

The Search for Butterflies: Sports and Gender

When I was 8, my girlfriends and I organized a football team in my neighborhood. We were "The Butterflies football team." It was a wonderful solution to pass the long and warm summer days, in a time where internet, play stations and dance carpets were science fiction.

That summer we encouraged the girls in nearby neighborhoods to make their own football teams. For middle January we were in the position to play the first football championship in the area. The only objective for the challenge was play; we didn't have any requests about suits, age, appearance, religion, or location: If you were a girl who wanted to play, you and your friends were very, very welcome.

Lately, I've been reading in newspapers and magazines information from all over the world about woman in sports activities and the way they must look. Just to mention two examples: On one hand, FIFA dismissed Iran's women's football team, killing their possibility to be part in the Olympics Games in London 2012. The reason was the inappropriate dress the players looked, composed of pants, long-sleeved shirts and Muslim headscarves. The authorities of the entity even argued that the headscarf worn by Iranian girls was unsafe to perform on the court. On the other hand, FIBA (International Federation of Basketball) decided to change the uniform, putting the shorts 10 centimeters shorter than the standard and doing the t-shirts tighter. The arguments given for one female representative to support the measure was that this is a way to bring more comfort for the player, improve their identity as women, and signal the difference from men in a traditionally manly-male environment.

There are many reasons to forbid or change uniforms and in these cases, the reasons are very far from the comfort, gender promotion and women identity issues. Actually, the only two concepts linked here to women are discrimination and sexism.

Discrimination. Yes sir. Religious discrimination. The headscarf is part of Muslim women's identity. In a western world full of prejudice against Muslims and suffering an excess of false information about what Islam is about, the suspension of the Iranian girls contributes to feed the wrong and the confusion.

Are the Olympic Games an occasion for meeting people around higher values such as peace, diversity and enhancement of the human qualities that make the world better, around the sport? Or not? Are there political issues involved that cross and go further, beyond the decision to leave out Iran from the competition? Maybe it would be useful to check which countries are often making trouble for the participation of covered woman for religious options in official sports activities.

If it is a matter of safety, why not promote rules against violence in football or strengthen controls over the behavior of the public to prevent the entry of sharps stuffs, bottles, fireworks and others which could cause troubles during the Olympic Games?

We are always listening from politicians, leaders and feminists about the need to encourage Muslim women to more visible stages. How is it possible to do this if the core of them, their identity and the elements that represent it, are being banned?

The International Basketball Federation mentioned the suit linked to female identity as a critical element directly related with the capacity of women to perform sports. So, the players are something where someone decides what to put on and off? Just tools without more complex dimensions? These decisions and the arguments that support them just show the strong male approach inside sports, beyond considerations about physical issues. And the sexist sight, one more time, used to make people watching basketball for wrong reasons.

These arguments, promoted in the name of a false equality and gender perspective, become oppressive to the women involved. This is a matter of power that comes from money, sponsors and commercial agreements deciding what is a woman, how she is used to build and deconstruct her identity, agree with advertising aims, and many more that never includes women as subjects, but as instrument used to stimulate voyeurism, the consumption of beer and junk food, buying sports goods of high brands, but in any case, the respect for women, her inclusion in the sport, or the practice of sports activities for health improving.

It is time for sport to show its true colors and makes a statement, clear and loud, about how to fill that empty vase between rules, tolerance, and gender. Identity is a constant search without term or day of arrival. It belongs to everyone as a right and cannot be used or manipulated under the terms and conditions of others. Like butterflies, finding and defining our identity is a transformation process where sport can be a strategic contribution towards a better and happier human being.