

Sport, Leisure and the Adolescent Girl

Single Sex vs. Co-Ed?

by Aniko Varpalotai

L'auteure présente les résultats de plusieurs études menés afin d'établir l'importance de méthodes pédagogiques pour filles

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seulement et ce du point de vue des filles. Pendant les entrevues, on demandait aux filles de réfléchir à un certain nombre de questions propres aux femmes et aux rôles sexuels.

Ringette and Girl Guides share a number of common features. They are both voluntary, recreational activities. Ringette is a winter sport designed primarily for girls. Girl Guides is an all-female youth organization. They differ most significantly in their leadership. Ringette has been played in Canada (as an alternative to ice hockey) by girls and women for over thirty years. The leadership, however, remains predominantly male. Girl Guides—established in Canada as the female branch of the scouting movement in 1910—remains exclusively female, despite the fact that Boy Scouts are now co-ed, and men are agitating to become Girl Guide leaders (see Sexton; Dowsett).

The issue of single-sex organizations is being debated on several fronts—the courts, the media, and human rights commissions. Educators, too, are being asked to reconsider the value of co-education. While most would not advocate a return to completely segregated institutions, many are beginning to contemplate the value of the single sex environment for both girls and boys in some activities or subject areas. For girls, at least, it appears that the pressures to conform to particular, socially prescribed ways of being are so strong that there is a real need for a space in which girls and women can share common concerns and experiences, learning together, and from one another.

Ringette is an ice sport for girls, invented in Canada in the 1960s to provide girls with a winter team sport. At the time, and to some extent still today, ice hockey was considered inappropriate for girls (despite the fact that women in Canada have played hockey for over 100 years—see McFarlane). Ringette is played with a straight

stick, and a rubber ring. With the exception of more passing and zone rules to increase the participation of all players, most of the equipment and skills required for the game are similar to hockey. This section is based on a study of adolescent girls/women aged 15-19 who have been extensively involved in the sport of ringette as players, officials, coaches, and instructors.

Girls learn at a very young age that what is acceptable, and indeed encouraged, for their brothers, is more or less out of the question for themselves. Such is the case for girls who grow up in athletic families (as most of these girls had). Interestingly enough, when I asked them if anyone had ever discouraged them from playing sports, either generally or a particular sport, most of them initially replied “no.” This was after they had told me that they had always wanted to play hockey! When I followed this question up with: “Why did you choose ringette instead of hockey?” they began to reveal to me numerous examples of subtle and overt forms of discouragement which they had buried in their consciousness. Some described being registered in figureskating as their first sport, at their parent’s prompting, in direct contrast to their brother’s registration in a hockey league. Others were advised that hockey, and even ringette could result in injury, often linked with an impact on personal appearance/attractiveness (i.e. how would bruised legs look when wearing a bathing suit?). A further disincentive was the “butch”/masculine connotations associated with girls who play “boys’ sports,” which at an older age took on sexual orientation meanings. By maintaining that “real” sports are for boys in order to develop their sense of masculinity and male privilege, girls are systematically marginalized and taught that they are a weak and inferior sex. Some rationalized that there were not enough teams for girls (in hockey), and that ringette was actually a very good comfort zone without too much compromise (i.e., giving up sport), or too much conformity (i.e., becoming like the giggling, passive, boy-crazy girls of whom they are so critical). Many of the choices made along the way are carefully thought out, others appear to be products of chance. As one girl put it:

Ringette was there, my sister played ringette, I think my parents put me in Petite [an age division]... my brother played hockey but he wasn't as sport minded as both my sister and I... I don't think I ever really decided... when I was little it was put into your mind that boys play hockey and girls play ringette so... (Brenda, age 18)

Elizabeth (age 16) explained her “choice” in the following way:

Really when I started playing ringette I didn't know that girls could play hockey. I think now that I've met a lot of girls who play hockey and I've seen girls play hockey at the [Ontario] Winter Games I wouldn't mind playing it... I didn't know girls could play hockey when I started ringette, it wasn't until about three years ago...

Despite a desire to play hockey, the girls enjoy ringette and in fact feel that it is special in its uniqueness. Although one girl considered joining a boys' hockey team, she prefers to play with the girls: "I could play with boys but the relationships are not as strong and you feel you're always aside" (Frances, age 16). Another girl told me she had never had an interest in playing hockey, but her parents would have discouraged it if she had. Most had experienced overt discouragement, mostly from a parent. Thus, even though parents were often instrumental in encouraging their daughter's involvement in sport, the encouragement was tempered with gendered understandings of which sport might be appropriate for a girl.

There were mixed views on the issue of integrated sport. Not only did most of the girls attach conditions to the integration depending on the type of sport, but most expressed a desire to play on all-girl teams. Much of their concern had to do with the masculine socialization of their male counterparts which not only prescribed the nature of male sports but to some degree also regulated females' participation in it. Some of the reasons given included the fact that boys became rougher as they got older, and that they resented a girl who was better than they were, thus a girl felt that she had to adjust herself accordingly (i.e., not try as hard in order to save the boy from embarrassment

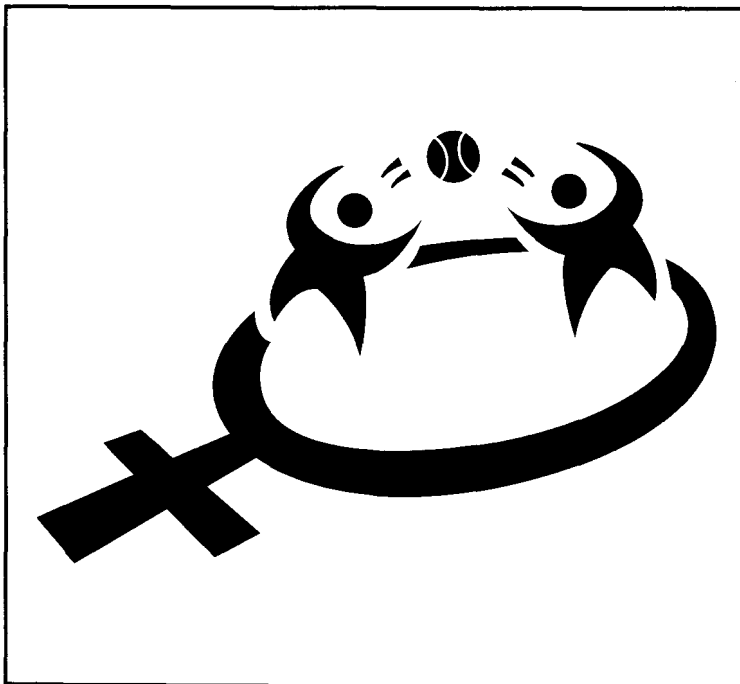
as well as make the situation more comfortable for all concerned).

This study conducted at the provincial ringette camp confirmed the impact of male dominance on the female athletes. The absence of female role models in girls' sport is a particular source of tension and contradiction, inhibiting girls' sport from being truly woman-defined (see Varpalotai 1987, 1991). The vast majority of the girls I spoke with had had almost exclusively male coaching. Ironically while many of these girls are already officiating and instructing younger girls, and intend to continue doing so even after their own playing days are over, they categorically dismissed women coaches. When asked about their experiences with and preference for male or female coaches, they almost unanimously chose male coaches over female.

...I prefer male [coaches]—they seem more stricter, if they're not tough on you I don't try... I think that all the male coaches I've had are the best coaches in the world... except one of them, he was a real turkey. It seems the ones I've had are so smart compared to the lady coaches, it seems they just got into it because their daughter plays and they seem like they're sucky about things. (Cindy, age 16)

One of the few who had had mostly female coaches had this to say:

I think I like male coaches better because they seem to be a lot more stronger, not so wimpy, like last year my coach she wouldn't speak up and say things... I'm not saying that all female coaches are like that, but... (Michelle, age 16)



Nancy Reid

The male presence in the subculture of women's sport, packaged in the ideology of male superiority, means that even that space which allows women to express themselves both physically and emotionally in a potentially empowering experience of individual strength and female solidarity is undermined and tainted. The majority of the athletes credited their fathers far more than their mothers for influencing them in their sports activities, although it became clear that the mothers did much of the support work in this regard (driving, attending games, etc.). Some players claimed not to have a preference regarding the sex of their coach (though they preferred a single-sex team), saying they would choose the more qualified or competent coach. But it became clear during the study that qualifications and competence were more often ascribed to a male coach. Only a few said they would prefer a female coach because a woman would be "more understanding," and because it was, after all, a girls' sport.

Nevertheless, there was a range of responses on whether there should be more women coaches. Some felt that the status of women was equal now and should remain that way (50:50) since the male/female combination was opti-

mal. Most of the athletes did not distinguish between the relative status of the male and female leadership of the team, which may be obscured by the "female on the bench" rule.¹ Tracey, age 15, describes why the male/female combination is seen to be the most desirable:

I like having a male and a female there...the male can be the more strict type because women tend to be the mother type and they get to be soft...and with the male there you can always be guaranteed that there is going to be some kind of strictness behind it. And I think every team should have some of that discipline and firmness...

Only a few of the athletes were critical of the status quo, citing the need for more women coaches, female leadership, role models, and the need to encourage more women to become qualified. But there seemed to be little understanding of the barriers standing in the way of women.

As much as the ringette athletes valued their sport experience, and enjoyed the fact that it was a predominantly female environment, the male presence in the position of power and authority inhibited their own aspirations.

The Girl Guides

The Girl Guides of Canada argue that girls in today's society are in need of strong female leadership role models, and therefore it is important to keep the organization all female. A statement issued by the Girl Guides' National Council in November, 1990, clarifies the reasons for its single sex mandate:

We believe strongly that the girls of Canada are best served by a program designed specifically for girls, and led by women. Although it is recognized that society is changing, it does not treat males and females equally. There is still a sexist approach to the development of girls and to the contributions that females can make to society...All-female organizations provide women with the opportunity to take executive and leadership positions and thus provide role models for girls... (Girl Guides 30)

Some callers to a radio talk show debating this issue questioned whether it was "natural for a lot of girls to just be with other girls," and suggested that "kids should be shown the real world—not put in a bubble" (CFRB). Margaret Ringland, Executive Director, Girl Guides of Canada, responded by saying

...almost all situations that girls are thrown in today are co-ed... we offer the one place where girls can in fact exist in a single sex situation and learn and develop and grow in their formative years... it gives them an alternative opportunity to be just with girls and they strive and are

encouraged to develop some skills that they may hold back on when they are in co-ed situations. (CFRB)

The girls and women² interviewed for this study were in agreement on many issues including the importance of the single sex membership of the Girl Guides and, perhaps most significantly, that the Girl Guide movement was a "safe place" for them to be together. They could attempt to learn new skills without fear of failure, and to talk about issues of interest and concern to them. Unlike their experiences in a co-ed setting, they did not fear exclusion or ridicule, and genuinely valued and enjoyed the company of other girls and women in this all too rare all-female environment.

Anne, 11, the youngest of the girls to be interviewed, felt that a mixed group was more challenging perhaps, but acknowledged that she likes Girl Guides because "it gives a chance to be more friendlier with the girls" and it also teaches girls that "they can do just as much as the guys." At the same time, she confirmed the concerns of feminist educators when she said that she and her girlfriends "cheer on the boys in baseball," that girls put up their hands to answer questions in class while boys "just talk out," and her brother usually determines activities at home.

Diana (age 12) is adamant that boys and men should not be allowed into Girl Guides. She contradicts herself several times on the pros and cons of having a mixed organization (there would be more sports if boys were involved). She, along with several of the other girls noted that the boys teased her about being in Guides—this teasing was one of the reasons she cited for wanting to go to an all-girls' school: "Boys tease you a lot and with girls all you have to do is make friends and they won't tease."

The older girls were clearer and more definite on their views. Emily, 15, valued the single sex nature of the organization, because of the tendency "by the men to want to take over several things." She specifically mentioned woodcraft skills and wilderness camping. She felt that the lack of competition with boys was a positive thing and also eliminated a distraction for some of the girls who "would just spend their time giggling or whatever, if there were guys in the same group." Emily thought that the positive self-image developed in Guiding might help women "stand up for what they want instead of just letting a male dominate in a relationship." She credits the Girl Guides with showing her that "I didn't have to limit myself to a profession where most of the people in it were women."

Lisa at age 16 has already made plans with a friend to be Guide leaders together as adults! She does not think men should be allowed:

...because Girl Guides to me has always been strictly a female organization and even though we're equal to males sometimes having the male there can be dominating and even though they're there as a support staff it's overbearing sometimes.

Melissa (16), Dani (19), and Juliet (17) were interviewed together. They talked about Girl Guides in terms of friendships, fun, and “open doors”:

Melissa: We are self-confident...I think it's an attitude though because its like if something goes wrong you have something to fall back on...More friends, more support, things like that.

Juliet: I don't like to sound sexist or anything but it is kind of nice to have your own little groups because you can relate to girls. I know I act differently when there are guys around. Here I can be myself and be goofy and silly.

Dani: Girl Guides opens up a lot of doors I think. There is so much opportunity out there that you wouldn't have known about, or had access to if you weren't part of the organization. Like scholarships, like international experiences, like camping, like friendships. There are a lot of doors out there and Girl Guides has helped me so much.

All of the other girls felt that it was important for Girl Guides to remain a single sex organization. Melissa sums it up:

Girl Guides has given me a lot of confidence...it showed me that I can do anything I want even if somebody says girls aren't supposed to do that. It gives you self-confidence in order to say I can do anything I want.

Conclusion

In both the Girl Guide and ringette studies, the girls/young women expressed a clear preference for those activities remaining single-sex. While the ringette players, for the most part, indicated their preference for a male coach, the Girl Guides almost all advocated exclusively female membership and leadership. The Girl Guide experience, it seems, taught them that women are capable and competent in both traditionally female and non-traditional domains. Some acknowledged that the presence of men would cause both sexes to fall back on sex role stereotypes. One finding that emerged from these two studies which requires further exploration is the relationship of the two groups of girls to their fathers and mothers, as defined by the nature of their activity. In many cases fathers encouraged and/or coached their daughters' sports, while in Girl Guides, the mothers had either been involved themselves as girls or were currently active as leaders. The range of activities engaged in by the Girl Guides (from traditional domestic skills to camping, and other less traditional activities) seemed to broaden their sense of women's capabilities and their own aspirations as adults.

While sport was clearly an empowering experience for the female participants, its effect was limited by the continuing perception—and reality—that only a few

privileged women are granted access to a predominantly male domain. Where women aren't visible as effective leaders, where they don't have a significant say in their activities, there is neither true equality of opportunity, nor access.

Gilbert and Taylor suggest that it is particularly instructive to discuss students' own day-to-day experiences with an opportunity to reflect on the gendered “choices” they have made. The ringette players had never considered the possibility that they had experienced sex discrimination in sport. Until they were directly asked: “Why ringette? Why not hockey?” they had assumed that ringette had been a completely independent, uninhibited choice.

Similarly, girls (and boys) will assume that the gender relations in their classroom are in fact equal, until they experience a single sex environment where a) girls feel free to speak and experiment with new activities and equipment, and b) they observe women in leadership positions engaging in a wide range of skills and activities. Girls (and boys) also need to learn that traditional female activities are as valuable as non-traditional (primarily male dominated) skills. The ringette players actively distance themselves from more traditional girls and women. At the same time they remarked on the disdain of the boys in their family studies classrooms. One girl described a cooking class during which the boys spit in the batter. Perhaps boys, too, would benefit from all male classrooms in areas not traditionally considered male domains. The Girl Guides, in contrast, did not feel the same need to undermine so-called feminine traits, and were also more likely to name their mothers among the women they most admired. At the same time, they more often considered themselves feminist, and expressed a wide range of career and family aspirations.

The contrast between the continued male domination of the sports world, and the exclusively female Girl Guides has implications for the gender identity of the girls who participate in each. While both groups offer potentially empowering experiences for adolescent girls, it is clear that this empowerment is easily compromised by the nature of the leadership and social attitudes.

Gilbert and Taylor conclude that:

...the key to empowerment for young women seems to be in the development of a sense of social or collective identity as girls or young women—rather than merely in the development of a sense of identity as an individual.
(139)

Educators, coaches, and youth leaders all need to take into account the experiences of girls in all of their social interactions in order to create a learning environment that will both validate and empower the women of tomorrow.

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¹Ringette rules require that there be at least one woman on the bench during games but often she is the team manager, rather than a coach.

²The views of the Guide leaders appear in an earlier article, see Varpalotai, 1992.

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ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

Skipping Games

Skip rope, you say,
it's good for hearts.

And I am six
and can't keep up
with rhyming games
the bigger girls
with double ropes
jump over, through,
like circus dogs
or seals through hoops.

I'd rather climb
the trees with boys.

Whatever sport,
I still end up
with knotted lines,
entangled limbs,
a jumbled heart
ensnarled in skeins
it will require
my entire life
to ravel out...

Elisavietta Ritchie is a writer, photographer, editor, and translator. In addition to ten collections of poetry, her most recent book is *Wild Garlic: The Journal of Maria X* (Big Easy Press, 1995). Her short story "I'm Writing You This Note—" won third prize in the 1995 Toronto Star Short Story Contest.