

Barriers to Female Officials in Sports

By: Brett Hietala and James G. Archibald

Refereeing has historically been a profession targeted exclusively for men. In the history of soccer, male opposition to the inclusion of women is well documented. In 1921, the Football Association banned female teams from competing on official Football League pitches (Forbes, Edwards & Fleming, 2014). The public reasoning for this move was that the sport was dangerous for women when in reality it was truly because women's soccer was a threat to the idea of the sport being a man's game. Although this created a rocky initial relationship between females and the soccer community, the Football Association has since revised their restrictions in order to be more inclusive, however, there is still much work to be had in combating discrimination within the sport.

Despite the discriminatory start, more inclusive changes have been implemented in this new era. More women around the world are being appointed as referees for a variety of sporting events. Over the course of the past two decades, female refereeing has seen a dramatic increase in everyday sports. The first account of female referees in a professional setting was in 1991 where three female referees worked in a tournament organized by the International Federation of Association Football, otherwise known as FIFA. Although they were employed by the organization for this tournament, they were not actually accredited by the FIFA organization (Denoncourt, 2017). In 1994, FIFA appointed four female referees were appointed to the international FIFA list (Denoncourt, 2017). Since these small initial breakthroughs, there has been quite an increase in the number of female referees in the sporting world, with an increase of 26 female referees in 1995 to a total of approximately 350 today (Denoncourt, 2017). Although the number of female referees has increased in the past two decades, the percentage of female to male referees worldwide is still quite unbalanced.

Despite the increase in female referees in the sporting world, many steps still need to be taken before equality is achieved. In 2012, the commissioner of the National Football League, otherwise known as the NFL announced the first female referee in the history of the organization. This announcement was obviously met with praise from one part of society, as well as disdain and sexism from others (Antunovic, 2014). Many media outlets reported this event as a special milestone for females in the sporting world, which helps to represent the evolving progressive culture of society, specifically regarding the empowerment of women in a male-dominated society.

Within the past twenty years, there have been substantial challenges to the traditional idea of specific gender roles within society. The evolution of the feminist perspective and the increased awareness regarding women's rights have allowed for substantial progress and societal breakthroughs for women everywhere. Although progress has been made, there are still barriers that restrict female referees in the sporting community. These barriers are still

significant, but with intentional interactions and deliberate actions, gender barriers can be broken down in order to create a positive and inclusive environment for all gender identities.

Barriers

When analyzing the reasons for the lack of female referees in the sporting community, it is important to analyze the major barriers and societal obstacles preventing women from entering the profession. These obstacles negatively impact the recruitment of women within officiating and need to be addressed if an equal representation is ever going to be attained within the profession. Some barriers include sexism, lack of female recruitment for the profession, as well as negative stereotypes perpetuated from the spectators. This relentless hostility continuously aimed at women has drastic negative implications for females in the position and tremendously harms the overall wellbeing of the official.

Sexism from players, onlookers in the crowd and other male referees is one of the biggest examples of the barriers facing women who attempt to enter a male-dominated field. “If women want fucking equal rights then they need to learn how to referee” (Forbes et al, 2014, p. 521)! This represents just one of the many comments directed at female referees during an amateur men’s football league game. Scenarios and outbursts such as this reaffirm the argument that female referees in a male-dominated sport trigger discrimination, sexism, and abuse from surrounding onlookers. In 2006, an amateur football coach named Mike Newell criticized a female referee and the Football Association by saying “She should not be here. I know that sounds sexist, but I am sexist” and “if you start bringing in women, you have big problems” (Forbes et al., 2014, p. 522). Openly sexist attitudes in male-dominated sports towards female referees are a huge component of why there is a lack of female representation within the refereeing community. Although reform to create more inclusive climates for women is needed and requested for by many, it is near impossible to reach if sexist attitudes and beliefs lie within the organization that recruits and hires the individual.

Sexist attitudes at the professional levels are still prevalent amongst some of the older more traditional folks who still hold positions of power within the professional level of FIFA officiating. Senior vice-president of the Football Association made an openly sexist remark stating that “A woman’s place is in the kitchen and not on a football field” (Sale, 2014). This comment was met with a four-month suspension and demonstrates the differing opinions of individuals in regards to women within referee positions. Being a female within the male-dominated environment of refereeing in the sports world is a challenge that male referee counterparts can never truly understand, due to the unique challenges and instances of discrimination that they face.

An underlying cause contributing to the lack of females in refereeing positions seems to relate to sexist and misogynist opinions permeating throughout society. Male dominated roles and environments are especially toxic, and an entire culture shift is required before women can truly enjoy equality within not only the refereeing community but equality within society as a whole. By having the conversation about what struggles women face in the male-dominated world of sports, it will lead to conversations that will lead to increased equality across the world.

Discrimination and marginalization of female referees transcend into multiple types of sports, rather than just a few. Female referees within a suburban rugby union also acknowledge and endure sexist and harassing remarks while in their positions, and are also “aware of their token status within the association” (Baldwin & Vallance, 2016, p. 61). This mental anguish demonstrates the mental barrier that women already face before they even step foot on the field. Due to societal gender barriers and lifelong held portrayals of what it means to be a

woman, some female referees are somewhat manipulated into believing that they are unable to complete a task simply because of their gender identity. This could also be a reason for a lack of female interest in refereeing in the first place because the sheer idea of being a female referee in a man's world is overbearing and intimidating. Gender roles, societal expectations, and stereotypes are powerful tools that hold power over the mind, and can completely prevent an individual from partaking in certain tasks or activities.

Gender Roles and Sporting Recruitment

Cultural gender roles are another component contributing to the lack of female referees within society. Recruitment tactics for referee positions are targeted towards male audiences, and thus impact the lower numbers of female referees. On a broad scale, female sporting events are generally much more underreported than men's sporting events. Essentially, accomplishments within the realm of female athletics are portrayed to be lackluster and insignificant in comparison to the accomplishments of men (Musto, Cooky & Messner, 2017). This lack of female representation in the sporting world by media outlets could add to the lack of interest in refereeing by female participants (Custers & McNallie, 2016), and may even add to the overall societal level of sexism towards women. Female sporting events are seen as insignificant when compared to male sporting events, and the comparison between the two can lead to extremely sexist assumptions and statements and gender roles, gender identity, and female sexuality in general.

Although recruiting women to the sporting world through mainstream media is lackluster through traditional sporting news channels, the interest in empowering young girls through sport is of high interest within young readers in the form of books (Heinecken, 2016). Books authored by female athletes are consistently some of the top selling books in the United States and demonstrate the upcoming shift in the ideology of young people, and the overwhelming increase of feminism in the nation (Heinecken, 2016). This shift in the generation demonstrates a possible increase in female participation in sports as a participant, which can then increase the interest in female refereeing. It is also important for these young women to have a role model to look up to because research has shown that having a role model to look up to can help alleviate the impacts of harsh stereotypes that negatively impact the impact of the individual (Todey, 2013). By having a role model that an individual aspires to become, increased dedication and performance are likely. Unfortunately, there are very few female referees that serve as strong inspirational beacons for young girls who dream to pursue the career, however, having a general female model that young girls can look up to can help to provide them with support in all aspects of life. These passions can include the urge to follow their dreams, which could indirectly lead to an increased interest in joining a male-dominated profession such as refereeing at all levels of sport.

Intramural Sports

At the collegiate level, intramural sports allow potential undergraduate students the first opportunity of their lives to learn the intricate rules and regulations of specific sports. Gender roles can have a large impact on women in regards to their decision to enter a male-dominated profession such as intramural refereeing. These women who decide to work as an intramural referee stated that they tend to place a lower level of importance on gender roles in their lives (Flint, 2012). These same women stated who participate in refereeing also claim that working as an intramural referee helps to develop their leadership and communication skills, which were transferable skills that could lead to future career choices.

An interesting aspect of being an intramural referee which is unique from all other levels of refereeing is the fact that you are officiating your peers. Intramural referees must find ways to

serve in a position of power over individuals who they might live with, have classes with, or individuals who they consider a friend (Flint, 2012). This is a unique challenge to intramural referees, and the intersecting role that being a female creates in addition to the other social identities may lead to a more negative experience within the intramural referee position that male referees may never experience.

Within almost every institution of higher education, there are core values and ideals that discuss the importance of inclusion and diversity on the college campus. Due to the fact that campus recreation has an obligation to carry out the mission of the university, it is essential to remember that college recreation needs to be heavily focused on inclusion. The National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association, otherwise known as NIRSA, has focused on advocating for minority and underrepresented groups within campus recreation environments. Through multiple training programs, social justice dialogues, and intentional conversations, NIRSA has helped to create a more inclusive and diverse environment for all identities, and thus assist in creating a more welcoming environment for all genders (Bravo, 2017).

Discrimination and Stereotypes

Discriminatory cultural stereotypes regarding women are prevalent negative barriers between women and pursuing a career as a referee. The idea that women are incapable of being successful and efficient referees in their respective sport simply due to their gender is a prevalent opinion within much of the sporting community. According to a 2014 study, former female officials stated that they experience a lack of perceived respect from male counterparts, inequitable policies, a lack of female role modeling, and an increased level of gendered abuse when compared to their male counterparts (Tingle, Warner & Satore-Baldwin, 2014). Together, the combined effects of these factors were substantially negative enough to force these female officials away from the profession of refereeing. Discrimination from fellow male referees tended to lead as the number one reason that female officials decided to leave refereeing, as various sexist comments and instances of exclusion led to a hostile work environment (Tingle et al, 2014). Incivility within the workplace has been shown to lead to decreased job satisfaction, burnout, and reduced retention rates and is a key aspect of the lack of retention of female referees in the sporting community (Tingle et al, 2014).

Spectator Harassment

Every day that female referees go to work, their gender, sexuality and overall qualifications for the position are attacked and questioned by others around them. (Forbes et al, 2014). These consistent attacks on gender identity are especially prevalent when the female referees make an honest mistake in officiating. According to a female referee, “When you make a mistake the first thing you hear is related to your gender, it's because you're female and not because you're a referee” (Forbes et al, 2014). When mistakes like these happen to male referees, onlookers tend to brush them off as simple mistakes, and never use these instances to attack their sexuality or their gender identity. Some female referees also note examples of onlookers attacking their sexuality by making assumptions about sexual orientation, or making sexually harassing comments. This showcases the sexist and discriminatory environment that female referees work in and highlights the gender gap between male and female referees in general. Female officials also bring up how they feel scapegoated when anything out of the ordinary happens within the game, such as excessively obnoxious fans, players or even coaches (Tingle et al, 2014). During situations that are out of the ordinary, the female referees claim that their gender identity is belittled and attacked, and some of the comments heard borderline on sexual harassment.

Within the professional realm, female referees are exposed to multiple levels of harassment from the crowd that male counterparts will never experience. For instance, in 2016 during a professional soccer game, a spectator shouted out that to the female referee that she needed to go home and do the dishes instead of being at the game (Polden, 2016). Following this sexist remark, the spectator was actually thrown out of the game, in which other fans cheered and applauded the removal. This example of support for gender equality and overall intolerance for sexist behaviors by the crowd assists in highlighting the rising support for women, and disdain for discriminatory behavior within society.

Implications for Practice

The struggle in recruiting and retaining women within male-dominated professions and environments is not an easy task and one that has many layers of complexity within it. The underlying issue within the lack of females in sporting official roles has to do with a patriarchal, male-dominated society. In order to entice more female officials into the male-dominated world of officiating, societal gender roles and expectations must be addressed and reduced. When thinking of the best way to combat this sexism and discrimination within society, one of the most logical places to start is at institutions of higher education. To eradicate sexist behaviors within society, it is important for institutions of higher education to encourage feministic behaviors and ideals within their goals for holistic student development. It is also essential for institutions to clarify what being a feminist actually is, and that it is a movement to end the exploitation, sexism, oppression, and harassment based on gender (Nicholson, 2011). This definition is extremely important due to the fact that too many people in society label feminists as simply man-haters. This is simply untrue, and if more people knew what being a feminist actually meant, society would be filled with people who identify with that title.

Sports are for all individuals and identities. Recruiting and retaining females within visible authoritative roles such as officiating can lead to increased societal change and reformation in regards to the equity of women (Tingle et al, 2014). Individuals need to be judged by their abilities and actions, rather than what their individual identities are. By creating more inclusive and healthy environment for female referees in sports, gender barriers will begin to break down and allow all people to pursue their dreams. As of current times, the constant threat of harassment, anger and unwarranted personal attacks on internal identities dissuade women to enter male-dominated fields such as refereeing. By having intentional conversations and encouraging societal wide acceptance of women and other minority identities, individuals will hold the power to truly pursue their dreams regardless of gender.

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