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SWET for the Summit: Exploration of Singapore's First All-female Mount Everest Team

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Mountaineering is a popular sport and leisure activity participated by people at all levels. It involves hiking, trekking and climbing on rock or ice with the ultimate challenge of reaching the summit of the mountain. The sport of mountaineering requires climbers to not only possess physical tenacity but also mental resilience in order to overcome the challenging task of climbing to the top of the mountains. Mountain climbing is considered a high risk sport in that the apparent danger of injury or even possibility of death is high. Mountaineers often suffer weakness, breathlessness, and retardation of thoughts and actions at an altitude of over 5485 meters. Beyond 8000 meters, mountaineers will be exposed to environmental conditions such as avalanches and extreme weather conditions. The highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest standing at 8848m, was discovered in the 1847. Typically, it takes mountaineers an average of two months which includes resting, acclimatization and waiting for good weather to climb to the summit of Mount Everest. The first men, who climbed to the summit of Mount Everest, were Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953, and the first woman to reach the summit after surviving from an avalanche attack was Japanese mountaineer, Junko Tabei in 1975 (Deegan, 2003). Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler, conquered the mountain without oxygen supply in 1978 (Deegan, 2003). This feat is considered dangerous because when the body is deprived of oxygen, there is likelihood for the person to suffer from brain damage. British mountaineer, Alison Hargreaves repeated this feat in 1995, solo and without oxygen supply (Deegan, 2003).

Several unfortunate events had happened on Mount Everest. The pre monsoon season in 1996 became the most infamous period in the history of Mount Everest, claiming 15 lives on the mountain and many others who barely survived (Deegan, 2003). Another high profile event in the history of Mount Everest is the disappearance of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine who were part of the British expedition in the 1920s. George Mallory's body was subsequently

discovered in 1999, which came at an “excellent timing, given the events of 1996 that had cast a pall over the aura of Everest” (Birrell, 2007, p. 16). In 2008, tens of thousands pro-Tibet protesters in Paris, San Francisco and London, came together to try to stop the Olympic torch relay up Mount Everest (Jackson, 2008). The peak was commandeered by the Chinese government, host of the 2008 Olympics, and it was closed to climbing until the Olympic torch was taken to the summit (Jackson, 2008).

Women, Mountaineering and Climbing

Climbing has been traditionally defined as a “masculine” sport (Young, 1997). Masculine sports were those that involved bodily contact, applying heavy force to an object, or executing oneself for a long duration (Appleby & Fisher, 2005). Under such circumstances, mountaineering in which an individual had to be exposed to the outdoor environment for a long period of time, especially in the case of climbing Mount Everest, is considered as a masculine sport. Csizma, Wittig, and Schurr (1988) in their study with college students, found that sports such as mountaineering and climbing were still considered socially inappropriate for women. Climbing and mountaineering requires the participant to not only have the mental tenacity to overcome any environmental barriers but also the physical strength to undertake strenuous actions involved in the activity. One of the reasons why few women participate in this sport is because it is very similar to high intensity resistance exercises, which contributes to the development of muscles on the body. Having a muscular body has always been associated to hegemonic masculinity and therefore this sport is often perceived as non feminine. Though some females may perceive mountaineering and climbing as a non-feminine sport, Appleby and Fisher (2005) noted in their study that “pioneering women in traditionally masculine sports may help other women transcend many of the social gender norms that inhibit women’s access to, and

participation in, other male-defined sport contexts” (p.22). Whittington (2006) reiterated that though mountaineering and climbing is perceived to be a “masculine” sport, it is beneficial for women to participate in this sport because outdoor activities can “offer avenues for women to resist social stereotypes, to challenge conventional notions of femininity, and promote positive gender identity development” (p.206). Participating in outdoor activities, women can also foster skills such as decision-making and taking charge as well as cooperation, and considering the needs of others (Whittington, 2006).

There exist barriers to women participating in a male-dominated sport. Scott and Derry (2005) noted that women’s conscious and unconscious feelings of athletic incompetence may be stemmed from the frustration of using equipment designed for males only. Though there is a recent trend to design products meant for women, such as backpacks and sleeping bags for physiologically smaller-built women, these items tend to be more costly than products made for men. “Male bodies are the norm in sports; female bodies are the variation” (Scott & Derry, 2005, p. 197). Another barrier faced by women is messages from the media which portrayed which sports are suitable for them and which are not. Often times, “masculine” sports which challenge their feminine identity are not encouraged and therefore, women who participate in these types of sports were marginalized.

First Female Ascents

First Female Ascents, also known as FFA in short in the climbing culture, means climbs that are succeeded or conquered by the first female in the climbing community. The first all female team to summit Mount Everest is from Japan and Tibet in 1975 (Webster, 2001). Prior to that, Marie Paradis from France is the first woman to summit Mont Blanc, Europe’s highest peak in 1808 (Webster, 2001). Interestingly, another female, Henriette D’Angeville became a second

woman to summit Mont Blanc in 1838, wearing custom made mountaineering clothing consisting of a full skirt of wool and matching wool trousers underneath to maintain a ladylike appearance (Lukan, 1968). In 1991, American female climbing legend, Lynn Hill broke the record much to the disbelief of Jibe Tribout from France who once claimed that no women would ever be able to climb at the grade set by men (McInerney, 2008). Lynn Hill also became the first person to climb the Nose at El Capitan, California using only free climbing technique in 1993 (Webster, 2001). A year later, in 1994, she repeated the feat in less than 24 hours which became a challenging task for anyone to achieve. Hill commented, “Back then, our sport was directed by fraternity of men, and there was little encouragement or, frankly inclination for women to participate. Yet women climbers were out there” (Hill & Child, 2002).

In recent years, women have been pushing the standards of climbing set by men with first female ascents made by Spaniard Josune Bereziartu and American Beth Rodden (McInerney, 2008). With so many feats achieved by women from all over the world, there ought to be equal attention to these women in the media as men. However, Emanoil (2002), associate editor for the Rock and Ice magazine commented that only eight percent of the images in the magazine depicts women and though climbing is no longer for men, coverage for women is still very scant. Voices from female mountaineers have been largely silent in the literature and their experiences have been scantily documented.

Feminist Cultural Studies

Feminist cultural studies were used as the main theoretical framework for this study. Feminist cultural studies contribute to the understanding of the relations among cultural practices, the body, and the reproduction of social formations (Cole, 1994). A feminist cultural study is “concerned with the role of culture in (re)producing gender inequality and in how gender

analysis can contribute to understanding the power structures of culture” (Bergner & Mackie, 1993, p. 1). Krane (2001) also mentioned that the role of females within our cultural interactions and reproduction of inequality between males and females were examined in feminist cultural studies. Researchers who utilize this framework often focus on the analysis of gender, power, privilege, and ideology in sports (Appleby & Fisher, 2005).

Sport is a male preserve and one way to indicate male dominance in sport is to examine gender differences in rates of participation and another way is on male dominance in the administration and organization of sport (Theberge, 1994). Mountaineering and the summit of Mount Everest is a site for the male preserve as Birell (2007) said:

When one looks more closely at the profile of those whose exploits on Everest form the bulk of the Everest epic and, more to the point, the way these stories are presented, one sees stories of unabashed nationalism, unacknowledged class privilege, naturalized ethnic differences that helpfully provide a race of porters whose workload enables white climbers to reach the heights, and the highest male preserve on earth. (p. 3)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of Singapore’s first all-female mountaineering team’s bid to summit Mount Everest in 2009, during the period of March to June. Specifically, my research is to examine the perceptions of the women regarding (a) their mind-body experiences in the sport of mountaineering and (b) the social and cultural challenges they face while participating in this male-dominated sport as well as how they overcome these obstacles. This study can help give voice to the Singapore women who participate in a predominantly male-dominated sport and help develop a picture of how these women perceive themselves in the arena of mountaineering within the culture of Singapore.

Methodology

This study examined the experiences of 6 women from Singapore who will be attempting to summit Mount Everest in 2009. These 6 women are part of the elite team of women mountaineers from the Singapore Women Everest Team (SWET). They had been engaging in alpine training and expeditions as a collective group prior to this Mount Everest expedition. The age range of my co-participants is from 24 to 38 years old and their races are all Asian Chinese.

Procedure

The researcher contacted the co-participants through a key informant, who is a member of the women team and a friend of the researcher. After the approval from the Institution Review Board, the six women were contacted to set up a place and time at their convenience to meet for the interviews. Each co-participant signed an informed consent, was made aware of her confidentiality rights, was told that she could withdraw from the study at any time, and that pseudonyms would be used in the final write up of the study.

The co-participants participated in a face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interview that lasted 60 - 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in Singapore in January 2009, two months before the team's expedition to Mount Everest. The focus of the interview was on the women mountaineers' experiences in the participation in this sport in the context of Singapore. A semi-structured interview protocol was used because it allows for flexibility and open responses (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The interview questions were open-ended, and that afforded me the opportunity to follow up on any of the co-participants answers that are of interest to my study. I was able to build a strong rapport with my co-participants because of my background as a Singaporean female who have participated in the sport of climbing at an elite

level for about 10 years. All of the interviews were conducted in person, tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis. Themes emerged inductively from the data allowing the voices of the co-participants to be heard. Inductive initial themes made up higher order themes regarding the data. Qualitative induction transcends the borders of experience and it extends knowledge to the extent that it proceeds from a limited selection to a larger totality (Reichertz, 2004).

Results

Preliminary findings from the interviews showed that most of the six women felt that women who participate in the sport of mountaineering are not physically disadvantaged in any way. Though men may be physically fitter than women at sea level, they felt that at higher altitudes, women may be able to endure longer than men. They based this observation on the outcome from their recent training expedition to Cho Oyu, sixth highest mountain in the world situated in the Himalayas, whereby their team made it to the summit while several other teams which comprised mostly males, failed in their attempt.

The women also mentioned about the sacrifices they had to make to pursue this sport, which included time for socialization with their family and friends as well as financial sacrifices. These 6 women chosen from the initial 16-member team from 2004 said that though they received social support from family and friends in their pursuit in this sport, they commented that many people outside the climbing culture have little understanding of the sport and were initially doubtful of their ability to accomplish the task. Being the pioneer all-female team from Singapore, they believed that they can help other women surpass social norms that hindered their participation in mountaineering.

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