



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Between Equality and Discrimination: The Paradox of Women's Bridge

Rogers, A., Snellgrove, M.L. and Punch, S. (2022) 'Between Equality and Discrimination: The Paradox of the Women's Game in the Mind-sport Bridge,' *World Leisure Journal*. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2022.2051068>

Summary

Gender differences in the sporting world are long-standing and historic. In many sports, the physical differences between men and women explain the necessity for women-only events. However, if the sport (or leisure activity) is not one that requires physical strength, divisions and discriminations still endure. For example, fewer than 1% of the top Grandmasters in chess are women. In general society, there are ongoing debates about the need for women to be able to access women-only spaces. In sport and leisure, women-only events have existed alongside men's, often with considerably less pay, media coverage and status granted to them.

This paper discusses the existence of women's events in bridge, and how the women's game can be viewed as both hindering women's progression in the game whilst also providing opportunities for women to compete internationally. Over 150 bridge players of both sexes, and covering a wide range of ages, responded to an email questionnaire, giving their views of the advantages and disadvantages of women-only events. The majority of responses came from the UK and the USA, and from both tournament and international players. The paper contains many examples of quotes (suitably anonymised) from respondents.

Findings

The paper discusses gender segregation from an academic viewpoint, and analyses the views expressed by bridge players.

- **Gender Segregation in Sport and Leisure:** In general life, there is a range of factors that can stop women from achieving success similar to their male counterparts (including the feminisation of caring responsibilities and a glass ceiling in the workplace) and there is not always an equality of opportunity. Often, sporting and leisure activities are dominated by masculinity and sexist language, leading to the need for women-only spaces. The paper gives examples from several activities, e.g. golf and climbing.
- **Women's Bridge:** The paper describes how major bridge events have Open and Women's categories, often held concurrently, with very few women playing in the Open. While this allows women to compete at international level, it could further entrench perceptions about women's inability to play higher level competitive bridge.
- **The Women's Game: A Second Tier?** Players' responses to the questionnaire illustrate that the situation of women-only events is complex. On the one hand, they are considered to

reinforce sexism, difference and a two-tier system of play and skill. On the other hand, they are important spaces for women to develop and compete in a less pressured arena relatively free of the sexism that is faced inside and outside of the bridge community. The paper contains many illustrative quotes from both male and female players.

- **Playing Like a Man:** There is a saying that “she plays bridge like a man”, meaning that such women are actually good at bridge. This notion is well embedded in bridge culture (both male and female). The paper discusses stereotypical behaviours and characteristics, both masculine and feminine, which relate to bridge playing. These include the ability to concentrate, competitiveness and aggressiveness. As the open game is seen as the gold standard of play, this reinforces the idea that the women-only game and women’s bridge are inferior. Such perceptions of women’s bridge hinder the cause for gender equality.
- **The Paradox of the Women’s Game:** Participants were divided between the continued need for women’s events and the desire to abolish them. There was acknowledgement of wider issues, e.g. that women may be constrained by factors such as childcare and other caring duties, which reduces time to practice, play and concentrate. The women’s game can be considered a valuable space given that many women face constraints relating to broader conditions and expectations of society. However, at the same time the existence of the women-only game serves to reinforce deeply entrenched ideas about women’s abilities to play top-level bridge.

Conclusions

Women’s bridge provides a useful insight into the complexities of women-only spaces in leisure and sport that go beyond physiology. As a mind-sport, and because men’s and women’s brains are not radically different, it could easily be assumed that there is no need to provide a separate category of women’s events. However, as the data demonstrates, ideas about different cognitive abilities between men and women are actively reproduced by both genders. Such ingrained gendered assumptions hinder women’s opportunities to progress.

To get rid of women’s bridge would be to remove a needed women-only space, but to keep it reinforces difference and skill-based inequality. This complexity is reinvigorated by often acrimonious debates within the bridge world; such polarising debates serve to perpetuate a binary view of either for/against women’s bridge. The paradox is that the women’s game both enables *and* constrains women, it is simultaneously both the problem *and* the solution.

Women’s bridge provides both opportunities and barriers for female players. Many women value the space but recognise that it can be problematic in terms of perception and ultimately it can be seen to hinder success, not promote it. As one female respondent put it:

I'm in two minds about segregated events; they simultaneously give females more opportunities (at one end) and limit them (at the other).

Given the potential negative consequences of a sudden abolishment of women’s bridge, the paper makes clear that there is no simple solution to the conundrum of the women-only game.

BAMSA Project Lead: Professor Samantha Punch

Email: bamsa@stir.ac.uk



UNIVERSITY of
STIRLING

