



3

Alice Milliat: A Feminist Pioneer for Women's Sport

Florence Carpentier

Despite being born into a modest family in provincial France, Alice Milliat rose to become a leading figure in the nascent international movement for women's sport. Her career began in 1915, when she was elected president of Femina Sport (founded in 1912), France's first women's sports club. She went on to help create the Fédération des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Féminins (FSFSF—Federation of French Women's Sports Clubs), in 1919, before founding the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI—International Women's Sport Federation), in 1921, in order to unite women's sports movements around the world. As President of the FSFI she organised four editions of the Women's World Games between 1922 and 1934. Milliat's main goal for these organisations was to develop women's sport and organise competitions for sportswomen in a society which equated sport with virility, strength and courage, that is, with men. Faced with determined opposition from the male-dominated world of international sport and

F. Carpentier (✉)

University of Rouen, Normandy, France

e-mail: florence.carpentier1@univ-rouen.fr

© The Author(s) 2018

E. Bayle and P. Clastres (eds.), *Global Sport Leaders*,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76753-6_3

the more conservative, misogynist and often anti-feminist sections of society, she employed a wide variety of strategies to get her message heard. Nevertheless, the positions Milliat adopted and the way she tackled the obstacles her opponents put in her way can only be truly understood in the light of her feminist ideals and links with France's First-wave feminist movement.

Although a seminal study of Alice Milliat's life and work by the American scholars Mary H. Leigh and Thérèse M. Bonin (1977) showed Milliat to be a staunch advocate of women's suffrage (French women obtained the right to vote in 1944), Pierre Arnaud, a French sports historian, categorically rejected this conclusion in 2000. Without citing a single source other than a book by two French sociologists,¹ Arnaud argued that Milliat was never a feminist and that the feminists of the 1910s and 1920s would never have endorsed sport. Arnaud's position was unquestioningly reiterated by Thierry Terret (2007a, b), who stated in 2010: "Alice Milliat was never a feminist in any formal way and never belonged to any movement struggling for the emancipation of women or for their right to vote".² In addition, André Drevon's (2005) very factual description of the lives of Alice Milliat and early twentieth-century sportswomen entirely overlooked the issue of Milliat's ideas on women's place in society. Even Philippe Tétard's entry on Milliat in the *Dictionnaire des Féministes, France, XVIIIe–XXIe siècle* (2017), edited by the gender historian Christine Bard, does not say much about her feminist ideas and ideals.

In contrast, the present chapter shows that Milliat's feminist beliefs were an integral part of her struggle for women's sport. As such, it contradicts the picture painted by many recent studies of Milliat, which have tended to avoid or even dismiss the issue of feminism in the history of women's sport. In fact, the small amount of information available in the literature, Milliat's statements to the press, and the FSFI's and French Athletics Federation's (FFA) archives all clearly demonstrate Milliat's support for the feminist struggles of the 1920s.

¹Annick Davaisse & Catherine Louveau, *Sports, école et société : la différence des sexes*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 1998.

²Terret Thierry, "From Alice Milliat to Marie-Thérèse Eyquem: Revisiting Women's Sport in France (1920s–1960s)", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27(7), 2010, p. 1156.

Many of her actions, such as establishing two sports federations for and run by women, and creating separate world games for women, suggest that she, like many 1920s and 1930s feminists, was a “differentialist” (Bard 2017). In other words, she accepted the idea that women and men are different but did not see these differences as a reason for denying both sexes equal rights and duties. However, other aspects of her feminism showed a much more “egalitarian” point of view. For example, she believed passionately that women should be free to do any sport, including football, then a bastion of masculinity, and she fought hard for sportswomen to be admitted to the Olympic Games.

This chapter begins by presenting what is known about Alice Milliat’s rather unusual journey through life and her rise through the echelons of women’s sport administration. It then examines the strategies she used to advance the cause of women’s sport despite deep-seated resistance to her ideas, the support she received from feminists, and her fight to enable women to compete at the Olympic Games. This battle, in the mid-1930s, sounded the death knell for the FSFI and the Women’s World Games, and led a frustrated Alice Milliat to withdraw from public life.

A Provincial French Woman in Cosmopolitan London

Alice Joséphine Marie Million was born in Nantes on 5 May 1884 to a lower-middle-class family of shopkeepers. Her grandparents were innkeepers and tailors; her parents were grocers, although her father later took an office job and her mother became a seamstress. Alice was the eldest of five children (three sisters and one brother). In 1904, a year before she came of age, Alice moved to London, probably for love and against her parent’s wishes, as she immediately married Joseph Milliat, a barber’s son four years her senior, from her home district of Nantes. Joseph found a job in a London office but he died in 1908, leaving Alice a young widow with no children. Although some authors (Drevon 2005; Terret 2010) have claimed, albeit without citing their sources, that Milliat had been a junior-school teacher before leaving for London, her name does not appear in the official role of qualified teachers for that

time. Nor was this the profession she followed when she returned to Paris a few years later. Given her exclusive address in London—Holland Park Avenue, in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea—it would seem more likely that she found a position with a wealthy family as, for example, a private tutor. Working for a diplomat or an international businessman would also explain the trips to America and Scandinavia which she described in a press interview later in her life.³

At the time, very few provincial French women from modest families had the opportunity to travel abroad, but these experiences expanded Milliat's view of the world. Living in London also enabled her to become fluent in English, a skill that would allow her to find a job as a translator when she returned to Paris. More importantly, it would help her enormously in her career in international sport. In fact, it was almost certainly during her time in England that she discovered sport and feminism.

Early twentieth-century Britain was a pioneer with respect to both “modern” sports and the struggle for women's rights, so women's sport developed much earlier in the UK than in the rest of Europe. By the late nineteenth century, gym teachers at the newly founded Women's Polytechnic Institutes (Regent Street in 1888, Northampton in 1896) were encouraging young women (“poly girls”) to take up sports such as swimming, tennis, hockey, cricket, roller-skating, fencing, badminton and basketball (Hargreaves 1994). The 1880s and 1890s also saw the creation of the first football clubs for women, including the *Lady Footballers* and the *British Ladies' Football Club*, 30 years before the rest of Europe. Milliat had hated the “callisthenics” she had been forced to do at school, but she did take up a number of sports later in life, including football and rowing, which few French women had the opportunity to try prior to the First World War. She probably learned to row in Hyde Park or on the Thames, with one of the many clubs that were set up at the end of the nineteenth century.

To what extent was Alice Milliat influenced by British feminists? Information on this subject is scarce, but it is hard to imagine that her social and political consciousness was not impacted by her time in

³“Madame Alice Milliat ou le sport et la femme”, *Les cahiers de la République des lettres, des sciences et des arts*, 15 May 1927, pp. 83–87.

London, which had been the centre of a large women's suffrage movement since the end of the nineteenth century. The spectacular actions of the *Women's Social and Political Union*, founded by Emmeline Pankhurst the year before Milliat arrived in London, were regularly in the headlines. Frustrated by the lack of progress being made by more genteel activists, Pankhurst and her fellow "suffragettes", as they were called by the press, began attacking the institutional symbols of male domination, including sport, even at the risk of going to prison. Milliat, however, was never a radical suffragette; she preferred using more moderate methods to overcome men's domination of sport and bring about change within the conservative milieu of sports administration.

From Femina Sport to the Head of Women's Sport in France

Milliat, now a childless widow since 1908, moved back to France, probably at her father's death, in 1910, to care for her young brother and sister, while their mother died in 1907. She settled in Paris, where she held a number of different jobs, including accountant and office worker (Tétart 2017). It was now that she first became involved with sports administration, with a club called Femina Sport.

Three women's sports clubs (Femina Sport, En-avant and Académia) and a Union Française des Sociétés de Gymnastique Feminine (UFSGF—Union of French Women's Gymnastics Clubs) saw the light of day in Paris in the early years of the twentieth century. However, they had divergent ideas of what sportswomen could and should do. The biggest differences between these pioneering institutions concerned their opinions on which sports were suitable for women (from callisthenics to football), how sportswomen should dress, whether spectators should be allowed to watch women's sport, whether there should be competitions for women and whether women's sport should be run by women or by men. In other words, these clubs' views on how women's sport should be organised, which sports women should play and how they should be played were as diverse as the forms of feminism prevalent at the time, with some women calling for limited emancipation and

others demanding complete equality. *Femina Sport*, created in 1912 by the world champion gymnast Pierre Payssé, was undoubtedly the most progressive French club, as it encouraged women to play football and rugby (women's rugby was referred to as "barette"). The club was presided by a woman from the very beginning and had links with moderate feminist groups (Prudhomme-Poncet 2003). Milliat originally joined the club as a sporting member, but rose to become its president in 1915.

In the argument over which sports women should and should not be allowed to do, athletics was about the only area in which the women's movements of the time were able to find a minimum amount of common ground: running, jumping and throwing could be considered a sort of "grammar" of the body or a foundation course for sports, depending on one's point of view. Thus, in 1917 the heads of the three competing clubs managed to put aside their differences and organise France's first women's athletics championships. This led, a few weeks later, to the creation of a new umbrella organisation for women's sports clubs, called the FSFSF. However, the FSFSF's board of directors included only two women, Marie Surcouf, a famous balloon pilot and feminist, as vice-president, and Alice Milliat, as treasurer. By 1918 Milliat had become the federation's general secretary and by 1919 she had been named president, at which point she resigned as president of *Femina Sport*. Her first victory for the FSFSF was to obtain official recognition, and the subsidies that went with it, from the Ministry of War. This success gave her the opportunity to implement a fundamental principle of the contemporary feminist movement by appointing women to all the federation's executive positions.

A Revolution: Women in Charge of Women's Sport

In 1922, at the request of the socialist-republican Secretary of State for Sport, Gaston Vidal, Milliat agreed to merge the FSFSF with the conservative *Fédération Féminine d'Education Physique et de Gymnastique*

(Women's Physical Education and Gymnastics Federation), which had close ties with the all-male FFA. Concerned about the growing popularity of women's athletics, the FFA wanted to take it under its control, either directly or indirectly. Nevertheless, after long and difficult discussions, Milliat won her case: "the board of the FSFSF will be made up of women, as decided at our last meeting, on 6 August. Thus, we will keep our independence".⁴ This essential principle was later enshrined in the FSFSF's statutes: the federation's regional committees could nominate only women to the executive committee, which would include "a board composed of eight people, the majority of whom must be women, with senior positions being reserved for women".⁵ Milliat was always ready to defend, on the national and international stages, the principle that women's sport should be run uniquely by women. As she wrote in one of her first articles for *L'Auto*, in March 1923, "It is profoundly abnormal, for many reasons, to see men at the helm of women's organisations".⁶ The following year, when the federation was looking for referees for its national championships, she wrote: "let's hope that women's sport will be able to find all its administrative and technical managers from among women",⁷ and "no one hopes more strongly than I that our clubs' managers and coaching staff will be all female".⁸

Nevertheless, as was quite common in the period's feminist organisations, Milliat did not exclude men entirely from the organisations she led, mostly for pragmatic reasons. First, there were not enough women to fill every managerial position in every women's organisation, especially at the local level. Second, she did not want to exclude men who were sympathetic to her cause, as the more hostile male sports organisations, such as the FFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), were more likely to listen to the case for women's sport if it was presented by a man. Prominent male supporters included Dr. Maurice

⁴*L'Auto*, 10 August 1922.

⁵*L'Auto*, 10 January 1924.

⁶*L'Auto*, 26 March 1923.

⁷*L'Auto*, 28 February 1924.

⁸*L'Auto*, 15 May 1924.

Pillet, a former executive at the Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques (USFSA—Union of French Athletic Sports Clubs), and Emile Anthoine (1882–1969), a former athlete who founded (in 1926) and presided the International Walking Federation. However, the most important reason for accepting male managers was that Milliat, like most feminist reformers at the time, believed that male support was necessary to reassure opponents of women’s emancipation and to obtain political support. Consequently, in the early 1920s the FSFSF accepted the “high patronage” of Alexandre Millerand, France’s socialist president, and Henry Paté, a radical-socialist member of parliament, sports administrator and future Secretary of State for Sport.

Support from France’s Feminists

By 1915, members of the reformist Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes (UFSF—French Union for Women’s Suffrage) were starting to take the development of women’s sport more seriously and began supporting *Femina Sport* and the FSFSF. For example, the suffragist magazine *La Vie Féminine* published several articles on women’s football in England, lamenting the reluctance of French women to take up a sport it considered emancipating or even a primer for other struggles for women’s rights (Breuil 2011).

In the spring of 1922, at the initiative of the UFSF’s long-serving leader Jane Misme, the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises (CNFF—National Council of French Women), France’s largest feminist movement in the 1920s (Bard 1995), gave women’s football a huge boost by sponsoring a Women’s French Cup (Prudhomme-Poncet 2003). The CNFF had come to see sport as an important battleground in the struggle for women’s rights, as the following quotation shows: “Two major currents of feminist action are starting to come together: the movement to obtain civil and political rights for women and women’s sport. In fact, they are merely different manifestations of the same cause, feminism, that is, the struggle for the social equality of the sexes. [...] The apostles of women’s rights are beginning to understand this solidarity. France’s great feminist federation, the Conseil National

des Femmes Françaises, is proving this by donating the *La Française* Cup”.⁹ On the day of the cup final, Misme wrote in the CNFF’s official mouthpiece, a magazine called *La Française*, which she had edited since 1906: “*La Française* considers women’s sport to be an excellent movement with the power to build women’s physical and moral value. It is its duty to promote women’s sport in the same way it promotes other initiatives. It will not fail in this duty”.¹⁰ Every year Misme or Avril de Sainte-Croix, another major figure in the French feminist movement, attended the cup final in person and tried to rally young women footballers to their cause.

Milliat’s articles for the press show how close she was to France’s feminists and how strongly she believed in their fight. For example, she was tireless in her criticism of France as a “prejudiced country”¹¹ and of “[men’s] age-old desire to dominate, to keep women under their authority, for fear of them becoming something other than useful or agreeable objects for men.” She continued: “women still have a lot to do to gain recognition for their true value in the different categories of social life”, and “in the field of sport, as in all other fields, women have to struggle against the primitive spirit of male domination”.¹² That Milliat was herself a suffragist is shown by this extract from *La Française*, written in 1923, where she expresses her hope that politicians will one day give women’s sport the same material and financial help they give to men’s sport: “The day French women manage to replace with social and political rights the chores [society] has always been keen to impress upon them, the situation will look very different”.¹³ She reiterated her convictions in an interview she gave to an American feminist magazine in 1934: “Women’s sports of all kinds are handicapped in my country by the lack of playing space. As we have no vote, we cannot make our needs publicly felt, or bring pressure to bear in the right quarters.

⁹“Les droits de la femme et le sport”, *La Femme sportive*, n°12, 1 April 1922.

¹⁰*La Française*, 3 June 1922.

¹¹*L’Auto*, 17 January 1924.

¹²*L’Auto*, 17 January 1924.

¹³*La Française*, 21 April 1923.

I always tell my girls that the vote is one of the things they will have to work for if France is to keep its place with other nations in the realm of women's sport".¹⁴

However, Milliat was an astute tactician who was happy to express her suffragist beliefs in feminist magazines, but more measured in her disclosures to the sporting press and sports executives, who were mostly very conservative and suspicious of her objectives. She was not alone in this; similar tactics were adopted by many of her contemporaries, including Dr. Marie Houdré, a well-known socialist and activist for the Ligue Française pour les Droits des Femmes (French League for Women's Rights), Dr. Maurice Pillet, a sports administrator and editor of the sports column in *La Française*, and sportswomen such as Suzanne Liébrard and the Brulé sisters, Jeanne and Thérèse.

All Sports for All

Throughout her career, from her time at Femina Sport to her tenures at the top of national and international federations, Milliat skilfully and subtly fought her opponents' medical, social and moral arguments against women's sport. Many of these arguments were based on the widely accepted idea, even among the medical profession, that women were the "weaker" sex and that their constitutions were too fragile to support the intense effort sport required. According to another argument, the physical effort associated with sport was likely to damage a woman's reproductive organs and therefore prevent her having children. For these two reasons, physical exercise for most French girls during the nineteenth century was restricted to low-intensity callisthenics, centred round exercises to improve posture and flexibility, strengthen the abdominal and hip muscles for childbirth and develop what was seen as a woman's greatest asset—an ability to move gracefully.

¹⁴"Woman's World Games Dramatize Women's Athletics." *Independent Woman*, Vol. XII, Oct. 1934, quoted by Bonin and Leigh, "The pioneering role of Madame Alice Milliat and the FSFI in establishing International Trade and Field Competition for women", *Journal of Sport History*, 4(1), 1977, pp. 72–83.

Milliat rejected all these arguments, believing in all sports for all and competitive sport for the best. With medical backing from Doctors Marie Houdré and Maurice Pillet, she called upon her opponents to prove their case, demanding “facts, not words”.¹⁵ For Milliat, women had not been doing sport long enough to know whether or not it was dangerous for them: “let us heed the opinion of our women doctors who, combining practical experience with knowledge, say that studies conducted over several generations are needed to determine, with little risk of error, which sports women can do safely and usefully”.¹⁶ In addition, she used the first articles she wrote for *L'Auto*, in 1923, to show that there was nothing new in women doing sport and that the female sporting champions of the nineteenth century—often mountaineers or ballooners—were, in other respects, normal women. At the same time, her attacks on opponents of feminism, who she called “tardigrades” (antediluvians), could be extremely cutting: “By what right do so-called scientific “luminaries”, along with many ignoramuses, decree: “these exercises are suitable for women, these exercises will do them harm”? Who can say that with any certainty at this point in time”.¹⁷

Nevertheless, in order to reassure her readership, she suggested an adaptive approach to sport: young girls should participate in “reasonable and intelligent physical activity leading them to do different sports according to each person’s preferences and abilities”.¹⁸ Similarly, she conceded: “for this event [1000-m race], as for any other, serious preparation is needed and we can say with satisfaction that our clubs give these necessary preparations all the care of their instructors and doctors”.¹⁹ And, in order to counter the arguments of the self-appointed guardians of public morals, who believed that sport took women away from their duties as wives and mothers, she regularly brandished family photos of the “many married women footballers with beautiful

¹⁵*L'Auto*, 17 January 1924.

¹⁶“Propagande”, *La Femme Sportive*, n°11, 1 March 1922.

¹⁷“Propagande”, *La Femme Sportive*, n°11, 1 March 1922.

¹⁸*L'Auto*, 14 January 1924.

¹⁹*L'Auto*, 19 April 1923.

children”.²⁰ During this post-war period of high birth rate and “race protection” policies, Marie Houdré was the first person to present sport and the competitive spirit as beneficial for withstanding the ordeal of childbirth, rather than threats to maternity.²¹ These arguments from a well-known doctor represented a significant break with the conservative position espoused by Pierre de Coubertin and influential doctors such as Philippe Tissié and Maurice Boigey.

Although Milliat and the FSFSF encouraged women to do all sports, they did not want to expose women to excessive physical effort or injury. Consequently, they modified the rules some of some sports, especially team sports such as basketball, football and rugby, shortening the playing time, reducing the size of playing area and banning contact. In addition, sport’s administrators were very aware of concerns about the impact of watching women’s sport on spectators’ morals. Hence, while never ceding ground over a sportswoman’s right to wear shorts or t-shirts, there were frequent discussions about the decency of women’s outfits in order to ensure they were never too revealing or close fitting.

Winning Over the French Media

Milliat regularly and effectively used the media to promote both the FSFSF and women’s sport in general. In the years following World War One, she wrote frequent articles for the sporting, women’s and military press, expressing her ideas on a variety of subjects, but always adapting her discourse to the publication’s readership. She would, for example, be very patriotic when writing for a military magazine such as *Le Soldat de Demain*, a strident defender of women’s suffrage when expressing her views in the feminist press, and a cool-headed proponent of the benefits of sport for childbearing when addressing the readers of more

²⁰*L’Auto*, 2 March 1923.

²¹In the editorial she wrote for the first issue of *La Femme Sportive*, published on 1 May 1921, and in her famous book for women that was reprinted several times up until the 1950s: *Ma doctoresse, guide pratique d’hygiène et de médecine de la femme moderne (tomes 1 et 2)*, Strasbourg, Editorial Argenton, 1928.

conservative newspapers such as *La Culture Physique*, *L'Auto* and *Les Dimanches de la Femme*. Hence, rather than being taken at face value, the fact that she sometimes denied her feminism (Tétard 2017) should be seen as a strategy she used to get her message across. It is easy to imagine her forthright editorials for the FSFSF's ambitious monthly newsletter, which she created in 1921, being designed specifically to convince or reassure the fathers, husbands, families and friends of sportswomen. The two pages of sports results included in each issue give an idea of the popularity of women's sport in France, while the decision to report records set by sportswomen was a major step in recognising women's competitions.

However, it was in the pages of *L'Auto* that Milliat found her best platform, especially during the 1920s. In 1922, she demonstrated her sporting prowess by completing the very difficult *Audax-rameur*, which requires participants to row 80 km along the Seine in less than 12 hours. This exploit was reported on *L'Auto's* front page, alongside a photograph of the "rowing-woman", and earned her a certain amount of respect in sports circles. Over the next two years she wrote more than 20 in-depth articles for *L'Auto*, in which she promoted women's sport and denounced the "prejudices" and "conservatism" ("la routine") of sport's administrators. *L'Auto* also chronicled her regular appearances among women's and men's sporting society. Milliat had become a sporting figure who was invited to sports events and banquets, as well as to important meetings with the heads of other federations and political leaders.

However, this fame work did not protect her from being attacked by her opponents throughout her career, right up to her retirement from sport in 1936. Accused of being "bossy", compared to Napoleon, called "a dictator, a Mussolini",²² and subjected to a smear campaign by the FFA, Milliat twice came close to resigning from the FSFSF: in 1920, following pressure from sports executives who were opposed to her appointment as president, and in 1922, when the FSFSF merged with the Women's Physical Education and Gymnastics Federation. On this

²²*L'Auto*, 25 April 1924.

occasion, she was alleged to have received payment for her work as president of the FSFSF, which was illegal because the FSFSF was a non-profit association and contrary to the period's strict rules on sporting amateurism. She vigorously denied the accusations, but they were given a degree of plausibility by the fact that, unlike most federation presidents at the time, who came from affluent or even aristocratic backgrounds, Milliat had to earn her own living. Consequently, she lived very modestly, providing for her needs by taking a succession of low-paid jobs. She finally did resign in 1925, after finding herself in a minority in her federation, only to return in 1930, when she focused on developing international women's sport, a movement that had begun in 1921.

Creation and Conquest of the FSFI

According to the literature (Arnaud 2000; Drevon 2005; Terret 2007a, b), Milliat helped create the Monte-Carlo Women's Olympiad, the first edition of which took place in April 1921, and she used its success to found the FSFI a few months later. However, this interpretation of events raises a number of questions. For example, how could a modest Parisian office worker have developed the necessary contacts with Monaco's high society? If she had created the Olympiad, why did she not go to the event? And why, a year later, would she create another event, the Women's Olympic Games, in direct competition with the second edition of the Olympiad? In fact, the president of the Women's Olympiad organising committee was none other than Marcel Delarbre, the vice president of the FFA, which saw the event as a way of gaining control over women's athletics.²³ Hence, it is likely that Milliat created the FSFI as a way of ensuring the feminist movement kept control over international competitions for women by organising a World Games capable of countering the success of the Women's Olympiad.

The FSFI officially came into being on 31 October 1921, during a congress held in Paris at the initiative of the FSFSF and its president.

²³FFA archives.

At this time, there were large disparities between Western countries with respect to the administration of women's sport. Although the United States had set up a federation for women's sport in 1904, other pioneering countries in the development of women's sport, such as England and Czechoslovakia, still had no such federation. For England and Czechoslovakia, as for many other countries, the opportunity to join an international federation served as a catalyst for the formation of national federations for sportswomen. Milliat used her column in *L'Auto* to explain how the FSFI had come about: "First, there was a rapprochement between France and the United States and an exchange of correspondence between the women's federation presided by Mme Milliat and a committee representing university and civil clubs in the United States. It was only when an agreement between America and the French federation was sealed that Mme Milliat approached England, Czechoslovakia and Spain in order to form a larger and more compact group. [...] In this way, the international federation was created by the representatives of the French federation presided by Mme Milliat, England and Czechoslovakia, with support from America and the Spanish authorities".²⁴

As the only female head of a national women's sports organisation, Milliat had to do some careful manoeuvring in order to be elected president of the FSFI. She was not everyone's obvious choice for president, with even her main French ally, Emile Anthoine, recommending that the new federation be run by a man "because of the diplomatic relations it might need". Milliat was shrewd enough to begin her campaign by reiterating certain principles she held dear: "Mme Milliat expresses the wish that the members of the committee include several women and would like, if possible, for women to be in the majority, as long as they have the expertise required and are able to serve the International Women's Sports Federation".²⁵ She then suggested that a postal vote be held after the congress. In the end, the vote was held the following year, at the FSFI's second annual congress, and Milliat was elected president

²⁴"Comment fut fondée la Fédération Internationale féminine", *L'Auto*, 3 November 1921.

²⁵FSFI minutes, 31 October 1921, Paris.

“by acclamation”.²⁶ She owed this success largely to her efforts to increase the number of female-led national women’s sports federations affiliated to the FSFI, which meant that a much larger proportion of the delegates at the second congress were women. In fact, the minutes for this second congress list 38 affiliated countries, almost as many as the men’s international athletics federation. By 1926 every country in Europe was affiliated to the FSFI, except for Germany, which was still banned from all international organisations (including the League of Nations and IOC). Elsewhere in the world, the FSFI could count on Canada, five South American republics (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Uruguay), Australia, China, Japan and Britain’s two African colonies, Egypt and South Africa.

The Admission of Women to the Olympic Games

The FSFI’s main objective was to take control of international women’s sports competitions as quickly as possible and thereby thwart the efforts of the all-male FFA to gain dominion over women’s sport. Hence, in its statutes, the FSFI claimed the exclusive right to organise international competitions for women and the power to control all other events. In fact, what Milliat really wanted was for female athletes to be given “full admittance” to the Olympic Games athletics programme, in other words, for women to be allowed to compete in all the athletics disciplines open to men. She petitioned the IOC’s president, Pierre de Coubertin, about this issue on two occasions, first in 1919 and then in 1922, but Coubertin ignored both requests. Consequently, Milliat and the FSFI organised their own “Women’s World Games”. As one of Milliat’s objectives for these Games was to provide a showcase for women’s sport capable of winning over the IOC, the first edition of the event, in 1922, was held in Coubertin’s home city, Paris. Similarly, Brussels was chosen to host the second edition of the event, in 1926, as Belgium’s Henri de Baillet-Latour had taken over from Coubertin at the

²⁶FSFI minutes, 18 August 1922, Paris.

head of the IOC. When the Brussels organisers pulled out, the Games were transferred to Gothenburg, home of Sigfried Edström, then president of the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) and a member of the IOC's Executive Committee.

Nevertheless, the FSFI was split between two opposing conceptions of women's sport. Alice Milliat, on the one hand, believed that women could do the same sports as men and compete with them. This is why she saw the Women's World Games as an intermediary step towards women taking part in the Olympic Games on an equal footing with men. On the other hand, Sophie Elyott-Lynn, a British athlete and future aviator, felt that women should have their own, completely separate international competition, mostly in order to protect public morals. In addition, Elyott-Lynn's views on feminism were highly differentialist, as she believed in women's liberation through sport, but she also believed that women and men should be treated differently because of the "natural" differences between the sexes. Unlike Milliat, many of Elyott-Lynn's compatriots shared these views, which is why British sportswomen boycotted the men's Olympic Games in 1928 and 1932. Although these two visions of women's sport caused disagreements within the FSFI, in 1926 the federation's delegates gave Milliat permission to negotiate with Edström the admittance of women into the Olympic athletics programme.

Aware that the Women's World Games were due to be held in his home country, Edström convinced the IOC and IAAF to allow women athletes to compete in a number of events at the Olympics. However, his aim was not to promote women's sport, rather, it was to take control of women's athletics and put an end to the FSFI. Edström later expressed his feelings very clearly in a letter he wrote to his colleague and future IOC president Avery Brundage in 1935: "I suppose you know that Mme Milliat's Federation has caused us so much trouble that we certainly have no interest at all to support it. We should like the whole thing to disappear from the surface of the earth".²⁷ This letter

²⁷Letter from Sigfried Edström to Avery Brundage, 3 January 1935, "ABC Box 42, reel 24", Archives of the International Centre for Olympic Studies, University of Western Ontario, Canada, cited by Carly Adams (2002).

eloquently illustrates how strongly many powerful sports administrators opposed women's sport.

Nevertheless, by dangling the possibility of women being allowed to participate "fully" in track and field and of an egalitarian partnership with the FSFI, Edström convinced Milliat to accept a trial in which women would be allowed to compete at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics in five of the twelve events open to men. But, within the space of just two Olympiads, Edström, supported by the national athletics federations, especially the FFA, managed to eliminate the Women's World Games. Although Milliat and the FSFI's American and Austrian representatives attempted several times to withdraw women's athletics from the Olympic Games and regain their independence,²⁸ they never managed to overthrow the IAAF's and IOC's control. The great depression of the 1930s was particularly deleterious to women's sport and in 1936 the FSFI disintegrated. This was also the end of Alice Milliat's career in sport, as, due to a shortage of money and lack of support she was forced to abandon the FSFI.

Conclusion

The admission of women athletes to the 1928 Olympic Games was a Pyrrhic victory, as Milliat and the FSFI quickly realised. Sigfried Edström took over as president of the IOC in 1942, following the death of Baillet-Latour, a position he held until 1952, when he handed over the reins to America's Avery Brundage, his friend and colleague from the IAAF. Brundage remained at the top of the IOC for 20 years. Both men succeeded in their aim of stemming the development of international women's sport, as under their presidencies women were restricted to a limited number of events and never accounted for more than 15% of competitors at the Olympics. It was not until the presidency passed to Ireland's Michael Killanin (1972–1980), and especially Spain's Juan Antonio Samaranch (1980–2001), that the Olympics began to open up

²⁸Correspondence with the IOC in 1930 and 1935. IOC archives, Lausanne, Switzerland.

to women (20% of competitors were women in 1976, 28% in 1992, 40% in 2004, 47% in 2016). The IOC admitted its first two women members in 1981, but it was a further ten years before it began explicitly encouraging women's sport around the world. While traditional Olympic sports have had to progressively embrace women's competitions, all new Olympic sports since 1991 have had to include women's events. Now the greatest inequalities are between countries and within the upper echelons of sport administration. The IOC has taken steps to encourage international sport federations and national Olympic committees to work towards greater parity between the sexes, but it cannot force change.

Through her work with the FSFI, by gaining acceptance for the idea that women could do sport and take part in competitions, by organizing the Women's World Games and by writing numerous articles for newspapers and magazines, Alice Milliat played a vital role in promoting women's sport in many countries. Her belief in the need for women's sport to be run by women and she was proved to be well founded by the efforts male sports administrators made to hamper the development of women's sport when they managed to take it under their control.

After the collapse of the FSFI, in 1936, Milliat disappeared from public view. She died 21 years later, completely forgotten, and was laid to rest in a grave that does not even bear her name. Her final resting place, in a Nantes cemetery, was only discovered thanks to the efforts of André Drevon. Although French scholars have tended to ignore or minimise Milliat's feminism, there is no doubt that her male contemporaries in sport administration found her activism discomfiting and too strident. After withstanding repeated and often violent attacks from her opponents over almost three decades, Milliat finally abandoned her struggle for women's sport in the mid 1930s. She has already been silenced once; modern scholars must not be allowed to silence her again by dismissing her convictions and commitment to the feminist cause.

Biography

- 5 May 1884: Alice Joséphine Marie Million is born in Nantes (France).
- 1904: At the age of 20, she moves to London and marries Joseph Milliat, who was born in Nantes in 1880.
- 1908: The couple are still childless when Joseph dies at the age of 28, leaving Alice a widow.
- 1914: Milliat returns to France, probably at the beginning of World War I.
- 1915: Becomes president of Femina Sport, Paris' first women's sports club, formed in 1912.
- 1917: The FSFSF is founded with Alice Milliat as its treasurer.
- 1918: Appointed general secretary of the FSFSF.
- 1919: Elected president of the FSFSF at the very young age of 35.
- 1919: Petitions Pierre de Coubertin to allow women to take part in athletics events at the Olympic Games.
- 1921: "Women's Olympiad" in Monte-Carlo, organised by the FFA. Milliat helps create the FSFI (October).
- 1922: Becomes president of the FSFI. Again petitions Pierre de Coubertin to allow women to take part in the Olympic Games. Opens the first Women's World Games in Paris.
- 1925: Resigns as president of the FSFSF.
- 1926: Opens the second Women's World Games in Gothenburg, Sweden.
- 1930: Becomes president of the FSFSF for the second time. Opens the third Women's World Games in Prague (Hungary).
- 1934: Opens the fourth Women's World Games in London (United Kingdom).
- 1936: Resigns the presidencies of both the FSFI and FSFSF, which cease to exist.
- 1957: Dies in Paris at the age of 73 and is buried anonymously in a cemetery in Nantes.

Bibliography

- Adams, Carly. 2002. Fighting for Acceptance: Sigfried Edström and Avery Brundage: Their Efforts to Shape and Control Women's Participation in the Olympic Games. In *Sixth International Symposium for Olympic Research*, 143–148.
- Arnaud, Pierre. 2000. Sport et antiféminisme : mythe ou réalité ? La construction historique d'une problématique identité féminine par le sport (1900–1939). In *Sport et identités*, ed. Serge Fauché, Jean-Paul Callède, Jean-Louis Gay-Lescot, and Jean-Pierre Laplagne, 15–27. Paris: L'Armathan.
- Bard, Christine. 1995. *Les filles de Marianne*. Paris: Fayard.
- Bard, Christine (ed.). 2017. *Dictionnaire des féministes. France, XVIIIe–XXIe siècle*. Paris: PUF.
- Breuil, Xavier. 2011. *Histoire du football féminin en Europe*. Paris: Nouveau monde Editions.
- Carpentier, Florence, and Jean-Pierre Lefèvre. 2006. The Modern Olympic Movement, Women's Sport and the Social Order During the Interwar Period. *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 23 (7): 938–964.
- Drevon, André. 2005. *Alice Milliat, la passionaria du sport féminin*. Paris: Vuibert.
- Eyquem, Marie-Thérèse. 1944. *La femme et le sport*. Paris: J. Susse.
- Guttman, Allen. 1991. *Women's Sport. A History*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hargreaves, Jennifer. 1994. *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*. London: Routledge.
- Leigh, Mary, and Thérèse Bonin. 1977. The Pioneering Role of Madame Alice Milliat and the FSFI in Establishing International Track and Field Competition for Women. *Journal of Sport History* 4 (1): 72–83.
- Prudhomme-Poncet, Laurence. 2003. *Histoire du football féminin en France au XXe siècle*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Terret, Thierry. 2007a. *Histoire du sport*. Paris: PUF.
- Terret, Thierry. 2007b. Sport et genre. In *Histoire du sport en France (Tome 1)*, ed. Philippe Tétard. Paris: Vuibert.
- Terret, Thierry. 2010. From Alice Milliat to Marie-Thérèse Eyquem: Revisiting Women's Sport in France (1920s–1960s). *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27 (7): 1154–1172.
- Tétart, Philippe. 2017. Alice Milliat. In *Dictionnaire des féministes. France, XVIIIe–XXIe siècle*, ed. Bard Christine. Paris: PUF.