THE BARON AND THE BARRIERS: PIERRE DE COUBERTIN'S INFLUENCE ON THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S SPORT IN THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the extent to which Pierre de Coubertin's ideology established a patriarchal framework for the early Olympic Games and how these foundational restrictions were gradually overcome over time. The aim is to explore the multifaceted and often contradictory influence of Coubertin's personal views on the historical development of women's sport within the Olympic Movement. A qualitative historical analysis was applied, based on primary sources (Coubertin's writings) and secondary literature. The research traces the evolution of disciplines available to women, the arguments for and against their participation, as well as key milestones in their struggle for inclusion. The findings reveal that Coubertin's views created an institutional logic of exclusion that selectively restricted women's participation to sports considered "appropriate." This barrier was not dismantled through internal reform but through persistent external pressure. The efforts of women's sport advocates, most notably the organized resistance of Alice Milliat and her FSFI, combined with broader social changes and external catalysts, such as Title IX legislation in the United States, gradually expanded opportunities for female athletes. The evolution of women's participation illustrates a sustained struggle against these foundational constraints, culminating in the achievement of full gender parity (50/50) at Paris 2024 and the election of the first female IOC President in 2025. While Coubertin's role in the creation of the Olympic Movement is undeniable, his personal biases represented a significant and lasting obstacle. Understanding this legacy is crucial for assessing the historical trajectory of the Games and for comprehending the transition from formal to substantive gender equality in sport.

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INTRODUCTION

The Olympic movement is founded on a paradox: although presented as a symbol of universal human values, from its very revival at the end of the 19th century, it has built a patriarchal framework that institutionalizes historically conditioned forms of exclusion. The main architect of this framework is Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who is traditionally presented as a humanist and visionary (Bardareva, 2008; Vladova, 2014, 2018; MacAloon, 2008), whose philosophy in fact represents a key challenge to the idea of gender equality – a problem that today can be analyzed through the lens of sports feminism. The contemporary debate on gender equality in sport is directly linked to the historical legacy of the twentieth century. During this period, sport was conceptualized as an exclusively male domain and privilege, grounded in the belief that men were "naturally" destined for physical achievement, while women's sporting accomplishments were systematically diminished (Angelova-Igova, 2023).

The paradox mentioned above lies in the profound contradiction between Coubertin's public image and his categorical opposition to women's participation in competitive sport. His ideology, a synthesis of neo-Hellenistic, aristocratic, and nationalist views, deliberately defined sport as a male domain (Guttmann, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994). His conception of Olympism was built upon the idealized image of a "chivalric contest" among men, carrying both aesthetic and moral value (Müller, 2000). He described women's athletics as "unaesthetic" and "inappropriate," assigning women a ceremonial rather than a competitive role. Coubertin wished the modern Olympic Games to follow the model of Ancient Greece, where women were excluded from competition. For this reason, the issue of women's participation was not raised at the early Olympic Congresses – Paris (1894),

Le Havre (1897), and Brussels (1905). Throughout the 29 years he led the international Olympic movement, he consistently defended this position, gradually intensifying his criticism of women's involvement. His hostility toward women's sport and rejection of the principle of gender equality led him to label female claims as "absurd" (Rosol, 2000). This stance laid the foundation for their systematic exclusion from the Olympic stage. Coubertin's personal sexism was transformed into a lasting institutional policy that delayed the development of women's sport for decades (Lenskyj, 1986).

This article offers a critical reading "beyond the myth" of the founder of the Olympic Movement. It examines how his personal convictions were transformed into an institutional logic of exclusion within the IOC, and how this logic was challenged and ultimately fractured not from within, but through the pressure of external women's organizations. Led by figures such as Alice Milliat and her Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI), these movements established parallel structures that compelled the IOC and the Olympic elite to make reluctant concessions.

Research Aim

This study aims to analyze the multifaceted and often contradictory influence of Pierre de Coubertin's personal ideology on the historical development and evolution of women's participation in the modern Olympic Games, tracing how his views shaped the early stages of female involvement and how the restrictions he imposed have changed over time.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative historical analysis to interpret the multifaceted influence of Pierre de Coubertin's ideology on the development of women's participation in the Olympic Games. The approach is interdisciplinary, combining methods from sports history, social history, and gender studies.

Sources and Selection Criteria

The study is based on the analysis of two types of sources:

Primary sources: The focus is placed on key works, articles, and official speeches by Pierre de Coubertin, allowing for a direct analysis of his rhetoric and argumentation. The selection was guided by their relevance to the theme of women's participation and the role of women in sport, drawing on compilations such as Müller (2000).

Secondary sources: A broad range of academic literature was reviewed, including monographs and peer-reviewed articles dedicated to the history of the Olympic Movement, women's sport, and feminist perspectives on sport. The selection criteria included the relevance of the source, its scholarly value, and its contribution to understanding the institutional policy of the IOC**.**

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted in several stages:

Chronological reconstruction: Key events, IOC decisions, and stages in the evolution of women's participation were arranged chronologically to trace the development of the process over time.

Thematic analysis: Both primary and secondary sources were thematically analyzed to identify and systematize the main arguments for and against women's participation, the ideological frameworks, and recurring motifs in the rhetoric of Coubertin and his successors. *Contextual analysis:* The identified themes and events were situated within a broader socio-political context, including Victorian gender norms, the rise of feminism, and later equality movements, to explain the underlying causes of specific decisions and policies.

Hermeneutic approach: Used to contextualize and interpret sources, revealing how the meanings of women's participation in sport were historically constructed and transformed.

The statistical data on women's participation (Table 1) are not employed for statistical inferences but rather as descriptive evidence to illustrate the historical trends under analysis.

Ethical Considerations: Since the study relies exclusively on publicly available documents, primary texts, and secondary sources, approval from a research ethics committee was not required.

RESULTS

The historical evolution of women's participation in the Olympic Games reveals a clear trajectory from systemic exclusion to gradual and hard-won integration. This process was directly shaped by the ideological and institutional barriers established at the founding of the movement, followed by sustained external pressure.

The Foundational Barrier: Coubertin's Exclusionary Ideology on Women in Sport

Deeply influenced by the neo-Hellenistic interpretation of history, Pierre de Coubertin's concept and vision for the revived Olympic Games were entirely centered on the moral and physical education of men (Carpentier, 2022; MacAloon, 2008; Müller, 2000). He sought to recreate the idealized model of the ancient Games – an exclusively male arena from which women were systematically excluded (Bardareva, 2008; Guttmann, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994). His ideology, firmly rooted in the values of his time, regarded intense physical competition as an exclusively male domain. In his writings, he consistently argued that "true" Olympism required a spectacle of male strength, which he considered unsuitable for women (Müller, 2000). This vision of women as ceremonial spectators rather than active competitors is encapsulated in his famous phrase, which states that their role was "to crown the victors with garlands" (Leigh & Bonin, 1977; Hargreaves, 1994; Müller, 2000). This oft-cited position was not a passing remark but was expressed most explicitly in the aftermath of the 1912 Stockholm Games, where the growing female presence sparked debate. In an article entitled Les Jeux Olympiques de Stockholm, published in the official IOC journal Revue Olympique, Pierre de Coubertin himself wrote: *"A female Olympiad would be impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and improper. […] The primary role of women should above all be to crown the victors."* (Coubertin, 1912, p. 110). This statement serves as a concise summary of Coubertin's anti-feminist views. Published in the official organ of the IOC, it was not merely a personal opinion but rather a programmatic ideological declaration. In it, the active participation of women was defined not simply as undesirable but as "improper". At the same time, their role was reduced to that of a passive, decorative, and ceremonial element – a beautiful backdrop to men's sporting achievements. According to Coubertin, the true Olympic hero was male, and the Olympic Games were to remain an exclusively male competition. Women's role, in his conviction, was limited to the ceremonial crowning of the victors.

Coubertin's stance was more complex than an outright prohibition. It represented a normative restriction of women's sport to the private sphere, "without excesses," and kept away from the public stage on moral grounds. In comparison, the educational and social functions of sport were addressed by him to young men. For women, only moderate and non-public activity was considered acceptable. This framing effectively excluded women from the competitive public sphere of Olympism (Carpentier, 2022).

This ideological attitude was institutionalized through his leadership of the IOC. Although some women "slipped into" the Games as early as 1900 (through decisions made by local organizers), Coubertin himself raised the issue as the first point on the agenda of the Olympic Congress in 1914, to define the programmatic scope of subsequent Olympiads. The outcome was the preservation of the status quo – women's participation remained restricted solely to tennis and swimming (Carpentier, 2022). This demonstrates that what was at stake was not merely a personal inclination but an institutionalized policy of minimization.

Coubertin opposed women's participation in disciplines he regarded as central, while tolerating their presence in sports considered "acceptable," such as tennis and golf (Leigh & Bonin, 1977; Guttmann, 2002). This selective tolerance effectively created a double standard, establishing an institutional logic whereby women could participate, but only in a limited set of sports aligned with prevailing aesthetic and social codes of femininity (Hargreaves, 1994).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, women faced severe restrictions and were rarely admitted to official competitions. Gradually, however, their rights and public visibility in sport began to grow. In the United States, for instance, the "legality and significance of hierarchy" long served as justification for women's subordinate status. Sexist attitudes, grounded in biological determinism and in the belief that women were the "biologically weaker sex," also dominated contemporary culture and sporting practices (Hargreaves, 1994). Women were perceived as weaker and inferior to men and thus expected to remain under their authority. These restrictive practices stemmed in part from the Victorian era, marked by culturally constructed gender differences. Additional influence came from medical stereotypes of the "delicate female," through which physicians of the time legitimized with "scientific" arguments the notion that men should dominate women, who were regarded as biologically and socially deficient (Hargreaves, 1994). Coubertin himself adhered to these ideas. He argued that athletic achievements were incompatible with "female nature," whose essence he associated

with femininity, health, and dignity, and he embraced the prevailing belief of the time that it was men who should decide "what is good and what is not good for women." For him, women's desire to participate in sporting competitions, including the Olympic Games, was absurd and indecent. In his view, the only acceptable compromise was that women might practice sports, but compete without spectators (Rosol, 2000).

His ideology outlived his presidency (1925), as his successors largely upheld a restrictive stance toward women's participation, significantly delaying the expansion of the women's Olympic program.

Early Participation: The First Reluctant Concessions

The complete exclusion of women from the first modern Games in Athens (1896) was a direct reflection of Coubertin's philosophy. However, the debut of female athletes only four years later in Paris (1900) did not signify an ideological shift but rather a historical anomaly resulting from specific organizational circumstances. The Paris Games were fully integrated into the World Exposition, with the IOC and Coubertin exercising almost no control over the organization (Bardareva, 2008; Guttmann, 2002; Toohey & Veal, 2007). As a result, the decision to include 22 women in a handful of sports was taken not by the Olympic Committee but by the French exhibition organizers, who sought to enhance its appeal. This occurred despite, rather than because of, Coubertin's position (Leigh & Bonin, 1977).

Crucial to understanding this episode is the choice of sports – tennis, golf, croquet, and sailing. These were not athletic disciplines, but activities perceived as "appropriate" for upper-class ladies, conforming to prevailing social codes of femininity (Hargreaves, 1994). Thus, the debut of women in the Olympic Movement was not the outcome of progressive policy, but rather the result of the coincidence of organizational chaos and class-based prejudice, which incidentally opened a narrow door for a strictly limited circle of athletes.

This pattern of reluctant and minimal inclusion continued in the following decades, with each new sport admitted only after intense debate. The inclusion of swimming in 1912, for example, sparked discussions about the propriety of competitive costumes (Hargreaves, 1994). The most contentious and telling battle, however, was over track and field. Under the persistent pressure of the highly successful "Women's World Games" or "Women's Olympic Games," organized by Alice Milliat, the IOC was compelled to compromise by including five athletics events at the 1928 Amsterdam Games (Guttmann, 2002).

The subsequent reaction provided the clearest evidence of deeply entrenched institutional resistance. Media reports describing exhausted competitors at the finish of the 800 meters were seized upon by opponents of women's sport as "proof" of women's physical incapacity to endure such exertion. This "moral panic" led the IOC to remove the event from the Olympic program, and it did not return until 32 years later, at the 1960 Olympics in Rome. This episode epitomizes the IOC's stubborn resistance to full female participation in the so-called "true" athletic sports (Cahn, 1994).

The Organized Counter-Movement: Alice Milliat and the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI), 1921

In 1921, Alice Milliat founded the Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI), which organized the Women's World Games. These competitions attracted international attention and demonstrated women's capacity to compete at a high level. The growing popularity of the Games exerted pressure on the IOC and contributed directly to the inclusion of women's athletics at the Amsterdam 1928 Olympics (Leigh & Bonin, 1977; Carpentier, 2022; Castan-Vicente, 2024). The FSFI went on to organize its own highly successful international competitions – the Women's World Games (originally known as the Women's Olympic Games), the first of which was held in 1922 (Gross, 2017; Carpentier, 2022; Castan-Vicente, 2024).

These events demonstrated that women could compete at a high level across a wide range of disciplines, attracting substantial media attention (Gross, 2017). The success of this alternative "Olympiad" placed enormous pressure on the male-dominated IOC. The clash escalated into an open "war" for control of international women's sport, ultimately forcing the IOC to negotiate (Cahn, 1994). The inclusion of five women's athletics events in the Amsterdam Olympics of 1928 was a direct outcome of this pressure – a reluctant compromise designed to neutralize the threat posed by the FSFI and preserve the IOC's monopoly (Guttmann, 1991; Cahn, 1994).

The Interwar Period: An Era of Tension and Early Breakthroughs

The breakthrough of women in athletics and swimming at the Amsterdam Games in 1928 was not an isolated event but rather a symptom of deeper social transformations that followed the First World War. This period marked a slow yet irreversible shift in public attitudes. The changing social role of women – entering the workforce and securing political rights in many countries – exerted increasing pressure on conservative institutions such as the IOC to adapt their policies (Hargreaves, 1994).

At the same time, media coverage also underwent significant evolution. Whereas in the early years women's sport was often treated with irony, the interwar period saw the emergence of the first serious reports that focused on athletic performance rather than the appearance of female competitors (Cahn, 1994). Despite these positive developments, full integration remained a distant goal. This era was characterized by persistent tension between the growing social pressure for equality, embodied by organizations such as the FSFI, and the entrenched institutional conservatism of the IOC, which was still heavily influenced by Coubertin's legacy (Carpentier & Lefèvre, 2006). However, it was within this conflict that the foundations were laid for the more significant changes that would unfold in the second half of the twentieth century.

External Catalysts and Institutional Change: Title IX and the Olympic Charter

The struggle for equality accelerated significantly during the second half of the twentieth century, catalyzed by forces external to the Olympic Movement itself. A pivotal turning point was the enactment of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 in the United States – a landmark law prohibiting sex-based discrimination in federally funded educational and athletic programs (Lopiano, 2000; Cahn, 1994; Liu, 2022). The law led to a revolutionary increase in women's participation in sport in the United States and to their empowerment through the creation of athletic scholarships, fostering a new generation of elite female athletes (Liu, 2022). This legislative momentum from the United States established a new global standard that the IOC could no longer ignore.

Under the weight of decades of struggle and a transformed social landscape, the Olympic institution itself began to reform from within. One of the most important steps in this direction was the amendment of the Olympic Charter in 1994, which officially declared the promotion of women's participation a fundamental mission of the Olympic Movement and formally guaranteed the principle of equal opportunities for women (Terret & Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo, 2012; IOC, 2024). This institutional reform, the product of long-standing activism, symbolized the slow but irreversible retreat from Coubertin's restrictive legacy – a process that can also be traced at the level of individual international federations (Chappelet, 2008; Terret & Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo, 2012).

Late Turning Points: The Road Toward Formal Equality

The expansion of the Olympic program for women accelerated during the second half of the twentieth century, particularly with the inclusion of sports such as rhythmic gymnastics and synchronized swimming at the 1984 Games. Significant institutional progress was achieved at the 2000 Sydney Games: for the first time, women competed in every sport on the Olympic program, though not yet in every discipline (Toohey & Veal, 2007; Miller, 2008).

The culmination of this process of formal inclusion came in London in 2012. These were the first Games in which every participating nation sent at least one female athlete, and women's events were present in every Olympic sport (IOC, 2024). This historic moment, the product of decades of social pressure and institutional reform, symbolized the formal end of an era of exclusion that had begun more than a century earlier. According to Lenskyj (2000), this progress was not a natural evolution but rather a series of concessions won through decades of activism and pressure from women's sport movements.

The Data: A Century-Long Struggle for Parity

The statistical data on women's participation provide a precise quantitative measure of this historical evolution (Table 1).

Table 1. *Women's Participation in the Olympic Games based on (IOC, n.d.; IOC Factsheet, 2024)*

Host City and Year	Olympiad	Total Athletes (*n*)	Female Participants (*n*)	Female Participants (%)
Athens 1896	I	241	-	-
Paris 1900	II	1226	24	1.9%
St. Louis 1904	III	651	6	0.9%
London 1908	IV	2008	37	1.8%
Stockholm 1912	V	2407	48	2.0%
Antwerp 1920	VII	2622	63	2.4%
Paris 1924	VIII	3088	135	4.4%
Amsterdam 1928	IX	2883	277	9.6%
Los Angeles 1932	X	1334	126	9.0%
Berlin 1936	XI	3963	331	8.3%
London 1948	XIV	4104	390	9.5%
Helsinki 1952	XV	4955	519	10.5%
Melbourne 1956	XVI	3314	376	13.3%
Rome 1960	XVII	5338	611	11.4%
Tokyo 1964	XVIII	5151	678	13.2%
Mexico City 1968	XIX	5516	781	14.2%
Munich 1972	XX	7134	1059	14.6%
Montreal 1976	XXI	6084	1260	20.7%
Moscow 1980	XXII	5179	1115	21.5%
Los Angeles 1984	XXIII	6829	1566	23.0%
Seoul 1988	XXIV	8391	2194	26.1%
Barcelona 1992	XXV	9356	2704	28.8%
Atlanta 1996	XXVI	10318	3512	34.0%
Sydney 2000	XXVII	10651	4069	38.2%
Athens 2004	XXVIII	10625	4329	40.7%
Beijing 2008	XXIX	10942	4637	42.4%
London 2012	XXX	10568	4676	44.2%
Rio de Janeiro 2016	XXXI	11238	5059	45.0%
Tokyo 2020	XXXII	11420	5457	47.8%
Paris 2024	XXXIII	10500	5250	50.0%

The quantitative data presented in Table 1 provide a clear statistical illustration of the historical trajectory of women's participation and confirm the central thesis of this study. The influence of Pierre de Coubertin's ideology is directly reflected in the minimal representation of women during the first decades of the Olympic Movement. The initial phase (1900–1936) was characterized by stagnation at symbolic levels of participation, with the proportion of women rarely exceeding 9% and even declining (for example, from 9.6% in Amsterdam 1928 to 8.3% in Berlin 1936). These figures are a direct measure of the restrictive framework formulated by the founder of the Games.

The second phase, spanning the post–World War II period through the 1980s, demonstrates gradual yet steady growth in women's participation. Under the pressure of social change and the efforts of women's sport movements, the share of female athletes rose consistently, surpassing the symbolic threshold of 10% in Helsinki (1952) and reaching 26.1% in Seoul (1988).

The third phase, from the late twentieth into the early twenty-first century, marks a dramatic rise. Women's participation doubled in less than three decades, culminating in the historic achievement of gender parity at 50% in Paris (2024).

This quantitative trajectory not only reflects the overcoming of the barriers established by Coubertin but also serves as an objective indicator of the long-term transition from ideological restrictions to the full integration of women into the Olympic Movement.

DISCUSSION

The results clearly demonstrate that Pierre de Coubertin's ideology functioned as a systemic barrier for women. This creates a profound paradox within his legacy. On the one hand, his Olympic philosophy was infused with universalist and multicultural ideals – rejecting racial and national discrimination and promoting mutual respect among nations (Vladova, 2018). On the other hand, however, this universalism had clear boundaries, as it categorically excluded women from the competitive arena. It is precisely this contradiction – between progressive multiculturalism in relation to nations and restrictive patriarchy in relation to gender – that makes his legacy so complex and central to understanding the historical struggle for equality in sport.

As the findings reveal, women's initial successes in the Olympic program did not automatically eliminate the barriers. On the contrary, they often intensified ideological resistance to full inclusion, which remained particularly strong even after the interwar period. Coubertin's legacy, his conviction that the "true" Olympic Games were created for men, continued to serve as a guiding principle for many IOC members decades after his death (MacAloon, 2008).

This persistent resistance manifested itself in two main ways. First, through the selective inclusion of disciplines, the IOC continued to favor sports deemed "acceptable" and "feminine" (such as gymnastics and figure skating), while "strength-based" or "rough" sports like boxing and weightlifting remained taboo for decades (Hargreaves, 1994). Second, resistance was articulated through pseudo-medical and moral rhetoric. Arguments claiming that intensive exertion was harmful to women's health or that sport threatened traditional roles – though framed as "concern" – functioned primarily as mechanisms for maintaining male hegemony in sport (Vertinsky, 1994).

This deeply entrenched institutional conservatism explains why, even after the Second World War, the process of expanding the women's program remained so slow. Coubertin's ideological legacy proved enduring, requiring decades of social and cultural pressure to be gradually overcome.

The results indicate that the history of women in the Olympic Games is not one of linear progress, but rather a prolonged struggle against deeply entrenched, institutionalized barriers. Pierre de Coubertin's ideology was not merely a matter of personal opinion; it was embedded within the very structure and culture of the IOC, creating a legacy of resistance to gender equality that took nearly a century to dismantle. His vision of "male" Olympic Games (Guttmann, 2002; Müller, 2000) functioned as a key justification for restricting women's access and confining them to a narrow set of "feminine" sports.

The role of Alice Milliat and the FSFI was crucial in advancing women's inclusion in the Olympic program. Their actions can be interpreted as a practical manifestation of what Angelova-Igova (2023) terms "sport feminism." By creating a successful and popular alternative to the official Games, they exposed the IOC's gender bias and employed competitive pressure to force institutional change. This underscores a decisive dynamic: progress was not granted by a benevolent IOC but was won through organized women's activism that challenged the patriarchal order from the outside.

The impact of Title IX illustrates the limits of change within conservative institutions such as the IOC. Substantial progress was not initiated internally but was catalyzed by external legal frameworks that redefined global standards of gender equality. This demonstrates how systemic reforms in sport often depend on broader social and political forces rather than on voluntary institutional transformation.

Thus, the trajectory from 0% female participation in 1896 to 50% in 2024 is more than a statistic. It is a measure of a century-long cultural and political struggle, reflecting the gradual dismantling of the barriers erected by Coubertin, driven by the unwavering commitment of female athletes and their advocates.

CONCLUSION

While Pierre de Coubertin's foundational role in the Olympic Movement is indisputable, the present study confirms that his personal ideology represented a significant and enduring barrier to the development of women's sport within the Olympic Games. His vision of an athletic festival centered on men was institutionalized in the early policies of the IOC, legitimizing the marginalization of female athletes for decades.

The evolution toward gender equality was not a natural progression but rather the direct result of persistent struggle against this restrictive legacy. Key milestones were achieved primarily through external pressures – from the organized resistance of the FSFI in the 1920s to the legislative mandates of the 1970s. These challenges gradually compelled the IOC to dismantle the barriers in-

herited from its founder.

Understanding this complex and often contradictory legacy is crucial. It provides essential context for assessing the historical trajectory of gender equality in the Games. It highlights the ongoing need for proactive policies to address the more subtle forms of inequality that persist today in areas such as media coverage, leadership positions, and funding. The path to 50/50 parity in Paris 2024 is not the end of the journey but an important milestone in a struggle that began with the very origins of the Olympic Movement.

The achievement of formal 50/50 parity in Paris 2024, followed by the election of Kirsty Coventry as the first female president in the IOC's 131-year history in 2025, represents not an endpoint but a turning point in this long battle. These events symbolize the definitive overcoming of the foundational barriers erected by Coubertin. The true challenge now facing the new leadership of the Olympic Movement is to transform this quantitative and symbolic success into genuine qualitative equality and to ensure that the struggle, begun more than a century ago, results in lasting change.

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