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Emancipation through sport? Feminism and medical control of the body in interwar France.

Florys Castan-Vicente¹ and Anaïs Bohuon²

From 1910 to the 1920s the range of sports open to women expanded, and the development of women's sport in France intensified, despite the alarming proscriptions of the medical community. Two different visions of how women should move their bodies were put forward: either teaching educational gymnastics or training sports champions. We will focus on the strategies developed by the independent French Women's Sports Federation to promote women's sport, and answer or bypass the medical advice. We aim to highlight members' personal initiatives, the support of the federation and prevailing opinion about the development of women's sport, in particular how the federation used medical legitimation and selected sports deemed compatible with women's body movement ('adapted' sports). We relate these tactics to different feminist discourses and strategies of the period, mostly moderate and differentialist, and also sometimes more radical and egalitarian.

KEYWORDS: Women's sports; Feminism; Medicine; Interwar France; Adapted sports

Introduction

The sports 'field'³ has been described as a 'stronghold of masculinity',⁴ a place of hegemonic masculinity,⁵ and as an arena for an often essentialist discussion. Historically, organised sport strictly excluded women, an exclusion they fought for nearly two centuries by taking up an increasing number of sports, attempting to take part in competitions and, more rarely, by occupying positions of power in sports organisations.⁶ Sport is also considered as a social

space producing a highly differentialist discourse, as shown by ‘gender tests’⁷ or journalists’ comments.⁸ Hence, for Ann Hall, a gender analysis of sports is an important way to show that ‘sporting practices are historically produced, socially constructed, and culturally defined to serve the interests and needs of powerful groups in society.’⁹ Nowadays, competitive sports are generally open to women and formal restrictions are the exception.¹⁰ Although ‘it is now virtually unthinkable to ignore women when analysing sport’,¹¹ sport history has long perpetuated this exclusion. In France, women’s sport history began to develop in the 1990’s¹² but worldwide, according to Osborne and Skillen, it remained a ‘peculiarly neglected area’.¹³

At the beginning of the twentieth century women’s sports expanded, alongside the many debates about different methods of physical exercise. Women played golf and lawn tennis in the second modern Olympic Games (Paris, 1900). Women participated in competitive swimming,¹⁴ women climbers took part in the French Alpine Club,¹⁵ and middle-class women started cycling. Women aviators organised their own independent club, La Stella from 1909.¹⁶ Just before the war, the iconic Suzanne Lenglen became tennis world champion. In 1912, at the initiative of Mme Ludin, president of the women’s gymnastic society L’Eglantine de Lyon, the French Union of Women’s Gymnastics Clubs (UFSGF) was founded.¹⁷ Also in 1912, a women’s gymnastics club, called Fémina-Sport, was created, and progressively added different sports to its activities. The institutionalisation of women’s sport intensified during the war. In 1915, the club Académia was founded. Its honorary president was Anne d’Uzès, a feminist militant.¹⁸ It offered instruction in various sports (athletics, swimming, rowing, hockey and basketball).¹⁹ The first competitions were organised between these clubs. Women began playing competitive athletics and football, and national and international competitions were organised by the French Women’s Sports Federation (FSFSF) created in 1917.²⁰ With these first institutions, a ‘high level’ of performance emerged and was discussed.

The First World War facilitated the emergence and institutionalisation of women's sport; men were spending long periods away at the heavily entrenched front – and women were temporarily empowered through greater access to public life.²¹ But after the huge losses of the conflict, the interwar medical community argued for primacy of motherhood.²² Though the war years increased their participation in modern sports, two different visions of women's physical activities emerged: either teaching educational gymnastics or training sporting champions.²³ Supporters of women's sport used different strategies, especially medical legitimisation through choosing sports deemed compatible with women's body movement; distances, duration, rules and weights were also often minimised, reduced or softened. In 1919, Alice Milliat became president of the FSFSF. Previously president of Fémina-Sport, and, from 1921, president of the International Women's Sport Federation (Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale, FSFI), she is considered as a 'pioneer for women's sport'.²⁴ Within the FSFSF, she supported the development of competitions, even in the most disputed sports like football or rugby ('barette'), though slightly adapted to the presumed specificities of women's bodies. Highly criticised, she was defended by physicians close to the federation. In 1926, she was replaced by Dr Legrand, who was closer to the dominant medical point of view, and much more opposed to competition. Indeed, for Jennifer Hargreaves 'Sports are *loci* for freedom and for constraint: they produce new opportunities and meanings for women and they reproduce prejudice and oppression'.²⁵ In the first years of women's sports in France elements of both coexisted, including inside the FSFSF and in its leaders' discourses.

As in Great Britain and the US,²⁶ the growth in women's physical education and sport can be linked with the feminist movement. In France, the institutionalisation of women's sports happened alongside growing agitation by the French feminist movement at the turn of the twentieth century, which included the sometimes conflictual coexistence of different

types of feminism.²⁷ Feminist thought could be divided into ‘egalitarianism’ and ‘differentialism’. The egalitarians sought strict equality of treatment, total integration in all fields and without limits, for example women working in the same professions as men for the same pay. In contrast differentialists saw a ‘natural’ difference between men and women that must be respected and called for rights in the name of this difference.²⁸ The historian Gertrud Pfister showed that these contrasting views can be related to different kinds of ‘sport feminism’: either strict equality in sports (the same practices, the same competitions) or developing activities adapted to women and their supposed physical specificities.²⁹ Feminists were also divided into ‘moderates’ and ‘radicals’. A minority of ‘radicals’, avant-garde and revolutionary, demanded total equality and questioned gender roles, while a majority of moderate reformists, had more limited demands, and aimed for change through progressive legal reforms.³⁰ However, sometimes, these contradictory discourses existed in one single person or group:³¹ not every FSFSF leader agreed with Milliat’s policy. Mangan argues that ‘rather than being portrayed as polar opposites, feminism and anti-feminism need to be understood as *connected* [emphasis added] across an extended spectrum of areas’.³² The FSFSF leadership differed and sometimes took opposing directions. During Milliat’s leadership the FSFSF combined elements of both differentialism and egalitarianism; while the Legrand period was more differentialist and moderate, and even sometimes conservative. In the First Wave of French feminism, moderates and differentialists were a majority, particularly after the Great War, when radicals became very discrete.³³ Birth control propaganda was forbidden by law from 1920 and the fear of depopulation stimulated maternalism: women were seen firstly as mothers, even by most feminist organisations.³⁴

The different organisations traced a rather murky path through divisions between radicals and moderates, between proponents of equality or of women’s distinctive identity; and women’s sport developed amidst these controversies. However, for the first

sportswomen, feminism was more than a context, it was also a resource: the feminist newspapers *La Fronde*³⁵ and *La Française*³⁶ in particular supported competitive sport.

As Mangan argues, ‘Women’s advance in modern sport has been too frequently characterized by condescension and confrontation, denial and defiance, proscription and persistence, and too often, by necessary forced entry and grudging accommodation’.³⁷ The FSFSF was created to bypass the exclusion of women by the athletics and football federations, and to develop an independent institution for sportswomen. Nevertheless, women’s sports organisations had to ‘grudgingly’ accept some modification of their sports. We aim to focus on the strategies developed by the French Women’s Sports Federation, sometimes shared by Fémina-Sport and the FSFI, where the influence of Milliat was also important, to promote women’s sport, and provide some responses to medical discourses opposed to their practices, hesitating between confrontation and compromise, imposition or accommodation, egalitarianism and differentialism, moderate or radical feminism. Fémina-Sport, the FSFSF, and the FSFI were three independent institutions mostly ruled by women, for women. Can their fight for women’s competition be seen as ‘a form of social resistance, an effort to establish a non-subordinate mode of living?’³⁸ How did they try to emancipate women’s bodies from an omnipresent medical control? Under Milliat’s leadership, French federation members used a differentialist discourse while demanding equal access to sports and competitions for women; arguably as a strategy to answer medical critics.

This article analyses discussions on women’s sports in contemporary medical publications, academic papers and the sports press,³⁹ but also consults archive materials, including those of the International Olympic Committee, the image library of the National Institute of Sport, Expertise and Performance (known by its French acronym INSEP), photographs from the Fémina-Sport club and women’s games programmes, documents from the French national sports museum (newsletters from French women’s sports groups

and minutes from the FSFI), and finally the Marguerite Durand library, which houses specific files related to sports and sportswomen.

Strategies for legitimisation of women's sport

Medical legitimacy

Many studies⁴⁰ have shown how doctors and physiologists proclaimed themselves experts in the field of physical exercise, which until then had been foreign to them. They took control of a hitherto unoccupied space and, at the same time, imposed themselves as those most capable of theorising physical exercise. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, 'gymnastics' was increasingly seen as an acceptable practice for women in France.

Physicians became prominent in the development of physical education for women, which was frequently considered as a 'remedy' for some pathologies, especially nervous disorders.⁴¹ Doctors discussed the ideal of a 'healthy' female body, especially in its role as an agent of reproduction: for them, a woman's social and biological function was primarily to give birth. It was viewed as her 'nature' as much as her duty.⁴² Even perfectly healthy pregnant women were considered in need of strict medical attention. Physicians' arguments for women's physical education focused on their role as mothers and emphasised the differences between the sexes:⁴³ They were part 'of a movement which sought to define or redefine sexual differences in every part of the organism'.⁴⁴

For women and girls in the early twentieth century, doctors also tended to limit their prescription to the usual practices, such as gymnastics or games (sports and non-sports). This pre-war stance helped to legitimise the institutionalisation of women's sport during the war. Indeed, when they came back from the front, doctors attempted to take back control of

the development of women's sport, insisting on the need to increase medical supervision of women's sport and physical activity.

Athletics, football, rugby and combat sports were so inconceivable for women that they were never mentioned by physicians in the pre-war years. After the war, the medical profession was concerned by the institutionalisation of women's sports, which seemed to be slipping away from them. Some were totally against the FSFSF's idea of female 'champions'. The physical expression of effort was considered unsuitable for women. Prevailing medical thinking recognised a certain health benefit in football but forbade it for women because of the threat it presented to their grace, beauty and female reproductive organs. Dr Pène, a physician and second-lieutenant whose thesis researched physical exercise for women, expressed his concerns:

What can we say about these falls on the head, on the chest, about these scrums where the desire for victory bashes head against head? What can we say of these clumsy blows to any part of an adversary or a partner's body in hockey? What about the kicks that bruise legs and cause painful falls in football? All of this violence speaks against women's sports that can only create disappointment, disgust and functional troubles.⁴⁵

If sport was a bastion *par excellence* of masculinity where the expression of the body's physicality came first, it was difficult to even define women's sports: how could women exercise their bodies without making them more virile, ruining or 'de-naturing' them?

In short, whether they were prescribers or proscribers, whether they considered female bodies as 'healthy' or 'unhealthy',⁴⁶ doctors all sought to 'discipline' them, literally 'build' them, and 'produce' them as feminine. The growing influence of medicine on women's physical practice was, ultimately, the result of a political will to control bodies.

Physicians were in fact less focused on the danger of masculinisation than on aesthetic imperatives and the need for grace, flexibility and fluidity of movement. Thus doctors established a new standard of femininity, to legitimise the access of women to new sports.

Medical discourses on women's exercise were therefore based on a contradictory injunction: women had to become strong and resilient to carry out their maternal duties but they had to steer clear of turning into viragos. The need to rebuild the nation and strengthen 'the race' required the promotion of a vigorous female body, which intrinsically threatened the natural basis of difference between the sexes and the strict division of gender roles.⁴⁷

This urgent need to get women exercising for health reasons, to regenerate the French nation,⁴⁸ coincided with the significant progress of women in some sports; for example, the French tennis player Suzanne Lenglen who, notably through her clothes, demonstrated her femininity to spectators and the media.⁴⁹ She seemed to influence doctors to show a certain indulgence towards sports that seemed more practicable for women.

The bodybuilding Dr Ruffier stressed for example how some women had been successful at tennis and skating, the more so because they were able to remain graceful:

Other sports such as tennis and skating allow young women to participate, shine and be successful without damaging their grace and their beauty. [...] And I do not need to insist again on the excellent educational benefits they can derive there from.⁵⁰

Walking and dancing were also generally approved. For Dr Boigey, they were the ideal sports for women, along with: 'skipping rope, racket sports [...], rowing and swimming, fencing, which actually only moderately work the arms and solicit above all the abdominal muscles [and so] remain the main exercises suitable for women.'⁵¹ These

activities seemed to comply with the doctors' requirement to develop the lower half of the female body, necessary for procreation.

Among all these fears, criticisms and recommendations, both Fémina-Sport and Académia received some support from doctors, in particular Dr Marie Houdré (1883–1986). Student of the famous Dr Broca, she received her doctor's diploma in 1914, before assisting him at a children's hospital. She quickly became interested in exercise for women and joined Fémina-Sport. She was also a freemason, a socialist, a feminist militant⁵² and part of the central committee of the French League for Women's Rights, which was then one of the main feminist organisations, and had a moderate differentialist approach.⁵³

In 1917, she took part in the creation of the FSFSF, became its chief medical officer and headed its medical commission.⁵⁴ When the federation created its own newspaper *La Femme Sportive* or 'The Sporting Woman', she wrote an editorial for the first issue in favour of sport for women.⁵⁵ In this article, she insisted on motherhood as women's social and biological role, claiming that the movement of the body enabled women to produce healthy children, and indeed the FSFSF firmly maintained that women's patriotic duty and purpose was to produce healthy children.⁵⁶ Historian Christine Bard sees Houdré's opinion as typical of the most moderate feminist positions on maternity.⁵⁷ In addition to Dr Houdré, the federation also had the support of Dr Baudet, chief surgeon for the Paris hospitals and former president of the FSFSF who continued to support women's sport, especially by organising a football tournament in 1921.⁵⁸ These two prestigious doctors were highlighted as a legitimating and reassuring presence. Houdré brought to the association 'her valuable knowledge of women's medical matters ... as head of a major laboratory ... but also as a sportswoman'.⁵⁹

Between the wars, the practice of sport as favoured by the Federation, received the support of other physicians. Dr Jacques Dedet, who trained in Paris hospitals and

contributed to the founding of the Medical Society for Physical and Sports Education (SMEPS), had a particular interest in rugby. In his book dedicated to a sport that had been exclusively masculine, he nevertheless mentions women in one paragraph.

Sportswomen have adopted rugby. They have adapted it to their physical capabilities by modifying the rules. They play on a smaller field and the violent tackles that are one of the characteristics of rugby are no longer present in the women's game. The sport, which does not seem to have been designed to be played seriously by women, modified in this way becomes excellent training in running and agility.⁶⁰

The Federation developed different strategies in order to head off any potential criticism from doctors sceptical about competitive women's sport. Alice Milliat was careful to make clear that the athletes were thoroughly prepared and under medical supervision.⁶¹ Physical fitness was presented as an indispensable condition to participate in sports. Members then underwent a medical examination before being allowed to take part and the Federation kept its members' 'physiological files' – conceived by Houdré⁶² – updated. Once the preparation and the test were over 'training thus corresponded, within proportion, to that used for male sports'.⁶³ Milliat nuanced this notion of equality. The right to enter competitions did not signify specialisation. The same women could take part in both athletics and soccer competitions. As women's sport was a subject of media debate and with the press tending to pit 'gymnastics and physical education' against 'competitive sport', Milliat avoided confrontation and positioned herself as a moderate, rather than an unreasonable supporter of competition.⁶⁴

In particular, football, considered a very masculine sport, was opposed by 'systematic detractors' who had never, according to *La Femme Sportive*, 'attended a single match'. To

reassure those who believed in ‘feminine weakness’, the Federation stressed that the female players were ‘prepared with physical fitness training’ and had ‘solid lungs’.⁶⁵ Through *La Femme Sportive* and with the help of its medical supporters, the FSFSF sought to counter the alarmist claims, to reassure members’ parents and to rally supporters of eugenics.⁶⁶ They emphasised good health, better physical development and preparation for motherhood.

This period was also dominated by loud calls from the medical profession for restrictions on and differentiation in women’s physical activity. The Federation decided to partially accept this argument, rather than trying to bypass or tackle it head on. Indeed, in 1922 the first Medical Congress for the Physical Education of Children and Women coincided with the first Women’s Olympic Games, organised by the Women’s Federation of France under the rules of the International Women’s Sporting Federation⁶⁷ though they were soon told by the International Olympic Committee to rename the event as the ‘Women’s World Games’. The 1922 Congress took place on September 9–11 and was organised at the behest of the Vichy medical society. It was chaired by Dr Latarget, inspector of the advanced course in physical education at the University of Paris, and Professor Letulle.

According to the Congress ‘letting women’s sport be played with its current intensity and exaggeration, with no checks or controls, is unwittingly leading to serious physiological consequences’.⁶⁸ And, in conclusion ‘women’s sport, in order to arrive at a happy result, should only be played under strict controls and very precise conditions’. The conclusions of the Congress were thus marked by the need to restrict women’s athletics: endurance races should not be over distances above 2,500m, shot putts should be lighter and the long jump was banned altogether. In addition, ‘the doctors think it right to limit sprints to 80m, with 60m and 40m as preparatory distances and always on condition that young girls do not repeat these speed exercises, whose main feature is to generate effort and intense non-rhythmic work’.⁶⁹

The federation found sympathetic doctors such as Houdré to participate in the organisation, even at a high level, so as to counter medical attempts to control women's sporting bodies. These allies were used to reassure families and contest medical opposition. Houdré used a differentialist feminist discourse about maternity to soften the critics.

Legitimation through the choice of promoted activities

The FSFSF, and the FSFI, were balancing their positions, between advances and limits, between independence and concessions to criticism, between equality and difference. The Federation argued both for equal access to sports, including competitive ones, and for differentiation because of weaker feminine 'nature'. Critics used this hypothetical feminine 'nature' to oppose women's sport, and assumed an immutable biological destiny of the 'eternally injured'. Milliat took up this differentialist argument, which could also justify women's sport: 'by nature' women played football and rugby in a less violent manner, so there was no need to worry about clashes between them being too rough.⁷⁰ The 'nature' argument was thus turned against its opponents.⁷¹ It was neither bypassed nor contradicted which risked reinforcing the stereotypes of women's natural and biological weakness. Nevertheless, the Federation opposed the recommendations of the most reticent doctors and used the international success of the Women's World Games, as proof of women's physical capabilities.

For the FSFSF, women's physical education should be 'sporty', based on the exercises performed by men, though often in an easier or more gentle form; weights were lighter and distances shorter. While competition was criticised by doctors and proponents of physical education, the FSFSF attempted to reassure them by also promoting 'physical fitness' and rhythmic gymnastics. The legitimation strategies for the movement of women's bodies fluctuated between two strongly opposed views. One of these prioritised supple and fluid

gestures/movement, which lent itself well to musical rhythms and was more in line with the representations of women of the time and with the traditional aesthetic canon of feminine ‘grace’, notably through the harmonic gymnastics of Irène Popard (an admirer of the famous dancer Isadora Duncan and a pupil of physiologist Georges Demeny).⁷² Popard sought to feminise, by choreographing gymnastics which had previously been very masculine and dominated by demonstrations of strength. The other legitimisation strategy, by contrast, sought greater similarity with the movement of men’s sporting bodies, until now a practically impenetrable male stronghold, even if it meant adaptation of a sport in order to legitimise and justify practices.

The exclusively female clubs, Fémina-Sport and Académia, which promoted competitive sport did, however, retain gymnastics amongst their activities. The FSFSF included such practices even in international competitions, highlighting gymnastics, particularly at large public events. During the second French women’s athletics championships in 1918, Fémina-Sport gave a demonstration of Hellenic rhythmic gymnastics,⁷³ while the ‘rival’ club Académia presented ‘a series of dance-gymnastic moves’.⁷⁴ Fémina-Sport’s annual festivals were celebrated with athletics competitions⁷⁵ and also with Hellenic gymnastics demonstrations.⁷⁶ Still, in 1921, the programme for the First International Meeting for Physical Education and Sports was illustrated by a photograph of Hellenic dancing, while the sporting events were interspersed with demonstrations of different styles of gymnastics.⁷⁷ Four gymnasts are pictured posing in a circle, holding hands, leaping in mid-air wearing white dresses. The pose, evoking lightness and suppleness, is completely in line with the gender norms of the period, the ‘eternal feminine’ championed by those opposed to competitive sports. The choice of these young women – Fémina’s leading champions and medal-winners in various sports – was no coincidence either. For example, Thérèse Brûlé, co-founder of the club, won several titles in high jump, long jump, 80m, and

was a member of the national football team.⁷⁸ So the point was not only to show that women's sports clubs also continued to teach gymnastics but also that the same young women could do both successfully, and thus that competitive sports had no negative effect on their gracefulness.

Underlining that these norms of femininity were being upheld was a response to critics and reassured the families of future potential sportswomen. This use of more aesthetically pleasing gymnastics, highlighted during competitive sports events, demonstrated publicly that real sportswomen were both competitive athletes, and preserved their so-called feminine virtues such as suppleness. It therefore seems that a deliberate communication strategy was put in place in order to reassure the public that the athletes retained their 'femininity' and to demonstrate that the gender order was not threatened by the real athletic performance that was to follow. Reassurance that the sportswomen retained their natural grace was important and the staging of these events played a major role in reaching this goal:

The Olympiad had to finish on a high note: the competitors' parade, perfectly choreographed, made a strong impression and the winners appeared under a triumphal arch of flowers, while their companions, placed on either side, formed a guard of honour, throwing flowers at the winners of this unique week of art and sport. A very significant battle has just been won in Monte Carlo.⁷⁹

By the time of the 'First Olympic Games for Women' organised by the FSFSF in Paris (1922), the traditional gymnastics displays had disappeared, replaced by demonstrations of 'throwing a 2kg ball' by the Czechs, basketball and baseball as well as triple jump from the Americans.⁸⁰ The programme mentions the long jump, 100 yards, 300m

and 1,000m races, 100m hurdles, shot putting with weights of 3.628kg and javelins weighing 800g.⁸¹ Here, the absence of gymnastics can be attributed to the wish to move closer to the men's Olympic Games, in order to better compete with them. Regarding the choice of events, these Games stood out because of the inclusion of activities that were not recommended by doctors and forbidden by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The 1,000m race took on an even greater symbolic significance after 1928 and the Amsterdam Olympics. These games were the first to allow women's athletic events and were the scene of a scandal after sportswomen were allegedly left suffering from exhaustion after a new world record set by the winner, Germany's Lina Radke. Both the IAAF and the IOC used the scandal to ban the women's 800m race.⁸² The FSFI, however, retained it and the 1930 Women's World Games included an 800m race. The FSFI included a distance race, banned from the Olympics, but reduced the distance by 200m: once again, the Federation sat on the fence between calls for action and compromise.

The desire to change practices in response to critics can also be seen in the introduction of easier activities. Barrette, launched by Fémina-Sport in the winter of 1920–1 in order to give women the right to play, was a gentler form of rugby, created and firmly supported by Dr Houdré. The rules were adapted to women's supposed physical capabilities by removing any hint of rough play: 'Women's rugby won't be "rugby", with tackling forbidden, smaller pitches and shorter game time, with the transformation of the scrum, the female champions will thus abandon all rough tactics'.⁸³

Both officials and champions of the Federation attempted to defend the game in the press. Milliat stressed Houdré's role, reminding them that 'the idea for a study of rugby for women comes from a doctor ... who does not give any opinion without having examined the sporting questions very closely'.⁸⁴ Suzanne Liébrard spoke out as a player, described in the press as 'an all-round athlete': 'You don't think that I, a player of all sports who has never

wanted to specialise, would seek to oppose the idea of women playing rugby'.⁸⁵ While Jeanne Brûlé, a player and Federation General Secretary, said: 'If we'd listened to our detractors and all those "moralisers" we would have done nothing, absolutely nothing, in terms of sporting endeavours. We would still be doing a few Swedish gymnastics exercises that would only interest, because of their monotonous nature, about a dozen people'.⁸⁶ She nevertheless notes: 'You'd better believe that we are women and that we intend to remain women!'⁸⁷ This way, the sportswomen themselves helped to communicate via the press an idea of competitive sport which allowed women to keep their 'femininity'. When the *Fémina-Sport* champions were interviewed, they stressed this point, and the fact that gender norms were maintained.

In football, the FSFSF acted in the same spirit of 'adapted' ('easier') events. From 1921 restrictions included: a smaller pitch, a shorter playing time and 'the banning of some tackles'.⁸⁸ These adaptations responded to specific concerns: breathlessness (young women were considered particularly vulnerable to this) and risks of blows and collisions, allegedly damaging to women's reproductive systems. However, the news of these changes in *La Femme Sportive* were followed by a reaffirmation: the rules for international matches would be wholly 'the work of the FSFI'. The independent international women's association thereby reserved the right to issue the rules, without seeking the opinion of the men's federation, while at the same time conceding to the critics who wanted easier conditions. So were these concessions the price paid for independence and success?

From *Fémina-Sport* to the FSFI, women's independent sports institutions, led by Milliat and her supporters, choose their activities in response to medical critics. Harmonic gymnastics were used as a communication strategy, and sports were sometimes softened to make them acceptable for women. Using differentialist discourse to justify adapted activities, they also enabled women to free themselves from medical proscription and participate in sports

considered too masculine and violent. In 1926, Dr Legrand became leader of the federation. She was both a doctor and a feminist, like her friend Houdré, who introduced her to the direction of Fémina-Sport in 1923.⁸⁹ Like most doctors, Legrand promoted physical education and moderation in sports, and was opposed to competition. Physical education was argued to develop moral qualities and virtues, whereas competition was considered as a commercial, show-business activity exposing young women. Feminism and emancipation were considered as legitimate goals for sportswomen, but not at the cost of ‘championship sickness’ and an imitation of ‘masculine mistakes’: sportswomen and feminists should both stay ‘feminine’. Thus, Legrand followed the recommendations of the SMEPS’s congress, as well as those of her feminist group.

Sport Feminism

Can we talk about differentialist feminism in sport?

In her recent article on Milliat, Florence Carpentier refers to historical accounts and shows that Milliat was often considered not to be a feminist, a definition the author then disproves.⁹⁰ Milliat and the Federation have also been considered by some as feminists, without any further development of this argument, or giving any details or definition of this feminism.⁹¹ Indeed, if Christine Bard shows that studying feminism implies paying attention to self-determination, we must also be careful not to give precedence to just one kind of feminism; for example, only the most radical, like the few feminists advocating for birth control before the First World War, or those transgressing gender norms more directly.⁹²

Indeed, the FSFSF’s official newspaper, *La Femme Sportive*, made a direct claim to be feminist. In February 1922, the newspaper headlined its front page ‘Feminism’, the title of an article by Dr Pillet, a former member of the USFSA (Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports

Athlétiques, or Union of French Athletics Societies). He claimed that sport must play a role in the emancipation of women, giving them strength, courage and loyalty, qualities that were as much physical as moral. He pronounced himself in favour of ‘the triumph of feminism’ : ‘Sport must be a free land where women have all their rights’.⁹³ However these rights are based also on the difference between men and women: men’s and women’s sport have ‘nothing in common’ and there is no competition possible between them. This article takes a differentialist view, as it was the leading form of feminism at the time. As for Milliat, although she did not use the term ‘feminist’ and was not affiliated with any feminist organisation, she used a feminist vocabulary. She spoke of women’s ‘struggle’ against ‘male domination’, and about how male ‘guardianship’⁹⁴ should be shaken off, equating this struggle to those elsewhere such as equality in education. She also called for the right to vote as an indispensable means of obtaining equal treatment in sport.⁹⁵ This call for equal rights also appeared in the press, interviews and statements linked to Fémina-Sport, the FSFSF and the FSFI, combined with a reaffirmation of difference, characteristic of the interwar years.⁹⁶

These organisations aimed to gain women access to activities earlier reserved for men, which explains why part of the historiography sees these arguments as ‘feminist’. Sportswomen organised themselves along separatist, non-mixed lines to access sports from which men’s organisations had excluded them: a classic feminist method,⁹⁷ but one which is also found in non-feminist women’s movements. Men were thus excluded from the management of the FSFSF from 1920 – a militant strategy of separate development but also a strategy to combat public fears of promiscuity. As a journalist pointed out, this single-sex environment afforded ‘the greatest safety to mothers’ who might refuse to send their daughters to mixed clubs.⁹⁸ This idea of separate development, even if it did not always mean that men were excluded from management, was found at every level, from the local club Fémina-Sport, via the French federation, to the international organisation, guaranteeing

independence in the choice and organisation of activities. Finally, women's sport benefited from the concrete support of the feminist movement, for example, when the feminist newspaper *La Fronde* published a call to subscribe to the FSFSF in order to finance costs arising from the Women's Games in Gothenburg in 1926.⁹⁹ *La Fronde* seized the opportunity to call for general support of women's competitive sport and a fair division of sporting subsidies.¹⁰⁰

Therefore, there was some solidarity, common rhetoric and even common claims between women's sports organisations and the differentialist feminist movement of the time. Some activists were members of both the feminist and women's sports networks, and their differentialist feminist arguments were used to answer medical critics.

'Strategic' feminism in sport: between moderation and emancipation

The rejection by some scholars,¹⁰¹ of the idea that these institutions and their officials were feminist, is supported by their numerous precautions not to appear too transgressive. Indeed, the calls for access to new practices were accompanied by essentialist views, indispensable support of the medical profession, modifications, reductions and many compromises, apparently used to counter opponents when pursuing a strategic goal, at the risk of reaffirming gender norms. The rhetoric of the organisations studied mixes transgression, compromise and reaffirmation of independence.

If there was feminism, therefore, it was a moderate, differentialist feminism, which called for equal access but with difference. The acceptance of a female body devoted uniquely to child-bearing – and thus essentialist gender roles – underlies these organisations' caution, their language, their progressive claims, their adoption of 'adapted' activities and their constant reaffirmations of the importance of women's role in society.

Essentialism, differentialism and the very moderate appearance of most First Wave feminists, have been interpreted as a conscious militant strategy, both at the time and by historians.¹⁰² For Bard, in ‘seeking to disguise their transgression of the social order, they sought to neutralize it by conforming to the law of “gender”, meaning the social norms that defined femininity’.¹⁰³ Thus, the very moderate positions of the reformist feminists can be explained as a wish to fit in with the republican consensus, to reassure and avoid attacks from anti-feminists over the alleged ‘destruction of the family’ caused by feminists.¹⁰⁴

Between the two wars, the radicals and the egalitarians questioned gender norms in a much more head-on fashion, like Madeleine Pelletier,¹⁰⁵ who saw the differentialist position in favour of physical exercise for women as an impoverished strategy. ‘In this way an old militant, defending the feminism of fifteen years ago, calling for fencing to be taught to young girls, cited the wielding of the foil as having an influence on the development of the mammary glands’.¹⁰⁶ For Pelletier, herself a doctor, it was a fallacious argument, verging on the ridiculous, to justify calls for access through doctors’ (mistaken) recommendations, in particular relating to maternal function. Hiding advances behind ‘prejudices’ seemed to her to initially strengthen those prejudices, and to remove credibility from women and feminists. However, Pelletier was an exception. Historian Nicole Edelman argues that she ‘slipped some scientific innovations and some twisting of the dominant representations in here and there’.¹⁰⁷ In her study of the first French female doctors, Edelman explains that:

... once qualified as doctors, they had to remain in a very specific field: that of women’s and children’s medicine. They were assigned to this by their male colleagues, at least those who accepted their entry into the medical profession [...] Most accepted this edict, they certainly had not had much opportunity to do

anything else during the first decades, but some seemed to really internalise this obligation.¹⁰⁸

In *Feminist Education* (1914), Pelletier shows how femininity is a social and cultural construct. As an egalitarian feminist who transgressed norms and questioned education, she denied the existence of any feminine ‘nature’. She considered ‘virilisation’ as necessary for equality and supported the practice of physical activities entirely similar to those for men.¹⁰⁹ However, Pelletier’s view is a marginal one, and the trend was to reject any elements that were not ‘feminine’, considering them as damaging to the cause and inviting accusations of lesbianism. According to Bard, Pelletier was kept at arm’s length by the organisations of the First Wave for these reasons.¹¹⁰

Violette Morris’s radicalism led to her exclusion from the FSFSF in 1928. She was a champion in several sports including football, shot putting and motor racing; she frequently dressed as a man and flaunted her bisexuality. When she complained at her exclusion, in its defence, the FSFSF called on two moderate militant feminist lawyers.¹¹¹ The final ruling, delivered in 1930, confirmed her expulsion, highlighting the bad influence of her behaviour on young people, which could frighten parents who might then refuse to let their daughters play sport, preventing the federation from achieving its main objective of bringing sport to women. Morris, who was not a militant, nevertheless resembled radicals such as Pelletier through her desire to live freely outside gender norms, which had led to her expulsion from the FSFSF. The federation’s strategy of respectability and ‘moderation’ could thus turn quite violently against the sportswomen themselves. Though Milliat implemented and backed this policy of respectability, Morris’s exclusion took place under the presidency of Dr Legrand,¹¹² who steered the federation in a much less combative direction after 1926.¹¹³ In 1930, Milliat stood against Legrand and took back control of the federation. Morris’s

eviction illustrated sportswomen's fears (like those of some feminists) of damaging their cause by appearing too transgressive, too emancipated, manly and non-heterosexual.

Conclusion

The medical discourse on women's sports was strongly determined by the social subordination of women to their biological function of child-bearing. By connecting the character of women to a 'feminine nature' entirely organised for procreation, the life sciences reinforced a social construction, which underpinned their approach. It became a reference for practices. At first, essentially negative and prohibitive towards any violent and apparently unfeminine exercise, this attitude was immediately – and ever more frequently – tempered by advice and proposals to help identify, adapt or build exercise which (arguably) reinforced fertility. Physicians established control over women's bodies but struggled to delimit clearly the 'correct' ways of moving the female body because they were unable to reconcile the promotion of a robust, reproductive female body, with the maintenance of 'natural' differences between the sexes. During the interwar period in France, women's sport institutions had to deal with this contradictory injunction, and under Milliat's presidency, the FSFSF used the contradiction within medical discourse to create a space to claim equality and emancipation. With the help of some feminist physicians, and the participation of well-known champions, the federation built communication strategies to simultaneously reaffirm and transgress gender norms.

Thus, feminism in sport was mostly moderate and marked by a strong differentialism which could originate in the personal convictions of the players, militant strategy or social necessity. The actions of the women's sporting organisations demonstrate a desire for collective mobilisation by women for women, in organisations that devised their own vocabulary (emancipation, struggle) and method (separatism) borrowed from feminism.

According to the definitions established by Laure Bereni and Anne Revillard, these organisations may appear to be closer to ‘women’s movements’ (collective mobilisations led principally by women as women) than ‘feminist movements’ (which contested the established social hierarchy between the sexes),¹¹⁴ feminism being defined as ‘a critique of male supremacy, formed and offered in the light of a will to change it, which in turn assumes a conviction that it is changeable’.¹¹⁵ The women’s movements thus encompassed but exceeded the feminist movements. Women’s movements can also politicise women, and influence them towards feminism, hence the clearly feminist demands which appeared from time to time within the independent women’s sports organisations.

Starting off with Morris’s exclusion from the FSFSF, the 1930s confirmed a conservative trend that affected women’s sport as well as the feminist movements. The FSFSF gradually faded away and sportswomen had to join the men’s federations, where possible. Thus, women’s football disappeared before being officially banned by the Vichy government and its director of women’s sport, Marie-Thérèse Eyquem. Under her management, the number of sportswomen increased but followed a strongly differentialist and essentialist line. Eyquem, while deploring that France was lagging behind in women’s sport compared with other European countries, attributed it to ‘violent hostility’¹¹⁶ arising from the ‘excesses’¹¹⁷ committed by sportswomen, citing their lack of gracefulness, their crude speech and their bad behaviour, notably that of Violette Morris. Masculine-looking sportswomen were described as ‘unbalanced’.¹¹⁸ According to Eyquem, French sportswomen should ‘have numerous children’.¹¹⁹ She strongly promoted the model of the sporting mother which, as opposed to feminism as it may seem, did not stop Eyquem becoming the leader of a feminist group, the women’s democratic movement, at the start of the 1960s.¹²⁰

Notes

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