

Sport in the construction of masculinity



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Gender studies is an interdisciplinary study which investigate different aspects of gender. Sport is one of the aspects that researchers in these years are trying to analyse in a gender perspective. It is believed that sport is socially conditioned based on many researches. This essay will examine sport contributing to the construction of masculinity by several ways, they are: gender stratification in tradition, homophobia in sport, sport as male bonding ritual, biased opportunities towards men and media influence. Further examples and elaborations will follow in each point to demonstrate sport is indeed a social constitution constructing masculinity.

Sport has long been instituted as male dominated and masculine in orientation by a couple of reasons. First, the historical gender stratification throughout a century has established that sport is an institution constructing masculinity. We are living in a patriarchal society that male are always in superior status than female, from economic status to daily life. The society has embedded a concept that the role of women is to give birth and their only obligation is to take care of children. But in 20th century, women are no longer highly dependent on men, as more and more women have become labours in the market. It has shortened the distance between two sexes, but obviously gender inequality cannot be eliminated so easily. Bilrell and Cole (1990) have mentioned that superiority of physical fitness is the key factor of winning in sport, and sport is the main activities emphasis on the sexual differentiation. Since sport emphasizes a lot on strength and bravery, male are thought to perform well innately than women (Klein 1990). As a result, the male participating rate in sport in general is higher than women. It is no wonder that Zane Grey (1992) in his book wrote “ All boys love baseball. If

they don't they're not real boys." This concept was passed on from generation to generation and eventually sport becomes a site constructing masculinity.

Second, homophobia is another factor constructing masculinity in sport. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, sport has somehow developed into a male hegemonic activity. Male who does not participate in sports are not regarded as 'real' man, and female participating in sports are thought to be manlike. They may, therefore, be treated as homosexuals. In fact, in the traditional socialization process, men in the early age had learnt that male who does not perform in manly way may see as homosexual (Messner 1992). Athletics, no matter male or female, may sometimes make apparent or even exaggerated movement to show their masculinity and femininity, just because they are afraid of people confusing their gender identity. Ordinarily, male's characteristics are tough, aggressive, competitive, physically strong, whereas women tend to show attractive appearance, to do make-up and wearing feminine clothing. The traditional association of physical strength, power and athleticism with masculinity causes many people to question the sexuality of women athletes. Former tennis star Chris Evert paid great attention to whether or not she acted like a woman in the court, and almost the end of her tennis career she finally willing to admit that she is an athlete (Woolum 1998). Though she is a tennis player, she tried to act like a woman so as to maintain her feminine image. When Evert evaluated on her early stage of career, she said she never feel like an athlete, she was just a person playing tennis (Woolum 1998). She would like to be a 'complete' woman such as having nail polish and wearing fancy hair band, rather than a 'freak'

in others' eyes. From this example, we have seen that sport is thought to be male-oriented. Since female athletes challenge traditional notions of femininity and their abilities are seen as stereotypically masculine, female athletes are always contending with homophobia so that they will not be labelled as lesbian. It, in turns, lessens female's willingness to participate in sport. As for men, they tend to participating in sport in order to show their manhood and avoid categorized as gay. It is, therefore, understandable that sports is a site for the embodiment of masculinity because of its nature of male-oriented.

Third, sports play an important role in masculinity because sport is constructed as male bonding ritual. Similar to fraternity and military, sport helps young boys making connections in their life (Fine 2000). As we all know, sport focuses a lot of competitiveness and aggression, or sometimes, even involves physical contact and collision in between athletes. These are the elements that enable the notion of masculinity and the hegemonic ideal to construct a boy into a real man. Burstyn (1999) believed that sport “ provided the kind of rituals of conquest and aggression that men with a weak sense of masculinity needed to symbolize, to make physical and palpable, the difference between a ‘ man’s man’ and a ‘ mama’s boy’ “, which means sport is “ succeeded in socializing boys into manhood despite the absence of the family father...” (Burstyn 1999). Here we realize that sport is in fact served as an embodied ritual of confirming and strengthening men’s gender identity. Even if some children may live in single-parent families, they are still able to achieve manliness as sport can be a replacement of father for them to obtain masculinity. All men can group together to retain their

manhood and to reassert their gender privilege via sport. Thus, we can conclude that sport is a bonding ritual for men to construct their masculinity.

In addition, biased opportunity towards men is a way to gradually construct masculinity in sport. Traditionally we are told that girls are only suitable for activities which are related to the aesthetic side of sports such as ice cheerleading and skating. Females are not recommended to engage in high physical contact activities such as rugby, boxing and soccer. In the schooling stage, gender socialization and gender typing shaped teenagers how they should act based on their gender. Plausibly, self-fulfilling prophecy has occurred and these norms have shaped individuals' behavior, which in turn shapes future expectations. This cycle has shaped our society into a male supremacy culture, and sport is an embodiment of this notion. The opportunities bias can be seen particularly in the professional ranks. Women's sport would never be at the top of the priority when business companies looking to use sports to market their product (Person 2009). They concerned with earning money from the advertising and they believed that the money return will not be as much if they invest in women's sport (Person 2009). The average salary can obviously indicate the inequality of opportunities within two sexes, men are able to earn 4 millions in average whereas women can only earn approximately 1.4% of men, around \$55,000 in average. Without social and economical motivation, girls devote less time to the sport. As a result, sport become male domain and a site for constructing masculinity.

Finally, media influence is a factor contributing to the masculine construction in sport. The Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles has done a

<https://assignbuster.com/sport-in-the-construction-of-masculinity/>

research (Wilson 1999) claiming that over 90% of American teenagers consume sports media. Since sports are mostly dominated by men, from the athletes and coaches to the commentators and reporters, media is definitely influential enough to transmit ideas about masculinity and maleness. And when it comes to reporting sport news, the newsworthiness is the main point reporters are focusing on. Men's sport is generally believed to have more attention and enthusiasm from the public, compared with women's sport. Sometimes after a match has finished, reporters are able to immediately interview male athletes in the changing room, it is, however, impossible to do the same thing on women. It is, therefore, clear that there are lots of bias and limitations on sports media which ultimately contribute to the construction of masculinity in our society.

In conclusion, sport was demonstrated as being a dominant social institution which naturalized men's power and privilege over women. It has marginalized and trivialized female athletes, which sequentially help reproducing the ideological of masculinity in sport.