

Women in Sport: Gender Stereotypes in the Past and Present

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Introduction

Society expects males and females to adopt, believe in, and fulfill specific gender roles and stereotypes that have been established. In the western world, males are expected to be strong, independent, and athletic, whereas females are expected to be quiet, obedient, attractive nurturers. Society demands compliance to the enforced gender order. When these gender norms are violated, it is common for labels to be given (i.e. lesbian), questions to be asked (“Are you sure that is not a boy in the net?”), and people to be ridiculed (“a girl playing football – what a butch”). While “traditional” gender stereotypes have remained fairly constant over the past few centuries, they have also been challenged and confronted by many women and feminists. One specific area in which traditional gender stereotypes have been evaluated and analyzed, is sports and physical activities. Comparing traditional female gender stereotypes with those of the 21st century women in sports, it is clear that female athletes are beginning to establish themselves in the sports world. Their ability to challenge sexist barriers and restrictive notions about women's physical appearance, athletic ability, and participation in sports, is evident through their increased involvement in sports. However, it is also true that traditional female stereotypes continue to prevail. In this paper, female athletic stereotypes, women's sensitivity to gender issues in sports, recommendations for increasing female participation in sports, and personal experiences with gender and

sports, will be presented and discussed in relation to the impact female gender stereotypes have on girls and women who participate in traditional and non-traditional sports.

Traditional Female Stereotypes

People are bombarded with gender stereotypes from birth until death. Once a new baby's sex is revealed, they are dressed in either blue or pink, given gifts of trucks and soldiers or dolls and animals, and referred to as strong and alert or soft and delicate (Malszecki and Cavar, 2005, p.161; Zimmerman and Reaville, 1998, p.41). Actions and ideas such as these are only the first of many gender stereotypes that a new child will encounter throughout their lifetime. Males are expected to demonstrate certain characteristics and behaviours that are "masculine", while females are held accountable for being "feminine".

Traditionally, females have been expected to wear dresses, cook and clean, raise children, maintain a beautiful and delicate body, and remain passive, moral, and pure (Griffin, 1998; Sherrow, 1996; Woolum, 1998; Zimmerman and Reavill, 1998). Deemed to be the "weaker sex"- physically, mentally, and emotionally, women have been stereotyped as being feminine. Femininity, according to Sherrow (1996), is the issue of what is feminine in appearance and behaviour (i.e. being attractive, carefully groomed, submissive, nurturing women). When the principle of femininity is applied, females are expected to live up to these specific gender roles that are held by both men and women in mainstream society. This expectation of femininity often results in women being dissuaded from lifting weights, sweating, grunting, being aggressive, participating and

competing in sports and physical activities. The main reason for this is because society expects women to be “ladylike”, not demonstrate characteristics that are defined as being masculine. However, when women do “cross the line” and exhibit these so-called “manly traits”, their gender identity, sexual orientation, values, and social roles are often questioned (Griffin, 1998). Negative stigmas are often attached to athletic women, and consequently are used as a mechanism to control and limit women’s participation in sports.

Female Athletic Stereotypes: Past and Present

Sports and athletics have traditionally been restricted to and associated with males, masculinity, and the “manly domain”. In their works, Woolum (1998) and Sherrow (1996) trace this pattern and highlight how sports have, over time, evolved for women. They point out that for centuries, athletics, competition, strength, and team sportsmanship have been deemed appropriate traits within the “masculine domain”. As a result, many girls and women avoided taking part in sports. It was not until the mid 1800’s that women began to accompany their male relatives to specific sporting events (such as horse races and baseball games) and participate in mild exercise such as dancing and ice-skating. Then, after the Civil War in the late 1800’s, women were finally given the opportunity to participate in organized sports. Golf, archery, and croquet, were the first sports to gain acceptance among women because they did not involve physical contact or strain. Because perspiring, physical contact, and competition were not socially acceptable “ladylike” behaviours, women’s physical recreation activities and opportunities were limited. Furthermore, women were required to protect their

reproductive systems, and activities such as these, allowed women to “play safely” (Sherrow, 1996; Woolum, 1998).

Before the end of the 19th century, the invention of the bicycle began to revolutionize women and their participation in physical activities. It is during this time that women adopted a freer style of dress (they set aside their big hooped dresses in exchange for “bloomers” - wide pants that fit beneath a loose fitting dress) so they could enjoy cycling, and other activities such as horseback riding, gymnastics, and skating. This major change not only allowed women to consider pursuing athletics (i.e. participation in basketball, baseball, track and field), but it also liberated them in other areas such as attire, roles, and professions (Sherrow, 1996).

With these revolutionary changes, traditional gender stereotypes for females began to transform. The ideas that “girls don’t sweat”, “girls don’t run”, and “girls don’t get dirty”, began to be challenged and questioned in conjunction with being a female and being feminine. In the 1930’s, Mildred “Babe” Didrikson showed that women could successfully participate in competitive athletics (track and field, baseball, golf, swimming). After World War II women’s competitive collegiate sports began to emerge. And in the 1960 – 70’s, the women’s movement created new attitudes and demanded equal opportunities, funding, and facilities for women in sports. It was during this period that Billie Jean King defeated Bobby Riggs, a former men's champion, in a tennis match called the Battle of the Sexes. In the early 1980's this women’s tennis champion also admitted to a seven-year lesbian relationship. Her motivation for both of these significant actions was to prove that female athletes deserve respect (Rappoport, 2005, p.60). This

helped pave the way for Martina Navratilova (another American tennis champion), to become the first professional female athlete to publicly embrace her lesbian identity and actively participate in the lesbian and gay civil rights movement (Griffin, 1998, p.47).

More recently, increasing numbers of girls and women are participating in “traditional male sports”. Zimmerman and Reaville (1998) report that the number of girls and women participating in recreational and competitive football, boxing, and wrestling, has grown. They also state that female participation in extreme sports (or “X sports”) such as snowboarding, skateboarding, and inline skating, has also increased. One factor that may contribute to this trend toward increased female athletes in a wider range of sports is the idea that borders between the sexes seem to be less patrolled among generation X’ers. Another factor may be that a broader definition of femininity is beginning to evolve as a result of women challenging the “traditional” gender stereotypes that used to define them. A broader definition allows for greater latitude in women’s ability to claim their own definitions of “womanhood” and “femininity”. A third factor may be that the presence of females in these types of sports helps break a lot of male-oriented and prescribed stereotypes and barriers; thus giving girls and women the courage and esteem to participate in a wide range of sports and physical activities.

Women’s Sensitivity to Gender Issues in Sports

Society has been “trained” to think of sports in terms of “genderedness”. Men are encouraged and taught to participate in strenuous, aggressive, competitive team sports, while women are commonly steered toward individual aesthetically pleasing activities such as gymnastics, figure skating, and synchronized swimming (Schmalz and Kersetter,

2006). Dividing sports along masculine and feminine lines encourages and allows women to accept physical limits that have been placed on them (Birell, 1998 as cited in McClung and Blinde, 2002). Therefore, women can be reluctant to break free of traditional gender stereotypes.

Research shows that children have stigma consciousness of gender in sports and physical activities. In their study, Schmalz and Kerstette (2006) report that participation in sports perceived as gender specific was noticeably different between the two sexes. The authors had three significant findings. Firstly, they found that children curb their behaviours and sports participation to fit the social norms of appropriate behaviours based on gender (p. 550). Secondly, gender neutral sports (such as swimming, running, soccer, and bicycling) had the highest participation rates for boys and girls (p. 550). Thirdly, “*children as young as eight* are aware of and affected by gender stereotypes in sports and physical activities” (p. 551). These findings indicate that although females in sports have come a long way, stereotypes of gender still persist in sports and physical activities. Sex-typing of sports is still alive.

McClung and Blinde (2002) also demonstrate that gender stereotypes in sports persist. In their study, the authors explored the extent to which women intercollegiate athletes identify with and define gender issues. By exploring their experiences and perceptions in the sport context, study participants made three distinct identifications: 1) that their status in athletics is secondary to that of men, 2) that women’s sport “doesn’t really matter”, and 3) that societal perceptions of women athletes were stereotyped as being “lesbian”, “butch”, “tomboy”, or “masculine” (p. 121). The majority of the

participants also stated that: 1) they believe women athletes are beginning to be viewed more positively (especially as women athletes improve, develop to a higher level, and increase in number), 2) their participation in sports did challenge society's perception and acceptance of women in sport, and 3) they tended to dissociate themselves from feminism and gender issues because of the negative perceptions society associates with the terms. These findings also indicate that women's participation and experience in sports are influenced by gender stereotypes.

These two studies demonstrate that although society is more aware of gender stereotyping in sports and physical activities, traditional gender stereotypes for females persist. Female athletes have a subordinate position in the sports world, thereby perpetuating the idea that sports and athletics continue to be more appropriate in the masculine domain. This gender inequality can be paralleled to the patriarchal nature of both society and sport. However, it can also continue to be challenged by encouraging girls and women to be physically active, involved with sports at all levels (i.e. athlete, coach, official, volunteer), and willing to confront traditional female stereotypes.

Recommendations for Increasing Female Participation in Sports

As is evident through the exploration of female stereotypes and participation in sports and physical activities throughout the past few decades, girls and women are making headway in sports and the sports world. This is largely due to the efforts that are being made to improve the number of females involved in all levels of sport. As described by the Canadian Association for Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAWS, 2005), numerous sporting organizations in Canada are implementing strategies to recruit

females in the sports world. For example, the Canada Games Council has implemented gender equity in policies (p.7), the Canadian Amateur Wrestling Federation is providing equal funding to men and women on the national wrestling team (p. 8), the Canadian Canoe Association is providing a full range of events within all national competitions (p.9), and the Canadian Freestyle Ski Association is providing funding for girl's camps, only if a female coach is attending the camp as well (p.11). These strategies, along with the Canadian Interuniversity Sport increasing financial rewards for female athletes to equal that of males (p.12), and Hockey Canada hosting a free Fun Day for females to try the sport of hockey (p.20), demonstrate that steps are being taken to increase girl's and women's involvement and presence in sport. It is only through measures such as these, that females will continue to make headway in the world of sports.

Personal Experiences with Gender and Sports

Throughout my life I have been involved in gymnastics. I began participating in the sport at the age of 3, and completed my competitive career at the age of 18. I was a strong and powerful gymnast who did well on the vault and bars, but had more difficulties with the graceful dancing aspects of the balance beam and floor exercise. To me, my larger, muscular body frame stood out among most other gymnasts who were petite and graceful. However, this did not stop me from pursuing the sport I loved.

Before doing this paper, I never thought about gymnastics being a traditionally female sport. I knew Nadia Comaneci revolutionized the sport after the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. I knew it focuses on and highlights the aesthetic characteristics of females.

I also knew that gymnastics was mainly an individualized sport. But, what I have learned from doing this paper is that gymnastics is deemed a feminine sport largely because it lacks face-to-face competition and overt aggression. Although it combines strength and flexibility with grace and power, the aesthetic quality of the sport gender types it as being predominately feminine. However, with the amazing skills and strength male gymnasts demonstrate, I see that this sport sex-typing is beginning to change. Behaviour and participation in the sport seems to be more and more gender neutral, thereby encouraging both males and females to participate in gymnastics because it provides wonderful strength and flexibility fundamentals for girls and boys future sports involvement.

Conclusion

Historically, girls, women, and femininity have been defined in relation and contrast to men and masculinity. Sports and the sports world have been tied with the masculine domain, and there has been a legacy of bias against the female athlete. In the past few decades, this trend has been confronted and challenged. Girls and women have “tackled” narrow, negative, and limiting concepts and ideas that they should not participate in sports, sweat, show aggression, or compete, and begun to include physical strength and athletic prowess in the definition of femininity. As a result, traditional stereotypes for females have slowly been changing and evolving. This will likely continue once girls and women quit feeling that they need to choose between sports and femininity. While there is still a long way to go, females can obviously break free of traditional stereotypes.

Resources

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