

ISSN 1652-7224 • Published 6 June 2010

Go to printer-friendly version

Read more about sports and gender at idrottsforum.org

Read more in English at idrottsforum.org

A Letter to the Editor:

The World Village of Women Sports. Whose vision?



Celia Brackenridge

Professor of Sport Sciences, Brunel University, UK

We have, from time to time, in this forum written about the World Village of Women Sports (WVWS), a unique undertaking and a major investment in women's sports that will manifest itself in a gigantic international women's sports center in central Malmö. The center will allow female athletes the same opportunities as men to develop. It will cost €200 million, it will provide opportunities for research and development and training, and sports organizations and clubs from around the world are invited, as well as Swedish and international companies offering products and services in medicine, nutrition and sports equipment. The project is initiated by Mårten Hedlund and Kent Widding-Persson, the men behind the successful LdB FC, who currently have a solid grip on the top women's football league in Sweden, and Dan Olofsson, well known computer millionaire and philanthropist in Malmö.

The architectural competition for the center is already settled, and was won by Danish Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) with a design called the Crown Princess – nearest neighbor is Malmö's

architectural pride before Turning Torso was built, the 25-story high-rise the Crown Prince. But far more difficult than to design and build the sports R&D facilities and surrounding residential, office and commercial premises will be to create the content. An Executive Advisory Board, with currently nine people representing sports, science and the owners, have the heavy responsibility of ensuring that the WVWS actually meets the grandiose ambitions of becoming a world leading center for women athletes and women's sports. One who is worried that it might not be so, is the English professor of sport sciences at Brunel University, Celia Brackenridge, who has devoted her academic work to the promotion of women in sport and society. This spring, Celia Brackenridge visited the international research conference Centers and Peripheries in Sports, which was organized by the Department of Sport Sciences at Malmö University, where she talked about another cause for concern, children's rights in sports. Speaking at the conference was also Mårten Hedlund, who, accompanied by sounds and moving images, presented the World Village of Women Sports to the assembled sports researchers. Professor Brackenridge has stated her concerns in positive and constructive terms in a letter to the editor of idrottsforum.org, where she offers a list of principles and commitments that would ensure that the women's perspective will prevail beyond the stages of proclamations and planning.

Dear Editor,

I recently attended the excellent conference at Malmö on Centers and Peripheries in Sport. During the programme on women and sport we heard exciting news of a plan to invest in a World Village of Women Sports that seems intended to serve as a one-stop-shop for the international study and science of sport, sports practice, coaching, competition and management. For those of us who regard ourselves as 'sports feminists', and who have been fighting against sex discrimination and sexism in sport, arguing and advocating for women's sport, for the past forty years, this initiative seems almost too good to be true. Is it?

I was impressed by the presentation by CEO Mårten Hedlund and a little reassured about the motives of the men behind this project. But it's easy to sound supportive: it is far less easy to turn that message into something both practical and financially viable. I wish to put forward here some possible ideas about the WVWS and hope that those responsible for the plan will do me the service of reflecting upon and responding to my comments. I cannot speak for others but, as someone whose professional life has been dedicated to changing the gender politics of sport, I suspect that my voice will resonate elsewhere.

I have to admit that I am very sceptical that a capitalistic venture such as this could succeed to support women in sport in the ways that many long-term advocates of women's sport might wish. Seeing three white, middle class men in the project brochure certainly did not inspire me with confidence! I suspect that the WVWS will be developed purely in terms of income/economics but I hope the male executives will pay attention to some critical views as, in the end, this may well strengthen their 'product'.

For me, the chance to do something different here is very exciting but also a practical and political challenge. It will be a huge waste of time, money and emotion if this initiative simply reproduces something that mirrors the same or the worst in men's sport. So, I would like to think that the 'owners' would be willing to consider something genuinely transformational. For example, in addition to the more obvious elements of coaching, training, sport science, rehabilitation and competition, it would be great if they would build in to their business and operational plans a number of principles and commitments to a truly gender – in reality *female* – perspective. This could include:

1. Employment and human resources policies by which...

- women are taken on wherever possible as administrators, technical and coaching staff, scientists and leaders (notwithstanding the requirement to comply with Swedish employment laws)
- strong policies are adopted on equality, diversity, anti-homophobia etc.
- comprehensive policies and procedures are adopted for child protection for all users under 18 years old
- a system of regular monitoring and review is adopted that is based on independent, expert, external scrutiny that includes people involved in women's politics, education and business

2. Education and professional development policies by which...

- mentoring, personal and professional development programmes are provided for women trainees (such as coaches, physiotherapists, match officials), using women trainers
- scholarships and intern placements are offered for women from developing countries to come and work/study/practice

- an education programme is developed that welcomes all perspectives, even/especially critical ones, for seminars, guest lectures, debates and visiting scholars
- professional accredited awards are offered for female coaches and referees and other roles to redress the current structural gender imbalances in sport
- outreach education programmes are developed that can widen the access to and influence of the Village beyond the usual, privileged northern hemisphere communities

3. Facilities policies by which...

- a resource/library is housed that could become an international observatory on women and sport
- a childcare centre is available to all staff, volunteers and users of the Village
- timetabling and programming systems ensure equitable access to all facilities and services
- good ecological features are designed in to minimise the carbon footprint

4. External relations policies by which...

- genuine and practical partnerships are built with the existing women in sport organisations such as *WomenSport International* (WSI) and the *International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women* (IAPESGW) and all International and National Federations for women's sports
- the Village works with women's groups outside sport to make sure that women-friendly principles become embedded

5. Marketing and sponsorship policies by which...

- the dignity of all female users of the Village is assured, regardless of faith, culture, disability or any other identity
- only sponsors are selected that have good green/sustainability and women-friendly credentials (with no alcohol or tobacco associations or sexually explicit or demeaning product images)

Importantly, as proven successful business people, the owners of the Village will surely recognise that businesses thrive on diversity – of both people *and* thinking. If they are open to critique from a wide range of interests in and for women's sport then the chances of success for the WVWS will be vastly increased.

Without such an open approach, it will also be very difficult for the local academic community to build a genuine collaboration with the owners and for them not simply to be swamped in a commercial takeover. Academic integrity and academic freedom are essential to the whole enterprise. These qualities stem from social and ethical perspectives on sport and not simply from laboratory sciences.

Do women in sport want to be “on a par with men” (WVWS Newsletter 2, 2010)? I think the answer is no. Women's sport should develop its own ethos and not simply aspire to be like men's sport. This initiative is arguably the most significant ever opportunity for ensuring that this happens in a way that is both responsive to the commercial markets that sustain modern sport and also sensitive to the needs, desires and aspirations of women athletes.

Copyright © Celia Brackenridge 2010. Celia Brackenridge is Professor of Sport Sciences, *Brunel University*, UK; First Chair, UK *Women's Sports Foundation* (from 1984); Founding member and first secretary *WomenSport International* (from 1994); Programme consultant to the *International Olympic Committee* on sexual harassment prevention; Programme consultant to *UNICEF* on violence prevention in sport. Please visit www.celiabrackenridge.com