

Equal but not the same: equestrian sport's unisex approach hides inequity

Written by Kirrilly Thompson, Associate professor, CQUniversity Australia

Olympic equestrian events are celebrated for allowing men and women to compete with and against one another. But is this joining of hands and hooves a win for gender equality?

Most Olympic sports are sex-segregated based on [the assumption that men have an unfair physical advantage](#). But good horse riding requires skill, technique, precision and refined communication to form a partnership with a horse.

The [argument against sex segregation](#) holds that it reinforces the idea that women and women's sports are second to men and men's sports. But integrating women into sports from which they were historically excluded does not necessarily raise the status of female competitors.

Increased participation by women in equestrian sport in Sweden, for instance, has been perceived as an undesirable [feminisation of the sport](#), rather than a symbol of gender equality.

Why so uneven?

A big-picture view of the equestrian sport and recreation sector reveals a [cluster of women at amateur levels and a dearth at the professional level](#). Since the 1970s, [women have been the majority in Olympic dressage](#) (the "equestrian ballet", which accepted women in the 1952 Olympics).

But they have always been underrepresented in Olympic showjumping (the equestrian hurdles or high jump program, which accepted women in the 1956 Olympics).

Relatively low representation of women in elite levels of equestrian sport [may reflect team selectors favouring male riders](#). Mostly, though, it's a repercussion of female riders [giving up their own riding careers](#) to support their partners and children.

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In 2011, [I interviewed riders](#) on the European Veterans' showjumping circuit while they were competing at events in France. Several women had taken a hiatus from riding after they had children. While some had become risk-averse as mothers, others were just too busy raising a family and caring for horses that their husband continued to compete.

This scenario is by no means unique to equestrian sport. But equestrian *is* unique in its gender integration. So, is it time we looked beyond the feelgood glow of this and considered how it might be a barrier to equal opportunity for participation in all events, and at all levels, by men and women?

Keeping apart

What, then, if equestrian sport had separate events for male and female riders?

Well, the Olympic equestrian program would have equal numbers of male and female competitors (or in the cases of countries with few riders, equal opportunity for men and women to secure a place in the Olympic program). And female show jumpers might be more likely to negotiate family responsibilities to maintain their equestrian involvement if they perceived more opportunity for success.

Sponsors and selectors might give men and women equal attention, and the participation of male and female riders at elite levels of equestrian events could become significantly less subject to gender bias.

There may be more freedom to re-imagine equestrian sports that have been considered more or less masculine or feminine.

And, with more opportunity for men and women to showcase their talents in all equestrian disciplines (from qualitatively assessed events such as dressage through to quantitatively assessed events such as showjumping), there could be more opportunity for men and women to challenge gender norms in wider society.

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Increased male participation in dressage, for instance, could challenge ideas about male ability to develop subtle forms of communication and influence, as well as provide a means for men to express themselves artistically through sport.

What's more, increased participation by women in professional showjumping could challenge ideas about women as less willing to take risks and as being less capable of running a professional business in a physically demanding sector. In fact, [rising numbers of female riders](#) have challenged the "rural leisure landscape" in Britain.

Of course, all changes pose a risk of unintended consequences. And many female athletes in sex-segregated sports, such as football and golf, still struggle to achieve the recognition afforded to their male counterparts. But then no sport is directly comparable with another.

Finally, given that the inclusion of equestrian in the Olympic program is recurrently being reviewed due to the high cost of hosting the events, there may be a financial return on investment to be made from doubling events with sex-segregated classes and increasing the number of participants of both sexes across disciplines.

The potential for transforming equestrian culture and wider society could be one hell of a ride.

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