

The Moving towards Justice Series

A project of NAGWS' Inclusion & Social Justice Committee

Women in Sport: Playing by the Unwritten Rules

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

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Abstract: This paper addresses the impact of heterosexism and homonegativism on the sporting environment for female participants. Addressing historical and cultural factors influencing sports, it explores how women attempt to negotiate a contentious participatory environment, focusing particularly on one of Griffin's (1998) aspects of the "apologetic response" (p. 66) – the "promotion of a feminine, heterosexual image" (p.66), and concludes with suggestions for positive, social change.

Key Words: sexism, heterosexism, "feminine apologetic"

Sport is a powerful entity in American society. For many, it demands our attention and engulfs us by its captivating presence. Whether one is a fan, a participant, or both, it can become an all-consuming passion for those who love it. Athletes and coaches spend countless hours devoted to perfecting their craft and fans devote endless time and energy to its consumption. However, America's love affair with sport is not always as positive as we may think. While sport can be an engaging and captivating activity, it can also be a negative environment for those who do not "play by the rules." Whereas many advocate for sport to serve as a training ground for participants to learn social values like hard work, teamwork, persistence, and perseverance, unfortunately sporting culture does not create a welcoming environment for all of its participants. Many "—isms" (i.e. racism (Coakley, 2009; Griffin, 2001), sexism, heterosexism (Griffin, 1998, 2001; Krane & Barber, 2005; Coakley, 2009) and classism (Coakley, 2009)) still permeate the sporting environment, dramatically impacting the experiences for sports participants.

This paper will address the impact of heterosexism and homonegativism on the sporting environment for female participants. It will focus on historical and cultural factors influencing sports, explore how women attempt to negotiate a contentious participatory environment, focusing particularly on one of Griffin's (1998) aspects of the "apologetic response" (p. 66)—the "promotion of a feminine, heterosexual image" (p. 66), and finally, conclude with suggestions for positive change.

Sport Culture

Throughout history sport has been encouraged as a training ground for boys to learn how to become men and productive members of society (Coakley, 2009). Engagement in this activity was thought to teach young men the same social values we perceive can be garnered from involvement in sport today, like hard work and persistence (Coakley, 2009).

The locker rooms and playing fields of sport are laboratories in which we develop and practice values. Every practice and every game presents the opportunity to make ethical choices, from the adherence to the letter and spirit of rules to the way we treat teammates and opponents. By including sport as an important extracurricular activity in our educational institutions, we acknowledge the important possibilities of its use as a value laboratory (King, 2002 in Griffin, Perrotti, Priest & Muska, 2002, p. v).

As time passed, with it came the emergence of girls and women's participation. Great growth has been seen since the passage of Title IX in 1972. "Parents increasingly [saw] sports participation as a good thing for their daughters, and opportunities for girls to participate in youth soccer, softball, baseball, basketball, and other sports have expanded dramatically" (Messner, 2002, p. xvii). Because of increased parental support, in addition to other factors, today females are participating in high school and college sports at the highest levels ever (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008).

While this growth has been met with excitement and appreciation for positive change by advocates of women's sports, it has also been met with contention from others who are less supportive of this participatory shift. To illustrate this point, Messner (2002) chronicles an exchange between sports commentators on the *Tom Leykis Show*, highlighting their discussion about their perceived lack of worth in women's sport participation and spectatorship. He then provides an interpretation of the exchange, writing:

Sports are something that *men* do. Women do not do sports. And when it turns out that women *do* do sports, well, they are not real women. In short either women athletes are too soft and feminine to be worth considering as serious athletes..., or they are butch lesbians who are worthy only of derision (Messner, 2002, p. 108).

Unfortunately, the above-mentioned sentiments expressed on this particular radio program are chronicled throughout various texts (Coakley, 2009; Griffin, 1998) and articles (Krane & Barber, 2005; Griffin, 2001) as a consistent theme in sporting culture.

A Man's Game?

Socially "... men and women still are expected to conform to traditional expectations of masculinity and femininity" (Griffin, 2001, p. 279). Socially imposed gender roles delineate that being male is equated with being masculine and being female is equated with being feminine. Sport is seen as a masculine activity. Therefore, many believe that women and sport do not match (Coakley, 2009). An additional influence impacting this discussion is race. Griffin denotes that:

Many traditional gender expectations are also race-based. Dominant cultural expectations for femininity assume whiteness. Consequently standards of beauty and other aspects of feminine appearance or behavior, while difficult for many white women to conform to, are even more difficult for women of color to achieve (2001, p. 280).

Arguably, while it is easier for females to push gender boundaries than it is for males (i.e. it is deemed more socially acceptable for a girl to be called a “tomboy” than it is for a boy to be called a “sissy”) (Coakley, 2009) those socially imposed and heavily policed boundaries can only be pushed so far before one is considered to be “out of bounds” (Coakley, 2009, p. 260). One way used to force women to stay “in bounds” is to use the label of “lesbian” (Griffin, 1998).

No Apology Needed Ladies

The lesbian label is used as a form of intimidation and as a social-control mechanism (Griffin, 1998).

Because the lesbian stereotypes are severe (evil, sick, abnormal, predatory), many women do not want to be associated with them. Consequently, calling women in sport lesbians is often an effective way to make women feel defensive or timid about expressing their athleticism. In this way, heterosexism in women’s sport affects all women, regardless, of their sexual orientation (Griffin, 2001, p. 281).

The impact of this fear of backlash is detailed in the works of Pat Griffin (1998) who describes the “apologetic response” (p. 66) displayed by many female sport participants. In addition, Krane and Barber (2005) provide a rich description of the

experiences of lesbian coaches, indicating some consistency in their interview responses with Griffin's (1998) explanations.

Griffin (1998) posits that female athletes may attempt to deal with the negative implications attached to the label of lesbian by engaging in the "apologetic response" (p. 66). While she presents multiple examples of how females may choose to engage in this response, including "1) silence, 2) denial, 3) promotion of a feminine, heterosexual image, 4) promotion of a heterosexy image, 5) search for heterosexual-only space, 6) attacks on lesbians, 7) preference for male coaches, and 8) acknowledgement but disassociation from lesbians" (Griffin, 1998, p. 66), this paper will focus specifically on one aspect, the "promotion of a feminine, heterosexual image" (p. 66).

Griffin (1998) posits that female athletes may go to great lengths to appear heterosexual by showcasing their "heterosexual credentials" (p. 68). Evidence of such credentials could be displayed by women who purposefully choose to create a physical appearance consistent with feminine ideals. For example, they may wear make up and/or a dress, and/or have long hair. In addition, their credentials could be validated by the appearance, or reality, of engaging in heterosexual relationships. They may date men, consistently be seen with men, or talk about romantic relationships with men. Furthermore, women may also express desire to have children (Griffin, 1998). Use of these strategies can be employed by all women, regardless of their sexual orientation, for fear of the backlash associated with the label of lesbian. Griffin argues, "We assume that if she is heterosexual, she would be placing evidence of this on public display" (1998, p. 71).

The Price of Participation

The current culture of sport, which maintains a heterosexist and homonegative atmosphere “...affects all women: it creates fears, pressures women to conform to traditional gender roles, and silences and makes invisible the lesbians who manage, coach, and play sports” (Coakley, 2009, p. 246). Krane and Barber’s (2005) research echoes these sentiments using results from interviews with lesbian coaches to explain their experiences in this limiting environment. Interview responses indicated pressures to conform to the expectations of a hostile climate that encourages silence about their identity, engaging in acts to cover their identity, and avoidance with association of women perceived to be lesbian all in an attempt to “...not make waves” (Krane & Barber, 2005, p. 72) and to avoid possible discrimination and/or a loss of job.

The unfortunate reality of this participatory environment is that women are not allowed to participate freely. Many argue that participation in sport should be supported and encouraged because of the perceived link between participation and involvement with positive outcomes. However, as researchers have shown (Griffin, 1998, 2001; Krane & Barber, 2005) based upon the current structure of sport, female athletes, especially lesbian athletes, are not given a fair shot at striving for success and enjoyment.

Suggestions for Positive Change

In order for improvement to occur, a more inclusive environment must be adopted and encouraged (Roper & Hollaran, 2007). If we do not commit to enacting change now, “...we will have generations of coaches and athletes who perpetuate

prejudice and disrespect” (King, 2002, in Griffin, Perrotti, Priest & Muska, 2002, p. v). Griffin (1998) indicates that everyone must be willing examine the origins of our thoughts and fears and the impact they may have on our actions.

As with most forms of social injustice, heterosexism and homophobia are not sustained merely by virulent ‘homophobes’ who intentionally discriminate against lesbians. These injustices are also perpetuated by the larger number of well-intentioned people who do not understand how their fears about lesbians in sport form the basis for an acceptance of an athletic climate that forces a significant number of participants to live in fear of their colleagues’ or teammates’ prejudice and the institutional climate that supports that prejudice (Griffin, 1998, p. 89).

King (2002, in Griffin et al., 2002) appeals to the importance of recognizing and remembering the diversity in individuals and in the importance of judging people not on who they are but rather how they choose to live. She argues that “...honesty, integrity, the effort we put forth in practice and during the game, the way we treat others, and how we help others who are not as fortunate” (p. v) are what we should value.

As a participant—athlete, coach, administrator, parent/guardian, and/or fan— in sporting culture, embrace the ideal of making ethical choices and work to enact change to make sports a safe and positive place for everyone to play. Ways to accomplish this include using resources already available to help you navigate the challenging questions that may arise, like the *It Takes A Team! Education Kit*

published by the Women's Sports Foundation (Griffin et al., 2002). Engage in productive, positive conversation with others who harbor stereotypical thoughts but seek greater acceptance and understanding. Commit to educating yourself and others. Be an active listener and provide correct information in a non-confrontational manner to help battle damaging and incorrect stereotypes. Consistently provide a supportive and safe environment. Furthermore, critically explore the origins of your own thoughts and actions and be honest with yourself to encourage your own personal growth (Griffin et al., 2002). Finally, remember that you are not alone in your efforts to enact positive, social change. Sport is a powerful entity in American society. However, it should not be an arena where limitations are created and imposed that influence how, or if, someone can participate. All people should be allowed to participate freely as they are, not how others believe they should be.

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