

Do you think men and women are really treated equally? You may think so, but the other day I learned a shocking fact: there is a gender gap even in sports. I learned this from a pair of shoes.

In the sixth grade, I became a member of a relay team for an athletic meet. My grandparents bought me a new pair of shoes for the race. They were pink, light, and easy to run in. As the youngest of three sisters, I had always worn hand-me-downs, so I was overjoyed with those brand-new shoes of my very own! I made some good records with those shoes, but I quickly outgrew them, and they were put away.

Last year, I found those shoes again. They were still clean and nice. I wondered, "What shall I do with these shoes?" I looked into shoe donations and found many countries where shoes are needed. I was particularly interested in Tanzania.

So, I looked up some information about Tanzania on the Internet, and I was shocked to find out that there is a strong belief in Tanzania that sports are only for men, and women have limited opportunities to participate. I also learned that many women there feel negatively about being a woman. Why? In Japan, we can enjoy a variety of sports in school, such as track and field, ball games, and judo, regardless of gender. Many students play sports as club activities. I joined the soft tennis team. My sisters also took part in sports, and our parents always cheered us on. I have never felt that my gender was a barrier to playing sports, and I do not consider being born female a negative thing. So, I was very sad to learn about the situation of women in Tanzania.

I didn't know that even the Olympic Games had not been women-friendly in the past. When the first modern games were held in Athens, Greece in 1896, only men were allowed to participate. In the 1900 Paris Olympics, women were allowed to take part, but there were just 22 women, 2.2% of the total participants. It is only this year that an equal number of men and women took part in the Olympic Games. People were cheering for everyone's success. This is great progress. I was happy to see the athletes challenging each other to improve, regardless of gender. Olympic equality in gender was realized in Paris! It took a long time, 128 years, but we have finally reached this important milestone.

Since 2017, Tanzania has been hosting LADIES FIRST, an athletic competition for female athletes. After seeing this event, many Tanzanian people said, "It was cool to see women playing sports." and "I want to try it, too." Magdalena Shauri, a Tanzanian female marathon runner, was a winner at LADIES FIRST. Her father was once furious with her for running in shorts, but she never gave up. This year, she competed in the Paris Olympics.

I have had a lot of experiences in sports, and they have helped me develop feelings of respect and recognition for myself, my teammates, and even my opponents. I believe that sports nurture a spirit of mutual appreciation and teach us that men and women are equal.

Now, my old track shoes are on someone else's feet. Perhaps a girl in Tanzania. No matter whose feet they are on, I would encourage that person by saying, "Enjoy the sport!"

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Let's Run Toward Equality