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Breaking the Barriers in Women's Fencing: Historical Roots, Title IX and Empowerment of Women

By Grace Chenxin Liu¹

Abstract

Fencing, often referred to as a physical game of chess, is an organized sport involving the use of a sword, épée, foil, or saber for attack and defense according to set movements and rules. Fencing, one of the first nine sports included in the first Olympic Games in 1896, has a long history. This paper has systematically reviewed literature and evaluated the role of fencing in the empowerment of women through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods including first-hand observation, interviews, archival analysis, and secondary statistical data collection. It has attempted to narrow the empirical gap by exploring the gender perspective of fencing as a sport. It reveals that due to historical, social and cultural bias, financial constraints, as well as a lack of leadership, women's involvement in fencing had been limited throughout fencing's history. Since the 2nd half of the 19th century, fencing has witnessed tremendous strides in breaking the barriers influenced by the changing society propelled by a long history of feminist and civil rights activists who took a blend of the consciousness-raising and organizing approach and the pragmatic approach. Women's fencing shows a history of breaking barriers, and with the enacting of Title IX to eliminate gender discrimination in sports and education it is the most significant turning point. Title IX has not only broadened and deepened the scope and participation of women in fencing but also made fencing an enabler and driver to enhance women's grit and leadership, leading to the empowerment of women in society. The paper develops a framework to highlight the linkage between Title IX, women's fencing, and empowerment. The impact of Title IX on women with fencing as an enabler and drivers is far-reaching. It has widened the scope of women in fencing by reaching the general public and deepened the scope of women's fencing by raising the visibility of this women's sport in national and international arenas.

Keywords: Discrimination against women, Women's fencing, Barriers, Title IX, Empowerment of women, Qualitative and quantitative research, women in sports

Introduction

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair”--Nelson Mandela, 1918-2013 (The Associated Press, 2019)

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“Among those who control world and protect the State. There’s no one who doesn’t employ swordsmanship in his mind.” - Yagyū Muneyoshi, 1529-1606 (William, 1994)

Fencing, often referred to as a physical game of chess, is an organized sport involving the use of a sword, épée, foil, or saber for attack and defense according to set movements and rules (International Fencing Federation, 2021; Chung, 2014; Varady, 2007; Cohen, 2003; Gaugler, 1998). Fencing requires physical prowess and mental ability, builds muscle, increases concentration, activates the mind, and provides a healthy outlet for competition (Liu, 2019; Roi and Bianchedi, 2008). Fencing, one of the first nine sports included in the first Olympic Games in 1896, has a long history. It had found its footprint throughout the evolution of civilization in many forms and countries (The Olympic Studies Center, 2017; Evangelista, 1999; Lobo and Gaugler, 1997). Due to historical, social and cultural bias, financial constraints as well as a lack of leadership, women’s involvement in fencing had been limited throughout fencing’s history until Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 in the USA became law.

Existing literature on fencing has mainly focused on the history of the sport (Cohen, 2003; Castle, 2003; Lobo and Gaugler, 1997), the specifics of fencing technique (Windsor 2013; Varady, 2007; Cheris, 2002), the psychology, injury prevention and health-related issues of fencing (Kim, 2021; Allerdissen et al. 2017; Chung, 2014; Harris, 2010; Roi and Brianchedi, 2008), types of fencing weapons (Deladrier, 2020; Garret et al. 1994), and biographies of great fencers (Muhammad, 2018; Golubitsky, 2004; Nadi 1996). According to UNESCO (2021), 40 percent of all sports are participated by females today. A survey across eight countries including U.S., U.K., France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Australia, and New Zealand has indicated that 84 percent of sports fans are interested in women’s sports (Nielsen Sports, 2018). However, as pointed out by the United Nations (2021), sport is one of the last frontiers of gender equity. It is the place where discrimination against women and male domination are broadly considered reasonable and acceptable. Therefore, studying from the perspective of gender is not only one of the most important sport studies, but also one of the most under-researched, in particular for the sport of fencing.

Given the significance and lack of research into the gender perspective of fencing as a sport, this paper systematically reviews literature and evaluates the role of fencing in the empowerment of women. It has attempted to narrow the empirical gap by exploring the gender perspective of fencing as a sport. It reveals that due to historical, social and cultural bias, financial constraints, as well as a lack of leadership, women’s involvement in fencing had been limited throughout fencing’s history. Since the 2nd half of the 19th century, fencing has witnessed tremendous strides in breaking the barriers influenced by the changing society propelled by a long history of feminist and civil rights activists who took a blend of the consciousness-raising and organizing approach and the pragmatic approach. Women’s fencing shows a history of breaking the barriers with the enacting of Title IX to eliminate gender discrimination in sports and education being the most significant turning point. Title IX has not only broadened and deepened the scope and participation of women in fencing but also made fencing an enabler and driver to enhance women’s grit and leadership, leading to the empowerment of women in society. In this connection, a framework is developed to highlight the linkage between Title IX, women’s fencing, and empowerment. It further reviews that the impact of Title IX for women with fencing as an enabler and driver is far-reaching. It has widened the scope of women’s fencing by reaching the general public and deepened the scope of women in fencing by raising the visibility of this women’s sport into national and international arenas.

Concepts and Research Methodology

Two key concepts need to be defined and clarified in this paper. The first concept used frequently in this paper is "Title IX". According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021) and the U.S. Department of Justice (2021),

"Title IX is a federal civil rights law in the United States of America that was passed as part of the Education Amendments of 1972. It prohibits sex-based discrimination in any school or other education program that receives federal money."

The second concept is "empowerment", which has been used loosely and widely through critical discussions, dialogues, and debates by feminists. According to the United Nations (2010),

"Empowerment means active participation in decision-making, equal opportunity, economic freedom, and the right to give opinion, access to the productive resources that can make enable to increase the earnings. It is giving the strength to fight against any inequalities and getting self-respect and confidence."

Generally speaking, women's empowerment means to take part in a decision-making process that enhances women's or girls' worthy living (Hossain et al. 2006).

A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods has been utilized to enable data to be compared so as to cross-check or "triangulate" the results in this paper. The qualitative method involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts or experiences to gather in-depth insights into the fencing issues. Data was collected through first-hand observation, interviews, as well as archival analysis of secondary data. In terms of first-hand observation, the author has become a competitive member of the US Fencing Association since 2019, which helped to collect data in their natural settings. Between April 2019 and July 2020, the author worked closely with four coaches and received saber training. Among the four coaches, three are male coaches. One is a former national men's saber coach at the Junior and Cadet World Championships. One is a former Head Coach of a national saber team as well as a certified referee for World Champions and Olympic Games. One is a former Head Coach of a national fencing team, and one is a female coach who used to be a female saber fencer qualified for the Olympic Games. In terms of interviews, between May 2019 and February 2020, the author made a series of open-ended in-depth interviews with these coaches. The interviews helped the author to better understand the history and barriers regarding female fencing. Being insiders, the coaches' personal experiences, views, and observations had enriched the author's knowledge on the barriers and reasons behind these barriers and collected valuable first-hand information thoroughly.

For the quantitative method, data were obtained from Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, International Fencing Federation, International Olympic Committee, Museum of American Fencing, North American Society for Sports History, Olympia Fencing Center, The Amateur Athletic Union, The United States Department of Health and Human Services Office for Civil Rights, The United States Department of Justice, States Sports Academy, USA Fencing, Women Sports Foundation, and World Olympians Association, etc. The quantitative data helped

the author to view the research subject in a dynamic way, reflect in a wider population, and understand the reasons behind decisions, behaviors, or actions.

Historical Roots and Barriers

The first evidence of fencing contests in the form of swordplay could be traced back to drawings in Egypt built approximately 1190 B.C (Hattan, 2017). Warriors were trained in schools for entertainment purposes during the Greek and Roman civilizations in the 2nd Century B.C. The sword fighting of knights and military training was introduced in the Dark Ages of England between the 4th century and 11th century (Harkins, 2019). Fencing as a sport was introduced in Europe during the Renaissance during the 14th and 17th centuries (Cohen 2003). Later, Foil, a sword with a light, flexible blade of rectangular cross-section tapering to a blunt point, was designed as a practice weapon for the small sword fashionable in the 17th century. Saber, a heavy military sword with a long cutting edge, was derived from a Hungarian cavalry sword introduced from the Orient in the 18th century. Épée, a blunted sword was developed in the 19th century. Parallel to the growth of fencing in Europe, martial arts were blossoming as a sacred rite in medieval Japan from the 12th to the 17th century. Fencing has been on the program of the 1st Olympic Games since 1896 with the introduction of men's foil and épée and the inclusion of saber in 1900 (The Olympic Studies Center, 2017).

Although the oldest testimonies of female sword fighters can be traced back to the accounts of ancient Amazons (Hattan, 2017), women in the history of fencing have been overlooked due to historical, social, and cultural barriers. According to Yuval Noah Harari (2015) in his book entitled *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, the strength and aggression of men are behind men's dominance over women in history. According to Harari (2015), there are two theories in history. One theory explains that men are stronger than women and that they have used their greater physical power to force women into submission. Another theory explains that masculine dominance results not from strength but from aggression. Millions of years of evolution have made men far more violent than women. From ancient times, women's ability to participate in sports was questioned. The general pattern in Western societies, was that women were supposed to give birth to babies and raise families. For example, Plato and Aristotle declared that women had a limited amount of "energy" flowing through the body, to begin with (ThoughtCo, 2019), and women were not equal to men in strength and virtue (Smith, 1983). Fencing has been regarded as a province of male power. Women in fencing could not be as aggressive, competitive, or entertaining as their male counterparts. This explained why the widely accepted "33 greatest fencing masters of history" such as Agrippa, Camillo (1590-1650, Italy), Michel, Jean-Louis (1785-1865, France), Castello, Hutton, Alfred (1841 -1910, UK), and Julio Martinez (1882-1973, Spain) were all males (Amarillo Competitive Fencing Association, 2019).

Prior to the 19th century, fencing for women existed as a form of entertainment among the aristocracy where rather than being competitive, it was informal and without rules (Hattan, 2017). The existing literature about women in fencing before the 1st Olympic Games addresses the "seven most famous ladies sword duels" and "three outstanding female fencers". All of the ladies were wealthy, and their duels were triggered by love triangles or disagreements (Drusus, 2019). These women fencers were either princesses, property owners, or noblewomen. For example, a duel happened in 1552 between Isabella de Carazzi and Diambra de Pottinella because both of them fell in love with a gentleman. Another duel was between Olga Zavarova and Ekaterina Polesova in June 1829. Both were wealthy property owners and had a long history

of neighborly disagreements. This indicates that only the women from wealthy families could afford to fence and that financial constraint was a factor in preventing women from participating in the sport.

Even after the introduction of fencing in the Olympic Games in 1896, women still faced discrimination leading to the lack of female participation in the games and leadership in fencing sport governance. An examination of the archive finds the oldest poster with a women fencer (North American Society for Sports History, 1976). The poster was created during the 1990 Olympic Games with an image of a lady fencer carrying three fencing weapons, foil, saber, and épée. Ironically, women’s fencing events were not allowed during the 1990 Olympic Games and this female fencer dressed in an aristocratic fencing dress, which was not suitable for competition. An examination of the evolution in the number of Olympic fencing events reveals there were no female events between 1896 and 1920. As indicated by Table 1, between 1924 and 1956, there were six men’s events and only one women’s event. Senior administrators rarely had females on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) before the 1970s (International Olympic Committee, 2019) due to the fact that sport is a gender prejudiced institution and all processes operate according to men’s norms. According to Joshua A. Senne (2016),

“Male leaders in the sports industry use power to ensure that male leadership remained dominant, and the participation of women was limited to those who fit the model of leader as determined by the men on the boards studied.”

Resistance to promote women in sports games and leadership in sport governance was further manifested by the statement made by the former IOC President, known as the father of the modern Olympic Games and founder of the IOC, Baron Pierre de Coubertin,

“An Olympiad with females would be impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and improper.” (The Irish Times, 2019)”

Table 1: Olympic Games fencing events, 1896-2020, men vs. women

	Foil		Foil team		Épée		Épée team		Saber		Saber team	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1896	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
1900	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
1904	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
1908	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1912	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1920	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1924	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1928	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1932	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1936	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1948	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1952	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1956	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1960	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1964	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1968	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1972	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1976	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0

1980	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1984	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1988	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1992	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
1996	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0
2000	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0
2004	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
2008	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
2012	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
2016	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total events	28	23	24	14	28	7	25	6	29	5	25	3

Source: Author's calculation based on data from IOC. *Fencing: History of Fencing at the Olympic Games*, OSC Reference Collection. October 19, 2017.

Breaking the Barriers and Title IX

According to some feminists (Deborah, 2007; Sahay, 1998; Batiwala, 1995; Rowlands, 1995), there are four major approaches to women's empowerment in the existing literature including the pragmatic approach, the empowerment-integrated development approach, the economic development approach, and the consciousness-raising and organizing approach. After an examination of the existing major approaches to empowerment, the researcher has found that while these four approaches differ from each other conceptually, all these approaches have placed importance on group formation to build solidarity among women. Many organizations or initiatives on the ground have taken a blend of approaches with a particular focus on a mix of the consciousness-raising and organizing approach and the pragmatic approach throughout the history of women's empowerment in fencing.

The efforts in promoting women's involvement in fencing occurred in the 2nd half of the 19th century in North America under the influence of the suffrage movement, which not only won the right to vote, but also secured other freedoms for women including more opportunities and participation in sports and intercollegiate competition, and gained more power to effect changes (Gelb and Palley, 1982). The women's suffrage movement started as a consciousness-raising and organizing approach and began in the 1820s with the aim of giving women the right to vote. After nearly 100 years, on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in the United States was finally ratified and declared for the first time that women, like men, deserve all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The ultimate significance of women's suffrage is that women vote today because of the woman suffrage movement. The suffrage movement took traditional lobbying and petitioning supplemented by other more public actions—including parades, pageants, street speaking, and demonstrations, which gave a special focus on women's awareness about the complex factors causing women's subordination. The ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in the United States symbolizes that the suffrage movement had taken a pragmatic approach.

The U.S. suffrage movement resulted in modest gains for women in sports and intercollegiate competition. It organized women into collectives that tackled the sources of subordination. This approach had been successful in enabling women to address their position and desires to participate in sports in particular fencing. Around the 1870s, Thomas Monstery began training female fencers. (Museum of American Fencing, 2019). In 1888, the Amateur Athletic Union held its first fencing championships (AAU, 1888). The AAU was founded in

1888 to establish standards and uniformity in amateur sports. During its early years, the AAU served as a leader in international sport representing the U.S. in the international sports federations. The AAU worked closely with the Olympic movement to prepare athletes for the Olympic Games. The philosophy of AAU is "Sports for All, Forever". On April 6, 1888, the AAU conducted its first championships for three sports including fencing, boxing, and wrestling. During this event, Hans Hartl of Vienna toured America with a women's fencing demonstration (Olympia Fencing Center, 2020), which is the first time that women fencers appeared in a prestigious competition. During the 1880s, Hans Hartl of Vienna gave demonstrations throughout America with his women students in the use of the saber, sword, and dagger. By the 1890s many other fencing masters, such as Regis Senac, followed suit (Martial Arts New York, 2015). Women’s informal fencing clubs in the USA began offering women’s classes after WWI. The college clubs sponsored competitions as occasions for social gatherings (Gerber, 1974). In the early 1900s, the Committee on Women’s Athletics and the American Physical Education Association endorsed programs of broad participation for women (Park and Hult, 1993). In 1924, women’s fencing with individual foil was the first women’s fencing event introduced to the Olympic Games (The International Olympic Committee, 2017).

During WWII, many women joined the military service or left their homes to fill the void left in the workforce. They believed that if they could compete successfully in the workforce, they could definitely compete on the athletic fields (Chafe, 1972). As demonstrated by Table 2, feminist and civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s propelled the movement for women’s rights in sports forward. After WWII, the United States became embroiled in the debate for an Equal Rights Amendment. This debate raised the consciousness of those involved in women’s sports. As a result, the statement of the Division for Girls' and Women's Sports of the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation was amended. The amended statement indicates, “it was 'desirable' that intercollegiate programs for women exist.” We also saw the advent of the women's professional athletic team in fencing. For the first time, a foil team for women was introduced into the Olympic Games in 1960.

Table 2: Timeline of sport feminist movements behind Title IX

Time	Event	The impact upon women’s fencing
1950s-1960s	A wave of feminist activism was born.	Feminist activists propelled the movement for women’s rights in sports forward. The United States became involved in the debate for an Equal Rights Amendment. This debate raised the consciousness of those involved in women’s sports, including fencing.
1957	The statement of the Division for Girls' and Women's Sports (DGWS) of the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation was amended.	It is clearly stated that it was “desirable” that intercollegiate programs for women exist. This statement opened the door for women’s fencing at the collegiate level.
1964	The passage of the Civil Rights Act.	It helped to enhance the status of women’s fencers.
1966	DGWS appointed a Commission on Intercollegiate Sports for Women (CISW, renamed CIAW in 1967) to assist in conducting intercollegiate competitions.	The women’s movement in fencing was rapidly moving toward a status more in line with men’s fencing.
1971	The CIAW was replaced by the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW).	The increasingly positive attitude toward women in fencing carried over into the 1970s.

1960s-1970s	The feminist activists were seeking larger social reforms to legislative action for greater equal treatment in education and athletics. It led to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 in the USA to become law.	Women truly found a place as participants in the world of sports including fencing and in the public arena.
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Source: Author's summary and reflection based on Bell, Richard C. "A history of women in sport prior to Title IX". *The Sport Journal*. Issue 1543-9518. Vol. 21. March 14, 2008.

Note: This table summarizes sport feminist movements, leading to the amendment of Title IX. These events propelled by feminist activists pushed the movement for women's rights in sports forward.

Feminist activists were seeking broader social reforms to legislative action for greater equal treatment in education and athletics. In 1972, Title IX was signed into law (The United States Department of Justice, 1972). Title IX clearly states that,

"No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance."

Title IX is a comprehensive federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender in any education and sports program or activity. Title IX served as an accelerator for breaking the barriers for women's fencing history. According to Deborah (2007), what looks like legal progress on the surface does not necessarily translate into meaningful social change. Cultural norms are "sticky" and not easily discarded. And yet, neither are they set in stone. In the process of navigating the thicket of social norms, law plays a role in helping to create or suppress opportunities for resisting cultural norms, reinforcing certain norms while contesting others. In the past five decades, Title IX has been monumental in increasing the participation of women in sport. Enforcement was emphasized. Congress built in a six-year period for secondary and post-secondary schools to achieve compliance. The Office for Civil Rights provided technical assistance and guidance to schools at all levels to assist them in voluntarily complying with the law (The Office for Civil Rights, 2019). This has definitely helped to create better work, social, and cultural environments for women's fencing, and resulted in the allocation of more facilities, supplies, and financial assets to women's fencing. In this connection, Title IX is a great example that represents a pragmatic response to the distinctive ways in which women encounter subordination in sports and break the barriers after more than a centenary of the consciousness-raising and organizing initiatives and activities seeking empowerment.

Before the enforcement of Title IX², there were few female fencing students and they received little support or funds from the public and private sectors. For example, The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which was created in 1906, has been the ruling body of college athletics. NCAA had offered no athletic scholarships for women fencers and held no championships for women's fencing teams before the 1970s. Under the influence of Title IX, women's participation in high school and college sports increased by 904 percent and 456 percent between 1972 and 2006 (Lopiano, 2000). In 1972, less than 4 percent of high school girls played varsity sports. Entering the 1990s, the number increased to 40 percent (Acosta and Carpenter, 2019; Athletic Scholarships Net, 2019). Fencing clubs and teams and scholarships open to females have been growing dramatically. Women's NCAA Programs in fencing have

² It should be noted that Title IX is not fully enforced and approximately 90% of institutions of higher education and high schools in the US are non-compliant (<https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/06/23/title-ix-50-years-later-why-female-athletes-are-still-fighting-for-equality>).

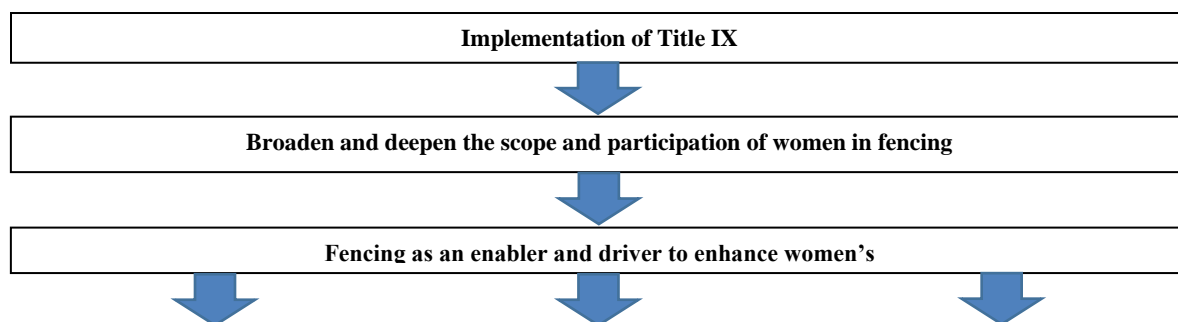
been established in 45 universities in the USA including Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Stanford, Columbia, Cornell, etc. (USA Fencing, 2019). College fencing clubs have increased to 105 with most clubs consisting of female fencers. The NCAA authorizes each division a university fencing program, 4.5 scholarships for men and five scholarships for women (Ugochi, 2019). Private funds, such as Absolute Fencing Gear All-Academic Team Scholarship and Connor Porter Memorial Scholarship, have been created to sponsor both male and female fencers.

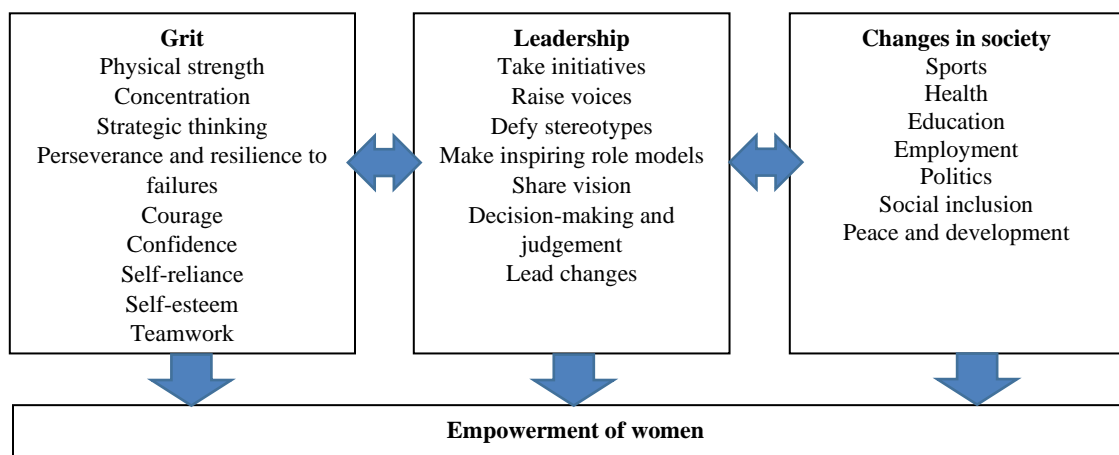
Parallel to the flourishing of women's fencing at the ground level, great progress has been made at national and international levels. In 1988, the last barrier between women's fencing and men's fencing in America fell when women's saber was added to the Fencing National Championship (Chirashnya, 2018). The "advanced weapons", épée and saber, deemed inappropriate for women, were included in the Olympic Games in 1996 and 2000, respectively. The rise of female fencing personalities such as Ibtihaj Muhammad (Muhammad, 2018), Valentina Vezzali (The Olympic Committee, 2019), Laura Flessel-Colovic (World Olympians Association, 2019), and Jujie Luan (Olympic Canada, 2019) further increased athletic media representation and perception in sports, making women's fencing more exciting and entertaining (Harkins, 2013), which has further increased interest and participation among women.

Empowerment of Women with Fencing as an Enabler and Driver

As demonstrated by Figure 1, the author has developed a framework to highlight the linkage between Title IX, women's fencing, and empowerment. It is evident that the impact of Title IX for women with fencing as an enabler and driver is far-reaching. It has widened the scope of women's fencing by reaching the general public and deepened the scope of women's fencing by raising the visibility of this women's sport into national and international arenas. A fencer's blade is believed to be the second-fastest moving object in sports behind a marksman's bullet (Bases, 2012). The nature and rules of fencing competitions have offered women great opportunities to develop a series of traits leading to success. In both individual and team events, a fencing "bout" usually lasts 2-9 minutes and takes place on a strip 14 meters long by 1.5-2 meters wide (USA Fencing, 2019). To meet an opponent's attack, the fencer has to be confident on their feet with offensive and defensive strategies, bold moves, and self-assuredness. A female fencer could face a lot of losses in tournaments within a short period of time. The nature of fencing as a fiercely competitive sport helps to build women's courage, self-reliance, self-esteem, teamwork, confidence, strategic thinking, and resilience to losses. According to Angela Duckworth (2019), what really drives success is not "genius" but "grit", a unique combination of passion and long-term perseverance and resilience to failures, which is exactly what fencing leads to.

Figure 1: An assessment framework: Fencing as an enabler and driver to enhance women's empowerment of women





Note: The author has developed this assessment framework to illustrate the empowerment of women with fencing as an enabler and driver. It helps to outline the key elements and explain the impact of Title IX on women's fencing and how it has enhanced the empowerment of women.

Fencing is a place where women can and should take up leadership positions. Wins on the fencing strip translate into wins off the strip. It encourages women to take initiatives, raise their voices, share visions and attempt the impossible. In this connection, breaking the barriers in women's fencing has enabled fencing to become one of the significant drivers for the empowerment of women. Women in fencing defy gender stereotypes, make inspiring role models, and lead changes in society. Breaking the barriers in fencing for women has opened doors for women fencers and allowed them to reach their full potential and take a closer step to complete equality in sports. Access to and participation in fencing is not only a right for women in itself but also can be used to encourage tolerance and gain respect, as well as providing access to various networks. In this connection, areas of development such as health, education, employment, as well as social inclusion can be influenced by women in fencing.

Fencing has the significant ability to reach local, state, national, and international stages and translate across the vast array of languages, religions, societies, politics, customs, and cultures as demonstrated by its long history throughout the evolution of civilization in different forms and countries. Although Title IX was adopted in the USA, given the importance of the USA as a powerhouse in world sports, it has set a terrific model for the rest of the world to follow in the foreseeable future, as noted by Donna Lopiano, former CEO of the Women's Sports Foundation, in *The New York Times* (Women's Sports Foundation, 2016).

Conclusion

Richard Cohen (2003) comments on the beauty of fencing as "a graceful and brutal, balletic and deadly, technically beautifully and fiercely competitive, life-threatening and life-enhancing, the most romantic of martial arts." Most of the literature on fencing has been concerned with empirical studies on the history of the sport, its technique and weapons, health-related issues, and the biographies of great fencers. This paper has attempted to narrow the empirical gap by exploring the gender perspective of fencing as a sport, which reveals that fencing has a long history marked by discrimination against women fencers due to historical roots. Since the 2nd half of the 19th century, fencing has witnessed tremendous strides in breaking the barriers influenced by the changing society propelled by a long history of feminist and civil

rights activists who took a blend of the consciousness-raising and organizing approach and the pragmatic approach. Breaking the barriers has given more opportunities to women with Title IX, being the “thrust”, if using a fencing term. Over the last century and a half of barriers falling in women's fencing, there have also been major accomplishments by female fencers and important advances for gender equality in the Olympic Games and the empowerment of females.

The findings of this paper are by no means representative of different sports as a whole. They simply shed light on the process of breaking the barriers of fencing in its development history, which contributes to an understanding of the females' empowerment in fencing. Although this research was specific (in regards to fencing), the discussion presented here has been situated within much broader global debates about feminists, women's empowerment, and different feminist and empowerment approach. The findings of this research have some implications for gender and sport studies. They support the view that most organizations or initiatives on the ground have been taking a blend of approaches and are also useful for other sport-related studies where gender stereotypes and social norms, customary male-dominated attitudes towards women are the major encumbrances to the pathway of women empowerment. Recent research (UNESCO, 2021; Schmidt, 2017) observes that there is a widespread acknowledgment of the inequities in the coverage of women's sports and the involvement of women in sports such as basketball, golf, soccer, baseball, tennis, etc. Further studies are needed to investigate how Title IX and women empowerment approaches are related to the development in these areas in history and their social impacts.

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