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Gender and Sports: Historical and Contemporary Perspective of Women in Kenyan Sports

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22 August 2022 For decades, Kenyans have dominated world athletics, especially in middle and long-distance races. From the middle of the twentieth century, Kenyans were already gaining international recognition on the world stage. However, the dominance of men in sports was clearly apparent. The gender gap at that time was huge with only a handful of women participants. This paper on the exploration of women and sports participation in Kenya is twofold: it examines the genesis of gender disparities in the participation of women in sports in pre-colonial and colonial Kenya and what changes led to a reduction in those discrepancies in the post-colonial period. This paper argues that cultural limitations in different African societies and colonial policies which were highly patriarchal inhibited women's participation in athletics during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Nevertheless, from the 1990s, the number of women started to increase significantly in different sporting spheres including athletics. This is attributed to positive change in advocacy, formal education, and inclusivity through government policies that gave women a better platform to excel in sports and athletics in general. The increase in institutions that acted as nurturing areas for sports such as schools' incorporation of women in the disciplined forces, among others was instrumental in giving them an opportunity and resources to engage in various sporting activities just like their male counterparts. The study was informed by the patriarchal and feminist ideology theories to explain the gender issue in sports. In methodology, the paper uses primary sources of data, mainly oral interviews, focus group discussions, and archival materials, as well as secondary sources to explain the representation of women in Kenyan sports.

Keywords:

*Athletes,
Gender,
Disparities,
Inclusivity,
Patriarchal.*

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of gender has become a popular topic in the study of sports in Africa. This whole issue has been an ongoing discussion by various researchers such as Sikes (2019); Sikes and Bale (2014), and Njororai (2013). These recent pieces of scholarship have attempted to explain the reason behind the dominance of men in sports and the conception of the idea about femininity and masculinity. The scholarly interest of these researchers is reflected by their desire to promote women participation in African sports as a way of enhancing gender equality. However, none of these duelling putative schools of thought have so far been able to settle the question of gender inequality in the history of African sports.

The main reasons for the exclusion of women in the African sporting scene can therefore be explained by the theoretical framework of patriarchy and feminist theory. For, Patriarchal theory, this refers to a collection of various norms and values of different African societies that upholds male superiority over female (Njororai, 2016, Coakley, 1994, p. 209). This patriarchal ideology also draws a connection between how women are supposed to behave in society and sports. Since sport is an esteemed social-cultural phenomenon, the philosophical perspective of patriarchy views sports as a male-dominated institution. For instance, Nauright, (2014) pointed out that the under-representation of women in sports in Botswana is due to the 'patriarchal ordering of social space, gender relations and cultural formations. A similar case was also present in a discussion about women and sports in Tanzania by Mazrui (1986). He argued that, "In Africa as a whole, women are underrepresented both in culture intensive sports such as lawn tennis and golf and in culture-neutral sports such as sprinting, long-distance running, and high jumping" due to patriarchal ideology (Mazrui, 1986, p. 116).

The feminist view, on the other hand, contends that sport perpetuates intellectual support for men's supremacy over women by glorifying women in domains that are thought to be against their biological "nature" (Coakley, 1994, p. 36). This philosophy, which has a long history in sports, derives its arguments from preconceptions that women are fragile and have physical weaknesses, implying that the female body is incapable of achieving physical achievements comparable to men's (Njororai & Mwisukha, 2013). This ideology, which is common in patriarchal African societies, drove policies that often-placed women on the periphery of sport participation.

Thus, in the African continent, Kenya included, women were devastatingly omitted from participating in sport based on patriarchal ideology which was present in different African societies. It is therefore vital to note that, this whole issue of women's under-representation in sports has its root in both pre-colonial, and colonial African settings. Nevertheless, in the post-independence period these women had to navigate through and assert themselves in the sporting scene. This paper will therefore seek to address the representation of women in Kenyan sports, using historical and contemporary perspectives. The article mainly relied on both primary sources; oral history interviews and archival sources and secondary sources to construct the story of women's participation in Kenyan sports.

WOMEN AND SPORTS IN PRE-COLONIAL KENYA BY 1894

A common phenomenon that characterized the pre-colonial African societies was the predominance of sporting activities in their cultural setting. These activities were intricately interwoven in the traditional cultural system and were part and parcel of the everyday way of life.

The pre-colonial games were participated by both the children, youth, and adults. Some of the motivation factors underlying the participation of the pre-colonial sporting activities included achievement of higher social status and social integration. Some of the pre-colonial sporting activities include; running, jumping, shooting ranges, arrow shooting, hunting, wrestling, and high jump (Bale & Sang, 1996, p. 45). Such activities were associated with certain ceremonies such as initiation and some activities would have been associated with the world of work.

The Pre-colonial Kenyan society, therefore, like any other African societies also indulged themselves in various types of pre-colonial sporting activities (Chepyator-Thomson, 1990). These pre-colonial sporting activities by then, played a pivotal role in the Kenyan societies; through them, the young could accumulate knowledge to enable them to play an adult role and so ensure the survival of their offspring (Amusa & Toriola, 2012). Additionally, these sporting activities were closely connected with traditional education to inculcate, among other things, the sense of belonging which was the highest value of the traditional cultural system.

However, the social stratification of the pre-colonial Kenya sporting activities was based on gender. For example, in the Kalenjin community, an ethnic group that has befittingly earned the name of “Kenya’s running tribe”, a characterization by sports historian Manners (1997), Sports for them was a male sphere. This is evidence by the early texts, references abound to how people moved, walked, and ran by travellers, ethnographers, colonial administrators, and missionaries who praised the stamina of men who covered long distances with seemingly little effort. According to Sikes, (2019, p. 282), he claimed that “the (indigenous Kalenjin) runner thinks no more of carrying a message sixty miles a day than we should a three-mile stroll”. A district officer in Baringo also observed the following

The young men of Masop, the High country, spend many days of their lives on long foot journeys, alone or with a young brother or a friend, across the grassland and the hills, between the outstretched arms of the forests, to see the family cattle which have been deposited with friends many miles away. Often enough you meet these young men on

the track that run from end of the country, driving one or two head of cattle to add to the deposit to or returning with a beast which had been reclaimed... (Hennings 1951, p. 163).

Anthropologist Ian Orchardson also described how Kipsigis, the southernmost and most populous of the Kalenjin peoples, might travel for days or weeks at a time to graze their cattle. In his words, “the men’s endurance on the march and ability to go for long periods without food and complaint (were) remarkable” (Orchardson, 1961, p. 34). Regina Oboler also echoed this in her ethnography of the Nandi, noting that “men pride themselves on feats of endurance, such as being able to travel on foot for very long periods without rest of food” (Oboler, 1985, p. 58).

A similar pattern emerges from Bale and Sang’s (1996) detailing of “pre-colonial running” in Rift Valley communities. Men often travelled long distances for cattle raids, trade, or herding animals, and boyhood games predicated on “endurance” and “discipline” prepared young men to become warriors, an exclusively male occupation (Bale & Sang, 1996, p. 54). According to Mazrui (1986, p. 116), the warrior culture of pre-colonial African society linked sports to physical combat. Since the warrior culture was male hegemonic, sports were in turn male-specific. Mazrui (1986, p. 115) also attributes the under-representation of females in sport in pre-colonial Africa to improper western-oriented games, clashing values of sexual beauty and sporting aptitude, and the split between women and indigenous Africa’s warrior heritage. As a result of the lack of women on the battlefield, they were also excluded from sports (Mazrui, 1986). Similarly, Ring (2013) uses this warrior and battle legacy as a justification for women’s exclusion in the American pastime of baseball. Coubertin’s opposition to women’s admission to the Olympic Games was based on this military function. Physical training, in the manner of the Anglo-Saxon model of modern sport, would develop a stronger generation of men, and hence a French army. To that end, running was consigned to male spheres and thus counterproductive to a woman’s responsibilities and social status.

It is also through this warrior culture among the Kalenjin community that sport is best understood in the context of greatly venerated masculinity. Moreover, it should be noted that while boys were perfecting on their masculinities, girls especially

at around puberty remained at home engaging in domestic activities such as cooking, fetching firewood, and so on (O.I, Jenifer Kilimo, 2/2/2021). This owed to the fact that, at that age, they were expected to perfect on the ways of being respectable young women in the societies. Meanwhile, their age mates' boys remained outdoors mostly in groups looking after cattle in the fields. This overwhelming outdoor oriented boyhood lifestyle provided them with plentiful opportunity to meet and compete against each other in combat activities such as running (Kipkorir, 2009, p. 34). Running, therefore, took place only within male spheres. Matson (1909) sums this up best when he observed;

In Nandi society, the division of labor between men and women left the able-bodied men free to devote most of their time to military activities and training exercises. Military aptitude, endurance, and discipline were developed by games and herding duties in early boyhood and by long journeys to salt licks, Kaptich grazing areas, and on raiding expeditions before initiation into warriorhood. The warriors were expected to maintain their physical fitness, including abstinence from beer (p.20).

WOMEN AND SPORTS IN COLONIAL KENYA, 1894-1963

The partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference in 1884 led to the subdivision of the African continent based on varying European powers: Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Spain. With Africa under European tutelage, many sports and games were introduced, which negatively impacted African physical activities. Thus, the introduction of modern sports changed the socio-cultural role of play activities that were integral to the life of African people (Ndee, 2010). Therefore, colonialism not only marginalized traditional sporting practices that were essential to the transmission of African culture from generation to generation but also represented the introduction of modern sports that became the blueprint for successive sport development; football becomes the most popular and the most developed sporting activity in the African continent and for Kenya, athletics became the most successful sports.

The main agents of colonialism were the missionaries, colonial administrators, and the

military, settlers. These colonial agents had a great affinity to sports of their British motherland and therefore it was easy for them to spread modern sports throughout the British Empire. The British government also sought recruitment of officers in the colonies, basing it on sports participation and ideas about athleticism (Baker and Mangan 1996). Hence in Africa, colonial administrators posted took with them an ingrained acceptance of the moral importance of organized games, implementing in empire ideas promulgated at home that "through sport, boys acquire virtues which no books can give them" (Holt, 1989, p.93). Indeed, the colonial agents who advanced their pastimes across the African continent perpetuated this version of masculinity in sports.

Therefore, the codified forms of sport that developed in nineteenth-century Britain and spread to the rest of the world largely excluded women. This was part of a worldview that held participation in and success at athletics as measures of the worth of a man "as a man" (Sike, 2019, p. 257). Women were unwelcomed as athletes in the increasingly organized world of British sport and at major international competitions like the Olympic Games (Sikes, 2016, p. 45). The gendered imperatives of Victorian society, Muscular Christianity, and the imperial endeavour celebrated masculinity in sport and limited the possibilities and expectations of women as athletes.

Hence the Western model of athletics thus came to Kenya, and elsewhere in Africa, infused with codes of gender conventions and ethics. Additionally, early British colonial administrators in Kenya would have had little experience with women's involvement in physical games (Bale & Sang, 1996, p. 54). Many of the men responsible for establishing, administering, and organizing sport in that colony for the duration of the colonial period had studied at elite public schools and universities, where the masculine nature of organized games was assumed (Baker & Mangan, 1986, p. 123). They sought to shape the culture of athletics according to these familiar codes of behaviour that excluded women and that were expressed at the highest levels of international sport. Indeed, this explains why women in colonial Kenya were excluded from participating in international events such as the; British Empire and Commonwealth Games.

However, in 1950s, as sportsmen were building a reputation abroad, competition for female athletes in Kenya were in their infancy. Women from the Rift Valley, the region that would make Kenya famous for its distance runners, first competed

beyond the local level at the Colony woman and decathlon championship at the Eldama ravine in 1959 (Sikes 2016). The following is a list of women participated;

Table 1: List of women participants at the Colony women and Decathlon championship

Name	District
Chamenjo Tapchum	Nandi
Chebunge Kipsang	Nandi
Leah James	West Suk
Selina Cheronon	Elgeyo-Marakwet
Martha Kamau	Nakuru

Source: KNA/PC/NKU/2/32/2-1956-1959.

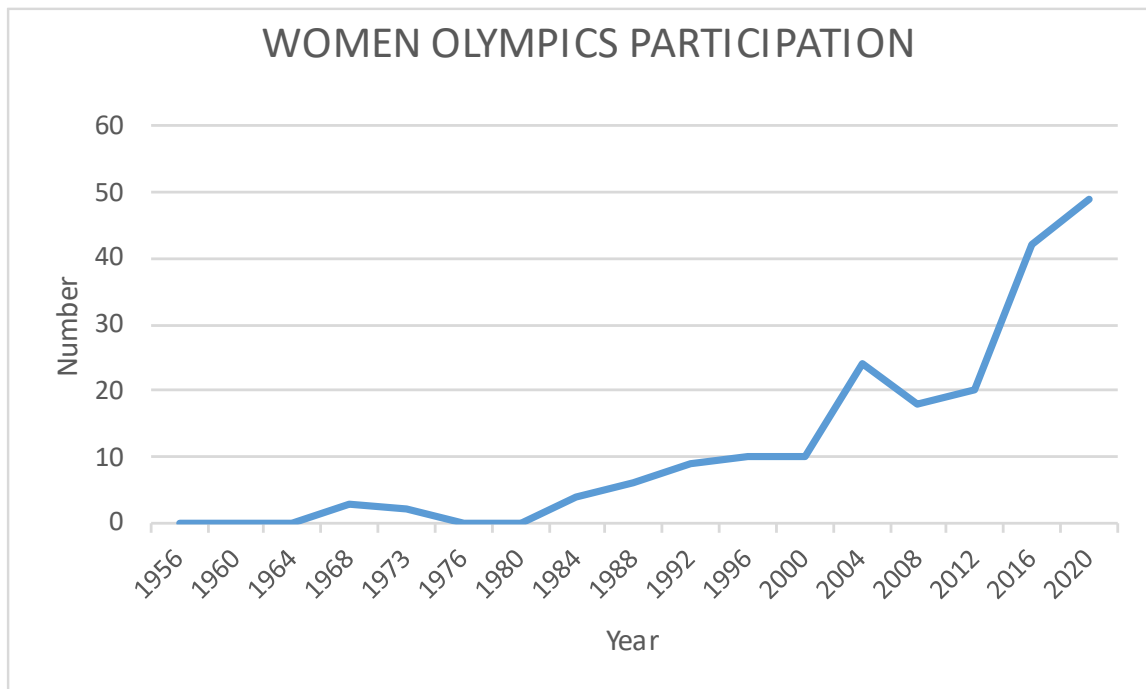
From the table it can be noted that, in the late 1950s, some women athletes were being able to participate in the national competition for the first time. Although, after independence some more women athletes started to emerged internationally, as we will see in our next discussion.

WOMEN AND SPORTS IN POST-COLONIAL KENYA, 1963-2000

Despite the contradictions that sportswomen had faced in the pre-colonial and colonial period, it should be appreciated that they have started

asserting themselves in the various sporting spheres in the post-colonial period. Indeed, they are strongly but steadily emerging from the hitherto shadow of men. In Kenya, for example, women were only incorporated in the national teams for the Olympics games in 1968. Since then, women athletes have consistently represented Kenya in all Olympic Games that Kenya has taken part in. All Africa Games since 1965, and the Commonwealth Games since 1966 (Njororai, 2016). It is also significant to note that in the 2003 All African games more women participated in the game than men (Njororai, 2016).

Figure 1: Women Olympics Participation



Source: Modified from National Olympics Committee statistics.

However, those successful women in sports must overcome numerous cultural and structural obstacles. Some of them do not reach their full potential as citizens of their societies, while others do for a number of reasons (Sikes 2016). Indeed, Kenyan women who have found success in sport are "symbolic of women who can actualize themselves within their societies," One female athlete who best illustrates this is Tecla Lorupe. Her story is especially significant because she comes from a Kalenjin ethnic group that stresses the warrior culture (Njororai 2016). Switzer (2013) claims that Tecla Lorupe was "so small when she was born that her father deemed her useless" (63), yet she went on to win the New York Marathon in 1994 and 1995, introducing Africa to the world of women's running. She made history by becoming the first African woman to win a major marathon. However, her Pokot ethnic tribe did not appreciate her achievement in 1994. But when she repeated the feat in 1995, the ultra-conservative community honoured her by making her a warrior – something that was unheard of for a woman. Switzer (2013), who singled out Tegla as one of the best marathon women runners of all time further states that:

Lorupe had to fight ancient traditions, cultural restrictions, and athletic bureaucracies just to run but inspired by her heroine, Mother Teresa, Lorupe endured and prevailed, thus opening doors for the flood of Kenyan women to follow. She broke Ingrid Kristiansen's 13-year-old world record twice and won London, Berlin, and Rotterdam, always pushing to break the 2:20 barrier. She came close, with a PR of 2:20:43. Lorupe is now organizing races to promote peace. The tiny body has a mighty voice that has been heard even at the UN General Assembly. In time, Lorupe's legacy of peace may well outshine her athletic accomplishments (p. 45).

Tecla epitomizes a spirit of resilience and drives for success despite cultural and structural challenges. These attributes resonate with the observation by Mazrui (1986) that Black African women 'often do more physical work than their

men. "... women often walk long distances, carry heavier loads, and have to learn a greater variety of balancing skills than their men" (125). Given the physical exertions in their childhood years, the girl child learns to exert and strive, attributes that are much needed in the sport. This contradiction where African women physically exert themselves on the domestic front, yet are not successful in sport elicited a question and commentary from Mazrui (1986) who noted that:

If the culture of work does indeed help to condition the culture of sports if African women can be so 'physical' in their economic activities on the land, why have they been so slow in excelling in the physical world of sports? One reason may be that decision-makers in Africa have been encouraging the wrong kind of sports. Perhaps more attention should be paid to the possibility of promoting marathon walks as a major sporting activity in Africa. Children begin to walk long distances to school quite early. Women have been walking longer and longer distances to diminishing supplies of firewood and water. The tradition of long-distance walking could be used to detect talent and structure new patterns of competitive sports. The very chores of collecting firewood could be given a new enthusiasm and liveliness as they are purposefully linked to training young girls for competitive walking. (p. 220)

Other major setback for Kenyan women athletes was the decrease in women events in various international sporting activities. For instance, the male dominated International Olympic Committee (IOC) just approved the women's 1500 m event at the 1972 Games in Munich. It was also not until the 1984 Games in Los Angeles that women had the opportunity to participate in the 3000 m and marathon races (Coakley, 1994, p. 215). Although changes have occurred, women athletes remain underrepresented in various international events. The table 2 below on the modern summer Olympic Games illustrate this point.

Table 2: Number of summer Olympics events opened to men and women

Year	Men	Women
1908	50	-
1932	87	14
1964	115	32
1980	146	50
1984	153	73
1988	165	86
1992	171	98

Source: Modified from Coakley 1994, p. 215.

From the above figures, it can be deduced that between 1908-1992 summer Olympics, the events for women were less than compared to their male counterpart.

However, from 1992, the most dramatic change in the history of sports has been the increase in participation rates among women and girls. This trend seems to have continued up to the twenty first century, with positive results evidenced by increased medals won at Commonwealth, Olympic, and World Athletics Championships. Also in 1992, The International Olympic Committee (IOC) declared that all new sports wishing to be on the Olympic Program must feature women's events. This broadening of the Olympic program thus also accounts for an increasing percentage of women athletes at the Olympic Games.

Dynamics behind the change, 1992-2000.

The key factors that account for recent increases in sports participation among women in post-colonial Kenya include; new opportunities, increased media coverage of women in sports, women movement, government legislation demanding equal treatment for women in public programs, institutions that have continued to provide the atmosphere and conditions necessary to help develop new talents, and continuing the tradition of those who had gone before.

New Opportunities

The main reason why more women and girls participate in sports today is because there are more opportunities than ever before. Before the professionalization of sports in the mid-1980s, many women did not participate in various sporting events for one simple reason: programs and teams did not exist. Therefore, teams and programs developed over the past decades have uncovered and cultivated interest ignored in the

past. Although, girls and women still do not receive an equal share of resources in most programs, it should be appreciated that increased participation has clearly accompanied the development of new opportunities.

For instance, in the aftermath of Kenya's poor results at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, a conference was hosted at Kenyatta University where Athletics Kenya (AK) and the National Olympic Committee of Kenya (NOCK) were called upon to allocate more opportunities to Kenya's women. Subsequently, women's participation in sports was included in the final conclusions of the Beijing Women's Conference. Indeed, new efforts to provide sport and physical education opportunities to promote the education, health, and human rights of girls and women in countries around the world were called for, and the Kenyan nation became more proactive in promoting gender equality in various spheres of life, including sport. At the same time, female participation in international sports increased, as did the quality of performances and medals. Athletic accomplishment has always served as a rallying point for national solidarity and identity as a nation. Women who won medals in international competitions became national heroes and role models for young girls and other women as a result. Serena Williams said, "It's essential to hear from women who battled preconceptions, misinformation, and discrimination... to be an athlete, (to be) strong," according to (Coakley 1994, p. 213).

Women Movement

It took the efforts of women activists who came together to form the Global Women's Rights Movement for women athletes to have a forum to exhibit their athletic abilities. Women's occupational and family roles changed dramatically as a result of this movement. Some of the developments made it possible for women

to get the time and resources they needed to participate in sports. Men's influence over women's affairs has weakened as a result of these changes, as has access to sports participation options. The 1994 Brighton Declaration in England, which highlighted "women, sport, and the challenge of change," is one of the global declarations that stressed women's rights. At the World Conferences on Women in Sport in Windhoek, Namibia in 1998, Montreal, Canada in 2002, and Kumamoto, Japan in 2006, this was followed up on and confirmed. All of these announcements are being used to put pressure on governments and sporting groups to expand possibilities for women in sports (Coakley, 1994).

The International Olympic Committee has also taken preparations to convene a world conference on women and sport every four years. The conference's main goal is to "review progress made in this field within the Olympic movement and establish a prioritized plan of action to promote and increase women's involvement in sport" (IOC, 2014). Indeed, almost 700 delegates from 121 nations suggested using sport as a vehicle to better the lives of women around the world during their 2012 conference in Los Angeles. They also underlined the importance of strengthening collaborations to improve and promote gender equality, as well as pushing for more women in sports leadership positions. As a result, the growing trend in women's participation in international sport, particularly in Kenya, cannot be separated from the global drive for change by feminist activists and groups. As a result, the Global Women's Initiative has been critical in promoting and ensuring opportunities for girls and women to participate in sports (Coakley, 1994). Other factors in Kenya's favour for female athletes were also in their favour.

Increased Media Coverage of Women in Sports

Increased participation rates have increased the media visibility of female athletes. Despite women's sports being not covered as often or in the same way as men's sports, women are now being able to see and read about the achievements of other women athletes in a wider range of sports than ever before (Coakley, 1994). This has promoted the idea that sports should be human activity rather than merely male activities. Seeing women athletes on television, attending women sports events, and talking to female friends who

participate in sports are especially important in encouraging girls and women to be active as athletes themselves (Knoppers, 1988). As girls grow up, they need to see what is possible before they will experiment with and develop athletic skills. Indeed, this is very important since girls may not receive the same kind of verbal and emotional support to be athletes as the male counterparts.

Developing Sports in Schools

Sports and games have always been an important part of the youth's education both in the traditional and formal systems. It gives young people the chance to expel excess energy and at the same time develop their physical faculties. The Latin saying – a healthy mind in a healthy body- holds much truth. But in the public schools of 19th century Britain, the playing of games came to be more important than academic work (Daily Nation, 1983, p. 14). A boy who played cricket with a straight bat or plunged fearlessly into a rugby scrum was deemed to be of good, solid character. While one who avoided games was probably both a bounder and a cad, unless he was also an academic genius and likely to bring glory to the school through this channel.

During Kenyan's colonial days, games were compulsory and meant to be taken very seriously (Boit, 2004). Coaches and track enthusiasts such as Laurie Campbell at Alliance, John Cawley and Doug Miller, realized that an expanded secondary schools' program was needed to complement the district meetings that often-produced champions (Amin & Moll, 1972). For instance, Campbell brought a tremendously knowledgeable enthusiasm to the Kenyan track in schools. After a short spell at Tumutumu, he returned to Alliance High school as the headmaster and in growing series of inter-school matches and triangular the school was unbeatable for six years. Since then, other secondary schools such as Sing'ore girls, Lugulu girls, Kapsabet girls, and St Patrick's Iten have continued to provide the atmosphere and conditions necessary to help develop new talents, continuing the tradition of those who had gone before. These schools have brought forward a whole host of female athletes of international calibre, such as Mary Chemweno and Rose Thomson (Amin & Moll, 1972). However, it should be noted that wheatears there are so many athletes' talents coming up from schools. One might well ask. What happens to them? Where are

the starts of yesterday? These questions are particularly relevant to those who are involved and interested in the future of Kenya as an athletic nation.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, there have been several international calls for action by various stakeholders to increase the representation of women in sports and provide greater opportunities for appropriate participation in decision-making processes. For instance, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in the recent concluded Tokyo Olympic Games called for action for women to be included in all events. However, the extent to which these actions have had an impact on the situation of women in sport is difficult to determine, simply because there is a dearth of substantiated information in different countries.

But recently in Kenya, the call for appropriate action and push for gender equity in sports has been forthcoming. In the recent concluded conference on sports inclusivity in Kilifi, the president in remembrance of Agness Tirop noted that ‘my government has put in place progressive policies to promote gender equity and to empower our women and girls’. This will have a greater impact on community culture, family socialization, peer influence, and institutional chances for sports participation in Kenya.

But whereas Kenya’s women are starting to emerge from the shadows of men in the realm of competitive participation, there remain a question about their leadership role. Perhaps this emergence of more female athletes in the late 1990s, will translate into more Kenyan women being attracted to sports leadership role. This fact combined with greater calls for gender equity in many areas of social life may witness improved representation for females in sports generally and sports administration in particular. Involvement by women in administrative positions and hence decision making may be the key ingredient required to bolster women involvement in sport. The scenery in the 21st century looks promising for greater women participation in sports not only in Kenya but perhaps in the rest of Africa.

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