

1 *The Moving towards Justice Series*
2 A project of NAGWS’ Inclusion & Social Justice Committee
3

4 **Putting One’s “Game Face” On: Media Representations of Female Athletes**

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10 **About the Series:** The purpose of this series is to add to the conversation and dialogues occurring
11 in sport; thus, the National Association of Girls & Women in Sport has created this series to not
12 only inform our members but also the public about the various aspects of sport and physical
13 activity that display the diversity and inclusive nature of women’s sport. With the ultimate goal to
14 raise awareness, we hope this addition to the conversation will indirectly lead to creating social
15 justice and change in not only women’s sport but sport as a whole.
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21

22 **Abstract:** Media representation of female athletes is fraught with sexism, racism,
23 homophobia, ageism, and perfectionism (Schultz, 2005; Kane, 1993; Krane, 2001). How
24 can female athletes, their parents, coaches, administrators, schools, and communities
25 resist such representations? The authors first describe how certain female athlete images
26 are oppressed while others are privileged, particularly highlighting the intersectionality of
27 gender, race, and femininity. Next, ten social justice and resistance strategies are offered
28 framed by what Baumgardner and Richards (2000) call *autokeonony* (e.g., “self in
29 community”) or seeing social justice and activism not as a choice but as a *link* between
30 self and community that promotes balance between both of them.
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32 **Key Words:** media, gender, female athletes, femininity, activism

1 Running head: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

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1 Putting One’s “Game Face” On: Media Representations of Female Athletes

2 *Introduction*

3 It has been suggested by sport studies scholars that media representation of female
4 athletes is fraught with many social injustices. These include sexism, racism,
5 homophobia, ageism, and perfectionism (Schultz, 2005; Kane, 1993year; Krane, 2001).
6 Therefore, the focus of this position paper is on addressing how parents, coaches,
7 administrators, schools, communities, and even female athletes themselves can resist
8 such representations. We first define oppression and privilege and describe how these
9 terms relate to female athlete media images and “performing femininity”. Next, we
10 highlight the intersectionality of gender, race, and femininity. We conclude by offering
11 socially just resistance strategies focusing on what Baumgardner and Richards (2000) call
12 *autokeonomy* (e.g., “self in community”), where social justice and activism is not seen as
13 a choice but as a *link* that promotes balance between self and community.

14 *Oppression and Privilege*

15 Expanding on Fisher, Butryn, & Roper (2003) and Fisher, Roper, & Butryn
16 (2009), we find it helpful to think of privilege as part of an interlocking system which
17 also includes oppression and resistance. Following Heldke and O’Connor (2004), this
18 means that:

- 19 (a) oppression is most powerfully defined as the systematic and unfair
20 marginalization of some members of a society; (b) privilege is the flipside of
21 oppression, in that if some members are marginalized, then other members are
22 given an unfair advantage; and (c) oppression (and privilege) can be resisted
23 against. (Fisher, Roper, & Butryn, 2009, p.6)

1 It is the last part of Fisher, Roper, & Butryn’s (2009) quote which is most vital for this
2 position paper. We believe as they do that the most effective way to create change in an
3 oppressive system [like sport] is to educate people about how “...social change requires
4 collective action working *against* existing systems” (Heldke & O’Connor, 2004, p.vii, as
5 cited in Fisher, Roper, & Butryn, p.6-7).

6 What do education and social change have to do with female athletes and media
7 representations? Utilizing a critical sensibility regarding oppression, privilege and
8 resistance related to female athletes and media representation could help us examine the
9 ways that female athlete images have been mediated. In other words, we could critically
10 examine *which* female athletes get coverage and *which* do not, *which* female athlete
11 images are privileged and *which* are oppressed, and *which* women’s sports are more
12 likely to get coverage and *which are not*. This conscious, political stance allows us to
13 examine how female athletes’ images and identities are developed depending upon
14 location in matrices of power rather than being unchangeable or fixed. As Fisher, Roper,
15 & Butryn (2009) noted, images and identities, therefore:

16 ...are developed in a web of power dynamics and relationships that advantage
17 some selves while disadvantaging others. This places emphasis on...questions
18 which also address who is *resisting* oppression in sport, who is *resisting* privilege
19 (if any), in what *ways* and at what *times*, if athletes are even *aware* of their own
20 oppression and privilege, why/why not/when, who it serves if they are *not* aware,
21 and if they...are interested in *taking action* against their own oppression and
22 privilege. (Fisher, Roper, & Butryn, 2009, p.7)

1 We believe, therefore, that we must purposefully interrogate the institution of sport—
 2 particularly media representation and coverage of female athletes—for its embedded
 3 policies/politics/contributions to female athlete exploitation while also exploring
 4 how/when such representations have influenced female athlete (e.g., racialized, gendered,
 5 classed) identities. To begin, we examine how the media disregards female athlete power
 6 and athletic competence in favor of a feminine “game face” and how female athletes
 7 internalize this practice themselves.

8 *“Putting On Your Game Face”: Performing Femininity As A Female Athlete*

9 The community of sport has long been an influential site for the production and
 10 reproduction of masculinity, heterosexuality and hegemonic gender practices due to its
 11 cultural force and economic prominence (Dunning, 1999). Sport is a cultural site where
 12 marketers can reproduce idealized forms of heterosexuality and femininity (Dworkin &
 13 Messner, 1999; Hall, 1988; Messner, 1988). While female athletes are excelling in the
 14 long, male-dominated arena of sport they can still find themselves “performing feminine
 15 identity” (Butler, 1990) given the limited hegemonic forms and resources offered in this
 16 context (Mean & Kassing, 2008). Hegemonic femininity relates to idealized forms of
 17 femininity in a given culture.

18 One way to perform hegemonic femininity is to apply make-up prior to
 19 competition (Krane, 2004). This is to ensure that female athletes’ femininities remain
 20 visible while they are displaying “masculine” characteristics (e.g., sweating and battling
 21 in the athletic arena). As Krane (2004) suggests, “Femininity is incongruous with sport,
 22 so these athletes also construct a feminine appearance to be perceived as ‘normal’
 23 women” (p. 316). Femininity is conveyed through markers such as ribbons in ponytails,

1 and makeup and jewelry worn during competition (Admas, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005).
 2 In this way, confirming femininity reassures both men and other women of the
 3 heterosexuality of female athletes. Long burdened with the lesbian stereotype (Christian,
 4 2004; Pelak, 2002), female athletes who fear being labeled “lesbian” can use such
 5 feminine markers to prove that they are not lesbian (Roth & Basow, 2004). Thus, all
 6 female athletes, regardless of their sexuality, receive messages indicating that they should
 7 have a feminine appearance so as to assure they are “real women” (Fallon & Jome, 2007).

8 The paradoxical linking of female athletic empowerment and traditional female
 9 (hetero) sexual appeal utilized via the media illustrates this practice (Christopherson et al.,
 10 2002). In this way, female athletes are forced to promote idealized feminine identities
 11 (Caudwell, 1999) or risk exclusion from the sport membership category. Female athlete
 12 images, therefore, are contradictory for they demonstrate both resistance to and
 13 acceptance of hegemonic forms (Foucault, 1972; van Dijk, 1993). Furthermore, female
 14 athletes can find themselves subjected to gate-keeping practices, especially where
 15 definitions and boundaries of femininity are challenged in sports like basketball and
 16 rugby (Cameron, 1998; Mean, 2001). These paradoxical sporting images and practices
 17 ensure that gender remains the primary categorization of female athletes, privileging the
 18 reproduction of images of feminine females who play sport rather than who are athletes
 19 first and foremost (Mean & Kassing, 2008).

20 When female athletes do not conform to a feminine image, they are often seen as
 21 “lesbian” (Hall, 1993), resulting in derogation, exclusion, and invisibility (Griffin, 1992).
 22 Women athletes can then begin to “police” their own identities and femininity. This fear
 23 of not having enough femininity or of becoming “masculinized” is one explanation for

1 putting on makeup and primping for the games; as Evans (2006) suggests, “...not only
 2 does performance of a feminine identity involve looking ‘right’, but [it] also [means]
 3 being a competent sportswoman” (p. 554). Often, female athletes engage in behaviors
 4 meant to overemphasize their femininity because getting that look results in profitable
 5 behaviors (Wolf, 1991). In other words, one way to gain more media attention is to limit
 6 and deemphasize one’s physical power and capabilities by associating female athleticism
 7 with female sex appeal (Roth & Basow, 2004). Makeup and femininity—a focus on sex
 8 appeal—helps viewers forget the incredible amount of strength, power and athleticism
 9 female athletes have.

10 As Krane (2004) states, “Female athletes learn what behaviors and appearances
 11 are privileged, and femininity is ‘performed’ to gain social acceptance and status” (p.
 12 316). Female athletes exert considerable effort to ensure that they are perceived as
 13 heterosexual and feminine. Putting on one’s “game face” by wearing makeup and styling
 14 one’s hair prior to a sporting event is a way to remind spectators that one is an athlete but
 15 is still a woman. Since feminine women in sport reap additional benefits such as positive
 16 media attention, fan adoration, and sponsorship (Krane, 2004; Krane, 2001), female
 17 athletes often feel the pressure to put on their “game face” for athletic participation.
 18 Regrettably, femininity performance often obscures a more natural game face of intensity,
 19 power, determination, and athleticism. However, performing feminine identity is only
 20 one of the multiple forms of oppression female athletes experience. The intersectionality
 21 of race and gender and the consequent discrimination minority women in sport live with
 22 daily also must be explored.

23

1 *The Intersectionality of Race And Gender in Performing Femininity*

2 The performance of femininity as it relates to sport media representation is also
3 made more complex by the intersectionality of gender and race. Despite growing bodies
4 of literature produced in women’s, race, media, and sport studies, the *intersectional* lives
5 and experiences of women—particularly women of color in sport—have largely been
6 ignored (Douglas, 2003). This lack of critical study has turned the complex and
7 contradictory nature of most women’s multiple oppressions into a marginalized and
8 oversimplified vision of gender and race acting independently to influence women’s
9 sporting experiences (Douglas, 2003). As explained by Mary Jo Kane (1996), “It is clear
10 that one of the most powerful transmitters of cultural knowledge – the visual image – is
11 actively shaping, reinforcing, and creating oppressive and demeaning attitudes toward
12 female athleticism” (p. 28), especially as relates to female athletes’ intersectional
13 identities. Furthermore, sport media as a site of cultural *struggle* has also largely been
14 ignored.

15 Thus, it is critical that sport media be examined as a potential vanguard for the
16 creation, dissemination, and enforcement of stereotypically gendered and racialized
17 messages regarding female athletes. As we know, both within and outside of sport,
18 “Gender, race, class, and sexual orientation intersect and shape everyday interactions”
19 (Lamphere, Ragone, & Zavella, 1997, p. 1). Therefore, the multi-layered nature of
20 intersectional lives requires a non-linear approach to its exploration. Since gender itself
21 is a fluid and a “...multi-layered system of practices and relations that operates at all
22 levels of the social world” (Wharton, 2005, p.69), as female educators, we must actively
23 help female athletes deconstruct incomplete images of themselves put out by the media.

1 Sport as an institution also “...helps to create ideas about male and female bodies
 2 and their physical capabilities or limitations” (Wharton, 2005, p.66). For example, as
 3 Buysee and Embser-Herbert (2004) discovered in their investigation of intercollegiate
 4 media guide covers for both male and female athletes, female athletes are rarely
 5 represented in ways which display them as “competent, elite athletes” (p. 79). One such
 6 example of this finding came from a women’s basketball team which included a diversity
 7 of female athletes. The team was featured in formal gowns complete with make-up and
 8 styled hair (Buysse & Embser-Herbet, 2004). As the authors noted, “...the message
 9 communicated is not about basketball. There is no evidence anywhere on the cover that
 10 suggests that this is a basketball team. Rather, it appears that they might be candidates
 11 for homecoming queen” (Buysse & Embser-Herbet, 2004, p. 79). Within this example
 12 we find that female bodies are being represented in ways that restrict their athletic
 13 competence while at the same time enhancing their sexuality and hegemonic feminine
 14 appeal. This sort of portrayal sends a clear message to the viewer that the women are
 15 only marginal athletes and are first and foremost, beautiful women. The identity drawn
 16 from this described photo is one of “heterosexy” (Krane, 2001) charm, not competent,
 17 serious athlete.

18 Owen, Stein, and Vande Berg (2007) suggest that there may be multiple reasons
 19 why female athletes of color engage in the performance of hegemonic femininity for the
 20 media. For these women, the “memory of oppression is vivid, palpable, and hurtful” (p.
 21 3) and the media plays a key role in the maintenance of such ideals within the world of
 22 sport (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004). For example, African American female athletes
 23 are often featured in either extreme or hypersexualized postures which play on the racial

1 stereotypes of the “Black athlete” as “animalistic” and/or “superhuman”; these images
2 also focus on gendered stereotypes of female athletes as being women first and athletes
3 second (Douglas, 2003; Withycombe, 2007). In fact, “...media and sport construct and
4 utilize gender [and arguably by extension, racial] stereotypes to maintain gender [and
5 racial] inequality” (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004, p. 67). That is why “...it is
6 important to examine the ways in which these two powerful institutions interact with one
7 another” (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004, p. 67).

8 However, many of today’s young women have no lived experience with the
9 oppressions faced by women of the past. It has even been suggested that they live in the
10 safety of a collective amnesia regarding the past (Owen, Stein, Vande Berg, 2007)¹. Yet,
11 the general trend within mainstream media is to use gender in a way which both
12 consciously and unconsciously trivializes the athletic efforts of female athletes (Douglas,
13 2003). While this approach has also impacted African American female athletes, they are
14 additionally marginalized by stereotypical representations of their race (Douglas, 2003).
15 Often, African American women’s athletic efforts are not only belittled through the
16 sexualization of their bodies, but they are also made victims of exaggerated physicality
17 used to reinforce their contradiction when compared to dominant notions of white
18 hegemonic femininity (Douglas, 2003). The use of visual media to keep African
19 American female athletes on the fringes of two already marginalized groups puts them in
20 the unique and precarious position of facing double discrimination.

21 In addition to double discrimination, this “post-feminist” idea is reinforced in the
22 media where we are often told that the battle over race and gender has been won. By co-

¹ Recent research also suggests that Division I African American female athletes report no lived experience with the oppressions faced by women in previous generations (Withycombe, 2009).

1 opting what were once symbols of iconic importance to the struggles for racial and
2 gender equality, the media makes passé the concept of gender and/or race imbalance. As
3 Owen et al. (2007) suggest, previous social justice struggles related to fair “...labor
4 practice, childcare, domestic violence, and political representation are erased [in the
5 media] as foundational concerns of feminism [as they run] contrary to established
6 economic interests, entrenched labor practices, and the entitlements of wealth” (Owen,
7 Stein, Vande Berg, 2007, p. 4).

8 In this context, we believe that such media representational practices become acts
9 of willful ignorance. By disregarding the substance of women’s own personal
10 experiences within society, the media – and female athletes themselves - are able to
11 eliminate any notion that inequality still exists. As previously stated, this means we
12 create for ourselves a sort of “cultural amnesia” surrounding negative socio-cultural
13 experiences (Owen, Stein, Vande Berg, 2007). The result, however, is a “fracturing of
14 consciousness that arises from this embodiment...[which] leads women to hide in and
15 merge with hegemonic discourses of gender by adopting feminine drag, or living as
16 outliers, relegated to the margins of political and economic channels of change” (Owen,
17 Stein, Vande Berg, 2007, p. 3).

18 Therefore, by helping ourselves and other female athletes recognize and name this
19 “cultural amnesia” we discover “...that the mass media play a significant role in the
20 transmission of dominant cultural values, especially in the perpetuation of images of
21 gender [and race] difference and gender [and racial] inequality” (Buisse & Embser-
22 Herbert, 2004, p. 66). In fact, the media often “operates as a surveillance mechanism,
23 monitoring, coding, and recording virtually every element of [our] daily lives” (Douglas,

1 2003). The lack of realistic media portrayals of female athletes in addition to the lack of
 2 coverage for prominent female athletes of color has significantly influenced the way in
 3 which the American public thinks about us as a group. In other words, the general trend
 4 within mainstream [sport] media is to use gender *and* race in ways which both
 5 consciously and unconsciously trivialize the athletic efforts of all female athletes
 6 (Douglas, 2003). Due to the trivializations and inequalities faced by white and minority
 7 women alike, it is our responsibility to be advocates for all women in sport. Thus, we
 8 conclude with social justice and resistance strategies we can utilize as agents of change in
 9 for female athletes.

10 *Social Justice and Resistance Strategies*

11 So, how can we educate female athletes, parents, teachers, coaches, administrators
 12 and communities about social injustices related to the media that are faced by female
 13 athletes? And, how can we work collectively to resist such injustices? First, we
 14 believe— like Baumgardner and Richards (2000)—that social justice and activism is not
 15 a choice but a vital *link* between ourselves and our communities. Such a link creates
 16 balance in both our lives and the life of a community. This is the idea of *autokeonomy or*
 17 “self in community.” In order to forge such links, it is helpful to examine Baumgardner
 18 and Richards’ (2000) list of the ten most common forms of activism and then tailor them
 19 specifically to dismantle oppressive media images of female athletes. These are: (a)
 20 activist trainings; (b) boycotts; (c) canvassing; (d) petitions; (e) protests; (f) sit-ins; (g)
 21 speak-outs; (h) street theatre; (i) tabling; and (j) teach-ins.

22 *Activist trainings.* This involves “...taking an interested body of people and
 23 giving them tools with which to organize or protest” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000,

1 p.221). In the sport context, this could include educating female athletes about the
2 history of women’s sports, the feminist movement, feminist theories that are inclusive of
3 women of color, the intersectionality of female athlete identities (especially as it relates to
4 race and sexual orientation), and critical sport studies scholarship with a focus on
5 deconstructing media images and reconstructing more realistic and powerful ones.

6 *Boycotts.* This is when “...regular people [use] consumer power to protest the
7 practices of a large corporation, which would typically ignore individual comments”
8 (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p.222). So, for example, what would happen if readers
9 of/subscribers to *Sports Illustrated* consciously decided to boycott the magazine until the
10 “swimsuit issue” was either dropped all together or included realistic images of actual
11 female athletes?

12 *Canvassing.* Canvassing is “...literally going door-to-door providing information
13 and consciousness-raising” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p.222). In one’s
14 community, this might mean that parents of female athletes at the local college visit the
15 homes of Athletic Department staff with actual media guides to show them the ways that
16 female athletes are portrayed differently than male athletes at the same school.

17 *Petitions.* This involves gathering “...a list of signatures in support of a certain
18 issue or person” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p.222). What if members from a
19 female collegiate basketball team solicited signatures of fans, community members, and
20 students via a petition requesting that the team captains (regardless of race or “sexual
21 appeal”) were featured on the cover of the team’s media guides?

22 *Protests.* This usually means that a group of people gather “...to disrupt the
23 status quo or to erode support for an issue or institution” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000,

1 p.222). Imagine if rookie members of the LPGA refused to attend portions of an
2 orientation session that involved lessons on fashion and makeup application.

3 *Sit-ins.* According to Baumgardner and Richards (2000), sit-ins are when
4 “...activists take over spaces that need to be changed and just stay there—sitting tight—
5 until demands are met, consciousness is raised, or the media catch on” (p.223). What
6 would happen if an entire collegiate softball team appeared at their yearly team photo
7 session makeup-less and with their hair unstyled? Perhaps the Athletic Director would
8 view the session photos and then set up a second photo session to capture more
9 “feminine” pictures. At that time, the team could come to the second photo “shoot” with
10 no makeup on and unstyled hair, refusing to change their “look” for the team photo.

11 *Speak-outs.* Speak-outs refer to public meetings or protests “...that feature
12 personal testimonials, such as often happens at a Take Back the Night march”
13 (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p.223). Female athletes from all collegiate teams at the
14 same school could organize an evening where they talk about their experiences being
15 portrayed negatively in the media.

16 *Street theater.* Although this activist strategy might seem dramatic, “...using
17 guerrilla art and acting to protest publicly” can be very powerful (Baumgardner &
18 Richards, 2000, p.223). Imagine a professor of Sport Management, Sport Psychology or
19 Sport Sociology requiring an undergraduate class to complete a creative critique project
20 that would illustrate the sexism/racism/homophobia and oppression female athletes face.
21 The projects could include poems, art or acting and students could be encouraged to share
22 their work at the annual college colloquium.

1 *Tabling.* Tabling is one of the easiest ways to raise public consciousness about a
2 particular issue such as media representations. It involves “...public education
3 (pamphlets, handouts, or a person fielding questions at a table), usually taking place at
4 some established event or space...” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p.224). Several
5 pamphlets containing sexist/racist/homophobic media representations of female athletes
6 versus non-oppressive images could be copied and distributed by students at a local
7 women’s athletic event.

8 *Teach-ins.* Teach-ins have been used for the last forty-plus years in the United
9 States and involve “...an informal crash course in a current and complicated political
10 issue, making up for the gaps or bias in the media coverage or one’s education”
11 (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p.224). Graduate student instructors who teach
12 Physical Education activity courses could devote at least one lecture to media
13 representations of female athletes.

14 *Conclusions*

15 The expression of hegemonic femininity and heteronormative characteristics and
16 behavior appears to be an integral part of being a female athlete in today’s society.
17 Despite the well-known benefits of athletic participation for girls and women it is clear
18 their experiences are tempered by unrealistic and oppressive representations of what it
19 means to be both a female and an athlete. The media serves as a catalyst for the
20 dissemination of stereotypes regarding female athleticism which is further compounded
21 by issues of intersectionality such as race, class, and sexual orientation. The most
22 successful way to encourage changes in this area is to link our lives at a grassroots level
23 with those in the communities around us. By way of “autokeonomy” the keys to resisting

1 the multiple oppressions faced by female athletes can be found. Social justice must be
2 more than a slogan—it must permeate the very foundations and structures of our
3 communities.

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