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Sexism in Sports Media

Introduction: Sexism is the prejudice or discrimination based on sex, especially, discrimination against women (“Sexism”). This term is present in all aspects of society, and although often forgotten by many, lingers in everyday life. The sports world is no exception, where it has shown to be a pressing issue. Sexism finds a way to be expressed in a variety of forms in sports culture. Some of these forms are blatant while others are subliminal. But for all these forms, discrimination of women takes shape through mass media, which is constantly influencing our attitudes and what we perceive as normal. This study will focus on sexism as it pertains to the media, including but not limited to the following topics: gender roles and stereotypes, media representations of female athletes, exposure of women's sports, and sexist language. The objective of analyzing these issues is to develop a better understanding of sexism in the sports world. With this understanding, conclusions can be made on how the public perceives sexism as it pertains to sports media and society in general. Recommendations will also be made on how the sports world can be more conscious and work to reform these issues appropriately.

Case & Recommendations: One way that the media portrays it's thoughts and opinions is through the language they use. The way the media speaks is important to consider, because when we consume it, it influences how people choose to speak. It also interacts with morals we

might have. Many figures in the sports media world people look up to. Therefore, the language some of these broadcasters use dictate what terms or phrases are acceptable in society. This is important to be aware of because there is a clear, unfortunate difference, in the way males vs. females are spoken about in broadcasting. Sexism as a whole and gender roles are not separate from sports media. In broadcasting, male athletes are described as athletes plain and simple. Women, however, are described as female, and athletes second (Smith). The baggage of bringing sex into sports in this aspect discredits women of their accomplishments and hard work. A standard is set up where no matter what you achieve, no matter how outstanding of a display you provide, your sex will ultimately overshadow it. Using a large database, one study analyzed mass media throughout the internet and news articles for language describing female athletes. Much of the language used was describing what females were wearing and how they looked opposed to commentary on performance. Michelle Jenke is an Australian 100m hurdler. She was described by the United Kingdom tabloid newspaper, The Sun, as follows: “Jenneke certainly isn’t shy about showing off her body” and using terms like “fabulous” to describe her outfit (Bates). For males, sex isn’t even a thought when describing accomplishments. To put it in perspective, there is a similar article by USA Today on Christian Coleman, an American sprinter. The article shows a close up image of Coleman in his tight uniform with his muscles exposed. “Coleman beat his personal best by 0.03 seconds to become the sixth-fastest man in history” is one of the first lines under the image (“Christian Coleman Wins 100 Meter Dash”). The picture has more than enough sexual content for commentary from journalists but solely focuses on his accomplishments. Not once is anything regarding sex mentioned.

Similarly, another way that language differs between sexes is that female athletes are categorized by age to emphasize sex. The same study mentioned before found that female athletes are often referred to as “girls” instead of women which is usually the correct term (Bates). The reason for the term “girls” is because calling a female a girl implies that they are of young age. Being youthful and being attractive has a direct correlation especially for females in modern society. On the other hand, the term “boy” is sometimes used incorrectly on purpose to describe men as well. Yet, the way it is used does not really promote sexualization. It is often used to emasculate in a comparison between two athletes. For example, players will be called a ‘little boy’ (in the NFL and NBA especially) to infer that they are weaker, smaller, or a less impressive specimen compared to their opponent.

Not only is there clear difference in the language used between sexes but there is also a clear difference in association of sex overall. Sex as a whole seems to be less prevalent when discussing male vs. female athletes. These instances of language reinforce female stereotypes and contribute to a sexist culture in sports media. This sexist culture takes away from accurate reporting. It is even more so a notable issue in sports media because it hinders progression of the industry. Journalists and Broadcasters choose to report on sexual connotations instead of actual content and at the same time discourage female athletes by downplaying achievements. This issue also brings up speculation that perhaps sexist language, among other things, could discourage women from participating in sports. One important aspect of journalism is abstaining from bias at times. As soon as sexist language is used that bias becomes apparent. Journalists should focus on applying consistency in language regardless of sex. If this was applied even

slightly, the content that would be coming out would be more accurate, and the public would become more educated on women sports and therefore reduce sexism in their lives.

Another issue that makes involvement in athletics less appealing to women is their lack of coverage. This lack of coverage is often refuted with the argument that there is a lack of interest from the public in women's sports. Which makes sense upon first glance. But, it seems to be more than that. There is a relationship between the marketing of games/leagues and the interest or ratings that they receive. An article from Public Radio International supports the idea that without coverage, interest cannot be maximized. Stating that “when a WNBA game gets punted to an obscure cable channel and has a low production value, it sends a message about priorities to audiences” (Serazio). Hype up games and providing suspense before the actual action attracts viewers. Therefore, not providing that coverage, puts the public interest for women's sports at a severe disadvantage. This lack of coverage is very drastic and is without exception for networks and industry leaders. ESPN only dedicates about 2% of its total coverage to women's sports. One study published in 2015 that tracked women's sports for a quarter decade concluded that local news stations coverage is 3% for women's sports. It also offered the idea that not only is there a lack of coverage but it's suggested that the coverage provided sometimes is a lower quality than of men's. “Frequently absent from such women's sports stories were the commentators' voluminous vocal inflections, exclamatory descriptions of athletic successes, and heartfelt laments of failures that saturate the commentary in men's coverage” (Cooky et al.). In terms of this finding it promotes the stigma that women's sports are less exciting opposed to men's even though they are playing the same sports. It is also not beneficial to whoever is airing the games because they are not maximizing the potential of what is being broadcasted.

The lack of coverage vs. lack of interest debate is an effort to pinpoint where the root of sexism is in sports culture. Is the sexism from the fans? Or is the sexism started by news outlets and networks? Whichever the case is, it's apparent that networks do not see a moral duty to promote even a small increase for women's sports coverage. The lack of promotion keeps sports sexism static. It also shows no call for activism in the industry, at least for sexism. With no reform from networks like ESPN, public opinion will never have the opportunity to be challenged either. There is potential to increase the ratings of women's sports with just a fraction of the coverage that men's sports receives. With more exposure, public opinion might change as well as help abolish other aspects of sexism in sports media. The potential to change the industry seems to be there for the taking but nobody, let alone an industry leader wants to be the first to make the leap. Someone or some entity needs to lead by example. Sexism is so ingrained in the sports world that it will have to take a movement and recognition of the issue by a sizable portion of the industry and public. If a large network were to make a change in the percentage of televised women's sports it would perhaps be the basis for starting to weed out sexism by acting as the beginning of a movement.

Not only do female athletes lack exposure, but women who work in the sports media industry are also misrepresented. The amount of diversity in terms of sex is very little. The field is dominated by males as broadcasters, editors, and anchors are 90% men. Out of this small percentage of female representatives very few have broken barriers and reached the stardom status that many men have. In an age that sexism should be phasing out, only three years ago was the first time a woman called a men's march madness game (Serazio). The fact of the matter is that women are presented with an additional set of obstacles opposed to men in sports.

Journalism is the embodiment of this. It is so difficult because credentials that are possessed do not translate the same way if you are a woman. A man will always be chosen over a woman with the same credentials just because that's how the industry operates. But in journalism it goes past discrimination all the way to the normalization of harassment. A study from the international women's media foundation found that nearly two out of three women journalists experienced abuse or harassment (“Study: almost $\frac{2}{3}$ woman journalists experienced abuse”). The opposition to making it big in sports media for women is systematic, and deep rooted. Even if women break through and make a name for themselves in the industry, sexism is still prevalent. Maybe not from peers, but they make themselves vulnerable to more public oppression. Social media has been the breeding ground for scrutiny of many female figures in the sports media industry. Tina Cervasio, a sports reporter for Fox says she still gets tweets to “go back in the kitchen”(Serazio). Examples like these are what demonstrate the persistence of sexism in the sports media industry, no matter how far you get, it is always present for women.

Sexism in the sports media industry is bad for its potential because it limits it's possibilities. Sexism is not a secret in the industry. There is without doubt that there are women who are beyond qualified to make strides in the industry, who will think twice about chasing this profession. Beyond sexism being morally wrong, that's how it is detrimental to the industry. There are certainties that propel and diminish potential. Sexism diminishes potential media in all aspects. Media outlets should not only work to reform themselves regarding acceptance of women, but encourage the bravery that it takes to be a woman in a male dominant profession.

Conclusion: Sexism is a deep rooted issue all throughout sports media. There is no equality in any sense in terms of reporting, coverage, or representation. It takes away from the accuracy of journalism and discourages participation from female athletes and female media professionals. But more so it limits the potential advancement of sports journalism as an industry. There is no collaboration by anyone for any reform of these hindering issues. Sexism in sports media has become so advanced that many of the issues regarding sexism play off of each other. Yet, that makes sexism a little easier to tackle as a problem. There needs to be a call for action to reform the way that women are perceived in sports media. Not by one reporter or one journalist but from a whole media outlet or network. A small effort will go a long way. That goes for any issue. If coverage for women's sports increases, or more female journalists start to blossom in a valuable capacity, that message will spread. As one aspect of sexism in sports media is solved, others will follow. Once that has advanced, the public's attitude towards sexism in sports media will change as well, creating a more progressive sports culture.

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