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Social precursors affecting women participation in sports: A systematic literature review

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Abstract

The paper aims to find out the social factors affecting women participation in sports. For the said purpose Author has gone through the studies around the world and tries to focus on those studies, which are closely linked with female participation in sports. Society expects males and females to adopt, believe in, and fulfil specific gender roles and stereotypes that have been established. 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. One specific area in which traditional gender stereotypes have been evaluated and analysed, 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.

Keywords: Sports participation, gender stereotype.

Introduction

Society expects males and females to adopt, believe in, and fulfil specific gender roles and stereotypes that have been established. 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, 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 analysed, 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

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and animals, and referred to as strong and alert or soft and delicate (Malszecki and Cavar, 2005; Zimmerman and Reaville, 1998.). 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 sexl- 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 —ladylikel, not demonstrate characteristics that are defined as being masculine. However, when women do —cross the linel and exhibit these so called —manly traitsl, their gender identity, sexual orientation, values, and social roles are often 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 sexl- 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, and 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 —ladylikel, not demonstrate characteristics that are defined as being masculine. However, when women do —cross the linel and exhibit these so called —manly traitsl, 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 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.

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 —bloomersl - 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 sweatl, —girls don't runl, and —girls don't get dirtyl, began to be challenged and questioned in conjunction with being a female and being feminine. In the 1930's, Mildred —Babel 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.). 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.).

More recently, increasing numbers of girls and women are participating in —traditional male sportsl. 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 sportsl) 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 —traditionall gender stereotypes that used to define them. A broader definition allows for greater latitude in women's ability to claim their own definitions of —womanhoodl and —femininityl. 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 ability to claim their own definitions of —womanhoodl and —femininityl. 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 —genderednessl. 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. Secondly, gender neutral sports (such as swimming, running, soccer, and bicycling) had the highest participation rates for boys and girls. Thirdly, —children as young as eight are aware of and affected by gender stereotypes in sports and physical activities. 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, —tomboyl, 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

Conclusion

In the review of related literature it is noticeable that in recent years the level and numbers of women increased globally in sports participation at grass root level to 52 international competitions. The review of literature also shows that there were so many myths and baseless ideas against women participation in all the times. However, during the time norms and values of society also gone through the process of change that caused the positive change in traditional mind set of people. Nevertheless, the whole process can not seen less than women's struggle „on playground for a playground “from ancient to modern times in East or West, in developed to developing countries and from modern to backward feudal societies. It can be seen everywhere as a battleground and a mirror, a stage for gender wars and a reflection of the changing status of women for a natural right to play, still it is going on because there are so many country and societies who prevent women from sports. We cannot rule out existence of a bit of flexibility now days in our society but it is also true that still there are sufficient evidences of hierarchy, class, discrimination on the basis of race, gender and ethnicity viz-a-

viz women's family, parents education, economy which adversely affect women's participation. Even then sports participation is growing rapidly as observed in last few years but women's participation is not satisfactory and proportionately equal to the men sports. Along with these vertically common issues there are region and society specific issues too exists regarding women participation. In Haryana it seems that the fruits of social development and advancement could not available equally across the section of gender and caste. Though, as a society we gained a lot but isn't it half-truth and matter of concern, if we know that the maximum number of women participants belonged to a particular section or class of the society. The reasons should be examined for the sake of betterment of society and country.

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