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Stereotypes in Women's Sports and their Psychological Effects

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the different pressures and stereotypes that female athletes face and the psychological effects that result from these stereotypes. These stereotypes cause issues in athletes' lives such as low self-esteem which can cause more serious psychological impacts on one's life.

Female athletes have already overcome so many adversaries. They have gone from not being able to compete competitively because of biological beliefs to having the same opportunities as male athletes because of Title IX. There is more room for female athletes to become accepted in society today. Society creates pressure on everyone but throw in being a female athlete and there is more pressure than before. There is pressure to be competitive in competition but come out and act like a lady, based on what society deems as acceptable, all while being labeled and criticized for how a female athlete looks compared to non-athletic women.

Young athletes face an increased amount of pressure causing them to drop out of sports because it is not fun anymore, and they cannot deal with the implications that come along with being a young female athlete. Female athletes are labeled as gay, delicate and face the dreaded saying 'like a girl,' as well as dealing with body image issues that can lead to more serious health issues. Even specific sports cause female athletes to feel criticized based on the uniforms the sport requires for competition.

Society praises male athletes, they should do the same for female athletes, and deem it acceptable to have qualities that have once been deem masculine. The qualities of being

aggressive and dominant should not just be tied to males. There needs to be acceptance of females showing off these qualities as well.

Increased stereotypes in women's sports have led to a decrease in female athletes. Social stigmas of being labeled as 'gay', delicate, and playing like a girl have led to body image issues, eating disorders, and depression for many female athletes.

Background of Women in Sports

Sports have been around for years, but they were not always for women. There was a time when women could not compete in competitive games such as the Olympics. There were many reasons that women were deemed incapable of competing in events. Many of these reasons were because of the biological build of the female body. One of the myths believed was, “Women were not physically capable of running long distances, justified by such silly notions as a women’s uterus would fall out and it would affect her reproductive ability” (Learn). Some of these beliefs were backed by doctors, “In 1898, a doctor in Berlin wrote in the German Journal of Physical Education that, ‘violent movements of the body can cause a shift in the position and a loosening of the uterus as well as prolapse and bleeding, with resulting sterility, thus defeating a woman’s true purpose in life, i.e., the bringing forth of strong children’” (Learn). Many did not want women competing in sports since it was once believed to have impacts on sexual reproduction. This has been proven false, as many female athletes have left competition to have children. Some of these athletes went back to participating at the same level they did before giving birth such as Professional Soccer Player Alex Morgan and Tennis superstar Serena Williams.

Other than biological notions, women did not get a chance to compete in the Olympics until 1900 but were limited to only five events. These events ideally helped accentuate the ideal female features. Today, “The Olympics has gradually progressed to add more women's sports programming almost every cycle... Today at the Olympic level, we have almost reached equal opportunities and all new sports added to Olympic programming must include women's events” (Learn).

Like the Olympics, women did not get their first World Cup Tournament until 1991, unlike the men whose tournament began in 1930. Today in the United States, these opportunities for women to get the same events as men is because of Title IX which was signed in 1972.

Title IX

Title IX was signed into law in 1972 reading, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

This law impacted who was hired and the purchases of equipment and facilities, which people believed were taking away from men's sports (Edwards). It was not until Tennis player Billie Jean King proved to the world that women could succeed in the world of sports. One year after Title IX was passed, she defeated Bobby Riggs in a Battle of the Sexes tennis match, making strides for women in the world of sports.

Just because Title XI was passed creating opportunities for female athletes, does not mean these opportunities come equal to those that men have. Men's sports were still given better equipment, facilities, and benefits from programs including colleges and high schools:

“According to the Women's Sports Foundation, girls have 1.3 million fewer opportunities to play high school sports than do boys and there are 12 million 3rd through-12th-grade boys playing sports while only 8 million girls” (Learn). The numbers are skewed because of the thought that sports are for males. Many females' sports teams receive hand-me-downs from male teams and no not they the new appropriate equipment needed for participation.

ESPN realized that even with Title IX, there was still so much focus on men's sports. In 2013, to celebrate 40 years of Title IX, they released *Nine for IX*, a documentary series about women's sports and how Title IX still needed to be reformed. The series focused on, “stories of successful women in sport and tackle pertinent gender- and sex-related issues, including the exclusion of women sports journalists from locker rooms and the sexualization of female athletes in sport marketing” (Antunovic 535). ESPN also launched ESPNw, a platform for strictly women's sports to be highlighted. ESPN advocates for female athletes, but they still do not get airtime and respect in the sports industry.

Social Stigmas

Female athletes face many social stigmas that other females typically do not. They get labeled based on how they act and what they look like. Many major misconceptions about female athletes are that they are gay, masculine, and are labeled with sexual connotations based on skills, uniforms, and attitudes. Yes, there are many gay female athletes that have broken barriers and stand up for their rights, but that does not mean that all female athletes are gay although they support their teammates and peers. Women are having their sexuality questioned just because they have an interest in playing sports. This stigma also puts pressure on gay athletes who are not open about their sexuality.

Sports, in general, are labeled as aggressive, a feature in which females are not supposed to be based on societal norms, women are supposed to be delicate. "The qualities associated with sport and masculinity are the powers of dominance: physical superiority, violence, aggression, control, and victory" (Cahn). Sports give female athletes a bad reputation because they are the opposite of what society wants them to be. These are all qualities men are associated with and deemed acceptable for them.

Female athletes do not get the respect they deserve. In 2007, radio talk show host Don Imus called the Rutgers University women's basketball team 'nappy-headed hoes' (Learn). These are Division I athletes, from a winning program, getting brought down for the way they look and what sport they play. Female athletes should not be victim to the standard that society sets. Being a female athlete comes with connotations about who these women are on the inside.

Female athletes are criticized for being masculine. Society wants them to be masculine when participating but change their persona to be feminine when not participating. There is a stigma that being a girl during an athletic event is not acceptable, but off the field, it is not acceptable to act the way these females do during the competition: "The girls who play, they called them "marimachos" (tomboy), "machorras" (dyke). They say that you look like a man, for example the coach says to us: When you are in the football pitch you have to stop being a woman. I mean you should have a more aggressive attitude so that you do not lose the ball, but when you leave here, you then continue being yourself" (Oxford). There is a double standard here, if women want to be successful athletically, they have to be aggressive and have muscles to help them compete to the highest of their ability, but once the competition ends, these women are supposed to 'be themselves.' It is hard for these female athletes to find a true identity when they have to pretend to be someone, they are not either on the field or off because the person society

wants them to be is not the same. This pressure from social stigmas can result in psychological impacts among these female athletes.

Play Like a Girl

Every athletes' least favorite phrase, 'You play like a girl.' This small phrase has become so offensive. It gives off the impression that athletes were not competing at a high level and someone could perform the task better: "Having been trained to dread the accusation of doing anything 'like a girl' athletes were said to grow into the assumption that women were valueless and natural prey" (Fallow 84). This simple saying can make someone feel so powerless. There are many young athletes in today's world that want to pursue athletics but do not want to deal with insults based on their biological makeup that they begin to opt-out of sports or feel as though they cannot compete at the same level as their male peers.

This simple statement has given girls the thought that playing sports is for boys and that they can excel in sports while girls cannot.

Throwing like a girl, playing like a girl, kicking like a girl, none of these matters. Anyone can learn how to properly execute these actions the same way professional athletes do it, no matter who they are, male or female. Society should be praising girls for their accomplishments and not put a negative connotation on a phrase that can make someone feel as if they are not performing their tasks correctly.

Body Image

Body image is a major issue in society today. There is even more pressure on body image for female athletes, not only do they not fit the body image mold that society wants them to

reflect, but they also start to show features that are deemed masculine and are “destroying the beautiful lines and curves of her figure, and are robbing her of that charm and elusiveness that has so long characterized the female sex” (Cahn 56). Athletics are said to “broaden the shoulders, deepen the chest, narrow the hips, and develop the muscles of the arms, back and legs, which are masculine characteristics.” (Cahn 57). These features develop naturally from training at high levels. It is healthy for these athletes to have these features, but it is viewed as masculine, an attribute only associated with men.

Females were encouraged to play sports such as golf or bowling because they are said to extenuate female features like widen the hips and narrow the waist. Even when females are encouraged to partake in sports, it is sports that are deemed to benefit the looks of what society wants women to look like. These are also sports that are not aggressive and do not have any physical contact with their opponents, which helps protect from physical injury on the exterior of the body. This helps females have nice smooth skin, another attribute society deems that women should have.

More male athletes were said to have a more positive body image, “exercise is often essential for men to gain a muscular physique, which is consistent with masculinity stereotypes, while exercise may not lead to a desired stereotyped thinness in girls” (Gomez-Baya 2). Most males are staying in sports to keep up with their body image, but girls are dropping out of sports because “teasing and body image concerns appeared to contribute to reduced rates of participation in sports and other physical activities among adolescent girls (aged 12 to 16)” (McIntosh-Dalmedo). These girls could be the next generation of great athletes but will never know because they face such pressures at a young age, it becomes too difficult to deal with.

Not only do female athletes face body image issues in society, but they also face the issue while participating based on their uniforms. Some sports have tighter, more revealing uniforms as others have looser less form-fitting ones. Female athletes with tighter uniforms are objectified sexually and deemed less intelligent (Lauer). Society sexualizes female volleyball players based on their uniforms, causing high dissatisfaction when athletes see images of themselves competing; society also puts pressure on “meeting the ideal body standards that the spandex shorts imposed” (Lauer). The uniform for volleyball objectifies women and holds them to meet the standard that comes along with spandex shorts. Male athletes do not get objectified or sexualized in the uniforms required for their participation. These insecurities among female athletes can lead to eating disorders.

Eating Disorders

Trying to fit the ideal body image that society wants and the body sports demand, some female athletes develop eating disorders. Any athlete can develop an eating disorder, “but athletes participating in activities that emphasize leanness for performance and appearance are at a significantly greater risk. Thus, gymnasts, long-distance runners, divers, and figure skaters are more prone to developing eating disorders” (Cahn 142). Athletes can develop eating disorders from starvation, skipping meals, over-eating, use of slimming medications, and laxative and diuretic use. Between 6%-45% percent of female athletes having eating disorders (Canbolat & Çakıroğlu 232). Athletes feel the need to take part in these measures because of the pressure they face to look a certain way. They might not be as lean or skinny as society deems ideal, but that does not take away that these healthy athletes are making themselves unhealthy based on the pressure to not look manly and be more feminine.

Eating disorders in female athletes can lead to energy deficits, decrease in athletic performance, weakening of the immune system, musculoskeletal injuries, menstrual irregularity, decreased bone mineral density and increased risk of osteoporosis (Canbolat & Çakıroğlu 232). With so much pressure on female athletes from society and athletics, athletes are harming themselves to try to mold themselves to fit what everyone else wants them to be. While doing this they are doing damage to their bodies and altering their athletic ability. These side effects can impact their athletic performance which can cause serious injury. Eat disorders and their effects on female athletes can lead to depression and anxiety.

Depression

With all the pressure female athletes put on themselves to perform and have an ideal body, some fall into depression. Those who have an eating disorder characteristically have low mood and higher-than-average levels of depressive symptoms and are at greater risk of clinical depression.

Depression can be caused by a negative self-evaluation or evaluation that others are giving these athletes. Female athletes are constantly comparing themselves to their teammates, their competitors, and even other male athletes who compete in the same sport. Female athletes who participate in an individualized sport are more likely to experience depression or anxiety because there is no one to rely on but themselves (Pluhar). Depression can also be caused by the stereotypes and stigmas that female athletes cannot break from.

The depressive state these athletes go into impacts their performance on the field. Not having the proper mindset before a competition can result in injury to the athlete.

Conclusion

Overall, female athletes face so much criticism based on their performance and how they look while competing that it creates psychological effects that have impacts greater than sports. Female athletes have come a long way, breaking barriers to enter the world of sports, competing in the same events as male athletes, and even defeating male athletes on an even playing field, but there is still so much more to work towards.

Eliminating the negative connotation 'like a girl' brings and accepting female athletes' bodies for how incredible they are is a small step. Some strides have already been made when President Barrack Obama was addressing the United States Women's National Soccer Team, "This team taught all of America's children that 'playing like a girl' means you're a badass." This team stepped up on the field and off the field, filing for equal pay. The support for female athletes does not just stop on the government level, having male athletes support female athletes makes strides to eliminate the negative 'like a girl' meaning.

There have been many popular male athletes such as Kobe Bryant who pushed for female athletes to have more respect. Bryant was a strong supporter of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and National Women's Soccer League (NWSL). Having a successful male athlete accept these female athletes and advocate for them, not only shows girls it is acceptable to play, but it also teaches boys who idolized Bryant to accept female athletes and their abilities. It is important for more male athletes to stand up for women's sports and accept them. Acceptance is one way to break these stereotypes and start to have equality among all athletes.

There needs to be more organizations like the Women's Sports Foundation, which partners with athletes and companies to find equal opportunities for female athletes while

pushing them to be the best people they can be on and off the field. There is more to life than sports, and the stigmas and pressures impact athletes' real life.

All females, not just athletes need more acceptance when breaking out of the stereotypes that women need to be small, delicate, and calm. Women should be able to take charge, be aggressive, and show masculine features. Female athletes should not have to change on and off the field. Why should athletes step on to the field to compete and be exactly who they want to be, but then step off and must go back to how society wants them to act. There needs to be more accepting of females being aggressive and showing dominance.

Everyone has a different body type and athletes' bodies mold to what they need to be to compete at the level the athlete desires. Putting pressure on female athletes to perform to the best of their abilities while also fit the societal norms of looking feminine and petite is just unfair. Not only is society body-shaming these talented athletes, but they are also tearing them down mentally, leading to more issues than people can see.

It is important to get rid of stereotypes, especially in women's sports. Female athletes are more than capable of performing to a high level, and that has been proven. These stereotypes set in young female athletes' minds, make them not want to carry on with the sport they love because they cannot deal with the pressure of society and the labels that are being put on them at such a young age.

Not only are these stereotypes stopping females from participating in sports, but there is a bigger impact happening. Society and sports are pressuring girls so much that their physical and mental health is put in danger, all because their appearance is not what is socially known as attractive.

The first step in this acceptance is with female athletes, they need to take pride in how they look and who they are. Letting their confidence radiate into society will be the first step to society realizing these young athletes are happy and beautiful no matter what physical features they have that might not be the norm.

Sarah Fuller, a Division I athlete at Vanderbilt University, proved to girls everywhere that it is okay to break out of social norms. She became the first female to play Division I football in a Power Five conference on Saturday, November 28, 2020, when she kicked off in the second half, just days after she won the SEC soccer championship. The back of her helmet read 'play like a girl,' which proved to girls everywhere that it is possible to play on the same field as males: "All I want to do is be a good influence to the young girls out there because there were times I struggled in sports, but I'm so thankful that I stuck with it and it's given me so many opportunities and I've met so many amazing people through sports... And I just want to say that literally you can do anything you set your mind to" (Scarboroug). There was a lot of hate and criticism, which is a major issue when trying to make strides in the right direction. Fuller breaks a barrier to have men and women on the same field competing in the same event, and people cannot accept it and say she does not belong out on the field with the male athletes. Although she did not put up any points, this paves the way that one day a female athlete will kick a field goal or score an extra point.

This move by Vanderbilt Football helps eliminate the negative connotations of 'play like a girl' by accepting a girl onto their team, knowing that she had the capabilities to kick just as good or even better than a male athlete. They could have taken a kicker from the men's soccer team but went with Fuller instead.

The more accepted female athletes become the more room there is for growth for the younger generation of female athletes to come and do great things like Billie Jean King or the United States Women's National Team, but it will not happen if society stereotypes female athletes and puts pressure on them to fit the status quo. These pressures cause psychological impacts on female athletes that society does not recognize.

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