

Sporting women in the media

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Introduction

The aim of this free course, *Sporting women in the media*, is to explore whether gender discrimination and gender inequalities exist in sport, and, if they do, to investigate some of the implications.

There might be some biological differences which means that males and females don't compete against each other in all sports, but these do not explain or justify why there are such disparities of career opportunities and rewards for women in sport.

Indeed, sport could be argued to have one of the largest fields of unequal pay between the genders. While the Football Association chiefs say they are attempting to level the playing field for women's equal pay (see this [BBC article](#) for more details), accusations continue to circulate about the huge disparity of a gender pay gap in other sporting arenas, such as commentating (such as the [example of John McEnroe and Martina Navratilova](#)) which serves to value male voices over women's.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [E314 Exploring contemporary issues in sport and exercise](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the key contemporary issues surrounding gender in sport
- draw on evidence (not just statistics) to understand gender equality in sport
- understand gender discrimination in sport via traditional perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

1 'You run like a girl!'

You will begin by examining the commonly used insult: 'You run like a girl!' Why is that a derogatory comment when we see highly competent female athletes such as British record holder Dina Asher-Smith (Figure 1) competing on the track? Do you think that derogatory comments like this discriminate against women? What impact do you think comments like this have on young girls?



Figure 1 Dina Asher-Smith

To get a flavour of why gender is a contemporary issue in sport, and why it is important to study it, complete Activity 1.

Activity 1 Why study gender in sport?

Allow 20 minutes

Listen to the audio below in which Helen Owton speaks to Katie Barak. As you listen, reflect on why gender is a contemporary issue and why it is of relevance to you.

Please note that any reference to 'course' in this audio refer to the Open University course E314, rather than this OpenLearn course.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Comment

Gender is an issue for women and men to consider, study and become passionate about in sport. Katie discusses the importance of intersectionality, which is the idea that everyone is composed of multiple intersecting identities. Race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity and ability are all part of someone's identity and they are not experienced exclusively.

2 Gender discrimination in sport

You will start your exploration of gender discrimination in sport by reflecting on your knowledge of male and female athletes, in the activity below.

Activity 2 Guess who

Allow 15 minutes

Without using the internet, see if you can match the following athletes with their sports.

Men

Usain Bolt
Wayne Rooney
Andy Murray
Tom Daley
Bradley Wiggins
David Haye
Chris Robshaw
Louis Smith
Pete Reed
Alastair Cook

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Athletics
Football
Tennis
Diving/swimming
Cycling
Boxing
Rugby
Gymnastics
Rowing
Cricket

Women

Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce
Steph Houghton
Laura Robson
Rebecca Adlington
Victoria Pendleton

Marianne Marston

Katie McLean

Beth Tweddle

Katherine Grainger

Charlotte Edwards

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Athletics

Football

Tennis

Diving/swimming

Cycling

Boxing

Rugby

Gymnastics

Rowing

Cricket

How many did you match correctly and why do you think this was (e.g. consider the type of sport, exposure to female/male sport)?

Discussion

It is likely that you knew more of the male athletes than the female athletes. There are several reasons why this might be the case, but one reason could be due to gender differences in media coverage. Research has been carried out by Women in Sport (formerly the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation), for example – the leading charity dedicated to transforming sport for the benefit of every woman and girl in the UK – and their report, *Women in Sport* (2015, p. 3), produced the following figures on women's media coverage:

- Women's sport makes up 7% of all sports media coverage in the UK.

It gets:

- just over 10% of televised sports coverage
- 2% of national newspaper sports coverage
- 5% of radio sports coverage
- 4% of online sports coverage.

Additionally, women's sport received just 0.4% of reported UK sponsorship deals in sport between 2011 and 2013 (Women in Sport, 2015). This imbalance in sponsorship gives further exposure to men's sport. You will now continue to investigate the gender imbalance in sport, and its potential implications for how women's sports are valued.

Activity 2 highlights some of the gender imbalance evident in media sports coverage. This gender imbalance could be thought of as a form of discrimination. Gender discrimination is defined as 'a situation in which someone is treated less well because of their sex'

(Cambridge Dictionary Online). Under the UK Equal Opportunity Act (2010), which replaced the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), it is against the law to discriminate against, bully or treat someone unfairly in sport because of a personal characteristic (e.g. race, sex or disability). For example, a sports team not selecting someone to coach their team because that person is a woman, or a sports club refusing to provide the same range of sporting equipment to both a women's and a men's football team would be classed as discrimination. Although the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably, there are subtle differences between them. These are explained in the following [key terms and definitions](#).

Having now examined an example of gender discrimination, in the next activity you will reflect on your own experiences of gender discrimination.

Activity 3 Sharing experiences

Allow 30 minutes

Think about whether you have experienced any form of gender discrimination connected to your involvement in sport or exercise. Remember that both women and men can be discriminated against.

Write down your experiences in note form, using the 'prompt' questions below as a guide.

- What was the situation?
- How did it make you feel?
- Why do you think it occurred?
- How do you think this could have been prevented?

If you can't think of any personal experiences, think about why you haven't experienced any discrimination and/or think of an incident you might have witnessed. Also, consider whether you might have been an unintentional perpetrator of discrimination.

Reflect on your experiences and consider whether you feel that gender discrimination is a significant issue in sport and exercise.

Discussion

Reflecting on your own experiences is a good way to construct a deeper and more meaningful way of understanding and articulating knowledge. You may have spoken to others about their own experiences and this may have encouraged you to consider different perspectives. Sometimes, the dynamic process of reflection can also challenge existing theoretical perspectives. An awareness of gender inequality can provide you with a base from which to challenge discrimination as a whole (e.g. on the basis of disability, race or sexuality).

3 Inequalities in sport

In the previous section you reflected on your own experiences of gender discrimination. Now, let's look at how some of these inequalities are evident in top-level sport by examining global sporting events. You will start by examining gender at the Olympic Games.

Activity 4 Have we come a long way?

Allow 1 hour

At the first modern Olympics in Athens in 1896, no women were allowed to compete. In this activity you will examine the progress that has been made in women's sport since that time.

1. Look at Table 1, which shows the gender balance at each of the Olympic Games up to 2012. What pattern do you notice since 1908 in relation to the three London Olympics held, and does this type of analysis give us the full picture of gender in sport?
2. Read the journal article [‘Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: have we really “come a long way, baby”?’ by Janet Fink](#). As you read, answer the following questions:
 - c. What is the purpose of this article?
 - d. What are the key points arising from the article?
 - e. What is the purpose of a review paper?

Table 1 Male and female athletes in the modern summer Olympic Games, 1896–2012

Year	Place	Countries represented	Male athletes	Female athletes	Percentage female
1896	Athens	14	241	0	0.0
1900	Paris	24	975	22	2.2
1904	St Louis	12	645	6	0.9
1908	London	22	1971	37	1.8
1912	Stockholm	28	2359	48	2.0
1916	Olympics scheduled for Berlin cancelled (First World War)				
1920	Antwerp	29	2561	63	2.5
1924	Paris	44	2954	135	4.4
1928	Amsterdam	46	2606	277	9.6
1932	Los Angeles	37	1206	126	9.5
1936	Berlin	49	3632	331	8.4
1940	Olympics scheduled for Tokyo cancelled (Second World War)				

1944	Olympics cancelled (Second World War)				
1948	London	59	3714	390	9.5
1952	Helsinki	69	4436	519	10.5
1956	Melbourne	72	2938	376	11.3
1960	Rome	83	4727	611	11.4
1964	Tokyo	93	4473	678	13.2
1968	Mexico City	112	4735	781	14.2
1972	Munich	122	6075	1059	14.8
1976	Montreal	92	4824	1260	20.7
1980	Moscow	81	4064	1115	21.5
1984	Los Angeles	140	5263	1566	22.9
1988	Seoul	159	6197	2194	26.1
1992	Barcelona	169	6652	2704	28.9
1996	Atlanta	197	6806	3512	34.0
2000	Sydney	199	6582	4069	38.2
2004	Athens	201	6452	4329	40.9
2008	Beijing	204	6450	4637	41.8
2012	London	205	6068	4835	44.3

(Coakley and Pike, 2009, p. 241)

Discussion

1. If you compare the percentages of female competitors at the three London Olympics, you can see that there has been a substantial improvement, with an increase from 1.8% in 1908 to 9.5% in 1948 and to 44.3% in 2012. This suggests that great strides towards gender equality have been taken, but does this show us the full picture? The data from the 2012 Olympics suggests that we have almost reached gender equality. However, the recognisability of women in sport is still less than that of men, so perhaps gender equality is further away than the participation data would suggest.
2.
 - c. The purpose of the article is to raise awareness of the unequal representation of women in sport. This shows that participation data (such as that shown in Table 1) does not give us the full picture.
 - d. Fink notes that while there is an increasing number of women in sport, there is unequal media coverage. Furthermore, she analyses how female athletes are represented in the media. For example, she uses the term 'gender marking' when suggesting that male athletes and men's sport are seen as 'the norm', rendering women and women's sporting competition as secondary. Additionally, she highlights 'infantilising', which is when female athletes who are highly accomplished are referred to as 'girls' or 'young ladies'. Skilled male athletes are rarely referred to as 'boys'. She argues that the media focus on sex appeal, femininity and female athletes' roles as wives, girlfriends and mothers instead of focusing on their accomplishments.

- e. The purpose of a review paper is to provide a concise and coherent account of what is known in the particular field. The aim is to position the research into context, identifying strengths and weaknesses, questioning the design of the existing research and suggesting future areas of research to investigate.

Although participation in the Olympics has edged closer to gender equality in terms of participation rates, evidence suggests that gender discrimination does still occur in sport (Fink, 2014). In order to explore this further you will examine the experience of women's football.

Activity 5 Gender discrimination in football

Allow 30 minutes

Watch the video below which shows clips taken from the BBC programme *Sexism in Football*, aired in 2012, and complete the questions/tasks that follow.

1. In the video, there are quite a few references to women's experiences of gender discrimination. Select an example and consider how sexism relates to gender discrimination.
2. How can you link an example back to Fink's (2014) paper in the previous activity?

Video content is not available in this format.

Sexism in Football?

Comment

1. Sadly, many examples of sexism were highlighted in the clip. Two notable examples are:
 - b. Andy Gray and Richard Keys making sexist assumptions about a female football referee links to gender discrimination because the woman in question is being treated less well because of her sex.

- c. Manchester United fans chanting 'Get your tits out' at Gabby Logan. Again, this is an act of gender discrimination because the woman is being sexualised and treated less well because of her sex. Sir Bobby Charlton stands up towards the end of the game and pulls his top up to expose himself to the fans. This gesture could be viewed as an act of defiance and a way to highlight the different treatment that men and women receive in sport.
4. Fink's (2014) work enables you to understand the differences in the way women and men are treated in sport, as well as providing understandings for why this is.

Hopefully Activities 4 and 5 have helped you to understand that equality means more than just equal numbers of women and men in sport.

In the next section you will investigate the idea of gender ideologies in sport. Gender ideologies are a set of beliefs typical of how men and women are expected to behave and be treated. Key to these beliefs is the culture of masculinity, which you will also explore in the next section.

4 Masculinity and the culture of sport

The culture of masculinity embedded in sport is key to understanding gender discrimination.

First, it's important to define 'masculinity'. The term 'masculinity' refers to the social and biological qualities associated with being masculine or 'manly', and many sports can be an arena in which these characteristics are played out. For example, sport enables men and women to express aggression, competitiveness, speed, strength and skill – traits commonly associated with masculinity.

In sport, typically tough 'masculine' slogans are emphasised (e.g. 'No pain no gain'). For men, sport can be a masculinising experience, which exposes them to an environment highlighting these masculine ideals through sporting experiences that emphasise a 'mentally tough' attitude.

The cultures surrounding sport need to be understood in order to appreciate women's and men's behaviours in sport. Consider whether you think men 'own' masculinity and whether you feel it's acceptable for a woman to show 'masculine' traits, such as a 'win-at-all-costs' mentality. This goes against traditional views of femininity, which are not necessarily positively associated with sport.

What is known as hegemonic masculinity is the most valued form of masculinity and is associated with being white, heterosexual, privileged/middle class and able-bodied. In modern society masculine and feminine traits are not considered to be exclusive to males and females respectively, but how does hegemonic masculinity lead to gender discrimination?

5 Femininity and sport

You came across the term 'hegemonic' in the previous section and it is defined in the introduction to this study topic. Hegemonic femininity, often described as a 'hetero-sexy' image, is the ideology/stereotype women are pressured to conform to (e.g. white, able-bodied, slim, toned, privileged/middle class, heterosexual) (Krane, 2001). During the lead-up to the 2012 London Olympics the Women's Boxing Association argued that women boxers should walk into the ring wearing skirts (Woodward, 2014). This suggestion has been viewed as a presentation of hegemonic femininity and a way to distance women boxers from behaviour (e.g. boxing/punching) perceived as masculine (Krane, 2001). Do you think that making women boxers wear skirts is a form of gender discrimination? Many female boxers and observers did think this was discriminatory and protested. As a result the boxers wore shorts in the Olympics.

Some argue that, for women, having strength, muscularity and athletic skill is an asset, but these qualities can also be perceived as unfeminine and much less valued, and are sometimes denigrated. You may find it useful to reflect on how strength, muscularity and athletic skill are regarded in any sport and fitness environments that you use.

Often women who engage in sport and exercise challenge existing perceptions and expectations about femininity and gender. These women can sometimes be seen as 'outsiders' because they fall outside of what is expected of women. You will explore this further in the next section.

6 Gender outlaws

In the previous sections you explored hegemonic masculinity and femininity and how men and women who challenge these through sport can be considered as outsiders, or what Shilling and Bunsell (2009) describe as 'outlaws'. One of the most notable examples of women being referred to as 'outlaws' is female bodybuilders. In the next activity you will explore how female bodybuilders challenge the perceived gender norm.

Activity 6 Female bodybuilders

Allow 10 minutes



Figure 2 Gender outlaws: (a) Sadik Hadzovic who won the IFBB Arnold Sports Festival Champion in 2015; (b) Margie Martin who won the IFBB Wings of Strength PBW Tampa Pro in 2015.

Look at the photos above of a male and a female bodybuilder. Note your immediate reaction to these two photos.

Reflect on why you reacted the way you did to the images and consider whether your reaction was influenced by stereotypical perceptions of femininity and masculinity. Were your reactions indicative of gender discrimination?

Discussion

Numerous authors (e.g. Roussel et al., 2003; Shilling and Bunsell, 2009, 2014) have suggested that female bodybuilders challenge the gender norm by seeking a muscular body, which is generally viewed as more acceptable for men. Do you believe that this is true (think about your immediate reaction)? Think about whether and how different your responses were to the two images and whether you think this was because of gender.

Shilling and Bunsell (2009) refer to female bodybuilders as 'gender outlaws' because they break gender norms, both aesthetically (appearance) and kinaesthetically

(touch), of what it means to be a woman. When these photos have been shown to students in the past there has been a much stronger reaction to the appearance of the female bodybuilder than to the male bodybuilder. I hear students respond with comments such as 'Urgh, gross!' or 'It's just wrong for women to look that muscular' or 'I don't think women or men should be that muscular'.

The activity you have just completed, along with the rest of this course, will have encouraged you to reflect on gender perceptions within society and how these impact on sport, with a particular focus on the question 'Does gender discrimination exist in sport?' The ability to evaluate the evidence before reaching an answer to a question like this is a very important skill.

Conclusion

This free course, *Sporting women in the media*, set out to help you investigate whether sport is a level playing field for women and men, and to consider whether gender discrimination occurs in sport and exercise.

The main learning points for the course are:

- Gender in sport is a contemporary issue that is relevant to all those involved in sport.
- There is evidence to suggest that women's sport receives far less media coverage than men's sport.
- The proportion of women competing in the Olympics has increased; however, equal numbers are not the only measure of gender equality in sport.
- Traditional perceptions of masculinity and femininity could lead to gender discrimination in sport.
- Hegemonic femininity and hegemonic masculinity have an impact on those who challenge what are seen to be 'ideal' images of women and men or who cross traditional gender norms. For example, males who participate in traditionally female sports or females who participate in traditionally male sports are sometimes considered deviant.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [E314 Exploring contemporary issues in sport and exercise](#).

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