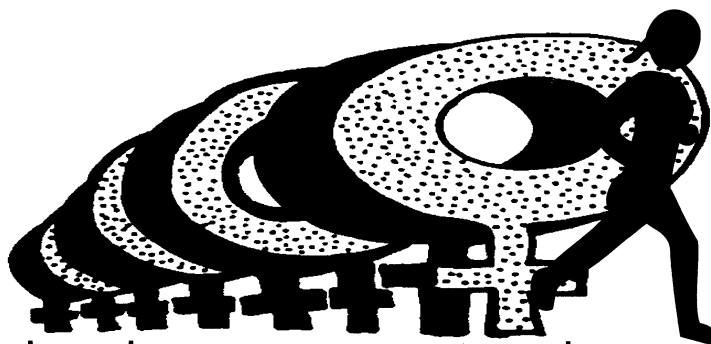


Zubeda Paruk
and
Cheryl de la Rey



RACE AND GENDER CONSTRAINTS IN SA ROAD RUNNING

Women's running is a rapidly growing sport in South Africa. Since the inception in 1979 of a women-only race in Durban, the number of participants has increased steadily with a record number of approximately 3 200 entrants in a 1992 ten kilometer race. While this trend continues, the number of women runners relative to men remains small. Moreover, the growth in the participation of women has been racially uneven, with white women far outnumbering black women. In the most recent ten kilometers women road race in Durban, only 46 of a total of 1 720 finishers were black¹ women. Since the removal of apartheid legislation in running, the participation of black men has increased dramatically. Black women's participation has not shown a similar trend.

Very few studies have investigated the social-psychological issues associated with women runners. In the South African literature the most comprehensive book on running, by Noakes (1985), includes merely one chapter which deals with women and children with only physiological and medical aspects

being discussed. In popular magazines like *SA Runner* the majority of articles tend to be descriptive with little analytic insight.

The information in this article is based on two studies conducted during 1992. The first was a survey of women runners without regard to race. Following this, eight black women runners were interviewed to explore specific issues experienced by this group. The findings showed that factors such as race, gender and culture combine in complex ways to influence the recreational and sporting opportunities of South African women.

Specific needs of women

The organisation of running as a sport is still male-dominated and this has implications for women's participation. The way in which races are organised does not cater for the specific needs of women. Some problems identified were that no child care facilities are available during organised runs and not enough toilets are provided, particularly on longer runs. Several respondents also expressed



dissatisfaction with the inequality in acknowledgement and incentives for female as compared with male runners. The lack of availability of running gear designed especially for women was also a source of dissatisfaction.

Personal safety while training was the most frequent concern expressed by women runners. Only 12 percent of the sample said that they always ran alone. While all women were concerned about their safety, black women living in townships faced the additional constraint of higher levels of crime and political violence.

Fewer black women runners

Difficulties in finding a suitable place to train may partially explain the relatively small number of black women runners; however, the women who were interviewed suggested that the attitudes of the wider black community was the main constraint. A frequently expressed view is illustrated in the following comment: "*They (blacks) say running is a sport for men and whites*". The participants noted that in the black community running was seen as being part of a white

lifestyle. Moreover, they said that fitness was seen as a masculine attribute and many black people think if a woman runs she will become masculine and less of a woman. It appears ironical that while running is perceived as part of a white lifestyle, it is seen as an acceptable activity for black men. This dual perception of running as a sport for 'men and whites' highlights the way in which gender and race intertwine to constrain black South African women's leisure activities. Some comments suggested that the activity of running minimises the traditional passive role of women: "*I feel more independent and in control of myself*" and "*Men recognise you as a strong woman*".

It is interesting to note from the findings that pressures to remain within the traditional feminine role came from women as well as men. Female members of the black community, for example, were reported to have made comments which accused the runners of not fulfilling their domestic duties and of trying to attract the attention of males. Even within the family it was the mothers who were often most disapproving of the participants' running.

Pressures to remain within the traditional feminine role came from women as well as men

Another contributing factor for the difference in the number of white women compared with black women who run, was the exposure of whites to sports from an early age and the lack of sports facilities in

the townships. White women were also seen to be more weight and body conscious than black women. Moreover, all the black women who were interviewed said that there were cultural taboos against their wearing shorts. At face value the traditional dress of southern African women reveals at least as much as the typical running gear worn in hot climates. The explanation was that the negative attitude only applied to the exposure of the body while wearing western-type clothing. It is interesting that this view applies exclusively to women since black male runners do not seem to face this kind of censure from their communities.

Concerns about sex role issues were expressed by women runners regardless of race. These included the influence of running on family commitment, child care and domestic chores. Often this meant difficulty finding time to train and problems with child care during organised races. Other issues which were specific to all women as runners were anxieties about the effects of running on menstruation, fertility, breast size and appearance (eg wrinkles).

Relationships affected

The majority of women surveyed noted that running had affected the significant relationships in their lives. The main trend was that where the significant other was also a runner, the relationship was enhanced eg an increase in shared time, closeness and understanding. When the change was negative, the significant other was most likely to be a non-runner. Examples of

negative effects were jealousy over friendships with male runners and resentment about the time spent running.

Similarly, the interviews revealed that other family members' attitudes varied depending on whether the individual family member participated in sport. For example, mothers tended to disapprove of their daughters' running, except in one case where the mother participated in aerobics.

Examples of negative effects were jealousy over friendships with male runners and resentment about the time spent running

Spouses/significant others also seemed to play a role in the women's motivation to begin running. Some women said that they saw other women running when they accompanied their husbands to road races. Others took up running so that they could share in an activity that consumed a great deal of their husbands' time.

Advantages of running

Commonly perceived advantages of being a woman runner were, in order of frequency, that it has positive physical consequences, psychological benefits such as increased self-esteem, a sense of achievement and reduction of depression, and it provides an opportunity for recreation and for making friends. The most frequent type of comment was that, as a result of running, respondents felt more relaxed, more confident and

in brief

more energetic; an example of an oft-used statement was:

"a feeling of well being - one copes better with stress, work, homelife. It improves one's quality of life".

Virtually all the women said that running had made them more conscious of their bodies which were seen to be firmer, with increased muscle tone. Running was also believed to have helped in weight reduction and maintenance.

Constraints on women that have emerged in other studies on gender and sport were all applicable to the runners in our research; black South African women, however, appear to face additional limitations

to their participation in running. Further research could provide a broader analysis of the influence of structural factors like class and culture, in addition to race and gender, on women's running. □

FOOTNOTE

1. Black women in this paper does not include women classified as Indian or coloured under apartheid laws.

REFERENCES

Noakes, T. (1985). *Lore of Running*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

**Zubeda Paruk and Cheryl de la Rey
are lecturers in the Department of
Psychology, University of
Durban-Westville.**