

The American athletics track is still a man's world

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The limited coverage that American female athletes get in the media is one of many subtle forms of gender biases they have to cope with. The little exposure they do get often focuses more on their attire, or how attractive, sexy or ladylike they are than on their actual athletic prowess. In the long run, this influences their performance in sports. This is the view of Emily Kaskan and Ivy Ho of the University of Massachusetts Lowell in the US, published in a review in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*.

Kaskan and Ho looked at how pervasive small subtle biases and stereotyping of American female athletes are and what types of "microaggression" exist, examining how they put pressure on athletes and other women, as well. They reviewed popular Internet articles and research from the Psycinfo database, using keywords such as 'sexism,' 'sports media,' 'Serena Williams' and 'Olympic coverage.'

Their analysis shows how the media often portray female athletes as inferior to their male counterparts and are dismissive of their true abilities. The little coverage received often sexually objectifies female athletes by putting the spotlight on their looks and strength. On the other hand, the media is quick to recoil at women who do not fit into the traditional feminine mold.

While research on the actual impact of such gender-based microaggressions is lacking, much can be learned from studies about the effects of racial discrimination. Therefore Kaskan and Ho argue that subtle biases that place cumulative stress on female athletes influence

how they think about themselves and their abilities. Prolonged psychological stress can trigger changes in their hormonal, immune and cardiovascular systems, and make athletes vulnerable to, among others, heart disease and hypertension. This, in turn, can influence a professional athlete's livelihood when she loses her place in a team because of her stress levels, impaired focus or poor health.

The influence of subtle stereotyping goes beyond the athletics track. Kaskan and Ho hold that these messages suggest to other women that their athleticism is unattractive, their physical appearance is more important than skill, and that their ability is inherently inferior to that of men. This could even influence the self-esteem, body image and physical health of women who have little to no interest in athletics. For example, some may steer clear of weight training for fear of bulking up and becoming unattractive, even though this exercise helps strengthen their bones and wards off osteoporosis, diabetes, [heart disease](#) and depression.

"Biases against women in sports are harmful not just to athletes, but to all women, because they can influence [women's](#) decisions on what types of physical fitness activities to participate in," asserts Kaskan.

"Because [female athletes](#) often occupy other marginalized identities besides gender, more research is needed to understand how these multiple identities intersect with regard to experience of micro-aggression," adds Ho.

More information: Kaskan, E.R. & Ho, I.K. (2014). Micro-aggressions and Female Athletes. *Sex Roles*. [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-014-0425-1](#)

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