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Modern Western societies, including the United States of America, are often credited for advancing equality for historically oppressed groups in society, including women. Since the founding of the United States, women have successfully fought for and obtained equal rights under the law in society. While much progress has been made, modern society continues to reinforce sexism and discrimination, specifically through the promotion and continuation of harmful gender stereotypes of both men and women. These stereotypes have existed for centuries and can be seen in all aspects of society. This includes how men and women are perceived in the household, in leadership positions, and in the workplace, just to name a few. Another clear example of sexism and gender discrimination based on stereotypes can be seen in sports. The history of women's sports in the United States has been defined by a struggle for relevance and equality. Women's sports have been a vehicle to promote and reinforce male superiority and female inferiority within the entire society. The promotion of traditional and harmful gender stereotypes also promotes the exclusion of transgender athletes in both men's and women's sports.

The history of women's sports in the United States can be defined by a struggle for equality and recognition alongside other women's movements that have existed in every aspect of society. Women's sports have historically been mocked and diminished by influential figures

and institutions. This includes Baron de Coubertin, who is credited as the “founder of the modern Olympic Games” who called women’s participation in the Olympics “impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and incorrect” (Katz, 2017). There were countless unreasonable justifications for de Coubertin and many others to oppose women’s sports, ranging from perceived effects on childbirth to intelligence and an understanding of how to play. Over many decades, women were gradually able to participate in more sports and it was not until 2012 that women were allowed to compete in all Olympic level sports (Katz, 2017).

As outlined in the article “It’s Been Like That for Donkey’s Years”, women’s sports have historically displayed the unequal power dynamics and relations between the genders (Shaw, 2002). Male superiority and female inferiority have been promoted directly through sports, specifically through the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. One way in which this is evident is through the management of women’s sports organizations. Throughout their existence, women’s sports organizations have frequently been controlled and managed by men. This dynamic is explained in Shaw’s article, which states “the relationships between women and men involved in the organization and management of sport have rarely been smooth and have frequently favored dominant groups of men at the expense of marginalized men and many women. In some sport organizations, attitudes towards women’s involvement in management appear to have changed little in the past 100 years” (Shaw, 2002). The article examines a historical lack of representation of women across virtually all major sports organizations. For example, Shaw notes that “in the International Olympic Committee, where there are 133 members, only 15 are women, and most of these are recent appointments” (Shaw, 2002).

While recent efforts have been made to increase the involvement of women in sports organizations, Shaw notes that these efforts are minimal and do not impact true structural

problems. Shaw states “the continual focus on increasing numbers of ‘women in decision making’ ... does little to critique the organizational structures that have traditionally constrained marginalized groups of women within sports organizations... nor does it acknowledge that some males, e.g. gay men or those from ethnic minorities, may also face under representation in sport organizations” (Shaw, 2002). Shaw critiques this unequal system, claiming “these organizational structures ensure the dominance of some individuals over others, may be understood as socially constructed power structures” which are “highly complex and ... a product of the historical roots of the organizations to which they contribute” (Shaw, 2002).

As described in “It’s Been Like That for Donkey’s Years”, traditional gender roles which dictate how men and women are “supposed” to behave have harmful consequences in practice, particularly for individuals who may not conform to these stereotypes in their own lives. The article states “gender relations have developed to favor historically constructed ‘masculinities’ expressed by men over those expressed by women and ‘femininities’ expressed by women and some men” (Shaw, 2002). Adhering to strict gender roles and stereotypes particularly influences and harms female athletes specifically. Discrimination against female athletes originates from more broad societal sexism that has always existed in American society. This is based upon false narratives and assumptions about women that have been reinforced for centuries. This includes claims that women are too weak and not athletic enough to play sports, as well as arguments that women are also not smart enough to understand the complexities of sports as well. These claims are not only scientifically untrue but have left a lasting, destructive impact on women’s sports that has yet to be corrected.

The significant differences regarding how men’s and women’s sports are perceived in popular culture and society results directly from a socially constructed narrative rather than

factual basis. Ronald Katz' "Changing Sex/Gender Roles in Sports" clearly argues this point, with Katz stating "sex/gender roles in sports have resulted almost entirely from stereotypes rather than from analytical thinking ... this situation has created unfairness and discrimination that have been highlighted by the rising trend of gender fluidity" (Katz, 2017). Katz identifies numerous flaws in past action, such as Title IX reforms, which do not help the advancement of women's sports and are sometimes contradictory. For example, the article notes how "the so-called Contact-Sport Exemption (CSE) to Title IX ... exempted such major venue-producing sports such as football and men's basketball from the requirements of Title IX" (Katz, 2017). The article finds flaws regarding gender and participation in sports organizations, as well, such as the International Olympic Committee and National Collegiate Athletic Association. Katz finds that these organizations have been unable to change and address new problems, such as the inclusion of transgender and intersex athletes. Katz notes that "with regard to intersex or transgender athletes, the CSE offers little guidance on questions such as whether a person transitioning from male to female could play on a women's field hockey team or whether a person transitioning from female to male could play on a football team ... attempted solutions fail because they are not scientifically based, they are invasive, and/or they do not take into account Title IX" (Katz, 2017). Katz provides a detailed proposal for solving these problems within organizations such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

The work of both Shaw and Katz establish the fact that while organizations such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association and policy and laws such as Title IX have worked to promote equality for women's sports, significant barriers to true equality remain, largely based on gender stereotypes and discrimination outdate the organizations and policies themselves.

Regardless of the level of internal work happening within organizations, or policies

mandated by the government, damaging gender stereotypes and discrimination still exist in society and are prevalent in the world of sports. Gender stereotypes in sports are reinforced primarily through societal institutions, including the media. The media at large has long promoted and reinforced harmful gender stereotypes through its portrayal of men and women. This includes the clothing, demeanor, and behaviors that are normal, appropriate, or acceptable for each gender. The way the media presents men's and women's sports is largely shaped by these gender stereotypes. This indoctrination by the media begins with very young children in a quite disturbing and unethical way.

The media notoriously beings targeting advertisements to children at very young ages, even before they are old enough to understand the messaging being sent to them. This type of messaging often teaches children harmful narratives which are internalized and shape the way that they view the world. The way that children consume sports media provides a perfect example of this problem. A study of *Sports Illustrated for Kids* examined the ways in which gender stereotypes were reinforced through the images used in the magazines. This intentional strategy is incredibly dangerous for children to consume, as young children can understand pictures before they can read. The study, conducted by Jacquelyn Cuneen and M. Joy Sidwell, reviewed the content of *Sports Illustrated for Kids* over a six-year period. Cuneen and Sidwell discovered that the way the children were portrayed in the magazine's photos significantly reinforced gender stereotypes about what sports were acceptable for boys and girls to play. The article described the findings, stating "content analysis revealed that girls and women were drastically underrepresented as models in *SIK* advertising and that distinct gender roles were sustained by depicting males in nearly all types of activities and products. Conventional stereotypical relationships between sport and gender were represented in the majority of *SIK*

advertisements” (Cuneen, 1998). This perpetuates stereotypes that men are meant to be strong, competitive, and aggressive, which allows them to compete in any sports, while women are supposed to be weak and docile, which limits their opportunities. The article notes these differences through the specific gender portrayals, stating “sport-related advertisements portrayed women in leisure-recreation activities rather than competitive sports. When women were portrayed competitively, they were engaged in individual (i.e., gender appropriate, publicly accepted) sports such as golf, tennis, and swimming” (Cuneen, 1998). Not only is this clear gender bias offensive to female athletes, but it directly influences the way children interpret both gender roles and sports from the time they are a toddler. As noted in the article, “children find their appropriate gender behavior to be rewarding, develop gender consistency, and perform those gender-appropriate behaviors displayed by same-sex models in advertising to avoid inappropriate behavior ... children are particularly likely to believe that photographs are realistically accurate and if advertising depicts females and males in traditional gender roles, children will be especially susceptible to accepting gender differences relative to activities and products” (Cuneen, 1998). The direct influence of type of representation is clear. If young girls only see females represented doing activities such as “jogging, roller blading, or Frisbee”, they will believe that this is normal and correct behavior for them. In turn, young boys internalize the stereotype that girls are not smart or strong enough to play the same sports as them, and the notion of male superiority and female inferiority is reinforced on a new generation (Cuneen, 1998). The article notes that in recent years, more sporting advertisements have been aimed at women, however it is speculated that this may be a result of economic and social conditions, as women spend significantly more money on consumer goods compared to their male counterparts (Cuneen, 1998.)

Unfortunately, a significant gendered bias in media portrayal of sports does not end with advertisements aimed at children. Traditional gender stereotypes influence the way sports are portrayed all the way up to the highest level of competition in the world, the Olympic Games. In a study conducted by Amy Jones, the gender stereotypes were analyzed in the portrayal of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Through an analysis of the different sports played at the Winter Olympics, Jones identified significant differences in the ways that athletes were portrayed. These differences included “both visual cues (camera angle, interaction with others, wardrobe) and verbal cues (sex of the commentator, commentary theme, and the use of social role adjectives)” (Jones, 2011). According to Jones’ research, men and women playing the same sport were covered very differently in numerous, sometimes subtle, ways. The study also found that athletes were portrayed very differently if they were participating in a “gender-inappropriate” sport, such as males competing in “feminine” sports such as figure-skating, or females competing in “masculine” sports such as snowboarding (Jones, 2011). Through perpetuating narratives of “masculine sports” and “feminine sports”, the media allows for the reinforcement and perpetuation of gender stereotypes which bring harm to athletes and society. When even athletes at the highest levels of competition are portrayed differently simply for participating in “gender-inappropriate” sports, sexism, discrimination, and gender stereotypes are all allowed to continue and are given legitimacy that is not based in scientific reality.

The perpetuation of this cycle that promotes gender stereotypes and causes the internalization of discriminatory narratives is described by some scholars as the result of the “unholy trinity” which describes the “sports-media-business alliance” (Kaelberer, 2019). Matthias Kaelberer uses the German Women’s Soccer team to illustrate the incredible power and influence held by this superstructure. Women’s soccer has seen noteworthy growth over several

decades, however this growth has been met with numerous consequences from the “unholy trinity” which has reinforced stereotypes to hold this movement back. This includes “asserting the superiority of men’s soccer ... the role of femininity in women’s soccer ... and the sexualization of the players” (Kaelberer, 2019). As argued in Kaelberer’s work, the “unholy trinity” is responsible for shaping society’s understanding of men’s and women’s sports, and the promotion of the superiority of men’s soccer. This can be displayed in several ways. For example, Kaelberer notes that “less than 10 percent of media sports reporting ... is devoted to women’s sports ... the majority of media executives are men, who decide what sports to broadcast or report on, and who hire the journalists and reporters ... and the work environment for women sports journalists is often discriminatory and sexist ... in other words, the sports-media-business alliance reinforces a cycle” (Kaelberer, 2019).

The ability of this alliance to dominate narratives around women’s sports has allowed for extreme, appalling consequences. The article notes the ways in which women’s sports are portrayed, noting that “sports journalism is often gender-stereotypical, and emphasizes non-sports related elements ... women’s sports focuses much more often on human-interest stories than it does for male athletes ... depictions of female athletes in the media often show them outside of the sport competition, in a passive pose and often in sexualized or eroticized fashion... women’s bodies are portrayed in terms of (passive) beauty, aesthetics, and elegance in contrast to depictions of men who get represented through competent, strong, and active bodies” (Kaelberer, 2019). The article concisely summarizes these differences as “degrading the athletic accomplishments of female athletes, while looks and attractive radiance become the main message of the imagery. The media frame of the winning male athlete is that of a hero, whereas the image of the victorious female is that of a friendly winner” (Kaelberer, 2019). As Kaelberer

tremendously describes, the alliance of media, sports, and business has radically altered women's sports in a way defined by gender stereotypes which subjects women to marginalization and even sexualization. These stereotypes and narratives not only influence the way female athletes are viewed in society, but also affects their self-perception as well, due to the internalization of these stereotypes and narratives about female athletes.

Studies on children's participation in sports show that gender stereotypes are internalized by children from a very young age and can have significant effects on the development of children. For example, a study by Karen Meaney found that "participation in sex-stereotypical activities in early childhood may limit a child's development and repertoire of motor skills ... participation in male-stereotyped activities promotes speed, strength, confidence, and fundamental motor skills... whereas participation in female-stereotyped activities promotes cooperation, empathy, and fine motor skills" (Meaney, 2002). As noted in Meaney's work, the activities that are given or encouraged to children can have significant effects on their physical development including fundamental motor skills. Discouraging or preventing children from participating in certain activities based on gendered stereotypes can literally prevent proper development and function.

Meaney's research also finds that participation in certain activities based on gender stereotypes influences the child's view of themselves and of other students, as well. For example, children's view of the "competency" of other children were affected based on participation in gender-stereotypical behavior. The article states that "both boys and girls attributed higher competence to a child performing a sex-appropriate activity than to a child performing a sex-inappropriate activity. However, with respect to performance in neutral activities, boys rated males more competent than females, whereas girls credited males and

females as of equivalent competence” (Meaney, 2002). These findings reflect the gender stereotyping that has been taught to children before they are able to understand it. The young boys and girls understand what they have observed and been taught through stereotypes, which is that it is “normal” to participate in activities simply because you are a boy or a girl. However, a significant finding regarding neutral activities reflects the male superiority present within culture and society, and it appears evident that the young boys studied have already internalized this sense of male superiority. This is because while the girls draw no distinctions for neutral activities, meaning it is acceptable for both boys and girls, the boys found that females were less competent than their male counterparts while participating in these neutral activities. The young boys appear to have internalized the idea that boys are generally more competent at participating in sports and physical activity, and that girls are less competent, and only should participate in certain stereotypically acceptable behaviors. Not only does this have a harmful impact on how young children view and interact with each other, but it also continues a cycle of oppression faced by women and female athletes specifically.

Another detrimental impact that traditional gender stereotypes have on athletes and society comes at the expense of transgender athletes. For as long as transgender athletes have been given media attention, their participation in sports, and mere existence, has been criticized and diminished. In recent months, several conservative leaning states have passed laws to severely limit or ban transgender participation in sports. For example, Florida representatives introduced a bill that could potentially subject transgender students to “genital inspections” if concerns are raised about the appropriate sports team for the student to be playing on. These types of anti-trans bills are incredibly harmful and disturbing for trans youth, and can discourage them from participating in sports at all. Transgender athletes have long been subject of intense

and personal investigations into their private lives, which is described as “invasive, humiliating, and degrading procedures about one of the most personal subjects, one’s sex or gender” (Katz, 2017).

The deliberate exclusion of transgender athletes, specifically trans women, from participating in sports at all levels stems from both gender stereotypes and male superiority that are reinforced and promoted by many traditionalist or conservative leaning individuals and institutions. People who reject the existence and identity of transgender women do not see them as true women, but as biological males, and therefore, men. Therefore, because this person is not legitimately seen as a “woman”, trans athletes’ participation is viewed as the “end of women’s sports”. This is simply because of the gender the athlete was given at birth, which therefore, according to some, means they are inherently too strong, powerful, intelligent, or otherwise superior to women and therefore should not be allowed to compete with and against them.

As previously discussed, sports organizations, the media and other influential societal institutions are largely controlled by men. This leads to decision-making based on the premise of male superiority. An example of this can be displayed in transgender participation in sports. While most of the narratives surrounding trans athletes revolve around unfairness and potential danger towards women, studies show that “women, consistent with their gender identity, are more supportive than men of transgender athletes participating in sports” (Flores, 2020). This leads to the belief that narratives about women being dominated by trans athletes are not coming from most women, but rather from men who are attempting to preserve male superiority, female inferiority, and transgender exclusion. Another barrier to trans inclusion may arise from sports fans generally, due to the discovery that “sports fans’ are more likely to oppose transgender athletes’ participation, and female sports fans have views that resemble those of male sports

fans” (Flores, 2020). These findings may point to broader, more inclusive change in sports culture that must be achieved for transgender athletes to be welcomed into athletic competition in both men’s and women’s sports.

The perpetuation of male superiority and female inferiority, along with the exclusion and marginalization of transgender individuals, is clearly present within society, specifically within sports. Harmful stereotypes about men and women are taught to children before they are old enough to read or write, and these stereotypes and narratives follow them for the rest of their lives. From young, children are taught what activities and sports are acceptable for their gender, and this is reinforced at all levels, including at the Olympic Games. The reinforcement of these stereotypes can largely be attributed to the mainstream media and other societal institutions, including sports organizations, and the alliance of sports, media, and business. These traditional gender stereotypes not only continue cycles of oppression but can significantly impact the development, function, participation, and perception of athletes. Significant policy, institutional, and cultural changes are necessary to begin to reverse the harmful effects of gender stereotypes on athletes and society.

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