so, initially, only the role of the spectator was intended for women at social and sports events (Bodnár 2003). At the same time, the female members of these very same classes were mainly those who recognized this social problem, the patriarchal relations and started fighting for balance of power between the sexes (Dunning 2002), which can be well traced in the field of sports; thus, in rowing, too.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the Modern Olympic Games appreciated rowing, its impact developing moral and social skills, and even considered it a sin not to use the available water surfaces, ponds and rivers for rowing. To create harmony in the movement of the graceful, thin boat, the rower and the rowing paddle – for men. Because "the strength which your sons acquire today will be their country's strength tomorrow."⁵ The easy-to-see rowing movement performed with the right technique and in a good rhythm, as a racing sport, is actually a strength and endurance sport with high strain, so no wonder that the lack of oxygen, the feeling of sore muscles during the races and the sight of post-race fainting did not particularly attract the middle and upper-class ladies to compete in rowing; at the same time, it became more and more popular as leisure sport. The Hungarian "Honderű" magazine reported on female rowers as early as in 1846: "Beautiful summer days are attracting our pretty women to come out to different places. In the past days, on Margaret Island, there were several coteries, one of which, crossing the Danube on a jolly boat, was rowed by beautiful lady hands."⁶ Well before that, the press had been keen on reporting about "militant Amazons", eccentrics and events attracting readers and audiences. Such is for instance a writing published in 1886, where the performance of Ann Glanville living in Saltash, England is praised, with thirty years of delay, who triumphed several times in the 1850s when competing against men (Parker 1993). In 1894 "Hercules", the Hungarian magazine reports about a promising "fierce Amazon battle" where "Timișoara and Torontal will measure the strengths of their rowing ladies." The clinker-built quadruple scull of "Torontal" was compiled by lord lieutenant Jenő Rónay, and his team's stroke was the lord lieutenant's wife, Mrs Jenő Rónay."⁷

Rowing within organized frameworks

From 1875, in the United States, several private colleges (e.g. Mount Holyoke and Wellesley College) set up recreational rowing programmes for female students where racing was prohibited but it was a good basis for exercise resulting in an elegant and healthy shape and, later, competitive sports (Schweinbenz, 2009).

⁵ "The strength which your sons acquire today will be their country's strength tomorrow." De Coubertin, P. *Olympism: Selected Writings*, p. 183. Translated by N. Müller. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2000 Quoted by Schweinbenz, A.N. (2009). Selling Femininity: The Introduction of Women's Rowing at the 1976 Olympic Games. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 26(5), 654-672.

⁶ Honderű. Literature, art and fashion magazine. Edited by: Lázár Petrichevich Horváth 1846., 22(4), 438.

⁷ Herkules. Official journal of sports clubs, biweekly magazine. Edited by: Jenő and Kálmán Porzsolt. 1894, 11(13),

Likewise, in England, where since 1884, female students at Sommerville College in Oxford could practice rowing, of course, strictly avoiding sensation and organizing trainings at times different from those of boys' teams. Around this time, the Cambridge student girls could take the water for the first time and they were strictly required to have excellent swimming skills. With more and more colleges cooperating with each other, in 1912, the London University Ladies' Boat Club was founded but they had no chance to compete. The first Women's Oxford-Cambridge Regatta took place in 1927, nearly a hundred years after the first men's regatta. However, this was a style competition (Dodd 1992).

Ladies' rowing clubs and style rowing for women

From the 1920s, women's sport was gaining ground worldwide, slowly including rowing. Women formed their own organizations, rowing clubs and associations to make it easier for them to access the water, trying to be independent from the long-standing structures (Bodnár 2015). In fact, they continued to struggle with ever greater confidence for the rights of women. Although it is true that this required the "civilization" transformation which, according to the gentlemen's code of decency, allowed women's aspirations to be realized, without the representatives of "the stronger sex" exercising their dominance and better combat ability (Dunning 2002). In addition, supporters often included influential husbands, brothers and rowing friends. Thus, it can be said that the development of modern rowing indirectly contributed to gender balance, if not to an equilibrium but to a change of balance in the field of power distribution. As a result of this development, in 1923, in England, Amy Gentry⁸ and Mrs. KL Summerton founded the Women's Amateur Rowing Association (WARA), and Lady Desborough, the wife of the British Olympic Committee's chairman was invited to become its first leader. The fact that they formed a "Women's" Alliance and not a "Ladies'" Alliance is of great significance since, this way, they set the adoption and spreading of women's competitive rowing as their main goal, instead of or in addition to recreational and style rowing. With a similar decision, in 1920, the Australian Ladies' Rowing Council was formed, but later, precisely following the English nomenclature, it renamed itself to the Women's Rowing Council (Wigglesworth 1992).

In order to understand this, it is necessary to mainly speak about style rowing and style competition. Among women, during this period, the so-called style rowing was developing in England and Germany, specifically with training in aesthetic and movement art. In style competitions, the goal was not to move the boat as fast as possible but, instead, the perfect technical execution was scored by the referees. This form of racing was supported by the contemporary medical discourse, as it strains the "fragile, vulnerable" female body less. At the same time, this way, rowers were differentiated according to social classes: ladies from higher classes preferred style rowing, while women from the lower class preferred "traditional" competitive rowing (Hutmacher 2010).

At the same time, for the broader social recognition of style competitions (especially among men), under the Gentry's leadership, WARA began lobbying as early as in 1927 for women's rowing style competition to be added to the competitions at the Olympic Games in Amsterdam a year later. Although he did not succeed in the next twenty years, as a result of ongoing requests and questions, the member countries of the International Rowing Federation (FISA) were forced to take a stand related to the issue of women's competition. There were supporters and opponents, and the idea of organizing women's international racing competitions was slowly put on the agenda (Schweinbenz 2009).

⁸ Amy Constance Gentry (26 July 1903 – 11 June 1976) was a pioneer of women's rowing in England, starting at Weybridge Rowing Club where she founded a ladies' section in 1920. She competed in a variety of styles and was the undefeated champion of the women's single scull from 1932 to 1934. She also helped to administer the sport of rowing, acting as secretary of the Women's Amateur Rowing Association between 1926 and 1938, then chairing it and its successor body, the women's committee of the Amateur Rowing Association, until retiring in 1968. In 1960, she persuaded the International Rowing Federation to hold its women's European championships in London. She was awarded the Order of the British Empire for services to rowing in 1969.

Female rowing until the end of the Second World War and beyond

It can be said that perhaps the English female rowers did the most in order to spread women's competitive rowing at an international level though, in Germany, rowing was equally popular among women/ladies. While style races enjoyed similar popularity in both countries, there was a difference in the judgment of sculling and sweep-oar rowing.⁹ While in Germany there was an argument whether the asymmetric movement of the sweep-oar rowing was harmful to the health of the female body, this question was basically not even raised in England.

In the Netherlands, style competitions for women were organized as early as in 1913 but competition rowing was not accessible to them and there was only one single women's club (in Leiden) even though many rowing clubs accepted ladies as regular members.¹⁰ In France, style competitions in women's rowing gained ground in the same time period. Similarly to Germany and England, Poland struggled with the problem of centralization, since over half of all female rowers in the country practiced rowing in the only club of the capital city.

In 1935, the statutory assembly of "Juventus First Hungarian Female Rowing Club" was held in Hungary, but as it is known from the narrative of dr. Klára Zarándy Aladárné Czögler, its former founder and vice-president, who deceased three years ago at the age of 104, the students of Jánosházy Rowing School (Jánosházy EI) were able to practice in a club from at the beginning of the 1930s (Alliquander 2011).

France, Belgium, Norway, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Denmark and Poland are among the countries where the international dissemination of female rowing has been supported since the 1930s. After the Second World War, more and more European national alliances "announced" women's rowing championships but while the development of civil society was not restricted by the state in western countries, in the countries of the "Eastern bloc" sports, as everything else, was managed by political administration. What is more, in these countries, rowing was labelled as an "aristocratic sport" and many great clubs were banned or nationalized. On the other hand, the communist sports leadership realized that the profitability of competition sports, including the profitability of women's competition sports could be used in order to legitimize the system (Bakonyi 2007).

Supporters and opponents of women's competition rowing in the International Rowing Federation (FISA)

As it has been mentioned earlier, the idea of organizing women's international rowing competitions was gradually emerging on the agenda. The FISA discussed the "women's issue", i.e. the German proposal to organize a European Championship for women, officially, for the first time in 1937 and then in 1938, but the question kept being removed from the agenda and then progress was blocked by the Second World War. In any case, it became apparent to "Amazons" fighting for women's competitive rowing, such as the English Amy Gentry or the French Antoinette Rocheux that "their lobbying" would only reach real results if they did not merely think in terms of women's alliances and international women's regattas organised by women but sought supporters in their national federations and in FISA, as well (Schweinbenz 2009).

Among the supporting countries were the Netherlands, Belgium, England, Denmark and Hungary. There were a number of partly supportive countries as well, because, referring to health reasons, the West German Rowing Association and the French Rowing Association only supported races in scull rowing (single, double, quad scull) as opposed to the asymmetric movement of sweep-oar rowing (pair, four, eight).

On the other hand, the Italian Rowing Association and the Swiss Rowing Association rejected women's competition. Only health sports (gymnastics, tennis, golf) were recommended for women in Italy and Switzerland as well, with the ultimate goal to ensure the ability of childbearing. It is interesting that the president of FISA, Thomas Keller, who was highly respected in international sports life, was a Swiss national,

⁹ Sweep-oar rowing – the rower holds one oar in his or her hand and rows either to the right or to the left. Scull rowing – the rower holds an oar in the right hand and another one in the left hand.

¹⁰ Borrmann, H. (1907). Vom Frauenrudern im Auslande. *Die Kunst des Ruderns* (p. 232) Berlin: Dr. Wedekind.

In Hutmacher, A. (2010). *Die Entwicklung des Frauenruderns in Deutschland*. Genehmigte Dissertation, Institut für Sportgeschichte der Deutschen Sporthochschule Köln.

and led the International Rowing Federation from 1958 until his death in 1989 and made a lot of efforts to include women's rowing in the Olympic program (Alliquander 2014).

The battle had to be fought in this environment of mixed assessment, taking into account the various traditions of sports history in each member country, the various perceptions of the effects of rowing on women's health and the lack of standardization in female competition rules. Despite all the difficulties, in 1951, the first formal international women's regatta was held in Macon, France, with the participation of four countries (England, Denmark, France and Netherlands), followed by Berlin in 1952, and Copenhagen in 1953. In May 1953, women's competition rules could be unified at the FISA Congress. The minimum weight of the coxswain was set at 50 kg, the race distance at 1,000 m, and the races were: coxless pair, double scull, coxed four, coxed quad and eight. And finally, in 1954, the first European Women's Championship was held in Amsterdam.¹¹

From the first European Championship to the first Olympics

It would be a pleasure to tell a success story from this period but, in fact, women's rowing sports had to overcome a lot of difficulties in order to finally have women's rowing competition at the Montreal Olympics in 1976.

Not only was the popularity of women's sports and the social acceptance of women's competitive sports and women's competition rowing increasing and recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which had a strong normative role in many countries (recommendations, measures for the equal rights for women's sports and athletes), but, in the battle of international politics, rowing women lost two decades before they could compete at World Championships and then at the Olympics.

Within IOC, the countries of the Eastern bloc obviously and unanimously stood behind the Soviet request to include female rowing in the Olympic program and the opposing camp argued that, at the European Championships, "almost every event" would be won by "fat Russians", which would shed negative light on female rowing and raise the suspicion of doping, too. With a smart diplomatic sense, Thomas Keller created the FISA Women's Committee with the participation of the prettiest rowing ladies, including the beautiful, slim, four-time European champion, multilingual, Hungarian Kornélia Pap.¹² The Women's Committee made a good impression on the members of IOC and, even though it was difficult to do so, ultimately, they achieved women's participation in 1976 (Schweinbenz 2009:662).

Women's rowing today

Currently, Olympic Agenda 2020, the reform program of IOC has a major impact on rowing and, due to the principles of "gender equality", a new female event will be added to the Olympic program (women's four) at the expense of men's lightweight four. The aim here is to enable men and women to compete in the same number and in the same events at the Olympics. This causes tensions, but, in the long run, helps the development of women's rowing and increases the professional prestige and recognition of professionals dealing with women, whether they are women or men.

Finally, a couple of comments "to prove" that there is progress, even if it is rather slow. England's two most reputable, longest-running clubs took men only as members from the beginning, as part of their statutes. Founded in 1818, Leander Club changed this rule in 1998, so now women can be members, as well. Likewise, since 2002, in the London Rowing Club, which was founded in 1856, ladies can row, as well.

¹¹ From the "volume" of Götz Gusztáv entitled *"Női evezés, E.B. 10 éve"* (Women's rowing, 10 Years of European Championship).

¹² During her athletic career, Kornélia Mérai Jenőné Pap won the Open Europe Championship in four consecutive years: 1958. Poznan, 1959. Macon, 1960. London, 1961. Prague. Third place: 1955 in Snagov, 1956 in Bled. After her sports career, Kornélia Pap worked for Nemzeti Sport (Hungarian sports magazine) for 26 years as a sports journalist. Her autobiographical book about her sports career, *"Vizek szabadja lettem" /I became the waters' independent lady/* was published twice so far. Ever since she stopped competing she has been active (rowing, kayaking, skating, cycling and skiing). Her way of life could serve as an example for the growing generation.

The other "big achievement" is that, in a recently published book on the preparation of rowers at international level, 14 experts have presented "good practices" according to their expert areas in order to achieve the best results. To praise the editors, one lady was also included among the 14.¹³

Conclusions

Studying the development of female rowing and racing from several aspects, we have shown that its slow spreading can be traced back to different causes. On one hand, the international rowing society was divided, as there were countries supportive of female competitive rowing, there were party supporting countries (supportive of sculling, but not of sweep rowing), as well as countries totally opposing it. Besides this, the social and medical discourses related to the judgement of women's sport differed in each country, and the history and traditions of sport were similarly diverse throughout the continent. In Central European countries, the era in terms of socioeconomic aspects seemed to be homogeneous in structure; nevertheless there were opportunities to separate professionalism and amateurism in the fields of sports and art. Competitive sport received a distinctive position in every case and country, but in realisation national sport political ideologies have always prevailed (priorities for disciplines, or favoured people etc.). In the end, also thanks to international sports diplomacy, more than two decades after the first ever Women's European Championships, women's rowing events also became part of the program at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal.

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¹³ Charles Simpson & Jim Flood (2017) Advanced Rowing International perspectives on high performance rowing. Bloomsbury Sport.

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AUTHOR'S ADDRESS:

Anna Alliquander
 Semmelweis University
 Institute of Public Health,
 Nagyvárad tér 4,
 1089 Budapest, Hungary
 E-mail: alliquander.anna@med.semmelweis-univ.hu

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