

DETELLIER, ÉLISE

Université de Montréal

SRG 2006

They Always Remain Girls: The re/production of gender relations in women's sports in Quebec, 1919-1961 (2011)

Project Summary

This doctoral thesis examines how multiple factors influenced women's participation in sports in Quebec between 1919 and 1961. It shows that gender, class, age, religious and ethno-linguistic affiliation, as well as whether a facility was co-ed or not, must be taken into consideration for a better understanding of women's participation in sports, an area that was, and still is, more readily associated with men.

The thesis is based on the study of the discourse of doctors, physical education teachers—especially Cécile Grenier—Catholic clergy members, women athletes—particularly Myrtle Cook—and, to a lesser extent, of civil servants, to identify the arguments these social actors put forward to restrict or encourage women's participation in sports. This study is linked to that of women's sports played in two sports centres in Montreal, namely the Palestre nationale, a co-ed centre frequented by French-Canadians, and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), a centre for women where members are predominantly English-speaking Protestants.

Research Methods

Numerous documents were consulted during this research, specifically French- and English-language medical journals, Catholic Church tracts, a number of Myrtle Cook's newspaper sports columns, and the archival records of Cecile Grenier, Conrad Poirier (photographer), and the Palestre nationale and YWCA in Montreal. In these archives, meeting minutes, annual reports, correspondence, bulletins, conference papers, articles and photographs were reviewed. By relying on a greater number of sources, the thesis highlights the complexity of the history of women's sports in Quebec.

Research Results

This thesis shows that between 1919 and 1961, many voices contributed to the discourse on women's sports in Quebec, and that practices were varied. In the province, as elsewhere in Canada, women's participation in sports therefore gave rise to social debates. The diverse prescriptive views on women's sports expressed by social actors as well as the various women's sports practices are understood in light of the definitions given according to gender, class, age, religious and ethno-linguistic affiliation, and whether a sports facility was

co-ed or not, while considering the socio-historical context in which the discourses took place and the sports were practiced.

This thesis sheds some light on the complexity of studying the history of women's sports in Quebec. The analysis is focussed on the discourse of a number of social actors and on the women's sports offered in two facilities. The study of other discourses and practices would help provide a better understanding of the elements of discourse and the practices that either encourage or prevent women from participating in sports.

Policy Implications

This thesis helps provide a better understanding of the various social, economic and political interests pursued by doctors, physical education teachers, Catholic Church clergy, women athletes and sports associations in deciding on or organizing women's sports at a time (1919–1961) when the federal government, the Quebec provincial government, and the municipalities rarely intervened in this area.

Next Steps

- This thesis raises many questions to be investigated about the history of women's sports in Quebec, which could help understand how gender, class and ethnicity influenced the organization of sports in the province and elsewhere in Canada, for instance by initiating the comparative study of physical education programs in English- and French-language schools and by analyzing the practices of the Young Women's Hebrew Association (YWHA) in Montreal. Although this city is a very important case study for women's sports in Quebec, as shown in this thesis, for example, researchers should also place a greater focus on the province's other cities and towns to better grasp how the gendered dimension of sports organizations is expressed and structured in a particular local context. It would also be useful to see how gender influenced the implementation of the first provincial and federal state activities in sports, an issue that requires further research.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity
This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the gender dimension of the history of sports in Quebec, therefore highlighting the complexity of the study of women's participation in the field, both in the province and elsewhere in Canada. The study of class, age and ethno-linguistic and religious affiliation, as well as the impact of whether the sports facility was co-ed or not on women's participation in sports, also reflects the complexity of the phenomenon. This thesis also makes it possible to identify, in part, the strategies used by women to overcome some of the ideas and practices preventing them from participating in sports, a field primarily associated with men.

Panthéon des sports du Québec [Quebec's Sports Hall of Fame]

This thesis enhances our knowledge of women athletes and sports organizers in the province.

Sports Quebec

This thesis provides a better understanding of the history of women's participation in sports in Quebec before the first universal state activities in the field, specifically the interests pursued by various sport organizations in the organization of women's sports, such as the Association athlétique d'amateurs Le National [National Amateur Athletic Association], the Commission de la Palestre de l'Association catholique de la jeunesse canadienne-française and Association athlétique nationale de la jeunesse.