

Female Football Players & Male Field Hockey Players: Where Gender Integration and Notions of Sport Equality Collide

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In 1982, just a decade after the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1964, legal scholar Wendy Williams wrote about the limitations of liberal feminism to promote an agenda for change within a U.S. judicial system inclined to preserve the status quo. She argued that within this system of justice conceptions of women's equality were effectively defined within pre-existing, predominantly male cultural, legal, political and social worlds. The work of integrating women into these male structures and pursuing questions of equality served as an "...opportunity to rethink our basic assumptions about women and men, assumptions sometimes buried beneath our consciousness. They allow us to ask afresh who we are, what we want, and if we are willing to begin to create a new order of things" (Williams, 1991, p. 15).

Williams further described what she called an "equality crisis" born out of attempts to cope with issues "that touch the hidden nerves of our most profoundly embedded cultural values." As resonant as Williams assessment was at the time, and as foundational as it has remained over the years to our understanding of U.S. legal constructions of gender equality, the preservation of a sex segregated system of athletics within America's educational institutions renders the contemplation of a "new order of things" elusive and the possibility for sport equality crises to be a regular occurrence.

The reluctance of educational decision makers to affirmatively embrace Title IX's mandate in athletic departments, as evidenced in the remaining gender gap in participation opportunities favoring male students, inequities in funding between men's and women's athletic programs, and ongoing and persistent disputes about the breadth and scope of Title IX's reach all speak to a persistent crisis mentality that has lasted for over 35 years (Cheslock, 2006, 2008; Staurowsky, Morris, Paule, & Reese, 2007).

Intersections in school-based athletic programs where these crises take on particular power and meaning are found in the cross-gender integration of females on male teams and males on female teams (Darowski, 2005; Fields, 2005; Powell, 2004). An argument can be made that the hidden nerves of culturally embedded values associated with gender and athleticism are particularly exposed in instances where males pursue playing opportunities in the sport of field hockey.

Codified as a "female" championship sport by the National Collegiate Athletic Association and historically situated as a sport anchored in a matriarchal power structure in the United States, the integration of males into the sport of field hockey has produced widespread debate, ranging from the persistent question of whether male field hockey players should be required to wear a skirt for a uniform to perceived competitive advantages posed by male players who may be physically stronger and faster than their female teammates and opponents to the threat of a male takeover of the sport itself (Dunn, 2008; Riley, 2001). A gendered bookend to those debates are ones that center on concerns about female athletes in the hypermasculine sport of football, which bears the imprimatur of a "contact sport" under Title IX but has been accessible to female athletes under equal protection laws in various states (Furman, 2007). Notably, the gender integration of a college or university field hockey program would render it a "mixed-sex" team, making that team ineligible to play for a national championship in a sport classified as "female", while the same result would not be triggered if a female participates on a college or university football team.

The purpose of this study was to examine the roots of these sport equality crises by tracing the policy decisions pertaining to cross-gender sport participation made by sport governing bodies such as state high school athletic associations, the NCAA, and related bodies, such as the United States Field Hockey Association. Using critical feminist theory, consideration will be given to how these policies, most of which were created in the first wave aftermath of Title IX's passage, may be viewed as extensions of long held gendered assumptions that serve to maintain the status quo and prevent the emergence of a new gendered order in sport appropriate for the 21st Century. A case will be made that the contact exemption in the Title IX regulatory scheme that privileges football should be removed. The complications associated with integrating previously all female teams such as field hockey when gender inequalities favoring males remain in the athletic system will also be discussed.