

Gender and Sport

Fact Sheet

Distributed by Sociologists for Women in Society

Prepared by Megan Chawansky, Ph.D., Department of Education, University of Bath (UK)

Gender and Sport

“Throwing like a girl” or “playing like a man” are just two of the many ways that people can speak of gender and sport. Physical and psychological attributes that are considered masculine have always been a part of the dominant sport culture, and therefore the link between men and sport frequently becomes naturalized and seen as inevitable as opposed to culturally shaped and reflective of historical forces. The belief that sport is a male domain continues to create challenges for women who seek to take their place as athletes and coaches. For some women, their desire to take the field as athletes and coaches is further complicated by discrimination based on the way their gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion.

Though discussions of gender and sport often focus on the challenges faced by women and girls, increased opportunities, both in the US and around the world, continue to demonstrate the shifting understandings of gender and sport. Additionally the positive outcomes for girls and women who participate in sport can help to challenge deeply-held cultural beliefs about girls’ and women’s physical abilities and capacities. Feminist scholars of sport readily point out that successful athletes are not only those who are muscular, brave, and physically competent (supposed ‘masculine’ attributes) but also those who are flexible, graceful, and collaborative (supposed ‘feminine’ qualities).

Though men and women are active in a variety of formally organized and semi-organized physical activities (i.e., physical education, exercise, martial arts, recreation), this fact sheet will provide facts on the role of gender in terms of US high school and intercollegiate sport as well as professional, Olympic, and Paralympic high-performance sport.

Getting in the Game: Participation in Sport

- 55.1% of students in high schools across the US participated in interscholastic athletics during the 2009-10 school year. Of these 7,628,377 high school participants, 58% were boys (4,455,740) while 42% were girls (3,172,637).ⁱ
- In 2008-9, the total number of student-athletes who participated in National Intercollegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) championship sports was 421,169, with women making up a large percentage of this total. Compared to the 1981-82 academic year, the average NCAA school now has approximately 72 more female student-athletes and 3 more males. Yet, there have always been more student-athletes who are men than student-athletes who are women. On average, a member institution (college or university) enrolls 399 student-athletes, of which 228 are men and 171 are women.^{ii iii}
- Though the number of women participating in intercollegiate sports is nearly at an all-time high, the proportion of women coaching women’s teams is almost at an all-time low. In 1972, more than 90% of women’s intercollegiate teams were coached by women. In 2010, 42.6% of women’s teams are coached by women. The percentage of women who coach men’s teams is 2-3% and has remained at this rate since 1972.^{iv}

Gender and Policy: Title IX

- Title IX of the 1972 Educational Amendments is frequently highlighted as the law which made the biggest impact on US girls' and women's sporting opportunities, even though it encompasses all educational endeavors receiving federal funding. It reads: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."^v
- The "three-prong test" is typically used as a way to measure if schools and universities are adhering to Title IX in terms of participation. Institutions receiving federal funds are in compliance with Title IX if they can 1) demonstrate that men and women participate in athletics in numbers substantially proportional to their total respective enrollments (Proportionality) or 2) demonstrate that they have a history of increasing opportunities for the underrepresented sex (women), or 3) demonstrate that they are accommodating the interests and abilities of the underrepresented sex.^{vi}
- The Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) was passed by Congress in 1994, and requires athletic departments for colleges and universities (receiving federal funds) to make public information on number of participants, staffing, coaches' salaries, revenues and expenses. A searchable database can be found at: <http://ope.ed.gov/athletics/index.aspx>
- Though largely considered a success, there are concerns about the ability of Title IX to increase intercollegiate sporting opportunities for women of color and athletes from lower or working class backgrounds. For instance, though the overall number of intercollegiate women athletes of color has increased, nine of out 10 black women who play college sports compete either in basketball or track.^{vii}

Gender and Media Coverage

- Messner and Cooky's (2010) recent study, "Gender in Televised Sport News and Highlight Shows," 1989-2009, found the following:^{viii}
 - ESPN's nationally - televised program, SportsCenter, devoted only 1.4% of its airtime to coverage of women's sports, a decline in their coverage of women's sports compared with 1999 (2.2%) and 2004 (2.1%).
 - Men's sports received 96.3% of the airtime, women's sports, 1.6%, and gender neutral topics, 2.1%. This is a significant decline in the coverage of women's sports since 2004, when 6.3% of the airtime was devoted to women's sports, and the lowest proportion ever recorded in this study.
 - 72% of all airtime (main and ticker coverage) focused on men's basketball, football, and baseball, even when they were not in season.

Gender and The Olympics and Paralympics

- The London 2012 Olympics will feature 26 sports, and women's boxing will be offered for the first time since 1904, when it was featured as a demonstration sport.^{ix x}
- The 2012 Paralympics will begin approximately three weeks after the London Olympics, will use most of the same facilities, and will include 20 sports on the program.^{xi} Participation rates for Paralympic female athletes still lags behind men. At the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games, 34.5% of those participating were female.^{xii} Further, there was no live television coverage of the 2008 Beijing Paralympics in the US, and there is limited academic engagement with this area as well.^{xiii xiv}
- In 2004, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) implemented a policy which allowed transsexual athletes to compete at the Olympic Games in Athens. The athlete(s) must meet a

variety of conditions, and will be assessed for on a case-by-case basis. This policy is referred to as the Stockholm Consensus on Sex Reassignment in Sports.^{xv}

- Though the IOC discontinued mandatory sex-testing of women athletes at the 2000 Olympic Games, the IOC does allow ‘suspicion based testing’ to occur when the gender identity of an athlete is called into question.^{xvi}

Gender and International Issues in Sport

- The International Working Group on Women and Sport unites scholars and activists in the field every four years to discuss issues pertinent to gender and sport. The working group first met in Brighton, UK in 1994, and will meet in Helsinki, Finland in 2014.^{xvii}
- Women’s Sport International (WSI) also connects research and activism on girls and women in sport in its capacity as an international advocacy organization.^{xviii}
- Sport is increasingly being used as a tool of international development, and in post-conflict settings. Programs engaging girls exist in many parts of Africa, the Middle East, South America, and the former Yugoslavia.^{xix}

Gender and Sport Teaching Resources: Suggested Films^{xx}

- *A Hero for Daisy*. 1999. 40 min. [DVD] Distributed by 50 Eggs Productions. This documentary tells the story of Chris Ernst, Olympic athlete and Title IX activist, and her quest to ensure Title IX compliance while competing as a member of the Yale women’s rowing team in 1976.
- *Girl Wrestler*. 2004. 53 min. [DVD] Distributed by Women Make Movies. A documentary that follows 13-year old Tara Neal on her quest to compete in the sport of wrestling despite Texas state regulations which prevent her from competing with boys once she enters high school.
- *Murderball*. 2005. 88 minutes. [DVD] Distributed by THINKFilm. This film provides an opportunity to examine intersections of masculinity, race, (dis-) ability, and sexuality as it follows men who participate in the sport of wheelchair rugby, also known as ‘murderball.’^{xxi}
- *Playing Unfair: The Media Image of the Female Athlete*. 2002. 30 minutes. [DVD] Distributed by the Media Education Foundation. This DVD provides a thorough examination of the larger historical and cultural context pertaining to media representations of female athletes. It also addresses the increased choice/impetus for female athletes to pose nude or in a sexually provocative manners.
- *100% Woman*. 2004. 59 minutes. [DVD] Distributed by Films Media Group. This documentary follows Michelle Dumaresq, a competitive downhill mountain biker, as she tries to find space and her place in the international women’s mountain biking community as an athlete who is transgendered. This is a compelling production that allows for discussions around issues of access, gender, and women’s sports.

Gender and Sport Teaching Resources: Suggested Websites

- **Black Women in Sport Foundation:** non-profit website dedicated to involving Black girls and women in all facets of sport (<http://www.blackwomeninsport.org>)
- **Muslim Women in Sport blog:** a blog maintained by Sertaç Sehlkoglul Karakas which contains a variety of news stories and clips on Muslim women athletes from around the world. (<http://muslimwomeninsports.blogspot.com/>)

- **The National Association for Girls and Women in Sport (NAGWS):** contains various resources on the experiences of girls and women in sport (<http://www.aahperd.org/nagws/>)
- **The Tucker Center:** University of Minnesota's center for research on girls and women in sport and physical activity (<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/tuckercenter/default.asp>)
- **Title IX blog:** features academic and popular commentary on Title IX (<http://title-ix.blogspot.com/>)
- **Women's Sports Foundation:** excellent resource for research and activities emerging from a non-profit dedicated to advancing the lives of girls and women through sport and physical activity (<http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/>)
- **Women Win:** global organization interested in helping to empower girls and women through sports (<http://www.womenwin.org/>)

i Howard, Bruce and John Gillis. 2010. "High School Sports Participation tops 7.6 million, Sets Record." Retrieved September 13, 2010 (<http://www.nfhs.org/content.aspx?id=4208>).

ii Within their statistical data, the NCAA separates those student athletes who participate in sports which compete for NCAA championships from those that do not (i.e., archery, synchronized swimming).

iii Zgonc, Erin. 2010. "NCAA® Sports Sponsorship and Participation Rates Report, 1981-82 — 2008-09." Retrieved September 13, 2010 (<http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/PR2010.pdf>).

iv Acosta, R. Vivian and Linda Jean Carpenter. 2010. "Women in Intercollegiate Sport: A longitudinal, national study, thirty three year update, 1977-2010." Retrieved September 13, 2010 (<http://www.acostacarpenter.org/2010pdf%20combined%20final.pdf>).

v Acosta, R. Vivian and Linda Jean Carpenter. n.d. "Title IX in a nutshell." Retrieved September 13, 2010 (<http://www.acostacarpenter.org/Title%20IX%20in%20a%20nutshell.pdf>).

vi Lopiano, D. 2005. "Title IX Q & A." Retrieved September 16, 2010 (<http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/Content/Articles/Issues/Title%20IX/T/Title%20IX%20Q%20%20A.aspx>).

vii Sander, L. 2010. "Narrowing the Gap." Retrieved September 14, 2010 (<http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Narrowing-the-Gap/26411/>). See also, "NCAA Student-Athlete Ethnicity Report 1999-2000 – 2008-9." Available at <http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/SAEREP10.pdf>.

viii Messner, Michael A. & Cheryl Cooky. 2010. "Gender in Televised Sport News and Highlight Shows, 1989-2009." Retrieved September 14, 2010 (<http://www.usc.edu/dept/cfr/html/documents/tvsports.pdf>).

ix "Boxing." n.d. Retrieved September 13, 2010 (<http://www.london2012.com/games/olympic-sports/boxing.php>).

x "Olympic Sports." n.d. Retrieved September 14, 2010 (<http://www.london2012.com/games/olympic-sports/index.php>).

xi "Paralympic Sports." n.d. Retrieved September 14, 2010 (<http://www.london2012.com/games/paralympic/index.php>).

xii Smith, Maureen and Alison M. Wrynn. 2009. "Women in the 2000, 2004, and 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Games: An Analysis of Participation, Leadership and Media Opportunities." Retrieved September 14, 2010 (<http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/~media/Files/Research%20Reports/2008Olympicreport%202010.pdf>).

xiii Smith, Maureen and Alison M. Wrynn. 2009. "Women in the 2000, 2004, and 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Games: An Analysis of Participation, Leadership and Media Opportunities." Retrieved September 14, 2010 (<http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/~media/Files/Research%20Reports/2008Olympicreport%202010.pdf>).

xiv For an exception, see Schell, Lee Ann and Margaret Carlisle Duncan. 1999. "A content analysis of CBS's coverage of the 1996 Paralympic Games." *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* 16: 27-47.

xv Cavanagh, Shelia.L. and Heather Sykes. 2006. "Transsexual Bodies at the Olympics: The International Committee's Policy on Transsexual Athletes at the 2004 Athens Summer Games." *Body & Society* 12(8): 75-102.

xvi Pilgrim et al., 2002-3: 511. Cited in Cavanagh, Shelia L. and Heather Sykes. 2006.

xvii "About IWG." n.d. Retrieved September 16, 2010 (<http://www.iwg-gti.org/>).

xviii "About WSI." (n.d.). Retrieved November 15, 2010, from <http://www.sportsbiz.bz/womensportinternational/about/index.htm>

xix "Sport and Gender." n.d. Retrieved September 16, 2010 (http://www.sportanddev.org/learnmore/sport_and_gender/).

xx The HBO documentary, *Dare to Compete* (1999), provides an excellent historical overview of women and gender in sport. However it proves nearly impossible to obtain a copy of this important production. See <http://www.hboarchives.com/documentaries/> for more information.

xxi See Michael Gard and Hayley Fitzgerald. 2008. "Tackling Murderball: Masculinity, Disability and the Big Screen." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 2(2): 126-141.