This Ruff guide provides a broad overview of the extensive field of gender and sport.

The examination of gender and sport has been an ongoing focus for sports academics and practitioners for many decades. Much of this work has focused on examining women and sport and in doing so highlighted the discrepancies and inequalities that exist in female sports participation. In more recent years the role sport plays in constructing dominant forms of masculinities at the expense of more alternative forms has been discussed (For more information see Messner, 1992; McKay, Messner and Sabo, 2000, Coad, 2008). The prominence of sport as a cultural phenomenon makes it an exceptionally powerful transmitter of traditional ideologies and norms. It has been suggested that sport, perhaps more than any other social institution perpetuates male superiority and female inferiority (Lenskyj, 1998). Sport not only acts as a site for reinforcing the gender discourses, it provides a very visual arena for constructing extreme versions of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 1998; Messner, 2007).

The analysis of women and sport emerged alongside broader women’s equality movements and heightening awareness through these that female were marginalised and restricted within society by dominant assumptions regarding their capabilities and how they should behave. Sport as a masculine domain was identified as a further arena where women were either excluded or had their participation severely restricted through only being able to access female only sports opportunities (for a historical analysis of how ‘female’ sport has been developed see Hargreaves, 1994). Coakley (1990), suggests that examinations of gender and sport have focused on two sets of issues: 1. participation and equity issues and 2. ideological and structural issues. The first areas covers issues of participation, and considers gender inequities across participation, administration and delivery of sport whilst the second considers how sport is connected to dominant forms of masculinity and femininity. Researchers in both areas are usually committed to highlighting what changes need to occur to achieve gender equity within sport.
The increased academic interest in gender and sport has required that traditional theoretical approaches to analysing sport and society be reconsidered. This has led to the increased use of feminist perspective within analysis of sport and gender. Liberal feminist approaches to sport have focused on the lack of participation opportunities for women and girls and championed for greater equality in this area. The underlying assumption of this theory is that providing equality of access will remove barriers to participation for minority groups. Radical feminists have challenged this assumption and suggest that the issues surrounding gender and sport and much deeper than equal opportunity and focus is much more on highlighting how sport maintains and perpetuates restrictive gender practices. In more recent years as academic knowledge on gender and sport has grown it has become evident that women are not a homogenous group and should not be studies as such. The experiences of women from lower socio-economic groups, those from ethnic minorities or disabled women may be very different from the traditional white middle class woman much of early feminist analysis focused on. As a result post-structural feminism has grown in popularity for analysing gender and sport and allows for an understanding of the diversity of women’s experiences within sport. Gender sport and social theory has been examined extensively, useful texts in this area include Wearing 1998, Hall, 1996; Costa and Guthrie, 1996.

Women’s and Sports Participation

Social survey statistics indicate that women consistently participate in sport less than men (see Active People Survey 2006 http://www.sportengland.org/research/active_people_survey.aspx ) particularly team sports. Teenage girls participate less than their male peers and by the age of 14, 40% of girls in the UK have dropped out of sport and physical activity (Youth Sport Trust, 2000).

Women and girls are excluded in other roles in the sports domain, resulting in a sports structure and organisation that is also male dominated, and directly contributes to the construction of sport as an exclusively male domain. There are significantly fewer women coaches and
administrators and very few women in senior positions in sports governance, particularly not in the governing bodies of traditional male sports. The implications of this are discussed more extensively in the work of Shaw and Slack (2002), Aitchison, (2005) and McKay, (1995).

There have been significant policies introduced in the last 30 years to attempt to address these gender imbalances in both sports participation and administration. The USA initiated this trend by addressing female under-representation in sport through the use of Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments Act. The 1994 Brighton Declaration raised the profile of sport and gender inequity further and encourage 82 countries to sign up to an agreement which outlined the principles that should guide action intended to increase the involvement of women in sport at all levels and in all functions and roles. The limited success of these policies has continued to drive research in sport and gender to better understand the lower participation rates of girls and women and what can be done to address this. The remainder of the guide provides a brief overview of some of the key areas of research examining this issue.

Gender Sport and the Media

Sport holds such an important position within contemporary society that the sports media has become an institution in its own right. It has played a crucial role in perpetuating dominant assumptions regarding sport and gender and ensuring women remain marginalised within the sporting world. Women’s sports coverage is limited, particularly of team sports. Many authors have suggested female athletes are underrepresented in sports media as a mechanism to preserve sport as a male domain (Kane and Lenskyj, 1998). In research undertaken by the Women’s Sports Foundation (2003) five national tabloids were examined for a one-month period. During this time 701 pages of sport were analysed. There were 1564 photographs of men participants and 36 of women. In the text women received 2.3% of coverage. As much of what individuals learn is developed from information provided in the media, the limited coverage of women’s sport plays an important role in informing knowledge, opinions and attitudes about
women and sport. The media also plays an important role in determining how female athletes are represented. Those that conform to gender norms such as Anna Kournikova are able to generate significant attention despite limited sports success. Those females that do not conform are either ignored or demonised as 'deviant' and inappropriate (Duncan and Messner, 1998; Creedon, 1994).

Gender, Sexuality and Sport

As an arena that preserves and perpetuates dominant notions of masculinity and femininity there has been a focus on the place of homophobia and homosexuality within sport. Analysis has demonstrated how constructing female athletes as lesbians and 'deviant' provides a key mechanism for turning women away from sport as they fear participation may lead their gender identity to be questioned (Lenskyj, 2003). Consideration has also been given to the experiences of gay men and women within sport and how the negotiate homophobic stereotypes (Anderson, 2005; Messner & Sabo, 1994; Aitchison 2007). Some exploration has also been undertaken into the role of sport in providing a 'safe' space for lesbian women (Caudwell, 1999; Cox and Thompson, 2000).

Gender, Sport and the Body

The body plays a central role in constructing both male and female identity. Through body shape and appearance women can legitimise or condemn their sports participation (Hall, 1996).
If a female can participate in sport, but still adhere to feminine visual body discourses, it is likely her participation will be acceptable (Kolnes, 1995). However, female athletes are faced with something of a paradox (Krane et al, 2004). To be successful in athletics females must develop characteristics conventionally associated with masculinity that contradict hegemonic femininity (Krane, 2001). By developing a sporting body which sits closer to masculine ideals, females risk having their female identity questioned by the sexuality discourses discussed. Presentation of the female body within sports has in recent years extended to regulating what athletes wear, and this has ensured they are sexualised women first and athletes second. In beach volleyball, now an Olympic sport, women are instructed not to wear briefs with the sides longer than six inches. There is no practical justification for this other than to feminise the sport and ensure the players are viewed as sexual objects rather than athletes (Lines, 2000). Within the sporting environment women and girls stand to lose their identities as females if they do not adhere to body discourses. This makes the regulations surrounding this matter some of the strongest global discourses governing women in sport.

Gender, Sport and Physical Education

School sport, physical education and gender has received extensive examination. Schools play a key role in providing boys and girls with both their first taste of formal sports participation and in instilling beliefs regarding the appropriateness of sport. Many studies have demonstrated that school physical education is heavily shaped and regulated by dominant gender assumptions and teachers continue to hold and transmit many restrictive beliefs regarding how boys and girls should engage in sport (Penney, 2002; Scraton, 1992). Examination of girls’ experiences of PE have also been key for illustrating why many girls drop out of sport from an early age. Girls have been shown to have poor participation experiences as a result of being marginalised when participating, having to endure wearing skimpy and revealing kit and being subject to overly competitive and judgemental sports environments (Institute of Youth Sport, 2000; Williams and Bedward, 2002).
Reshaping Gender Stereotypes through Sport

Analysis of gender and sport is useful for understanding how sport maintains dominant and restrictive versions of masculinity and femininity but research has also examined its role in assisting to challenge dominant stereotypes particularly for women. Greater numbers of females are now participating in sport that ever before. Women’s football in the UK for instance has seen phenomenal rises in participation in the last 10 years. The higher numbers of women playing sport and particularly those thought to be traditional masculine suggests that traditional gender notions are under threat. Research in this area discusses the empowerment women can gain through sports participation, particularly through the development of ‘strong’ bodies (Heywood, 1998; Mennesson, 2000). However it is also evident the negotiation that female athletes have to perform to ensure that they are still perceived as feminine outside the sports arena. The overarching conclusion of much of this work is that whilst female involvement in sport is assisting with challenging some of gender norms, restrictive ideologies continue to prevail and participation takes place within defined boundaries of acceptability.

References


Krane, V. (2001) “We can be athletic and feminine” but do we want to? Challenges to femininity and heterosexuality in women's sport, *Quest*, 53, pp.115-133


Additional Useful References

Women, sport and management


Gender Sport and the Media


Gender and the sporting body


Gender, sport and sexuality


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Gender and Physical Education


Related Documents

The gender and sport society forum

http://www.gssf.co.nr/

http://www.wsf.org.uk/

Brackenridge, C. (2009) ‘Because I’m Worth it’: A review of women’s experiences of participation in sport and other physical activity


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