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**Gender Specific Rules in Sport are based on an Outdated Idea  
of Femininity**

Carlie Minichino

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This work is meant to point out the disservice done to female athletes when they play the same sports as their male counterparts but are made to play with different rules. The differences are based on an outdated idea of femininity, as female docility and no longer apply today (if it ever did). This attitude, along with rules of sport, needs to be changed.

This paper analyzes this social ideology from three different angles. First, it examines how the female is viewed in society and how this gaze can be changed as presented in the academic writings. Then there is an analysis focusing on ice hockey where the only rule difference between the men's and women's game is the ability to check. Finally, it looks at sport in general, explaining why this is an important arena to be fighting for equality and how changing the rules of the women's game to equal the men's will accomplish this.

## **A Historical look at the Sex/Gender Distinction**

The sex/gender distinction is a continental feminist view well accepted throughout feminist philosophy. No one is born into a certain gender, rather a woman become such when she taught her role ("Simone de Beauvoir ("). This is done in a variety of ways such as, but certainly not limited to, body image, clothing options, acceptable toys and proper "manners". Sex, on the other hand is seen as the biological difference between someone who is male and someone who is female.<sup>1</sup>

One of the main issues with the sex/gender division is the fact that today most members of popular culture tend to think these two words are thought of as synonymous

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<sup>1</sup> Although I do understand that the very idea of a dichotomy of sex is troubling and unfair to the inter-sexed, this issue is not directly relevant to this work. I would like to avoid complications with people who have both genitalia and focus solely more on the cultural significance of the male/female distinction on sports.

despite the distinction between the two in academic discussion. This supposed “biological superiority” of men has been used to justify political and cultural superiority as well.<sup>2</sup> Therefore the academic distinction between sex and gender is an attempt to keep women from being forced into an inferior position in life.

Furthermore, forces within society tend to refuse to acknowledge the importance of work that has traditionally been thought of as women’s.<sup>3</sup> This is a troubling effect of the general quest for autonomy that was the focal point of much of the philosophical thought during the Enlightenment (“Continental Feminism” 11). In society, during that time, there was no way for a woman to survive economically, without getting married. Within this system, they became bound to the home and its work. This association, regardless of how society has changed, has remained. This is not to say that feminist theorists seek to neutralize gender but rather allow women to act as they wish and not be confined within the idea of being a “woman”.

As Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, “One is not born but becomes a woman” (267). Beauvoir is referring to “a woman” in terms of gender. As a young girl grows up in society, she develops through the constraints that culture has designed for her. She will only participate in activities that are defined as acceptable by gender and thus become a woman through these constraints. In addition, “the female body [is] perceived ... as either a passive site for medical intervention or a site of sexual spectacle” (Burke 59) because the female lacks subjectivity. In other words, men see women as

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<sup>2</sup> The problem with this confusion is that our culture tends to herald strength and power among other attributes that men are biological superior to women. While women can withstand more extreme temperatures as well as more pain and can run and swim longer than men, these attributes are seen as unimportant if the public has knowledge of these traits at all. (see Haslanger).

<sup>3</sup> This includes domestic work such as raising the children and keeping the home.

objects within the male subject rather than allowing being subjects in themselves. In this context, a woman loses ownership of herself and her body.

Many women challenge this idea by participating in traditionally masculine sports like bodybuilding. They show that the female body has the ability to achieve what was considered traditionally “unnatural” for them. However, even in situations such as female body building, where women are consciously going against traditional ideas of femininity, traditional values are still held in high regard. In female body building, steroid use by these athletes “is criticized in the bodybuilding literature, not for health reasons, but for the side effects that confuse the sex of the taker, rather than for the life-threatening side effects of prolonged use” (61).

But where did these gender construct come from and how did they spread? Sally Haslanger, in her article “Gender and Social Construction: Who? What? When? Where? How?” discusses the difficulty in pointing directly to where society’s influence is felt in the construction of ideas and concepts. She provides numerous illustrations of ways in which we fail to understand how much we are affected by social forces through how we think (17); the two strongest forces are our parents teaching us through a specific language, with its own linguistic concepts, and our culture being responsible for how we interpret the world. She uses this encompassing cultural effect on an individual’s ability to construct ideas to argue against our current conceptual framework system. She insists that we must be aware of what is “highlighted and what [is] eclipsed by a particular framework of concepts” (17). She does not attempt to disqualify our current cultural

tradition but only urges us to look at whom and where it comes from, and thus how it originally came to be.

From here she moves on to the framework of Western culture is based on the idea that there are two (and only two) sexes, a categorization which immediately separates and brackets all people as either male or female. She asks the reader to think about why this framework was set up in this way and more importantly, whose interests are (or are not) being served (17). It is imperative to look at socially constructed ideas and distinguish whether they privilege certain phenomena such as strength or beauty over others (19). The problem with the classifications of ideas or people is that they “do more than just map pre-existing groups... [they] establish and reinforce groupings which may eventually come to ‘fit’ the classifications” (19). This can produce a variety of consequences. One can want to be in a certain group, avoid a group, and justify behavior towards or against a person because of a classification. This immediately sets up hierarchical context to every distinction and polarizes members from certain groups made to oppose each other.

However, that is not to say that society is completely constructing these entities. Something already in existence comes to have a set of features, which qualify it into a certain category. For example a child born female will be treated and viewed a certain way that causes her to become gendered (19). That is to say, the gender category of woman did not bring her existence but rather defined the existence she already had. Haslanger writes that this classification of gender has a profound effect on an individual and his/her movement through society. It affects a person’s “social position as well as effect [their] experience and self-understanding” (19). This categorization is not based on biological or anatomical differences between people but rather social differences. If you

are male, you are not female and vice versa. From this distinction comes the idea that supposedly you carry different characteristics depending on the characterization.

Haslanger agrees with the classic definition of sex as anatomy and gender as a social and economic construct<sup>4</sup> started by Beauvoir. She uses this as a starting point to discuss the sex and gender distinction. Interestingly, she furthers Beauvoir's original point by connecting the distinction to an argument that some sociologists have made that the anatomical differences between men and women actually have social causes. She writes that "height and strength differences between the sexes are caused by a long history of gender norms concerning food and exercise" (20-21). Haslanger argues against the common assumption that the male is the superior specimen and therefore superior in all aspects of life is invalid. She concludes that gender exists but that "although some ideas about gender are fictions, these fictional ideas have functioned to create and reinforce gender reality" (22).

### **Cross-cultural Gender Roles**

Stephen B. Clark, in "The Universality of Sex Roles", takes a different approach. Rather than looking at the sex/gender distinction, he looks to historical precedent to see if there were ever any valid reasons to keep women in a subordinate place in society. He explains that throughout time there has always been a sexual division of labor and some form of female subordination (36-37). He connects female subordination to the difference in authority in the public and private spheres. Historically, women were in charge of the private sphere while men were in charge of the public sphere. However, women were still

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<sup>4</sup> I would feel remiss if I left out the fact that Haslanger does voice her disagreement with the fact that there are only *two* genders. While this is not pertinent to this project, she has interesting things to say about the dichotomy of gender as well.

subordinate to men inside the family where ultimate authority went to the husband, uncle or father (37).

In his article, Clark asks why there are these differences in roles throughout society and whether we should accept them simply because of their prevalence throughout history. He discusses different strains of feminism and how they respond to this question. He, quite rightly, immediately dismisses radical feminists who argue that there are no “real or significant” (39) physiological differences between men and women. Furthermore, he would disagree with Haslangers’ argument of societal causes for physiological differences between males and females. He believes that this view is not only false, but it also fails to understand American society today and how to successfully garner change. Clark explains how, against opposing ideology, we tend to hold fast to our engrained cultural identities, therefore making them stronger. He argues that this is why radical feminists cause a backlash against their ideals, something that is ultimately harmful to their cause. He believes that it is not enough simply to point out the prejudice against women in American society. To inspire change truly, one must show how the new idea will better “accommodate the natural differences between men and women and can prove a better basis for the structuring of society” (41).<sup>5</sup> In his article, Clark is basically calling out Haslanger and the like for their failure to suggest a plausible solution, focusing on in-depth analysis of the problem rather than pushing for actual change.

While I agree with much of what Clark is saying, I disagree with him on this final point. These issue need to be theorized and examined regardless of whether they suggest

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<sup>5</sup> It is this point that I will come back to later to support my argument for a small change within the framework of sports to support a larger change in the role of women in society



an alternative or not. This is because in addition to historical precedent, men have been placed in a superior position in many philosophical writings. Here, men have become synonymous with human, thereby immediately setting women in the category in some way less than human (5-6 “continental fem”). This idea of gender is very much attached to the Enlightenment and its need to develop the “true” sex of individuals in order to differentiate between male and female (5-6). From the Enlightenment on, women were bound into certain roles and positions with a fixed gender. These positions were politically not biologically decided and thus only a social constraint. Since these ideas of a woman’s place and inferiority have been constantly repeated throughout history, the distinction between sex and gender is crucially important. As long as these terms are viewed as one and the same, women are seen as biologically destined for an inferior place in society. This in turn continues to present the idea of men being superior as a natural distinction rather than a cultural one. If the sex/gender distinction becomes more prevalent throughout society, then the woman’s place will be less confining with more opportunity for mobility because it is no longer seen as determined by biology.

While I am not attempting to restructure society, I am looking to argue for a way to change the perception of the role of women in society. I agree with Clark’s argument that one cannot force drastic change and thus I am arguing for a small basic change in sport. My goal here is simply for greater equality in sport which I hope will contribute to greater change in the overall role of women in society. Through an understanding of the ideology is behind the constraints placed on women in sport, I hope to expose the invalidity of those constraints and release female athletes. To understand the thought

process that constrains female athletes, however, one must look at the role of women in society and historically.

The sex/gender distinction is not the sole concept that must be understood bring about change but also the idea of gender attribution. Much like Haslenger discussed bracketing, Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna wrote an excellent article on people's desire to place strangers into a male/female category upon meeting them. In "The Primacy of Gender Attribution", these women discuss about the discomfort one feels when coming across someone androgynous, until this stranger can be placed into a category. Regardless of the genital organs the person has, these women assert, that "in everyday life ultimately some criteria can (and will) be found by which each [person] is placed in one of two mutually exclusive gender categories" (43). However, as there are no actual definable characteristics for these categories; they are therefore subject to each person who is attributing. Even physical characteristics that most people would perceive as normal distinctions (such as, beards) cannot be used to completely distinguish genders. Despite the impossibility of any "true" distinction, a person is always defined as one gender or the other, with no grey area in between (44)

Kessler and McKenna refer to this process as gender attribution. They argue that attribution forms the foundation for understanding other pieces of gender such as gender roles and gender identity (44). Their article attempts to determine what exactly are the conditions to presenting oneself as a certain gender. They theorize that gender is construction by both parties in an interaction. While one person is trying to project

themselves as a certain gender, the other person in turn is projecting their own idea of gender.

This leads to a constructed gender binary, or dichotomy, in American society. It goes without saying that this construction excludes transgendered and transsexual. This dichotomy also affects men and women who seem to have gender attributes outside of the normative of man/woman. Kessler and McKenna ask “If Leslie is not male, is Leslie then necessarily female?” (44). Are there certain conditions that automatically place you in one category or another? While social scientists question the credibility of stating that masculinity and femininity are mutually exclusive, in our culture they are still found to be dichotomous and so “men” and “women” being treated certain, different ways.

Human beings believe that there is a world that exists independently of our presence. In this world there is constancy to the quality of gender that defines male and female for all people. In this way, the Western world presents this belief as reality which reduced the argument to right and wrong. (45). Kessler and McKenna suggest backing off of our certainty and looking only at these views as beliefs. This then takes each situation on its own without the constancy of years of past belief. Clark would agree with their suggestion because of its ease of integration into society today. It takes the historical precedence that he talks about and undermines the weight that people place in it. Even still, gender is only an anchor to which people cling and based on which they make all further judgments (46).

These assumptions can be theorized as gender roles. Kessler and McKenna define roles as “expectations about what behaviors are appropriate for a person holding a particular position within a particular social contest” (48). The interesting thing about

gender roles is that a person can be categorized as a certain gender either by the image they project or one projected onto them. One can describe the gender roles we have in American society without too much effort through dress, interests or activities. While our expectations are changing, there are still many ideas and expectations that are firmly gendered. Along with gender roles, one must understand that there are also specific characteristics that a member in each role is expected to have. For example, women are supposed to be helpless or passive (49).

It becomes obvious that gender roles are ascribed onto people and thus cause many to think that there are biological reasons for differences in roles and placement in society (49). However this is still under the assumption that there are only two genders with their naturally ascribed roles.

### **Why Does Sport Matter and What's Wrong with it Right Now**

As I have previously mentioned, in sport there are a clear examples of constraints placed on women due to society's ideology about gender roles. The roles of men and women in our culture become very apparent in society's reaction to female athletes. Many coaches, athletes, fans and sportscasters talk about sports as analogous to war.<sup>6</sup> Victory for a team means victory for the fans over those opposed. An extreme version of this is in international soccer, when the victors feel as if they have symbolically conquered the opposing country (Postow 125). Since there is an association with war and athletes being soldiers, there is a correlative negative feeling toward female athletes. Just as people feel they should not be on the front lines, women also should not be playing masculine sports.

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<sup>6</sup> War being traditionally seen by society as linked with masculinity because of its violence.

While sport seems to be a unserious place to build a claim for gender equality because it is recreational, due to a less definitive lines between men and women in politics, the work force, and the family, sports has become an important arena for gender politics. Creating equality in sports will be a great step for women towards equality elsewhere in society.

Equality starts with changing the fact that female athletes are viewed as *female* athletes, instead of *athletes* that happen to be female in sex. Foucault wrote that when deconstructing masculine superiority and supremacy, one must first deconstruct the naturalness of the body (Burke 55). Following from this idea is that, “Foucauldian feminists appropriated the idea that sex, selves and bodies are all social constructions” (55). While men are looked at as athletes with no gender attached to this distinction, women are defined by their gender first and thus constrained to an idea that their participation in sport should be limited because of this. A sport is presumed to be for men unless distinguished as the female version. There is lacrosse and women’s lacrosse, ice hockey and women’s ice hockey. The athletes playing in the women’s game are always first described by their gender and are constrained by all the cultural ideas that go along with it. The rules for women athletes are decided based on “woman” rather than “athlete” and thus since women are decided to be inferior from the very beginning, the rules reflect this misjudgment.<sup>7</sup> Therefore the foundation of different rules in sport is gender expectation.

Accordingly, women athletes must overcome many biases in order to get support and respect. Most notably, women are seen as physically weaker in important categories

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<sup>7</sup> As I will discuss later, society is making rules based on societies constructions

for sport such as height, strength and speed. Sports in general were designed to accentuate these attributes and therefore women's exclusion is seen as a "natural" fact rather than a bias (Boxill 24). The idea of "woman" is not conducive to that of competition, since it is a male domain, which involves "the physical body and... engenders a 'macho' aggressive image" (24).

Lois Bryson refers to sports such as football and ice hockey that are popular due to their adherence to the traditional idea of masculinity as "flag carriers" (Burke 51). The popularity of such sports reinforces the idea of female inferiority because of women's failure to excel in these sports due to their physical inadequacies. (That is not to mention the sports (such as football) in which they are pretty much excluded because of their suggested physical inferiority). As Kessler and McKenna would note, whether or not there is an actual inferiority both physically and socially is unimportant. This is because the visibility of these traditional masculine sports do all that is needed to convince the public of female deficiencies. Considering the powerful positions men play in these important sports, the jump is not far to assuming that men are "more suited to certain powerful positions in... wider society" (50). Therefore for women to gain an equal standing in society, it is important that they must gain an equal standing in the "flag carrying" sports. For this to occur women must be viewed first as athletes and therefore allowed to play the same sports with the same rules as men. When women can perform well at the same sports as men, with the same rules, there will be evidence against not only the social idea of the inferiority of women in sport but the underlying ideology that women are fragile and need protection.

The claimed inferiority of women does not stop at physical attributes. During athletics, women are supposedly susceptible not only to physical injury but also emotionally instability. In fact, this is one of the arguments for abolishing competition that Mary Vetterling-Braggin discusses in “Cooperative Competition in Sport.” Female athletes, the argument goes, will be pushed beyond themselves which would cause nervous instability as well as have physical costs such as pelvic ossification and narrowed vaginas (125). While both symptoms are at first glance laughable, it is important to note that while a simple medical test can disprove the supposed physical results of competition, it takes a lot more to dispel an idea of emotional instability. This is especially so in a society like ours in which women are classified as those ruled by emotion rather than logic and reason. Female athletes are stuck between a rock and a hard place. The rules as they stand today do not allow them to disprove this “emotional instability” argument and without examples of women being emotionally stable, the rules will not change. Why can men grunt in tennis because they are exerting all their strength but when women grunt it is viewed as sexual in nature or a woman unable to contain herself? A double-standard such as this is only one of many examples of the tightrope walked by women between being seen as feminine and competing at a high level.

Stepping away from the stereotypes placed on female athletes for a moment, what about the gains one receives from sports? Are women not entitled to the benefits of playing sports? Robert Simon writes in “Gender Equity and Inequity in Athletics” that “the case for gender equity in sports is that no individual should be deprived of access to beneficial activities or opportunities on the basis of gender” (7). There are many benefits,

the two most notable being exercise and competition. Another benefit is the connection that fellow athletes share within American society because of the value we place on the ability to compete at a high level. The benefit I am most interested in is what Jane English calls constitutive benefits, which are only comprehensible within the framework, defined by the specific rules of a game (7). Depending on the sport an athlete plays, she will gain greater control over a certain aspect of her body. One example (of many) would be the confidence and self-assurance over her body a female athlete gains through physical contact.

While Simon and English point to the positive benefits women could gain from sports, Mary Anne Warren points out in “Justice and Gender in School Sports” that society does not necessarily agree that women need these benefits. There is the idea engrained in the social consciousness that men gain a great deal of character from sports. It is not exclusively believed that women do not gain the same character but rather that they would be fine without it. A Connecticut judge in 1971 summarized this fact when he said, “Athletic competition...builds character in our boys. We do not need that kind of character in our girls, the women of tomorrow” (16). Warren asks more specifically than Simon and English about the character built by sport and why is it more desirable in men than women. Character traits listed include “masculine” virtues like aggressiveness, pride in achievement and the ability to function as part of a team” (16). These virtues are necessary in people (men) who will take dominant roles in society but seen as superfluous for the subordinate female. Warren remarks that “sports have been viewed as essentially a kind of sex-role training for males” (16). However, she does not acknowledge the flaws in this view. First, the argument is a bit outdated, especially when



viewed against the many high-powered women leading in American society today. Women, while not necessarily just as likely to hold a dominant role in society as men, do hold positions in which character traits gained from sports participation would be helpful if not necessary. Therefore there is no reason that it is desirable for men alone to gain certain character traits through sports. Similarly, there is no reason that men and women should play different versions of the same sport to save the gender ideology.

### **A Specific Case Study: Ice Hockey**

Hockey is the perfect sport to look at when discussing sex discrimination in similar sports. First of all, it is what many call a flag-carrying sport for masculinity and one of most often pointed out (along with football and boxing) as masculine in nature. No matter that only a small percentage of men can actually play in the NHL or at a high level at all, there is still a sense of pride in masculinity at the fact that men play with such force and aggression. This pride is juxtaposed against condescension of women trying to “act like a men” rather than a more generous conception of women finding power in their athleticism. It is also a good sport to investigate because the rules between men’s and “women’s hockey”<sup>8</sup> are so similar. The rules of men and women’s ice hockey are the same, minus one and therefore the correlation between gender and sport can be easily studied. In “women’s hockey”, checking is not allowed.

Checking is the skill used by an athlete “to slow down, take out or otherwise affect the opposition’s ability to play the game” (“Science”). It is physical force and body positioning used to gain possession of the puck. There are certain specific conditions in

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<sup>8</sup> I am choosing to avoid calling it the women’s game necessarily; there are also men’s leagues that are non-contact.

which a check can and cannot be thrown and how a player can go about checking. While these exact definitions are not important, it is notable that checking is a skill involved in playing, not an action to hurt another person intentionally. The issue of checking in hockey is pertinent not only to hockey but also to gender politics. As I have already pointed out, sport has become a place that has been used to enhance the ideology of male superiority. Hockey does exactly this because with women playing a different game (some say easier) these ideas of inferiority/superiority permeate mainstream cultural understanding. Society then turns around and reinforces the stereotype by, for example, discouraging female participation in the sport. When examined closely however, most arguments against checking in “women’s hockey” defy logic. Some of the more valid will discuss those that hold the most weight here.

One main argument against allowing female hockey players to check is that the men’s game is already too violent. Many argue that the men are not playing the game the right way and we should keep from exposing our women to ultra-aggressive tendencies that already degrade the men’s game. However, when looking at this argument, one can quickly deduce that it does not hold any water. There are no serious movements to take checking out of hockey and moreover, the simple suggestion of reducing aggression in the NHL is laughable. In addition, these “ultra-aggressive” tendencies are kept out of the game by the referees through penalties and suspensions. Checking is a skill and there is no reason to assume that just because these men are checking that they are playing to hurt another player. They understand that each action has a consequence and no one wants to penalize their team.

Therefore, as “chivalrous” as this argument is, I am skeptical that this is the true reason that women are not allowed to check. The argument itself is faulty at best and completely wrong at worst. Perhaps a more fitting reason is that women are discouraged from being aggressive because of an outdated idea of what is “becoming” and proper for a woman to be doing. Regardless of these gender standards, a check does not need to be an aggressive act of war, but rather can be looked at as an assertive skill integral to the sport and an athletes’ ability to succeed. The distinction between aggression and assertion is important because it helps reveal what those who oppose checking in women hockey really think and what they associate checking in hockey with.

The aggressive/assertive distinction is the focus of Shapcott’s sociological study, “Initial exploration of the factors influencing aggressive and assertive intentions of women ice hockey player.” Shapcott sets out to see under what circumstances (if any) aggressive behavior in “women’s hockey” is deemed acceptable. Shapcott identifies two types of aggression: hostile and instrumental. While instrumental aggression serves a particular goal, hostile aggression is designed to cause pain and suffering (146). Both instances of aggression provided satisfaction for the athletes because they felt their actions defined them as someone who takes initiative, is powerful and is fearless (146). These three qualities (initiative, power and fearlessness) are important for any athlete to possess, regardless of gender. Aggression becomes an issue when looked at along with the intention of the athletes. Of the athletes, coaches and referees Shapcott interviewed, a majority believe that “an individual’s intention to perform a behavior, such as aggression, is the major determinant of that behavior” (147). Based on this, Shapcott manipulates the definition of aggression to define assertiveness as, “[involving] no intent to harm the

opponent, [using] legitimate force to achieve the desired goal, and requires unusual effort and energy” (146). There is no difference between the definitions of instrumental aggression and assertiveness except for the clause of “no intent to harm the opponent”.

Shapcott attempts to make this distinction between aggression and assertiveness to allow for more contact in the women’s game. This is because she finds a distinct division between aggressiveness and assertiveness, the latter being acceptable and the former not so. This seems odd in comparison to the men’s game where aggression in the form of checking is allowed and only in the most extreme cases<sup>9</sup> are discussed on the basis of intentionality. I would argue that this is not because checking is allowed only in the men’s game but rather because aggression is more acceptable and looked on more favorably in men—not to mention that there *is* sometimes contact in the women’s game. Shapcott writes that “regardless of the absence of the body checking rule in women’s ice hockey, there was still considerable use of the body and body contact, both intentional and unintentional” (146). However, for our purposes, the interesting information in this study is not what influences aggression and assertive actions in the athletes but rather how these actions are viewed by men and women alike.

While I applaud Shapcott’s intention to legitimize contact in the women’s game, with the addition of intentionality she is taking the entire process steps backwards. She is still setting up a standard based on gender. She has to make up a new definition (that as I already pointed out was just a few words different than instrumental aggression) in order to allow women to check in hockey, a sport that already allows it. By adding intentionality she is marginalizing women. Why should it matter why an athlete checks another athlete? It almost never in the men’s game. She seems to suggest that a woman

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Simon using his skate as a weapon and receiving a 30-game suspension

should not want to harm another player, and should be penalized if she does. How would that even be enforced?

Although she is trying to broaden women's opportunity, Shapcott ends up treating them as if they are in need of protection instead of athletes that are choosing to put themselves in harm's way to achieve victory. It is no coincidence that athletes in contact sports have been compared to warriors entering the battlefield. Women have only recently been able to fight on the front lines and still face a great prejudice and a lack of trust by their fellow soldiers on their ability to perform. In order to level the playing field properly both in athletics and in the armed forces, the idea that women need to be sheltered and protected needs to be changed. People naturally act in accordance to what is expected of them. If women are socialized to act timid and not to act aggressively then they will not, which compounds the effects of society because no one is challenging the system. Shapcott says as much herself:

Subjective norm refers to the expectations of significant others to perform or not perform the behavior and is influenced by two components: beliefs about how other important individuals believe they should behave and the positive or negative judgment about each belief (147).

Each player whom she interviewed saw contact and aggression in a positive light, but only acted aggressively if she felt it would be looked upon well by her coach, peers and referees. "Participants' attitude towards playing aggressively or assertively consisted of their beliefs concerning the consequences of their behavior, and their positive or negative judgments about the behavior" (151). There needs to be a change in not only society's attitude toward female athletes but also a woman's capability as a being in general. One final note about Shapcott's study is that she had no control group. There was no discussion on whether men looked to their coaches and other players for judgment on

their behavior. This is just another way that women in the study and society at large are not considered by their actions first, but rather by their sex.

### **Support Affects Participation Which in Turn Affects Support**

Nancy Theberge has been on the forefront of sociological writings on gender with a specification in sport. Her work being crucial in my research, at this moment I will be focusing on her article “Same Sport, Different Gender”. Here she attempts to “deconstruct notions of biological determinism and to show that gender relations, like all social forms, are historically constructed” (183). Theberge, like me, is looking to undercut the prejudice that constrains female athletes by showing that they have an invalid foundation while making sure the progress is just that—progress. She disagrees with suggestions to increase the breadth of the definition of sport in order to encompass more activities that women take part in. The problem with this expansion is that it still provides a construction based on male and female (184). It is this view that shows that she would similarly disagree with Shapcott’s distinction between aggressiveness and assertiveness. This gender distinction is part of the overall problem. Looking at athletes differently based on their gender affects societal views on what is or is not acceptable for men and women. This societal pressure affects support, acceptance and inclusion of male and female athletes alike, depending on the sport.

Carol Auster writes on a similar principle in “The Effect of Cohort on Women’s Sport Participation: An Intergenerational Study of Collegiate Women Ice Hockey Players”. Here Auster explains that “femininity and masculinity [are] social constructs, [varying] by time, place, and even subcultures within a society” (314). Regardless of their

origin, these constructs affect men and women's participation in certain sports depending on their classification of a typical sport for their respective gender. Only 12 % of players registered with USA Hockey are women, making the sport still very much male-dominated (313). This vast difference in participation perpetuates the idea that the ice is not a place for women, at least not unless they are wearing figure skates. Women are supposed to participate in sports that are "associated more with femininity and the display of the body in aesthetically pleasing ways" (314). These sports include but are not limited to figure skating, gymnastics and dance. This is another instance the lack of subjectivity women are allowed in the sports arena.

Women are viewed as "the other" whose main purpose is for the use of the dominant male gender. This view means not only are there lower participation levels for women but also the women who choose to play a male-dominated sport are less likely to find support and acceptance. In American society today, as much progress as there has been, there are still certain expectations for each gender. Among other things, women are still considered the primary caregiver and that their families should take precedence over everything else. Women lose their individuality through this process, losing the ability to make choices for themselves, separate from their family. These expectations are based on an idea of femininity that is not only invalid but also greatly deprecating towards the female population. Sports can help them retain this autonomy and Title IX has increased women's participation in sports in general but has done nothing to the expectations and socializations that "continue to influence leisure preferences" (312), as Carol Auster writes.

Auster believes that “if gender expectations and gender norms are strong enough and deeply internalized, it is unlikely that an individual would even develop a preference for an activity nontraditional for one’s sex” (315). This is an interesting statement not only on the current study of femininity but also in how it affects future generations’ thoughts about gender. What she is saying is that if we continue with the status quo, many young women will develop without the desire to play sports outside a certain ideal. This will continue to discourage participation and possibly not allow for the numbers necessary for “women’s hockey”<sup>10</sup> to be taken seriously, and the money and support necessary for the sport to grow and be successful will likewise be lacking. Auster directly links an “enriched” social environment, such as a family setting to the ability to counteract the antecedent constraints such as “gender expectations and gendered perceptions” (315). However, the converse is also true. Without this “enriched” environment such as a supportive family, there is nothing counteracting the perceptions. These constraints point not just to a societal problem but also to an error in thought by the public.

In order to counteract these poor perceptions of women, one must first understand what they are. Iris Young wrote of contemporary industrial societies that descriptions of female body movement are “characterized by timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy” which results in a general lack of trust for a woman in her body and her ability to use it as a vehicle to her goals. Not only do they lack the benefits that Clark and English referred to but they also have negative self-perceptions. Along with a lack of confidence in self, society is prescribing certain areas that are “proper” and “specific” paths women should take. Therefore this uncertainty has nothing to do with the physiological differences

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<sup>10</sup> In particular but this applies for other supposedly “male” sports as well



between men and women but rather “arises from women’s experiences in contemporary society” (Theberge 498). While the Connecticut judge may have seemed outdated when he said women do not need the characteristics of sport, society still seems to abide by the ideology that the judge had. The difference in societal acceptance between young boys and girls causes a difference in self-confidence as well. In another fantastic article, “No Fear Comes,” Nancy Theberge writes that:

Boys are more likely to see themselves as skilled at sport and, as a result, to have greater self-confidence and willingness to test and use their bodies in active ways. Girls, in contrast, are more likely to minimize the physical space they occupy...and to accept the view that boys are physically superior (498).

Theberge is arguing that there is a corporeal basis of gender subjectivity. This subjectivity then manifests itself into a culture that constrains women and thus proves its hypothesis. Such a vicious cycle hinders young girls and causes them to grow up without the self-confidence necessary to push boundaries.

Certain sports empower more than others, namely ones that involve physical confrontations between opponents. Ice hockey in particular celebrates force and power and provides bonding that reinforces members’ identities (499). While young boys see sports as an affirmation of masculinity, young girls rarely see sports as an area where they could affirm their femininity. The issue with this fact is that the idea of femininity does not include strong, athletic women. While common conception would have one believe in the fragility of women both in mind and body, Theberge found that “girls [exhibit] a sense of pride and accomplishment that was grounded in their physical competency... [and] gave them a sense of being ‘in control’ and able ‘to manage’” (500). However, this pride comes from an activity that is at odds with the traditional form of

femininity and isolates the athlete from the supposed dominant actions of her gender and thus her association with the “norm”.

This “norm” affects women and their participation in hockey in a couple of ways. Not only do most young boys begin playing hockey at a younger age than their female counterparts but they also have more organization, better coaching and more support. In fact, Caroline Wiley, author of “Men’s and Women’s involvement in sports: An examination of the gendered aspects of leisure involvement” argues that each of these involved parties has a large part in the disparity between men’s and “women’s hockey”, not only in skill but also in development and support. While Auster speaks about involvement in general, Wiley focuses specifically on ice hockey. Both women regardless of their subjects are on the relationship between societal opinion and involvement. Wiley writes that:

Involvement was conceptualized as an attitude that an individual develops or learns through interaction with his or her social environment. This attitude was seen to represent a determination about what is important, meaningful, or relevant and thus to be used by individuals in making judgments about self and others and subsequently in making decisions about behaviors. (19)

Involvement, in another sense, is a person’s actions based on social awareness and societal norms. She continues by explaining that young boys are encouraged if not expected to participate in sports, that this is the “norm”. It is almost viewed as inevitable because of the “strong encouragement by parents, peers, and societal norms” (21). This however is not the case for girls of the same age. Activities young girls are encouraged to play when younger (hopscotch, “house”, jump rope) become activities done during play dates or sleepovers and are at best tossed aside as the child grows into a young adult or at worst (such as “house”) become what is expected of her for the rest of her life. Girls are not given the same opportunity and encouragement to play. As Wiley eloquently

explains, “because involvement is a learned attitude, and because it develops through interaction with the social environment, the different social environments of males and females can be expected to have an influence” (21).

Wiley believes that there is an impression set by society for different genders to become involved in certain activities because of gender stereotyping and constraints put upon these activities. Even with all of the progress we have made since Title IX and the introduction of big name female athletes like the Williams sisters, our society still distinguishes between sports that are “male” and sports that are “female”; hockey being the former rather than the latter. Again it comes down to what seems “appropriate” for women to be doing. The stereotyping “was related to gender-role expectations in the broader society... based on several factors, including the use of physical force, likelihood of body contact during play, and the aesthetic nature of the activity” (22). Wiley’s study took place in Canada where hockey is extremely popular and based on ideas of “toughness, aggression, and competition” (21). Hockey represents the continued physical superiority of men to women which permeates society as a (supposed) general superiority. Not only does this stereotype affect the participation choices of young children but it also affects the amount of support an athlete receives once he/she join the sport.

There is also something to be said about the relationship between femininity and contact between women. While male athletes that participate in football and hockey find no question of their sexual nature, women are almost presumed to be homosexual. It seems that in these “hyper-masculine” sports, men are at war, while women are partaking in subversive sexual activity. For a woman to want to play a contact sport, society needs

her to not only lose her femininity but also become as close to the opposite sex as possible. Described as “butch,” a woman participating in contact sports needs an underlying reason past the love of the game. Without getting too deeply into societal feelings on homosexuality, there is a correlation in people’s minds with contact, masculinity and love of the female body. Somehow, two women performing a gymnastic routine together, or synchronized swimming is heralded as “hot” but when two athletes who happened to be female engage in physical contact while performing, it is somehow unnatural. This is just another situation in which female athletes must be understood as athletes first in order to gain the respect and equality they deserve.

### **The Men’s Game is Already Too Violent**

To return to some other arguments for prohibiting checking in “women’s hockey”, it is said that checking is forbidden in “women’s hockey” because the men’s game is already too violent. To support this argument, people have cited instances in which “[increased] concern over injuries and violence in boys’ hockey [has] prompted some provincial and local hockey associations to implement programs that prohibit body checking” (Theberge 185-186). Basically the argument becomes, since men are already perverting the game with too much violence, why should we allow our women to fall into the same trap?

However, the problem with this argument is that although the NHL might be too violent, it is still seen as “real” hockey. Instances of play that prohibit checking are looked at as deviations from the norm, an alternative to the “real” game (186). There is a general hypocrisy surrounding this issue: aggression degrades the pure form of the sport but a non-checking hockey is not a real version of the game (187). Some people believe

that because of the greater emphasis on playmaking and speed rather than force, the women's game is superior to the men's and thus should stay as is. However, this does not answer why the men's game is seen as the "real" game with the women's game being a watered down alternative version (508). This view diminishes the value of the skills of the female athlete regardless of the level of hockey they are playing at.

Maybe the answer is simpler than the correlation between the ability to check and violence in the sport. While checking is not allowed in "women's hockey", it is important to note that there is still body contact. At the same time, it is obvious that checking is viewed as a skill in hockey; a check can be clean, crisp and acceptable or one that is perverted and seen as a degradation of the skill. This is where the Referee comes into play. Referees are front and center to all contact in the sport. It is their decision whether a check is legal or not. There are a couple of steps referees can take in order to make the men's game less perverted and cause less anxiety towards the idea of checking in the women's game.

Referees should call more penalties in the first period to set a standard for the rest of the game. As previously mentioned, hockey players take notice of how a certain referee views body contact and changes their game appropriately. Also, there will not be any worry of game changing penalties late in the game. In addition to more penalties being called to keep the game from getting out of hand, these penalties should be called more fairly across the board.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Instead of always penalizing the "bruiser" and never the star player.

One issue with the misunderstanding of contact in the women's game is the lack of female referees. While many women's tournaments try to get female referees in order to expand the sport and add a more exact understanding of the game, in many larger tournaments this just is not possible. The male referees borrowed from the men's game "do not know how to interpret and apply the rules of "women's hockey", particularly regarding body contact" (76). While some coaches believe that there is no contact to make refereeing easier and then improving referee quality, others believe that because today's athletes are bigger, stronger and pushing the limits of no contact, referees now have to depend too much on their own judgment calls. They believe that "the rules should be reviewed and rewritten to better reflect and accommodate both players' abilities and the game itself as they evolve" (77). If both games played by the same rules, there would not be a hiccup in refereeing depending on the officials' gender. This also highlights that there are no female referees in the men's game, which is an issue that is out of the scope of this paper.

What this debate comes down to is the general acceptance of checking and the need to achieve a greater understanding of acceptable displays of aggression. Women should be able to choose whether they would want to play hockey with or without checking. What this implies for the non-contact game is that athletes should be able to choose to play in a non-contact league, but under the knowledge that it will be viewed as touch football is to "real" contact football. There is a difference between contact and non-contact hockey or football, but it is a skill-level difference rather than a gender difference.

## **Women are More Likely to get Hurt**

Another argument against checking in the women's game is that women are more likely to get hurt playing hockey than men. This argument again relates back to the assumption that since women are fragile because they not as strong as men. First I would like to say that there is no factual information to prove this assumption. In addition, Haslanger would argue that it is based off a socially construct regardless. However, even if we suppose this is the case, if women learn from a young age how to check and be checked, they will learn how to protect themselves. As one athlete put it, "playing contact, you learn to take care of yourself, widen your stance and deal with it" (188). Theberge broached this topic in her study and found that many athletes recommended that girls play with boys until they could not anymore.

All athletes agreed that because boys were naturally quicker and stronger, girls worked harder to keep up physically. Also, these girls became smarter players having to learn how to outwit a stronger, faster opponent (191). This concept of mental toughness and ability becomes very important when discussing the gender gap. Although it has been rightly pointed out many times that there is a definite muscle gap between men and women, *necessarily* pointing to the superiority of men in sports is a social construct. As Theberge puts it, "most men can't play pro football themselves—but they can take vicarious comfort in the display of male physical competence and aggression" (196).

In "It's Part of the Game" Nancy Theberge writes that "while the experience of personal empowerment is significant for the lives of individual women, the political potential of sport rests on its ability to challenge dominant ideologies and structures of gender relations" (73). If the issue becomes focused not on the different rules between the

two sports but rather the different way society looks at them, perhaps the answer is to change ideologies rather than the way the game is played. Even the construction of the game as a different and less-violent version of the NHL is troubling in its distinguishing between the two sports and the assumption that the male version is the norm. As one athlete remarked, “You go out there and you play aggressive, you play your game and that’s that, whereas people are trying I think to give the image that it’s just an all-skill game and it’s a women’s game kind of thing” (75). What this woman is saying is by advertising this game as different, non-contact and all skill, it sets up the image that the women are playing a completely different version of the real game and do not compare to men. However, checking is a skill and not just a show of masculine aggression. This “all-skill” game does not include all skills and resembles an attempt to recreationalize the women’s game.

Nancy Theberge writes in “No Fear Comes” that, ““women’s hockey” is portrayed as a game of speed, finesse, and play making in contrast to the more aggressive physicality of the men’s game, which favors force and intimidation” (500). Analogous to the difference between men’s and women’s basketball, women’s ice hockey is considered a different game than the men’s version with an emphasis on different skills. Is this a necessary distinction or is it playing to an idea of femininity and a certain desire for the female body to be engaging in aesthetically pleasing actions? Checking, or intentional efforts to hit an opponent is prohibited in “women’s hockey”.

Regardless of this prohibition, many women hockey players still find a great importance in the physicality of the sport (505). One athlete answered Theberge’s question on this importance by saying that she was “pumped for a game... out there to



kill” (506). These are actions or motivations not normally associated with women. The tension between the athlete and the limitation of contact can be seen as a microcosm to the greater cultural struggle around ideas of gender, sport and physicality (507).

There are many reasons to dispel the idea that women are more likely to get hurt and thus should not be checking. First, women will be playing against women and thus be less likely to get hurt. Much like the men’s game, smaller athletes would be more apt to get hurt than larger ones. Secondly, as Theberge mentions, young girls actually benefit from playing against boys their age before the strength difference becomes too great. By learning how to check, like any other skill in hockey, girls will be able to control their bodies and reduce harm. As it is now there is already a lot of contact in the women’s game without the athletes having the knowledge of how to protect themselves.

It is not a matter of whether these women can play; it’s whether socially it is seen as acceptable for them to. It is sexist ideology that the sport is fighting, not a genuine care for the athletes’ well-being. If there was genuine interest, “women’s hockey” would have adequate facilities, trainers and care given. Their game would be considered a real alternative to the men’s game rather than a watered down version. This is not so. Instead they are forgotten, deviants that society wishes would disappear.

### **Are Female Athletes Getting Duped?**

Some would say checking in women’s hockey would give women a false equality. In *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women’s Self-Defense*, Martha McCaughey states that “women’s cultivation of aggressive personalities, especially when pleasurable, amounts to getting duped by male domination... [Playing] into the patriarchy by playing men’s games and sharing ‘male’ values” (511). McCaughey argues that

women should not have to play by the same rules as the men in order to be deemed empowered, athletic and successful at their sport. The real challenge, she claims, is for the women's sports to define models that resist the problems of the what she sees as the overly aggressive men's game while still allowing the athletes to feel empowerment and satisfaction (512).

Theberge comments on McCaughey's argument with by citing the Nike advertisement that was made to celebrate female empowerment. The ad was framed with the slogan "if you let me play" which itself contains the caveat that young girls and women must get permission from someone to play. Instead of the empowerment Nike was claiming, this campaign "[perpetuated] mechanisms of ideological control of women" (514). This ideology has slowly been challenged and is changing because of increased opportunities, better athletic performances and more fan interest. Especially important to the changing ideology is the increased participation of women in traditional male-dominated sports such as hockey.

McCaughey does make a good point that women are buying into a male idea of athleticism. However, as it stands today, the male idea of athleticism *is* athleticism. Today's world is a masculine-centric universe in which the male is the subject. Living within these standards is the first step to making different rules. For women to become CEOs they had to first play by the rules and break the glass ceiling before they could enact change from a position of power. I do not disagree that women athletes are forced to buy into a masculine idea of athleticism but in order to get respect and support, this is historically what has been necessary. The first step is to get each athlete on equal footing regardless of gender. That is done by having the women play the same game as the men

and by showing that they can be just as talented, tough and powerful as the men but on their own stage. In addition, regardless of whether the female athlete is buying into the idea of masculinity or not, she should have the opportunity to play whichever version (contact or not) that she so choose. It is easier to allow women to check than to change the ideology of society. As Clark says, in order to render change you must have a practical solution and what is more pragmatic, women playing contact or men not at all?

Another interesting argument against checking in “women’s hockey” is one that is focused on female athlete’s wellbeing. Rather than an argument based on prejudice, it is based in the reality of what “women’s hockey” is today. Using a basis of general logic and understanding of the game and the toll it takes on an athlete’s body, regardless of gender, this argument is that women should not check because they do not have the same support system male hockey players have. There is no professional hockey league for women, so most play without getting a salary and have other jobs. In addition, without a league or organized support such as trainers, proper facilities and the like, they are in greater risk not necessarily of getting injured but staying injured. Also, without proper trainers, there cannot be quick responses to injuries, which could further harm the athlete.

It is a fact that female hockey players have much less support and therefore amenities than their male counterparts. They are risking a lot more getting on the ice than the professional hockey players that play for the NHL and other pro teams. Should a female hockey player get hurt (say break a bone) while playing hockey, it would take much longer to heal than someone in the NHL. However, so would an injury sustained by men who are in pick up hockey leagues that allow checking. Why is there a difference

between a women's and men's league? Society seems to feel so strongly that they have to protect women. It seems no coincidence that by "protecting" these athletes they are actually only making decisions for them and confining them to a certain gender role. It is unreasonable that if a woman chooses to play full-contact hockey, that she is unable to. The same people that refuse to support women's hockey financially are willing to make risk judgments for these athletes

Ultimately, most arguments against checking in "women's hockey" can be summed up by an idea that the female needs to be protected. Whether the arguments are based on women being physically or mentally tough enough to handle contact or aggression is not becoming of a lady, the culture of sports is still obsessed with a masculine idea of athleticism. Some arguments with the premise that women's inferior nature will cause them harm in hockey are just false. Regardless, women are not young children that need to be protected. Female athletes are strong, confident and capable of making their own decisions regarding their bodies. Besides, could a check really be as painful as childbirth?

Other arguments are based on the idea of aggression and either a woman's lack of this characteristic or the undesirability of those who have it. This idea needs to be shaken from society's conscience. Gone are the days of the frail, timid woman and in her place have come Oprah and the Williams sisters. Women run companies, are in government and serve our country. They no longer need men to make decisions for them (if they ever did). The definition of femininity needs to catch up to today's woman. The only way this will happen is if women are constantly succeeding in a man's world. Allowing women to

check in hockey and realizing they still are no less feminine after taking or giving a hit will start to sketch out a new idea of what a person, who happens to be female, is.

## **Same Rules Equals Greater Rights for Women**

Some may look at sports as the least important venue to fight for equality. Why should we focus on sports when women are still not earning equal pay and are fighting for equality in places much more pertinent to daily life? Sport becomes important not only for what it represents but how it supports and maintains inequality outside its own arena. Nancy Theberge writes in “It’s Part of the Game” that “historically, sport has been a setting in which gender differences were established and celebrated. When women were admitted, it was on restricted terms and according to an adapted model... to conform to a view of women as fragile and weak” (69). Is there anything worse as a young man than being told that you “throw like a girl?” This phrase comes from a place of jest but behind it is a long history of exclusion of women from sport. From a very early age, girls are expected to be “seen and not heard” while similar behavior is excused on the other side of the gender gap for the reason that “boys will be boys.” Sport is one of the very first instructions given by society that boys should be aggressive, confident and active while girls should be docile, timid and domestic. When looked at in this manner, the importance of proper representations of gender in sport cannot be overestimated.

Theberge interestingly connects greater legal rights for women to a stronger importance placed on sport. She writes that “the historical grounding of masculine hegemony in force and power has been eroded by the willingness of the legal system to intervene in domestic violence...and the declining importance of physical work” (70). This puts a greater importance on the sports arena, being one of the only areas in which

men can still assert their dominance through force and intimidation. It is for this reason that a seemingly small issue like whether women can check (or what apparatus a gymnast uses or other examples of gendered rules) becomes a battle not only for gender equality but also against traditional views of femininity and masculinity in general. As a result, philosophy of sport with a focus on gender equality has become a hotbed for a multitude of theories on how to properly approach this issue.

People have suggested many approaches ranging from men and women competing together to the elimination of competition together. I do not think it is necessary for women to compete against men in order to gain equality in the sports arena. On the contrary, this may hurt their chances to be seen as viable participants in that they will not be as successful as men. I understand and recognize that there are physiological differences between men and women that would render even the best of women athletes mediocre when competing against men. Rather, I am calling for equality in reference to the rules in each gender's respective sport. By not allowing women to participate in full contact sports, society is saying something not only about their athleticism but also how a woman is viewed in general. Similarly, it is important for sports to remain competitive for all people to be able to strengthen their character through sport.

Iris Young said it best when she remarked that while 'there has been much progress in the status of women...little change has come in the masculinist idea of the feminine body as object' (262). She believes that there has been an exclusion of women from sports from the beginning, to preserve the definition of women as the 'other'. This identifies the female body as an object rather than the subject in discussion of sport (262).

The growth of athletics is stunted until women are viewed as athletes and treated as such. This can be easily accomplished by having the same rules for corresponding sports.

It is interesting to note where the burden of proof falls in this situation. As John Stuart Mill writes in *The Subjection of Women*, “For a cause supported on the one hand by universal usage, and on the other by so great a preponderance of popular sentiment, is supposed to have a presumption in its favour” (5). In most cases it is the group that is restricting liberties that must provide proof on why this group should be limited. However, when faced with longstanding beliefs that are linked to feelings, the burden of proof lies on those who want to change the standard (Mill 4). It does no good to argue against the current standard, so deeply ingrained in custom and tradition. Instead I will take the same approach Mill takes in his argumentation, go back to the beginning and disprove the original assumption in which all later feeling was based on. As explained through Theberge and Young, there have been general standards on what is “acceptable” for female athletes to play. These standards were based in a standard belief in the docility and physical and emotional weakness in women. Although better, these beliefs have not all disappeared but have subsided enough to make the argument for amending the current rules held for certain women athletes. Now, the criticisms against having the same rules regardless of gender must be seriously considered. It is easier for those oppressing women to feel as if women are incapable and they are helping women by keeping them out of athletics. Confining women in sports hinders their growth. While proving that women are more than capable in ice hockey, this will not be enough to prove this point in sports in general.

## **Are Women Physically Unable to Play Sports?**

Nancy Theberge has already told us that there has been a weakening in the legal support of toughness due to the outcry against domestic violence. This causes a crisis in masculinity for many men. Seeing their ultimate power over women slowly disintegrating, they looked to other areas to reestablish dominance. In *Sports and Male Domination*, Messner writes that ‘many men compensated the turn-of-the-century crisis of masculinity with a defensive insecurity that manifested itself in increased preoccupation with physicality and toughness’ (276). What this led to was a new overprotection of sport. The arena of sports was seen as a sphere impenetrable by the new independent feminine society. Women could be in the workplace and have some financial independence but were restricted from excelling in sports. These constraints allowed a place in which men were physically superior and looked as if they would always be (276). It provided stability for masculinity in addition to a connection between men. In a time with rigid class and place in society with little to no upward movement, sports linked all men, no matter their place in society. Sports like football that had a focus on aggression, force, strength, and included every male in society while concurrently excluding all women became especially popular.

Football was one of several sports as late as 1964 there were certain sports that women were excluded from because of the nature of how it was played. Examples of exclusive sport include ones’ ‘characterized by attempts to physically subdue the opponent by bodily contact, direct application of bodily force to some heavy object, ... situations in which body contact may occur’ (Weiss 213). In a post-modern period in



which feminism was just beginning to become a socially supported movement, restraint and traditional ideas of femininity were still heralded. Supposedly, if women were allowed to play contact sports, they would lose their air of docility and with that, their femininity.

However, there were sports in which women could participate. Any sport characterized by aesthetically pleasing motion and the application of light force was considered acceptable for a woman. Paul Weiss' main evidence to allow for the exclusion of women is the physiological differences between women and men. He writes a lengthy list that does not bear repeating on the inferiority of women physiologically including but definitely not limited to 'less muscular strength, lighter arms, and longer reaction time (Weiss 213).

Ironically, despite the inherent sexism in Weiss' writing (he maintains that women should be allowed to participate in sport to maintain a trim, firm body, with a desirable tone), he does have a firm grasp on the state of women in society without finding it problematic. Starting with the correct data, he comes to the wrong conclusions. For example, Weiss argues that it is part of the culture in 1964 to keep women from being hurt or disfigured which thus becomes one of the main causes for their exclusion from sport. He writes that "males can be treated as the norm with the women given handicaps in the shape of smaller and sometimes less dangerous or difficult tasks" (215). When the rules for women's sports were written, the women were treated as less capable men in a foreshortened version of similar sports as long as they wouldn't be in danger. Weiss argues that women should have the right to use "judgment, skill and imagination" by

“belong to something bigger than themselves, such as a tradition bound sport” (227). If taken through a sieve to weave out sexism, Weiss has quite a good handle on the nature of gender relations during his time as well as the benefits women will gain from participating in sport.

However, although I agree with much of Weiss’ argumentation, there are definitely some points in which I disagree with him. He writes that few women make athletics a career because of social custom, losing their femininity and the appeal of a social life. I would argue that it is the social custom that has taught women to think that they would lose their femininity and social life should they pursue sports. Femininity and athleticism are not mutually exclusive. In addition, although I will not spend much time belaboring the point, perhaps women did not make athletics a career in 1964 because they were unable to make a living. Here is an excellent example of an intelligent, well-informed philosopher being dated by his writing. In a similar way, the rules in women’s sports today are dating their influence in a different time. As Weiss must update his belief of what a woman is capable of, rules of sport must as well.

### **Where Does the Exclusion Come From?**

To return to Iris Young for a moment, in *The Exclusion of Women from Sport: Conceptual and Existential*, Young provides a compelling argument on the “subversive” exclusion of women from sport. Although written in 1979, her argument is still quite pertinent, specifically her discussion on how women are socialized to be inactive. She remarks that the aspects of the body that are most admired (the buttocks, breasts, and

neck) are the ones that least suggest action. She also notes that ‘feminine’ clothing that restricts action is also a concrete example of the emphasis on women as an object rather than a subject. These everyday notions of gender and femininity greatly influence society’s view of women in sports. This creates a tension between the idea of the inactive female object and women playing sports, which affects women’s ability to be taken seriously in the sporting arena where body and action becomes the most important relationship (263). Young justifiably takes this argument a step further, explaining that it follows that if there is a particular female person participating in sport, then either she is not ‘really’ a women or the sport she engages in is not ‘really’ a sport’ (263). This issue illuminates the different standards on behavior. What is it to “play like a man” or “play like a girl<sup>12</sup>”? These terms are double-edged swords. If a woman “plays like a boy” is she being complimented or having her femininity questioned?

A great example of this phenomenon is the 1983 Ms. Olympia competition. This female bodybuilding competition was historically more of a beauty pageant than a strength competition. Judges were looking for strong (with an emphasis on lean and thin) women who still retained their “femininity”. This standard was contested in 1983 by Bev Francis, a successful Australian professional power lifter. In the 1985 documentary *Pumping Iron II*, it was displayed in that judges had a problem with Francis’ level of femininity because of her vast strength. In a conversation between judges, the fact was illuminated that it was important for the contestants to look like women (from which of course one can infer that they did not feel that Francis met this qualification). What did they mean when they used the phrase “look like women”? Nothing about Francis’

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<sup>12</sup> Note the reference to women as girls. By calling women closer to childhood, “girl” is another way that women are subversively undermined.

genitalia had changed so she was still as female as any other contestant. Clearly the judges thought femininity has a certain look that Francis did not meet.

The judges were trying to exclude Francis based on a societal idea rather than the merits of her performance. Unfortunately, this type of exclusion is not isolated to adulthood. Rather, it starts at a young age with the discouragement of girls from engaging in physical activity or the qualification of how they pass their time as games rather than sport (263). This affects the development in girls in several of ways. First, when girls are not given the support and guidance that young boys get, their athletic development is stalled. (While I will not argue that this is the only reason boys and men tend to be better athletes, this does help to identify women as the weaker sex). Along the same lines, with the constant sanction against their participation in specific leagues or participation in games with contact and absences of resources, girls also tend to develop a sense that they are actually weaker (263). Regardless of the permeation of the idea of women as the weaker sex, the lack of support for their participation begins the trend of stagnation and lack of action for women.

Progress has been and still is being made. Throughout the history of our country, women have taken continuous steps toward equality. Whether working during the war, successfully lobbying for Title IX or becoming the breadwinners of some families; women have started to take on what were viewed traditionally as male roles. The progress should continue into the realm of sports. Since sport—and organized sports specifically—has been a means to continue the idea of male superiority, Messner writes that increasing female athleticism represents a genuine quest by women for equality by

means of control over their bodies and therefore represents a challenge to the ideological basis of male domination (274). It is easy to deduce that although society is no longer in the position to suppress women explicitly, sport can be one way to “subversively” continue to produce the ideology of male superiority implicitly. Messner writes that ‘not only do men as a group exert power over women as a group but historically derived definitions of masculinity and femininity reproduce those power relations’ (275). Basically, the dominant group is not only enforcing the rules, but also writing new ones so that they will always be dominant. As society adapts, the dominance adapts.

This power struggle takes place in the realm of sport and the concepts of femininity and masculinity (docile/active, weak/strong) that permeate how society looks at athletes. The classic example of why women ought to play by different rules is because they are just biologically inferior to men. The strength of this argument is in the supposed inability to argue with nature. Messner explains that since ‘sport appears as a sphere of activity outside society and particularly as it appears to involve natural and physical skills and capacities, it presents these ideological images as if they were natural’ (276). This is not the case. As previously mentioned, these ideas are sociological, with only a small percentage related to the physiological differences between men and women. In this way, sport has been an important arena for strengthening ideologies nowadays. Mill believes that women’s physical disabilities are clung to in order to place women in “subordination in domestic life” and continues that in general “the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal” (Mill 50). That is why it is all the more important that we examine the strength of female athletes and demonstrate that they are not the docile and weak creatures they were, and still are, claimed to be.

Progression towards equality in sport has been slower than one would hope and people often predicted. When the feminist movement entered the realm of sport, it was met with great opposition. In order to exist, their athletics had to be marginalized especially with the ‘establishment of an anticompetitive feminine philosophy of sport’ (Messner 276). Although this allowed women to enter into athletic play, it at once undercut the seriousness of their sport and the ability of the athletes. Even today one can see the subtle consequences of these first unwritten social laws. Examples include but are not limited to the societal response to Brandi Chastain tearing off her jersey after winning the world cup or the response tenacity of the Williams sisters. There are still certain societal rules female athletes must abide by to avoid the wrath of the media and others.

Women feel as if they must choose between being an athlete and being feminine in the eyes of society. In order to be “feminine” one must accept restrictions and marginalization by society. Messner successfully shows that the media plays a huge role in how female athletes are portrayed. More often than not, the media chooses not to cover women's sport at all. In the little coverage women’s sports gets, the media describes the women ‘either in terms of their physical desirability to men or in their domestic roles’ (280).

Of course the media has no such hang-ups about covering men's sport. By discouraging women to develop physically and at the same time encouraging men, there is a justification that men deserve this role of authority over women (265). This advantage is also seen in what sports American society believes most important and impressive; most specifically in sports that ‘put a premium on height, mass, strength and

speed' (265). This reasoning is not only illogical but also harmful to the development of an equal society.

### **What Should Change in Sports**

Traditionally women have been excluded from sports by what the powers that be call “for their own good”. The overall perception is that women are more likely to sustain injuries while playing sports than men. However, it can be quite easily seen that safety precautions are actually precautions against women becoming “too masculine”. There is a fear that women will ruin their appearance and until recently proven false, a great deal of weight was put into women’s reproductive organs being damaged due to physical activity<sup>13</sup>.

Jan Boxill in “Title IX and Gender Equity,” argues that women inability to compete in sports such as football reinforces society’s prejudices and perpetuates the inequity for women in sports (26). While we agree on this point, our ideas on how to solve this problem greatly differ. She believes that society should make the effort to support sports that favor women’s body types as much as the popular men’s sports. Society ought to put a greater emphasis on long distance swimming or situations in which flexibility is necessary.

Popular sports become so through history, sponsorship and their affiliation to what society values and enjoys. Some of the most popular sports in this country<sup>14</sup> are such because they have been played at the national level for nearly, and in some cases exceeding, a hundred years. Meanwhile, advertisement is a business. One cannot urge TV

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<sup>13</sup>On a side note, the damage that could be caused by the physical activity of having a child was never looked into on the grounds of it being “natural”.

<sup>14</sup> Excluding Nascar, although it has been around at least 53 years (Nascar.com)

companies and the media agencies to support long-distance swimming simply on moral grounds. These groups go to where there is money to be made and no one is watching long-distance swimming. For that matter while people are watching gymnastics it is still not always considered a sport. What Boxill fails to realize is that in order to garner respect female athletes need to succeed in sports in which society holds value in, namely aggressive, contact sports. As much as this seems like a good solution, it is impractical.

She continues by saying that another solution would be to modify the rules of existing sports to make special rules for women (26). Boxill is correct in her assessment that women's exclusion from certain sports that are identified as "macho" sports reinforces harmful stereotypes. However, saying getting more support for women's sports is a lot easier said than done. Women's games are slowly gaining popularity but currently, only women's basketball has the ability to draw anywhere near the type of crowds the men's game does.

Her second solution, changing the rules to accommodate women is exactly the idea I am fighting against. What Boxill does not understand is that just the changing of rule is marginalizing women and putting them automatically in a position of inferiority. Different rules are seen as proof that woman cannot play the *real* game and therefore need their own, easier game introduced. This solution will not induce equality but rather put women farther back.

Female athletes, when playing the same sports as their male counterparts but are made to play with different rules, proves that society is still based in an outdated idea of femininity. This attitude, along with rules of sport, needs to be changed. The first step is to understand the sex/gender division and thus show that the "biological superiority" of



men does not necessitate weakness in women. While sport seems to be a unserious place to build a claim for gender equality because it is recreational, due to a less definitive lines between men and women in politics, the work force, and the family, sports has become an important arena for gender politics. Creating equality in sports will be a great step for women towards equality elsewhere in society.

Equality starts with changing the fact that female athletes are viewed as *female* athletes, instead of *athletes* that happen to be female in sex. While men are looked at as athletes with no gender attached to this distinction, women are defined by their gender first and thus constrained to an idea that their participation in sport should be limited because of this. Therefore for women to gain an equal standing in society, it is important that they must gain an equal standing in the “flag carrying” sports. For this to occur women must be viewed first as athletes and therefore allowed to play the same sports with the same rules as men. When women can perform well at the same sports as men, with the same rules, there will be evidence against not only the social idea of the inferiority of women in sport but the underlying ideology that women are fragile and need protection.

I am calling for equality in reference to the rules in each gender’s respective sport. By not allowing women to participate in full contact sports, society is saying something not only about their athleticism but also how a woman is viewed in general. Similarly, it is important for sports to remain competitive for all people to be able to strengthen their character through sport..

We have come a great way from the “play days” of the past. If women were allowed to play at all, it was only with augmented rules and competition was not allowed. Teammates would change and an athlete never had the opportunity to take pride in her work (124). Play days seem silly in retrospect, and hopefully, soon so will different rules depending on gender. Although it is important to look to the future at what needs to change, it is also important to keep an eye on the past to have an understanding of where we’ve come from. Women have kept pace with men and are constantly showing their ability as athletes. So why are they still being babied and treated as second class citizens? People act as if since Title IX, all gender inequities in sports have been rectified. Men make more money and get more endorsements, they might say, but that is a social problem that needs to be fixed no matter the injury. In reality, the fight for equality is not over—it has only gone underground, which makes it harder to spot and change. As a society, we have just accepted these rules and the stereotypes on which they are based on. In this way women's sport continues to teach the next generation the very gender roles that it was intended to combat.

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