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Sex, Gender, Sport, Politics: Russia and the West

Abstract: Despite Olympic industry rhetoric extolling fair play, equality and the apolitical nature of sport, the Olympic Games have long served as a showcase for heteronormative sporting masculinities and femininities. Non-conforming women and members of sexual minorities are marginalized, and LGBT invisibility is the norm in Olympic and professional sport. Russia’s anti-gay legislation of June 2013 prompted world leaders and Olympic officials to express their concerns, even though the resurgence of traditional conservatism and homophobia for more than a decade under Putin’s presidency had passed largely unnoticed in Olympic industry circles.

Introduction

The Olympic industry’s concerted efforts to propagate the false message that Olympic sport is apolitical have succeeded in leading world opinion in that direction. In 2007, when Sochi was chosen as host of the 2014 Winter Olympics, Russia’s human rights violations, like China’s, were no secret, but the IOC shows little concern for social justice when exclusion of the culpable country would diminish the popularity and profitability of the Olympics. Its motives for selecting Beijing and Sochi reflect how geopolitical and market-driven forces outperform so-called Olympic values. IOC members knew at the outset that their awarding of the games to these countries would raise questions about threats to the purported egalitarianism enshrined in the Olympic Charter. Nevertheless, Sochi was selected for the 2014 games, and IOC president Jacques Rogge and other spokesmen mouthed the same platitudes about behind-the-scenes ‘soft diplomacy’ that they had rehearsed in the case of Beijing, while failing to exercise any moral leadership on the issue.

The Olympic Charter and human rights

Despite the popularity of broader interpretations, a close reading of the Olympic Charter suggests that the anti-discrimination clause (Rule 44, para. 6) could be viewed as specific only to the practice of sport: ‘Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind ...’ Similarly, one component of the IOC’s mission statement is ‘to act against any form of discrimination affecting the Olympic Movement’ (emphasis added). Thus, if narrowly interpreted, the Charter’s anti-discrimination clauses are not violated as long as a country does not disqualify an athlete based on his/her ‘race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise ...’ Of course, if all countries guilty of systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination were to be disqualified, it is unlikely that the Olympics would have survived into the 21st century.

Moreover, the IOC routinely asserts that it cannot and will not intervene in a country’s domestic politics. I was present in 1998 when the Canadian IOC member Dick Pound explained the IOC’s position on this issue to representatives of the Bread Not Circuses coalition, a Toronto anti-Olympic group, while, in 2013, the newly elected IOC president