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ENGL 1010

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Swimming in the Men's Lane: Sexism in the 2016 Rio Olympics

In 1896, in the Bay of Zea off the coast of Piraeus, thirteen males from four different nations competed for the first medal in one of the most exciting and popular sports in Summer Olympic history. ("Swimming at the Summer Olympic Games") It wasn't until later, at the 1912 Stockholm Summer Olympic Games, that women were included into this exhilarating sport. Fast forward 104 years and women are dominating Olympic swimming and proving to be fierce competition; however, they still face a great deal of sexism.

For years, women have shined at sports, but have been belittled by the sexism of the media. In 1988, Krisztina Egerszegi became the youngest swimmer to win a medal. Her nickname was "the Little Mouse," "due to her youth, size and a phonetic similarity between her name and the Hungarian word for mouse." (Anderson, Race, Bowmile, & Keith) Then, in 1996, Amanda Beard "became the second-youngest swimmer in American history to win an Olympic medal." (Anderson et al.) Oddly enough, the main focus of this 14-year-old gold medal winner's Olympic appearance was her infamous teddy bear that she carried around everywhere. In the media portrayal, there is often a bias towards men, which impacts female swimmers. Even injuries are reported on differently with male and female swimmers. Through the deification of Michael Phelps and the hyper-focus on women's' role in their family and their appearance, female Olympic swimmers are not gaining the recognition that they deserve for their

accomplishments. In today's society, how a woman looks on the podium outweighs what she is on the podium for and the media is continually emphasizing gender differences.

There is a glass ceiling for female swimmers, and Michael Phelps stands atop the glass with his 23 Olympic medals. Yet, most are unaware of how the era of Michael Phelps has unintentionally restricted modern female swimmers from gaining proper recognition. One of the young women to put a significant crack in this ceiling is Katie Ledecky. Ledecky was praised for her performance in the 800-meter freestyle, when she beat the silver medal winner by 13 seconds. Nonetheless, Bleacher Report went on to say, "she doesn't quite have the versatility of Michael Phelps, but her domination puts her at Phelpsian levels." (Moore, 1) By juxtaposing her level of domination to Phelps', the author inadvertently does Ledecky a disservice. Phelps has never beaten the nearest opponent by 13 seconds, but by referring to the levels of domination as 'Phelpsian,' the author implies that Phelps 'owns' this kind of domination. Lastly, stating that Ledecky does not 'have the versatility of Michael Phelps', is a hasty generalization, as Ledecky has medals in sprints and long-distance events. The Bleacher Report was not the only instance that Ledecky was discredited for her accomplishments by the media's blatant sexism. Likewise, there is a newspaper headline that reads, "Phelps Ties For Silver in 100 Fly." (Allegretti) Under the headline, in a font about half the size of the title, the subtitle reads "Ledecky sets world record in women's 800 freestyle." (Allegretti) Even though Ledecky set a world record, Michael Phelps is a priority to



media coverage and prevails above her.

In addition to the consistent comparison of female swimmers and Michael Phelps in the media, important names in the swim world make hasty generalizations about Phelps. One of these is the world-renowned coach Bob Bowman who went on to say, “it’s not even once in a generation; it’s maybe once in 10 generations that a Michael Phelps comes along.” (“Phelps Golden Swansong”) This is beyond an exaggeration. If swimmers like Dana Vollmer, Missy Franklin, and Katie Ledecky are any implication of the future for Olympic swimming, we will see a lot more domination that mirrors and even beats that of Michael Phelps. The author uses a false dilemma, implying that one can either be Phelps or fail trying. Women’s accomplishments could be just as remarkable, but they would always be given less praise. In this respect, an Olympic blogger was reporting the Olympics as it occurred, and acknowledged how Phelps’ goodbye stripped the women’s 4x100m relay team of recognition for a huge national achievement: “The hullabaloo over the 31-year-old's farewell overshadowed the achievement of the women's 4x100m medley relayers as they captured a 1,000 Olympic medal for the United States” (Henderson). The women’s 4x100m relay made history by winning the 1000th medal and recognition was still lost because Michael Phelps was saying goodbye to his swim career. ‘Overshadow’ means to tower above and cast a shadow over. Michael Phelps stands upon the glass ceiling, towering above female Olympic swimmers, and until they are out of the darkness of his shadow, they will never truly receive the appreciation they deserve. While some may insist that the media covers and deifies Michael Phelps because he is more famous, it is important to realize that his

fame came from his accomplishments, and many female swimmers have matched these accomplishments.

Michael Phelps is not the first man that women have been compared to. Shirley Babashoff wrote about her journey in winning Olympic medals and comparisons to Mark Spitz in the media. Babashoff, a successful competitive Olympic swimmer, ended her career with multiple medals and six world records. In her book, though, she recalls that the Long-Beach Press Telegram wrote “Babashoff left the Trials with a buzz surrounding the possibility of a female ‘Spitz’ who could win a possible 7 golds at the Games.” (Babashoff) Women have long battled the labels of the female version of famous male swimmers, instead of being allowed to be themselves, but this is not the only way that the media hinders the reputation of female Olympic swimmers.

The media further diminishes the accomplishments of female swimmers by criticizing them for being mothers or wives. Becoming a mother and having a family permanently labels a female Olympic swimmer, which debilitates their reputation. Yet when Olympic male swimmers become fathers, there is an outstanding double standard. Becoming a mother or wife begins a phenomenon, like the plague, in the media. Everything these women accomplish suddenly is for their family, whereas for men, it is irrelevant. For example, in the eyes of the media, motherhood labels a female swimmer and dictates how her accomplishments will be reported on. An example of this phenomenon is after Dana Vollmer had her son and made the Olympic team. Just after the media highlights read: “Dana Vollmer Just Misses Becoming First U.S. Mom to Win A Gold in Swimming.” (Oakes) Another read: “Dana Vollmer makes history, brings home more medals for her son.” (Oakes) Vollmer is labeled as ‘Mom’, not an athlete or

a swimmer. Everything she accomplishes from here on out will be for her family, even things that have nothing to do with parenting, like swimming. Her medals are ‘for her son’, because, in the eyes of the media, nothing can be for herself anymore. Although Vollmer is almost thirty-years-old and beats women half her age, her newfound motherhood became the focus.

These media titles show up differently when Olympic males with families win medals, even though they are equally responsible for their family. For instance, “Grevers’ wife, Annie, is pregnant with their first child, a girl, due around Thanksgiving. And Phelps became a first-time father in May.” (Crouse) Other famous Olympians have had children within the last year, like Vollmer. Still, the title of the article read: “American Swimmers Leave Father Time in Their Wake.” (Crouse) A ‘wake’ means “a trail of water or air left by the passage of a ship or aircraft.” Literally, men leave their family to compete in the Olympics. Figuratively, men leave the title of being a father behind and compete in the Olympics for sole recognition, which is a privilege women do not have. In the media, having a family is irrelevant when acknowledging achievement for male Olympians, but it defines new mothers returning to the Olympics and is detrimental to how their achievements are covered.

New mothers are not the only ones being labeled. Being a wife can also cloud how an Olympic female swimmer is perceived. Katinka Hosszu is an incredible swimmer who always seemed to come up short when it came to winning medals. So, after she won her first medal ever, an NBC commentator focused in on her husband and said: “There’s the guy responsible for turning Katinka Hosszu, his wife, into a whole new swimmer.” (CBS News) Should credit go to anyone other than the woman who

physically exhausted herself to smash a world record and win a gold medal? Hosszu is the only one responsible for her performance, a performance that took grueling training and total dedication. Yet women more prevalently have the title of being a mother or a wife tacked onto their Olympic identity.

While women participate in the same amount of training, practice, and competition as men, the media ignores this aspect and instead has an obsession with female Olympic swimmers' appearance and technique. This obsession takes away from the female Olympic swimmer's talent and accomplishments by negatively impacting the recognition they receive. After Katie Ledecky's three gold and one silver medal domination, the NBC Bay Area tweeted: "so, just how does swimmer Katie Ledecky keep her nail polish chip free?" (Allegretti)



The NBC Bay Area tweet uses ad populum by emotionally manipulating the audience and downplaying Ledecky's accomplishments with focus on the care of her cuticles instead. Ledecky is pictured at the wall, after having won a medal, so one would think that the media coverage would embody her amazing athletic performance. This sort of rhetorical fallacy is not unusual in the media coverage of female Olympic swimmers. On

FOXnews, Bo Dietl and Mark Simone discussed cosmetic endorsement in the Olympics and how female Olympians should look on the podium. “Why not a little blush on her lips, and cover those zits! I like to see a person who wins that gold medal go up there and look beautiful.” (Mei) Being on the podium, for most, is about bringing honor to their country and receiving praise for decades of dedication to their respective sports. The way someone looks has no correlation to the Olympics or the sport they compete in. By focusing on their appearance on the stand and not their achievement in the pool, Dietl and Simone diminishes the respect for these incredible women and their amazing athletic accomplishments.

The media likewise focuses on how exceptionally fast female swimmers resemble men. Ledecky is often the victim of these sexist attacks. In regards to Ledecky, Ryan Lochte went on to say: “her stroke is like a man’s stroke. I mean that in a positive way. She swims like a man.” (Sheinin) Saying that someone ‘swims like a man’ implies that the masculine way of swimming is the standard. Katie Ledecky, Missy Franklin, Dana Vollmer, Natalie Coughlin, and countless others have all proved that men do not dominate the sport, and therefore, do not set the standard. By spotlighting women’s appearance, the media ignores female swimmer’s actual achievements.

Plus, throughout the media coverage leading up to the Olympics, there was a difference in how injuries define men and women. Missy Franklin suffered a back injury that took her out of some of the training for the Rio Olympics. The media focused on how it was all a struggle that overwhelmed her. For example, “The 21-year-old has struggled since turning pro last summer and seems a bit overwhelmed by the enormous expectations she faced going into an Olympic year.” (Newberry) “Struggled” and

“overwhelmed” have connotations of weakness and distress. It furthers the media’s perception of female swimmers as the weaker sex. However, when Chase Kalisz beat Ryan Lochte in the 400 I.M. because of Lochte’s groin injury, the media described Lochte as a king being dethroned. “31-year-old Ryan Lochte, the reigning trials and Olympic champion in the event, hung his head in disappointment” (Wayne). Both Franklin and Lochte face the same defeat, but Franklin is described like a wounded animal and Lochte like royalty.

The Olympics are just a microcosm in the vast world of female discrimination, and social science often examines why men and women in sports are reported on so differently. Society has certain expectations for men and women who compete, and these ideals often come from the years where women were subordinates to their husband. “Orthodox stereotypes of male athletes stress their possession and application of strength, aggression and power, characteristics which accentuate their masculinity. On the other hand, the athletic female is often faced with the expectation of conforming to society’s definition of what constitutes ‘womanly’ and thus more passive.” (Toohey & Veal, 158) Males are expected to embrace their hegemonic masculinity, or the idea that men are dominant and embody the characteristics a stereotypical man would, and women are expected to play a poised role of lesser importance. However, successful swimmers, regardless of gender, need to have power and strength in order to succeed. While some may argue that this sort of discrimination and adherence to stereotypes does not happen in modern society, the media continues to perpetuate these stereotypes to their audience.

Moreover, women’s sports lack adequate coverage. The media, “when asked why they persist in showing mainly male sports and continue to ignore women’s sport,

continues to justify their reasoning based on questionable logic, for example, that women's sport is dull and lacks excitement, viewers are uninterested in it, and is generally not very newsworthy. However, an Australian case-study of the Summer Olympic Games has shown that 'the public is attracted to televised female sports, if given the opportunity to watch it.'" (Toohey et. al, 167) Toohey and Veal prove that, given the opportunity, viewers would be interested and entertained by female sports. The gap of media coverage persists because of the old-fashioned stereotype that women cannot provide the strength and power, that stimulates entertainment. Speaking to this issue, "Wenner has identified three categories of attributions that encompass the most commonly used descriptions of athletes all of which exaggerate the differences and inequalities between male and female competitors. These are: successful athletes being described as "larger than life," strength being valued over weakness, and agency whereby men's success is frequently attributed to their raw talent, power and intelligence and women's to their emotion, luck and family support." (O'Connor, 99) This quote implies that luck, yes, mere luck, was attributed to multiple Olympic medal wins for women. No one wakes up one day and decides that they are going to win an Olympic medal based on straight luck. Swimming icons like Missy Franklin and Natalie Coughlin have proved that females can have the raw talent and intelligence, that the media desires.

Lastly, the attractiveness of female swimmers often has more of a presence in media reporting than their accomplishments do. Focusing on a female Olympian's attractiveness not only takes away from their achievements, but also adds add likeliness that the swimmer will not be taken seriously based on the superficial nature of the comments. According to media critics, "Sport commentators and writers often allude or

explicitly refer to a female athlete's attractiveness, emotionality, femininity, and heterosexuality (all of which effectively convey to the audience that her stereotypical gender role is more salient than her athletic role)." (Knight & Giuliano, 219) Female swimmers train with power, train with the goal of victory, train with aggressiveness and strength, and all of that suddenly becomes dismissed because their looks take precedent. The female aesthetic is something that America obsesses over, so much so that other countries cannot help but sexualize our accomplished female Olympians. "While one can conclude that Korean media sexually discriminate against the foreign athletes, it must be noted that Korean companies...acquire their picture coverage from the databases of famous foreign media companies or image distributors." (Markula, 181) Markula is admitting that, although there appears to be discrimination within the Korean media against other country's athletes, Korean media receive these photos from popular magazines and news sites. They are sexualizing what has been already sexualized.

America likes to ensure that our female athletes embody femininity and poise when they are represented or photographed, specifically in their Olympic portraits.



Missy Franklin, in her portrait, is smiling with her hip popped out. She faces the camera with the front side of her body, and the background is light and fun. Conor Dwyer, however, is facing the camera sideways with a monochromatic background. This creates the intensity that Missy Franklin's portrait lacks with the fake specks of light in the background and the childish pose. Males are portrayed to be these serious and fierce competitors, while females are depicted as weak and lesser athletes.

These problems have a detrimental effect on aspiring female swimmers that I experienced firsthand as a competitive swimmer for eleven years. My stroke was the butterfly, and as a result I had very broad shoulders when I first entered high school. By the time homecoming came around, I could not fit into any dresses because of my strong back and large shoulders. But in a society that emphasized femininity and attractiveness so much, I saw my shoulders as a burden, when it was really proof of all I have accomplished. Because society and the media do not highlight strength in famous female swimmers, I was ashamed of my body. The focus on attractiveness in female swimmers not only hurts their reputation, but also their self-esteem.

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Committee is also proposing a change to the events that could permanently alter the way female swimmers are described. ““Imagine Nathan Adrian handing over to Katie Ledecky... It could happen in Tokyo 2020! The sport's governing body FINA has proposed adding mixed-gender relays to the Olympic program.” (Olympic Channel) This amendment to the Olympics could force greater equality in how both genders are perceived in the media. It would be a lot harder to discriminate against female Olympic swimmers when they are competing in the same event as males. In order to create a gender-balanced media, male and female successes

must be recognized equally, male and female failures must be recognized equally, and male and females must be recognized equality.

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