

Sexism in the Sports World

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A phrase that many people are familiar with is “it’s a man world.” People could argue that this has been relevant through centuries. It is even the title of a song by James Brown and the Famous Flames released in 1966. Throughout history, women have not been equal to men in society. It wasn’t until about one hundred years ago that women were granted the right to vote, making men superior by law in the United States. Men traditionally hold jobs, provide for their families and become the dominant figure within their families., This perspective leaves women out of the working world, and within the stereotype of taking care of the house and children. A dated ideal has been cemented in the minds of many people, leaving them to think it is abnormal for women to have jobs that require a full day’s work. Women have been socialized to believe they are inferior to men, and men have been programmed to think they are superior to women due to these ideals. Sexism is perpetuated in unconscious ways each day. It is even more abstract to think that women could perform in a field predominantly male, such as sports.

In order to discuss a woman’s place in sports, it is important to discuss the importance of sports in society. Sports are prevalent from youth to adulthood and are woven into the fabric of society. Sports are founded on the sense of comradery of people with similar interests, whether they are participating in the sport itself, or watching it amongst peers. This promotes a high sense of social bonding, and relation to others in society due to similar interests and passions.<sup>1</sup> Social connection is founded on the fact that people share a common ideal, and the share for the love of sports is what brings people together. As an athlete, participation in sports teaches hard work to young athletes. Working towards developing skills and getting better at activities take dedication, determination and effort. It takes time, failure and success in order to master sport. This is a principle that applies to all disciplines in life, and an ideal that is important to teach. Sports also promotes teamwork and exemplifies examples in which is prevails. Working with others is a

fundamental skill for all professions later in life and promotes socialization that overall contributes to comradery and bonding amongst people. Sports create an outlet for people to express their athleticism and interests and should be a space for both genders to share. However, sports have been male throughout history, as shown through the popularity of professional sports, college sports, as well as televised events. Statistics have shown that the most popular sports to watch in the United States are football, men's basketball and baseball.<sup>2</sup> Women's sports are not as frequently watched and do not get as much attention, socializing that men are dominant in the fields of sports and that women do not belong in the sports culture.

To portray the inequality of men and women, consider the example of the National College Athletic Association's March Madness Basketball Tournament in 2021. The tournament is a massive event that takes place amongst the top collegiate teams in the United States for both men's and women's basketball. The men's and women's tournaments are both funded by the NCAA but take place in different places in the country. The men's tournament has a budget of twenty-eight million dollars, while the women's tournament has a budget of fourteen million dollars, half of the men's.<sup>3</sup> This is due to the fact that the men's tournament is designed with courts further from each other, requiring to invest in more transportation than men. The women's tournament is situated on a singular campus, eliminating that cost from their budget. In addition, the men's tournament is held on a larger scale, being televised on cable and streaming applications, as well as having larger courts and more fan attendance.<sup>3</sup> The women's tournament does not have as much fan attendance, nor as many amenities as men, further decreasing the cost of their tournament compared to the men's.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the net income of the men's tournament is about eight hundred sixty-five million dollars, while the women's tournament costs the NCAA about three million dollars.<sup>3</sup> This is due to the fact that men's televised games

bring in about twenty-five times more than the women's programs due to deals television networks have made with the NCAA.<sup>3</sup> Women's television deals span five hundred million dollars over fourteen years, while the men's tournament will generate about twenty billion dollars over the next twenty-two years on networks such as CBS and ESPN.<sup>3</sup> Although inequality exist sin their budgets, it is important to note that money made from the NCAA men's tournament is distributed to all student athletes and programs, ranging from sport sponsorship, scholarship funds, championship games and student assistance funds.<sup>4</sup>

Hegemonic masculinity is the term used in people who embody masculine traits.<sup>1,5</sup> This legitimizes a man's dominant positioning society, and exists to prevent women from intruding on male boundaries.<sup>1</sup> This idea started in the 1980s as part of a power structure in political sociology, which demanded a spotlight be placed on a dominant group.<sup>6</sup> Not only does it create majorities and minorities, but partitions the genders into dominant and inferior groups. The socialization of this practice allowed for women to take dominance of women and continued to repeat the history of women's exclusion in predominantly male fields. Men are protective over their masculinity due to the fact that it embodies their sense of manhood.<sup>6</sup> Women entering previously male dominant fields are threats to the men that inhabited them, slowing deteriorating the structure of the patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> The less control that men have over the field, the further they are from hegemonic masculinity. Women having equality in sports makes it less of a men's ideal, and more neutral.

This is one of many examples of inequalities within sports, but nonetheless, one of the most recent representations of the fact that progress is still meant to be made in the field of sports for women. Since the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, there have been strides made in order to bridge the gap of inequality between men and women, which has helped to minimize the lasting

effects of unfair treatment towards women. However, there are still inequalities to be addressed, corrected, and changes to be implemented for the future. Though there are physiological differences between men and women, the sociological effects the stereotypes of women have on society has had its lasting effects. Gender stereotypes and bias towards women have led to their underrepresentation in sports throughout history, playing sports a male dominated field and harder for women to be recognized.

## PHYSIOLOGY

In order to begin to discuss equality in sports, it is important to discuss the physiological differences between men and women. Structurally, men are more advantaged, as they have a larger stature and physical build than women.<sup>7</sup> This allows men to have increased speed and strength, and produce more force and instantaneous velocity on objects that women cannot generate.<sup>7</sup> Men have advantages in throwing, running and climbing, and excel in sports such as football, wrestling and baseball.<sup>7</sup> This is due to their body composition, broken down into an average of fifteen percent fat mass and forty-five percent muscle mass.<sup>7</sup> The ability to build high amounts of muscle is due to the presence of the testosterone in the body.<sup>7</sup> Larger amounts of muscles allow for men to have more explosive and rapid force than women, being able to perform quick motions.<sup>7</sup> This is advantageous for sports like running, which is the reason that men's races are typically run at a faster rate than women's races. Furthermore, larger muscle mass allows men to use more resistance when training than women can, allowing men to improve their training.<sup>7</sup> Men have increased joint extensibility of the upper extremities such as the shoulder, which allows them to perform well in the aforementioned sports.<sup>7</sup> In addition, hemoglobin usage levels are ten to fourteen percent higher in men than women.<sup>7</sup> This allows men's bodies to transport oxygen through their body to muscles that require delivery. The increased circulation of oxygen in the body allows for improved aerobic capacity, helping men to outperform women in endurance sports.<sup>7</sup> This allows them to maintain energy, as men typically have twenty percent more energy than women.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, men have a disadvantage in terms of lactate accumulation, which means the muscles will fatigue more easily.<sup>7</sup> Men are less able to perform immediate energy activities that require anaerobic systems in the body, due to high levels of lactate accumulation in the muscles. Women are better able to clear blood lactate

with their muscle structure of type one fibers.<sup>8</sup> These fibers better allow women to perform endurance sports to make-up for the lack of hemoglobin transport that men have.

As men are advantaged in terms of structure and strength, women are advantaged in terms of balance and flexibility.<sup>7</sup> Women have a higher fat mass percentage than men and a lower muscle mass percentage, on average twenty five percent and thirty six percent respectively.<sup>7</sup> The higher percentage of fat mass in the body is due to the presence of estrogen in the female body, allowing for less muscle development.<sup>7</sup> Women do have testosterone stores in their bodies but at a much lower percentage than men do. Women have greater flexibility in their lower extremities such as the hips and knees, allowing them to perform better at sports such as dance and gymnastics.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, women have better coordination than men, specifically through ages eighteen to thirty.<sup>7</sup> Coordination extends to motor skills, both large and small. Larger motor skills like running and jumping are named gross motor skills, while small movements and manipulation of objects are fine motor skills.<sup>7</sup> Though men can produce more force to better perform at gross motor skills, women outperform men in terms of fine motor skills, which require more quick and accurate movement. This is applicable in sports such as figure skating, dance and cheerleading. In terms of how women approach their sports, they use analytical strategies allowing them to simultaneously perform physical tasks while reminding the body of spatial perception and precision.<sup>7</sup> Men, on the other hand, use holistic strategies, more focused on physically performing the task rather than thinking about the task at hand.<sup>7</sup>

Though there are many differences between male and female performance in sports, there are no differences between muscle contractility and nervous system adaptation between the genders.<sup>7</sup> This means that both men and women are capable of producing force through the same mechanism, but men can produce a greater amount of force.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there is no gender

difference in training ability, as both men and women have the same ability to learn skills. Though they both have the capacity to develop skills and train, men have a better ability to perform quick movements, while women better suited at flexibility and balance.<sup>7</sup>

## WOMEN'S ACCEPTANCE IN SPORTS

In 1972, the Federal Government passed Title IX, which barred sex discrimination in all public institutions in America.<sup>9</sup> This allowed men and women equal opportunities for education, which in turn created more opportunities for women in sports.<sup>9</sup> Although the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed in 1919, women still were not considered equal to men and not provided equal opportunity, which required the passing of Title IX over fifty years later. In order to be maintained, Title IX called for requirements of colleges and universities to have at least one employee responsible for compliance to make sure that there are equal treatment for men's and women's teams.<sup>9</sup> This forced institutions to face their sex stereotyping and be candid on the distribution of their resources to both men and women's sports. There have been great improvements made since the passing of this act, as the number of female athletes at NCAA institutions has increased forty three percent from 1972 to 2018.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the number of women's teams at said institutions have surpassed the number of men's teams in 1998, and has been greater since then.<sup>9</sup> However, the percentage of male athletes in the NCAA is still higher than the number of female participants.<sup>10</sup> In 2018, it was reported that Division I athletics had twelve percent more male athletes than female athletes, and sixteen percent more male athletes than females in both Division II and III sports.<sup>11</sup> It should also be noted that the total number of male participants surpassed the number of female participants by about sixty thousand athletes through NCAA institutions in the United States, showing the disparities between gendered sports.<sup>11</sup> Title IX was instituted almost fifty years ago, which begs the question, why is there still inequality in sports?

The media plays a major of the integration of women in the sports world. The media is the easiest and most mainstream way to illicit news and to read about what happens in society

daily, and an outlet for sports reporting. Sports media is an extremely influential outlet, between sports applications, sports magazines and network television devoted solely to sports, they are part of a huge part of society. With the different media types, it would be assumed that all sports get equal coverage. However, only five to eight percent of all sports media coverage is dedicated solely to women, while forty percent of all sports participation is in women.<sup>5</sup> The women's sports that get the most coverage are the women's soccer at the time of the World Cup, and women's sports in the Olympic Games, which only take place every four years.<sup>12</sup> Out of the low percentage of female sports broadcasted, most of them are sports that are considered feminine.<sup>13</sup> These sports usually include gymnastics, dance and cheerleading, which are the sports that are typically in argument of whether to be considered a "real" sport. Feminine sports are associated with their ideals of expressivity, grace and aesthetics, while masculine sports are associated with physical contact, face-to-face opposition, strength and aggressiveness.<sup>5</sup> Women who exhibit stereotypically masculine qualities are considered abnormal and outside of their gender norm. In addition, many women are sexualized for their appeal and not appreciated for their athleticism.<sup>5</sup> The sports typically televised for women are ones in which women do not wear much clothing, and have gotten tighter uniforms in recent years. Reflect upon cheerleading uniforms from past to cheerleading uniforms in the present. The goal of the uniform is to showcase the woman's body to best show off their form and skillful practice of their sport. However, the sole fact of being a woman accentuates features that many people become attracted to, bringing in viewership for women's body rather than their practice. If women in different sports were broadcasted, it would become more socialized that women portray different traits other than poise and lightness and show that they are capable of the caliber of play men practice.

The effects of the media also shape the views of children on the sports world.<sup>14</sup> The youth during today's time are heavily influenced by the programming they watch whether it be on television, through social media or through streaming applications. By seeing a majority of men on their screens, it teaches the normalcy that sports are for men, and that women belong in other areas of society. Many places where women are thought to have a place are fashion shows, on the sidelines of masculine sports such as football and baseball or even in other television programs in which they are performing for the arts, not for sports. The ideals that women are better in different areas inhibits people from accepting women's participation and achievement in sports. This is especially prevalent for the youth who are watching sports, by only seeing men playing collegiate and professional sports.<sup>14</sup> For girls, this shapes their self-concept and social norms in which they could associate themselves with, as well as their belief as to what they are able to achieve in their life.<sup>14</sup> The portrayal of men's sports sets the precedent as to what behaviors are acceptable for male athletes, which influences the temperament, personality, talents and expression of young boys.<sup>14</sup> The widespread broadcasting of men exceling in sports allows for role models from young athletes to look up to, shaping their belief and aspirations that they could one day achieve the same success as them.<sup>14</sup> This shows that men are stronger and more capable than women, and should be recognized based on the amazing skills they have. A sense of ability and aspirational achievements is based on the examples set by others in society, which boys are able to access. However, the underrepresentation of women in sports does not allow girls the same luxury, as they do not have strong and represented athletes to look up to.

Another effect the media has on society is the fact that sports are for men, meaning the women do not belong on the field, or in the office. Male dominant culture is hard for women to infiltrate, despite how qualified they are for the job.<sup>14</sup> This could be displayed by the number of

head coaches in Major League Baseball. In 2020, the San Francisco Giants hired Alyssa Nakken as an assistant coach, being the first female coach ever hired in professional baseball.<sup>15</sup> Though there are many women who are trained and fitting for the position, they are often left out of conversation due to their gender. This allows for organizations to continue getting away with hiring male staff, reproducing the male dominant culture in sports.<sup>14</sup> Sport organizations use exclusion and demarcation to prevent females from obtaining jobs in positions of control, whether it be as a manager or as an intern.<sup>14</sup> Stereotypes in society have to change in order for women to find their place in all aspects of sports, and to be socialized for their ability to excel in sports, not for just breaking the stereotypical norm of people who are involved with sports.

## GENDER STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN IN SPORTS

Gender stereotypes are harmful to both men and women but are particularly hurtful for women in sports. The idea of stereotype threat stems from a self-evaluation when someone is at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about his or herself.<sup>14</sup> This is applied to women in sports, especially in sports that both men and women play. For example, men's hockey and women's hockey is different in terms of the physical aspect of play, with less direct contact on the women's side. People will associate women with an "easier" version of hockey due to the lack of hitting, and work to fit into the mold that women are not capable of intense sports. Women are inadvertently exposed to stereotype threat, in which they feel the need to prove themselves as strong and worthy as men, even though they are not physiologically fit to play at the same caliber. This leads to treatment discrimination, which is the idea that individuals from certain groups receive less organizational resources than would be deserved.<sup>14</sup> This is incredibly relevant in college sports, as men's teams typically get more resources, receive more popularity and better coaching than women's teams. This does not mean they are any less than men but achieve in sports at different levels. This influences women to think that they are not as great as men, and could not achieve the same levels of acknowledgement because of the stereotypes that society has built against them.<sup>14</sup> Concepts of success are relative to the sport and the gender and should not be compared through which sport is inherently more "exciting." Stereotypes cause people to doubt their concept of ingroup, their concept of ability and their self-concept, which is shaped by the opinion of the culture and society that surrounds them.<sup>14</sup> Gender stereotypes in sports would cease to exist if people understood a woman's place in sports. The inability to accept this is harmful to women's sense of belonging, both in physical practice and in spectatorship.<sup>1</sup>

Another issue with women in sports is being associated with the color pink, a stereotypically feminine color.<sup>13</sup> The color pink denotes a “girly” person, someone who is weak and frail. Men, on the other hand, are associated with the color blue, a color that asserts dominance.<sup>13</sup> The color pink focuses on femininity and heterosexuality rather than their athletic ability.<sup>13</sup> In addition, many women’s teams at the youth, collegiate or professional level are classified with the name “lady” in front of the male team’s name. Not only does this denote that the women’s team is inferior to the men’s team, but also implies that the women’s team is not as strong. Other derogatory associations of women in sports are that they are presumably lesbian, as well as being crass and rude for being competitive.<sup>13</sup> There are also the gender ideals of “you throw like a girl” or “you run like a girl,” associating a women’s performance with something that is inferior to a man’s. As previously stated, it is factual that women cannot perform at the same physiological level as men, due to their genetic makeup. However, looking down upon women for not performing at the same caliber is not a fair assessment of their ability, as they are successful relative to the ability their body allows. This lack of social support and negative assessment from society undermine the psychological health of women and their well-being, leading themselves to believe that they cannot excel in sports.<sup>14</sup> Until gender stereotypes are socialized out of the framework of society, women will be culturized to think that they do not belong in sports. If women find interest in sports, then they are socialized to make sure they are less than men no matter their athletic ability and performance level, which is a reflection of unequal treatment of women in society.

A possible solution to the socialization of women into sport begins with the presence of female role models in sports. From 1972 until 2020, there has been an average of eight teams on NCAA campuses compared to seven prior to the passing of Title IX.<sup>16</sup> The Me Too Movement

has empowered women to pursue a career in fields dominated by women and fight for the equity that women deserve, changing the stereotypes of where women are allowed to work.<sup>16</sup> Once the breaking up of boy's clubs in sports is changed, society could work toward a more inclusive field.<sup>17</sup> The times of rationalizing gender inequities are dated, starting with the idea that women are inconsequential to men and the fact that women are not able to perform their jobs.<sup>18</sup> This is due to the fact that women are thought not to be competent in the field and practice of sports, and the assumption that they have prior obligations that leave them less committed to their work, such as family and home life.<sup>16</sup> However, this is not true amongst all women, and the stigma needs to change in order to make progress for the next generation of female athletes. This starts with having female role models in the field of sports, whether it be through coaching, through achieved athletics or through breaking down barriers of fields that have been predominantly occupied by men. Women are also thought to be too polite, accommodating and nurturing to coach, as coaches are typically associated with the ideals of being harsh, aggressive and strong leaders, qualities typically associated with a male.<sup>19</sup> For example, having female coaches for girl's youth sports sets the precedent that women can continue to be successful during their adulthood, shaping them to believe in themselves and their belonging in sports. It may also be helpful for girls to have a role model to look up to who understand the experience they are going through, rather than just being knowledgeable about the rules and regulations of the sport. By changing the scenery from a singular gender to a both genders, young girls will see that they in fact do have a place in sports and should not be deterred from the masculine taint that has been painted on the complex field.

It is time to rewrite the stigma that society has created for women in sports. Though they may not be equal physiologically to men, they deserve recognition for their ability, hard work

and dedication to their sport. Change begins with people who are brave to break the stereotypes that women face. A quote written by Jenele Hill encompasses the argument: “When it comes to women in sports, women are big targets for abuse because the resentment is two-fold. Some resent us for our confidence and beliefs. But there is also an added resentment because we are supposedly infiltrating a space that has been decidedly male.” If people believe there is not a problem with female recognition in sports, then they are a part of the problem.

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