**COVID-19: lip gloss and the threat to women’s sport**

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown social inequalities into sharp relief and is therefore likely to evolve into a point of sociocultural articulation and resolution. One such enduring inequality is male and female sport, an inequality undetachable from broader sex inequality. While men’s sport has suffered during the pandemic, women’s sport has suffered significantly more in terms of a thicket of features such as access, support structures, finance, media and gender ideology. Without robust post-pandemic responses that prioritize female sport voices, the progress made by women’s sport threatens to be dramatically reversed. Many girls, furthermore, may struggle to return to recreational sport (or return to their former extent) when the conditions of the pandemic are over. The critique of and prescriptions for the preceding disparities can use insights from Liberal Feminism, with its themes of equal access and status; Radical Feminism, with its themes of epistemic and political authority for women; and Marxist Feminism, with its theme of gendered economic inequality.

**Keywords**: gender, finance, access, ambiguity, sexualization

**Introduction**

At the height of the pandemic’s first wave in April 2020, Women in Sport Chief Executive Officer Steph Hilborne (2020) observed that “People are saying this pandemic may be a reference point for decades to come, in the same way the war was for many people.” The effects of COVID-19 upon sport are bound to be massive and revealing. Some of these effects might be ambiguous and, finally, salutary. The pandemic cannot but shine a light upon material and symbolic fault lines within sport. Furthermore, the pandemic might threaten to widen those fault lines. Therefore, measures and policies aimed at closing or narrowing them might ring more urgent.

Long established within the academic treatment of gender in sport is exposure, unpacking and critique of an ideology with a cluster of features and effects, including: “real sport” is a male enterprise that valorizes masculine characteristics such as strength, power, speed and competitiveness (Burke 2004, 179; MacKinnon 1987, 120; Willis 1994; Young 2010, 18-19; Burrow 2020; English 2020); sport and femaleness are antithetical (the “athlete/woman ideological tension”) (MacKinnon 1987, 120; Willis 1994; Burrow 2020; English 2020) and the female athlete (in the broadest sense) response of “emphasized femininity” (Daddario 1994, 284-285; Molnar and Kelly 2013, 99-100; English 2020; Sailors and Weaving 2017); there is less media coverage of women’s sport, putatively legitimated by market imperatives (Duncan et al. 1994, 253-254; Burke 2004, 170; Burrow 2020; English 2020); in media coverage, women athletes are liable to have their athletic identities discursively deprioritized in favour of their sexual appeal (Burke 2004, 170; Sailors and Weaving 2017); the said tendency towards sexualization, alongside the economic subordination of women’s sport, leads a few women athletes to profitably collude in their sexualization, reinforcing an underlying definition of the situation that disempowers the majority of women athletes (Burke 2004, 170); there is less sponsorship of women’s sport; women athletes are paid less, in terms of wages, prize money and endorsements; women athletes are liable to infantilization (Duncan et al. 1994, 261-262; Daddario, 1994, 281-284; Burrow 2020; English 2020); and there are gendered double standards in terms of sociocultural framing of male and female athlete behaviour (Edwards, Jones and Weaving, 2013).

This chapter has three objectives: first, to illustrate and theorize COVID-19’s exposure and reinforcement of some of the preceding material and symbolic gender inequalities within sport; second, to consider the prognosis for women’s sport; and third, to sketch a prescription for women’s sport. The chapter therefore has a feminist framework, with different species of feminism apt for different examples and different feminisms co-habiting within examples.

The focus is predominantly on women’s professional sport. However, since COVID-19’s effects are liable to diffuse across the ecosystem of sport, these effects threaten to be felt more widely, as we try to illustrate.

**Marxist feminism: domestic labour, financial and symbolic inequality**

The defining tenet of Marxist Feminism is that the most fundamental oppression suffered by women in the capitalist system is economic. For instance, women typically perform vital unpaid labour in maintaining a home and raising a family, in turn raising (a) the next generation of labour to sustain capitalism, and (b) the next generation of women to look after homes and raise the succeeding generation of labor and mothers. And so on. This is arguably a blind spot in classic Marxism. As Whelehan (1995, 48) puts it, “Women’s realms as reproducers, carers and nurturers within a monogamous family relationship are largely left untouched by Marxism’s concentration on the public sphere of waged labour and the accumulation of capital.” Whelehan also observes that this reinforces the separation of the “two worlds” of public and private, identified with the male and female respectively, and with the former granted ontological superiority (53).

Economic capital tends to ground other species of capital, such as social, cultural and educational. Conversely, lack of economic capital tends to significantly limit one’s access to capital of other kinds. In sport, as Molnar and Kelly (2013, 169-170) observe, “men still have more and wider opportunities to turn professional and make a living out of practicing and performing.” They offer the piquant illustration of bodybuilder Joanna Thomas, unable to secure sponsorship and moved to provide nude pictures of herself on the internet for paying customers to supplement her income. A more banal illustration in the COVID-19 context is provided by the fact that the 2021 Men’s Six Nations rugby tournament proceeded comparatively close to when it normally would, while the women’s equivalent—which usually runs at the same time as the men’s—was postponed until later, because of the expectation that the COVID-19 situation would be better. The ground of this decision is that with only one team (England) in the women’s tournament fully professional, many women players need to return swiftly to their jobs, some of which are in key and front-line occupations, making it riskier to play the women’s tournament over February and March (Sky Sports, 2021). Even if this rationale is sound, it throws the subaltern status of women’s rugby union into sharp relief.

Again, while the top and second tiers of men’s Scottish football (soccer) have continued, the women’s game has been suspended at all levels during the pandemic, inciting the chief executive of women’s club Glasgow City to implore the Scottish Football Association in February 2021 to release FIFA funds long earmarked for the women’s game (BBC, 2021a). Additionally, a women’s professional hockey league in North America, the National Women’s Hockey League (NWHL), were to play 24 games over a two-week period in a bubble. On the eve of the playoff commencing February 3, 2021, league play was suspended because of COVID-19 positive cases (Sportsnet, 2021). Meanwhile the National Hockey League (NHL) continued season play for the men, and teams continued to compete for the Stanley Cup. These decisions, again, cannot be detached from the respective financial frameworks of the leagues and cannot avoid disparate financial consequences.

*Sports Illustrated* senior writer Jenny Ventras (Pickman, 2020), again, observes that “Salaries for female athletes are on the whole, lower than men, and because in many cases their opportunities for major sponsorship deals are fewer, they are economically not as well positioned to handle the sports world being put on pause.” Hilborne (2020) laments that a Women in Sport 2018 report (*Where are All the Women?*) found that women’s sport was accounting for only 4% of media coverage in the UK. Since the media, especially television, pumps substantial quantities of money into sport, this figure suggests a considerable shortfall for women’s sport. The low media coverage cements another feature liable to have serious ramifications for post-COVID-19 women’s sport: since, as Hilborne (2020) again observes, women’s professional and semi-professional teams in traditionally male sports like football (soccer) and rugby generate far less than their male counterparts in match day and broadcasting revenue, they tend to be funded from other areas of the business. Therefore, when the books need to be balanced, the women’s game is under significantly greater threat. Among the examples noted by Hilborne is the possibility of teams in the top-tier Women’s Super League and second-tier Championship folding. Another example (BBC 2021b) that might be noted is that of the women’s team at Birmingham City FC, for whom problems include inadequate squad size, lack of payments for non-contract players, other players earning less than the minimum wage, delayed treatment of injuries, players compelled to play when not fully fit and irregular access to ‘suitable pitches’. To this can be added (Blinder 2021) controversial gendered inequities within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), including training facilities for the women’s Indiana tournament which are vastly inferior to those for the men’s Texas tournament, differences in the welcome gifts and coronavirus testing offered to men and women players, meal options, and the use of the March Madness trademark exclusively around the men’s event.

Returning to soccer, The Football Association has admitted there will be no COVID-19 financial support for women’s teams, and Jonas Baer-Hoffman (Hilborne, 2020), General Secretary global professional footballers’ union FIFPro, has warned that the pandemic presents an “almost existential threat” to the women’s game. If this threat comes to pass, then media coverage is liable to plummet from its already low base, diminishing both input and interest. However, Gillen (2021) observes that women’s sports has survived the pandemic thus far, even though in April of 2020 (early in the pandemic), the outcome was bleak:

Women’s teams, leagues and competitions have been perennially underfunded and ignored, although there are slight variations between country and sport. The pandemic exposed the already fragile foundations of women’s sport. At a time when clubs and governing bodies were experiencing financial woes and making cuts, the outlook for female athletes did not look positive.

Gillen claims that the pandemic created opportunities for women’s sport, like the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) Challenge Cup that took place in the USA in June and July 2020. However, despite the ratings success, there has been little opportunity to play football in the US since, and players moved to Europe. The USA held the *She Believes Cup* in February 2021, but it is too early to assess its legacy (US Soccer, 2021). There have been some gender gains, like the IOC claiming gender equality for the 2024 Olympic Games. However, such statements are mere promises at this stage, and until put into action remain that.

Hilborne (2020) notes that sports which are traditionally for women and girls are not invulnerable either. England Netball has admitted to a future of “considerable financial pressure” as teams in the Vitality Netball Superleague prepared in the Spring of 2020 to put staff on furlough. The preceding examples evidence Ventras’ counsel that “It's the women's leagues and female athletes who, without our attention, are much more at risk of not being able to pick up where things left off” (Pickman, 2020).

The upshot of economic imbalance is felt for individual athletes too. Hilborne (2020) notes that Welsh international footballer Angharad James was stopped by the police for training in a local park, despite following exercise and social distancing guidelines. Were it Gareth Bale (say), not only would the police recognize him, but he would be highly unlikely to be in the local park, as his money would allow him a home gym or he would be couriered equipment by his club.

 Cavallero and Gago (2020, 4), echoing Marxist Feminist insight, wrote how as a result of COVID-19, the politicization of domestic labor has been emphasized: “The quarantine amplifies the scene of social reproduction: that is, it renders visible the infrastructure that sustains collective life and the precarity that it produces.” Consider the (men’s) National Basketball Association (NBA) and Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) bubbles in the lockdown summer of 2020. The women basketball players brought their children to the bubble and had to manage care and online schooling while competing for a championship. Children were not allowed in the NBA Bubble until the final weeks. As journalist Hensley-Clansey (2020) puts it,

Children and families are not allowed in men’s league bubbles, partly out of concerns over the size of the operation and its cost. But those decisions, and the different ones in women’s leagues, also are a reflection of how American society largely treats child-rearing as the responsibility of women, even as the workload takes a toll on their careers and mental health.

Women athletes juggling childcare and their children’s health and well-being has been amplified during the pandemic, and such labor has become more visible, reinforcing traditional gender expectations. The asymmetrical arrangements between the women’s and men’s games—with children and families not allowed in the men’s league bubble until the final days—also provide ideological reinforcement of the preceding notion that “real” sport is a male enterprise and women’s equivalents the diminutive versions. The two ideological reinforcements sit together well. At the same time, their heightened visibility in the pandemic might facilitate a strengthened challenge to them.

 The effects of COVID-19 alongside the spectre of traditional gender expectations are not confined to professional sportswomen. Many girls across the world have not been attending school and therefore have not experienced Physical Education in the usual way (and in some cases, not at all). Being at home during an extended crisis leaves many girls vulnerable to (among other things) the pressure of traditional gender expectations. UN Women (2020, 5) observe that “once containment measures lift, many girls will be unable to return to sports practice, as traditional roles will have set in and their contributions to the economy and care for the family will be seen as necessary to family well-being and even survival, overshadowing the ‘luxury’ of their sport practice.”

**Liberal feminism: the rational, autonomous subject**

Liberal Feminism is known also as Sameness, Equality and Humanist Feminism. Inspired by thinkers that include nineteenth-century couple John Stuart Mill (1962, 1991) and Harriett Hardy Taylor Mill (1868), as well as twentieth-century luminaries such as Simone De Beauvoir (1949) and Betty Friedan (1963), it downplays sex differences, taking the female human to be defined by the same characteristics as her male counterpart: rationality and autonomy. Women best realize their natures when allowed to realize their abilities and frame their life plan as they see fit, free of the strictures or pressure of government, family, social attitudes and civic society. And women have largely the same abilities as men, with “femininity” a social construct that limits women’s possibilities at legal, social, cultural and psychophysical levels.[[1]](#endnote-1) One of liberal feminism’s defining motifs, therefore, is equal female access to formerly male spaces such as education, the professions, politics and sport. Illustrations in the preceding section ground currency for this motif, as they show that women’s access to sport is, when tested, far from equal to that of men. Again, support structures to enable optimum and safe performance are also inferior, illustrated luridly in the cases of the Birmingham City women’s football team and the preceding NCCA inequities.

While Liberal Feminism’s bete noire is femininity and Marxist Feminism’s bete noire is gendered economic inequality, these feminisms can cohabit. No one’s abilities can be realized if they lack necessary economic resources. Conversely, women often lack economic resources because ideals of femininity often confine them to domestic duties, child-rearing, and, at best, work that is poorly paid or which grants them inferior status (or both). Sport is a showcase of this cyclical relationship: the said femininity ideals support the exclusion, subordination and trivialization of women in sport. Women’s resultant catch-up game has unavoidable effects on performance outcomes, in turn recreating false beliefs about female capacities, sociocultural rationales for the subordination of female sport and inferior financial input. Women’s sport is therefore bound to reap the pandemic harvest illustrated. And if UN Women (2020, 5), again, are correct, repressive gender expectations present a heightened threat to girls’ participation in sport *beyond* the pandemic, too.

**Radical feminism: patriarchy and the control of women’s bodies**

Radical Feminism is heterogenous. Luminaries include Morgan (1970), Greer (1971), Millett (1977) and Firestone (1979). At least two overlapping themes are prominent: patriarchy and the male control of female bodies, mythologized in patriarchal discourse as inherently anarchic and dangerous. The former signifies a diffuse and total system of male domination, which outmanoeuvres legal equality of the sexes. It is outlined by Morgan (1970, 1):

Everything, from the verbal assault on the street, to a ‘well-meant’ sexist joke your husband tells, to the lower pay you get at work (for doing the same job a man would be paid more for),[[2]](#endnote-2) to television commercials, to rock-song lyrics, to the pink or blue blanket they put on your infant in the hospital nursery, to speeches by male ‘revolutionaries’ that reek of male supremacy – everything seems to barrage your aching brain, which has fewer and fewer protective defenses to screen such things out. You begin to see how all-pervasive a thing is sexism – the definition of and discrimination against half the human species by the other half.

While Morgan’s zero-sum conception of sexism might be contentious,[[3]](#endnote-3) its acceptance is not essential for the recognition that sexism that wrongfully disadvantages females is both pervasive and dissembling.[[4]](#endnote-4) The phenomena cited in the second paragraph of this essay, and discussed further below, provide illustration from sport. While few would deny the moral primacy of female access to sport, the limitations of this ideal are, again, long established (see, for instance, Boxill, 1995; Burke, 2004, 2010; Howe, 2015; English, 2017). When control of women’s bodies is an imperative of patriarchal power, this power has no choice in a practice defined by bodily expression but to busy itself in the status and framings of women. Hence, for instance, the preceding material and symbolic primacy of qualities in which the best men are likely to always outdistance the best women, the sexualization and infantilization of female competitors, and the Scylla and Charbydis of success at sport and success at being female. Therefore, for sport to fully realize its potential as a site where women can secure their bodies (and selves) from patriarchal control, access is insufficient. They need also to gain epistemic and political authority. Burke (2010, 22) puts it shrewdly:

We may be better served as feminists if we recognized that at certain times it will be necessary to argue as a liberal feminist, concerned with public issues such as the inequality of funding for female sports bodies, or the lack of access to certain sports competitions for females because of the way that equal opportunities legislation has been written. At other times, it will be more useful to argue in the terms of the radical feminists and challenge the male bias in the descriptions of sporting excellence or sporting entertainment. Hence, it is important to recognize that entry into cultural institutions and practices that have a long history of male control and definition may be a necessary condition of greater authority for females, but it is not a sufficient condition. What women do when they get to play these sports is also critical to the development of an/several authoritative female voice(s).

The following COVID-19 era illustrations yield further demonstration of the need for post-COVID authoritative women’s voices.

*Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism and a crippling ambiguity within a women’s post-COVID-19 ice hockey campaign?*

Willis (1994, 39) observes, in Radical Feminist spirit, that “ideology can never afford to let contradictory interpretations of reality go free from at least a crippling ambiguity.” Conventional gender ideology can therefore never allow female performances of conventional masculinity or male performances of conventional femininity to avoid a crippling ambiguity. Molnar and Kelly (2013, 99-100) provide two media examples (although they do not use the term, “crippling ambiguity”) in immediate succession. In each case, the piece might be thought to challenge dominant ideological assumptions yet ends up reinforcing sexist stereotypes. The first is a BBC interview with UK Olympic cyclist, Victoria Pendleton. The fact that Pendleton is getting prime time on probably the world’s most revered broadcasting network could easily appear emancipatory for her, female athletes and women. However, the interviewer heavily refracts the interview through the putative dilemma of maintaining one’s femininity alongside the aggressiveness and assertiveness needed to be a top-class athlete. After confirming her involuntary affinity with “girly” things (“I can’t help liking girly things”), Pendleton disavows the preceding aggression by saying it does not “come naturally” to her and that it is not how she is “in everyday life.” She adds her reliance on her male coach to give her everything she “needs.” The final, hackneyed message of a superficially progressive feature is that Pendleton’s femininity is natural and her athletic aggression unnatural, her male coach needed for inculcation of the latter. The second case is a tabloid article on football (soccer) lineswoman Sian Massey, a recent object of the primitively sexist (and factually incorrect) ridicule of commentators Andy Gray and Richard Keays.[[5]](#endnote-5) Apparently defending Massey against trivializing stereotypes, the piece provides a full-length photograph of her in mini-skirt and revealing blouse, dancing in what looks like a bar. This contingent decision serves to reinforce the reductive conceptions of women inscribed in the comments of Gray and Keays.

Attempts to champion women’s sport in the face of COVID-19 are liable to crippling ambiguity. In October 2020, the (Canadian) Professional Women’s Hockey Players’ Association website carried an item headed, “SecretR Deodorant Keeps Women’s Hockey Afloat During Covid-19 With $1 Million Dollar Commitment to PWHPA”(PWHPA, 2020). The piece noted of the “new normal” that “it is apparent women will face a disproportionate negative impact in their daily lives and in sport.” As illustration, the article observes huge revenue losses, deep cuts and a tight focus on “core business,” i.e. the ‘safe bet’ of men’s sport. The opening paragraph’s synopsis concludes starkly, “While men’s professional sports have continued to push forward defying all odds, women’s professional hockey has taken a back seat and is in jeopardy of losing all momentum.” **SecretR Deodorant** frame their commitment with the seemingly unexceptionable principle that “equal sweat deserves an equal opportunity.” So far, all sounds congenial to a Marxist Feminist or Liberal Feminist treatment of post-COVID-19 women’s sport. The Marxist Feminist flavour inheres in the economic disadvantage—and its effects—suffered by women’s sport. The Liberal Feminist tang inheres in the sex-blind principle, “equal sweat deserves an equal opportunity.” The equality of opportunity trope continues apace, with highlighting of the role of **SecretR**, including the **SecretR** Dream Gap Tour,in securing female access to training facilities.

The crippling ambiguity emerges in the **SecretR** slogan. **SecretR** is, we are told, the first antiperspirant designed specifically for women. This might be innocuous—not an ideological endorsement of the notion that sweat is gender-inappropriate for women—since there is evidence that female sweat smells differently from male sweat (Schwarcz, 2017) (albeit this rationale for **SecretR** is not confirmed in the article). The ambiguity inheres in **SecretR**’s latest campaign, “All Strength, No Sweat.” The first, superficial observation is the incongruity between this campaign slogan and **SecretR**’s erstwhile championing of the “equal sweat” of female athletes. In reading on, it becomes clear the second part of the slogan is a figurative construction, intended to signify a comparative ease with which women are to be imagined overcoming obstacles (women do not “sweat” the obstacles). However, this strained metaphor cannot avoid implication in a crippling ambiguity. First, it is natural and healthy for people of both sexes to sweat obstacles, literally and figuratively. Some of these obstacles are bound to be—for people of both sexes—unfair. The “no sweat” image for women perilously courts the feminine ideal of bodily self-possession—complete with fragrance— implicated in the past and present status of female sport bemoaned and challenged by **SecretR**. Second, this feminine ideal yet wields significant ideological power.[[6]](#endnote-6) Finally, the raison d’être of **SecretR** is to counteract the effects of specifically *female* sweat. Taken together, these considerations mean that **SecretR**’s “All Strength, No Sweat” slogan cannot avoid the contextual result of a crippling ambiguity about the literal sweat innocuously involved in women’s sport (and broader physical activity), and which **SecretR**, in liberal feminist spirit,have said should ground equal reward. A piece apparently inscribed with a fusion of Marxist and Liberal feminisms now courts (re)normalisation of distaste for female sweat, a historically potent and limiting gender norm, as well as illustration of the dissembling and potent sexism that Radical Feminism counsels is omnipresent.

*Hockey and lip gloss: further crippling ambiguity?*

 On October 18 2020, USA Hockey tweeted, “Look good. Feel good. Play Good.” The tweet pictures a young girl hockey player wearing a bright oversized pink hockey jersey and what seems like hockey pants. Her sleeves are rolled up and she appears to be in a hockey arena, as there are hockey trophies behind her. She has blue eyes and blond hair, pulled back in a ponytail with a few curls framing the side of her face. Yet she is not near an ice surface. Her stick, hockey gloves, or helmet are not featured in the photograph. In the photograph, the player is applying lip gloss with a long applicator and her lips are semi-parted (the girl does not smile, and her gaze is directed towards the photographer). It seems to be a posed picture rather than capturing a ‘moment’. The caption reads, “Look good. Feel good. Play good.” This tweet was met with backlash from journalists and athletes alike. The promotion sends the message to young girls that the most basic imperative is to appear feminine (to “look good”), and that satisfaction of this imperative is a condition, no less, of feeling good and playing “good.” It offers subtle illustration of MacKinnon’s (1987, 120) analysis:

In other words, men simply learning to be men, learn not only sports but learn those things that become elevated, extended, measured, valued and organized *in and as sport itself*. Women, simply learning to be women, do not learn those things, do learn the opposite of those things. So, it’s no news to any of you that being female and being athletic have been socially contradictory and that being male and being athletic have been more or less socially synonymous. Femininity has contradicted, masculinity has been consistent with, being athletic. Women get to choose between being a successful girl and being a successful athlete.

The USA tweet, again, confirms the narrative that in order for girls and women to participate in hockey and “play good,” one needs to “look good.” And whose conception of “looking good” is inscribed in the narrative? Here, looking good reflects traditional White stereotypical heterosexual ideals of girls and women, the ideals manifest in what Lock (2010) calls the “heterosexually successful” female. Given the pandemic, and the lack of elite women’s hockey being played, it seems odd and regressive that USA hockey celebrate, promote, and in turn sexualize young girls. This method of promotion not only does nothing for the political and sporting authority of women, but also emphasizes a triple-layered problem, given the apparently young age of the player photographed.

Sport offers women the opportunity for empowering ownership of their bodies. As Boxill (1995, 30) appositely puts it, “For the vast majority of people, sport is the most available form of unalienated activity and consequently is an important way that people develop their uniquely human attributes, their self-respect and their self-esteem. In this way, sport serves to humanize the individual.” The (hetero) sexualizaton of women athletes, however, obstructs women and girls’ realisation of sport’s emancipating and humanizing potential, since it casts their sexual appeal as more contextually normative than their sporting ability. Burke (2004, 170) observes, furthermore, that celebration of the heterosexual attractiveness of a few women athletes “occurs at the expense of establishing epistemic and political authority for women in sport; that the association of female sexual attractiveness and passivity, profitable for these individual women, gets in the way of sporting authority for all women.”

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Loves Baby Soft cosmetic company created problematic sexist advertisements. To market their lip gloss products, one advertisement featured a young girl hugging a white teddy bear. Her hair is styled, and her lips are glossy and prominent. The caption reads: “Loves Baby Soft because innocence is sexier than you think.” Collins (2013) analyzes Loves Baby Soft advertisements and refers to author Jane Caputi, who described the advert:

The ad blatantly positions the young girl as a sex object and acknowledges that is her ‘innocence’ that makes her such a suitable erotic target. … It makes perfect pornographic sense. The ‘moralistic’ ethic puts chastity next to godliness and makes sex ‘dirty,’ defiling a supposed bodily and spiritual ‘purity.’ Sexual gratification of any kind then becomes all bound up not only with taboo violation, but also with defilement.

The October messaging from USA is especially problematic, given that a month prior, in September of 2020, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) cancelled all five of the U18 Women’s World Championship tournaments in 2021. According to journalist Michelle Jay (2020), the IIHF claimed the cost of creating a bubble and testing all players was too much for the host nations as well as the IIHF. This is conspicuous, given that the IIHF announced approximately a month earlier that the U20 Men’s World Championship (also known as the World Juniors) would take place in a bubble in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, with daily COVID-19 testing. According to Jay,

This decision screams to me that the IIHF does not care about the women’s game. If it did, it would not have made a decision that will negatively impact the growth of the women’s hockey for years to come…By continually putting less resources and time into the U18 level, they show thy do not care about the women’s game.

In November of 2020, Tim Hortons[[7]](#endnote-7) (Tim’s), a Canadian coffee chain (created by former NHL player Tim Horton), partnered with Mattel to create a blond Barbie hockey player and a Black Barbie hockey player. Originally, there was to be only the blond player. However, due to the momentum of Black Lives Matter and criticisms about inclusivity, Tim’s delayed the launch from August to November to incorporate a Black doll (Szto 2020). The Barbie hockey dolls appear in a typical Barbie box. The backdrop of the box features hockey rink images with “Tim Hortons” and “Barbie” displayed on the boards (where advertisements are usually featured). Both dolls have a hockey stick connected with plastic to their arms. However, the Barbie hands would not be able to hold the stick. The dolls also have a hockey helmet (and full cage) attached to the other arm. Both dolls also have long hair, sported in ponytails.

Szto examines whether the hockey Barbie is a feminist Barbie. She refers to the concerns about Barbie’s idealistic and unrealistic physical dimensions and sexist context. This echoes Weaving’s (2016) observation of oddity in the creation of a swimsuit Barbie—a children’s toy—to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* (*SISI*)—a magazine that celebrates the sexual objectification of women.Tim’s Barbie might have feminist potential for the normalization of hockey-playing women. However, it should be noted that hockey Barbie is without gloves and padding, does not seem functional to hold the stick and wears lip gloss! On the other hand, one hundred percent of the proceeds of the Tim’s Barbie (which retails for $29.99 Canadian) go to Hockey Canada’s Foundation to support girls’ hockey. On the back of the box, the message reads,

Tim Hortons® Barbie® doll inspires girls to explore their limitless potential and encourages them that they can be anything including a hockey player. Get on the ice with Barbie as she suits up in her Tim Hortons hockey jersey, grabs her helmet and hockey stick and hits the ice with her team. It’s game time, so she enters the rink and with a whoosh skates across the ice and works with her teammates to get the puck towards their goal.

As Szoto concludes, hockey Barbie can be a feminist Barbie if that is what one opts for her to be.

As we were finalizing this chapter, the IIHF announced, on April 21, 2021, that the 2021 Women’s World Hockey Championship was cancelled because of increased community COVID-19 spread in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada (the intended tournament venue). The timing was horrific as some teams found out while they were at the airport getting ready to depart for Canada (McLellan, 2021). The last-minute cancellation exemplifies that elite-level women’s hockey is not afforded the same attention, care, respect nor opportunity as the men’s elite game. There was no Plan B. The men’s U18 IIHF tournament is, at time of writing, taking place in Texas, USA. This imbalance demonstrates a yet grisly political reality behind the facades of feminist progressivism.

**Conclusion**

Sport has an important role in the post-pandemic global recovery. The preceding UN Women (2020) response to COVID-19 is a seven-page document, outlining concerns for girls and women in sport. UN Women urges girls’ and women’s sports to “build back better post pandemic.” Lebel et al. (2020) are optimistic about this prospect:

We’re currently witnessing a continuous series of disruptions exposing the widening gaps in society accelerated by the pandemic. In sport, these disruptions have exposed the weaknesses of the traditional sports model. As we look towards the future of sport, COVID-19 may well be the catalyst for change that women’s sport has been waiting for.

Bowes, Lomax and Piasecki (2020, 15) prescribe more precisely that,

There needs to be targeted work done within sport at all levels – government, sports organisations, media corporations, sponsors and sports fans – to promote gender equality and raise awareness of gender inequity. The hope here is that an understanding of the challenges faced by sportswomen during these extreme times can contribute to the discussions moving forwards.

In order to create serious and necessary change, feminist perspectives must be at the forefront. There are important spaces for Liberal, Radical and Marxist Feminist voices, albeit the boundaries between them might be fuzzy. Wearing Liberal Feminist spectacles, access to sport for males and females remains—at least when tested—asymmetrical. While men’s sport has obviously suffered substantially during the pandemic, there are several illustrations of men’s elite sport continuing (sometimes after a pause), while the women’s equivalent has not. Similarly, the structures of quotidian support seem markedly inferior in women’s sport. Wearing Marxist Feminist spectacles, these imbalances are undetachable from the gendered economic disadvantage suffered by females in sport (and elsewhere), a disadvantage that COVID-19 has thrown into sharp relief. Similarly, girls’ post-pandemic access to sport is almost certain to suffer disproportionately due to the insidious power of traditional gender ideals, a key part of which is women’s contribution to the economy through care for family and home. Wearing Radical Feminist spectacles, this is in turn hard to detach from the legacy and the persistence of patriarchal framings of women and girls that undermine their epistemic and political authority in sport (as elsewhere).

 This chapter has shown that one of the most significant lessons learned with respect to women athletes and women’s sport is how COVID-19 highlighted and reinforced inequities—media coverage, funding, sponsorship, opportunity, access, support and heterosexualization. The injustices and the undervaluation of women’s sport must be recognized if real and substantial change is to occur, and if visions of empowerment are to be realized in a post-COVID-19 world. Such change requires realization of the Radical Feminist vision of epistemic and political authority for women in sport. As UN Women (2020: 6) put it, “Women and girls must be equally participants and leaders in the process of building back better, so their gains are not lost, and a better future for all becomes a reality, where women and girls can participate in, work with, govern and enjoy sport on an equal playing field.”

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1. For compelling argument that the comparatively passive throwing style of girls is rooted, not in biology but in gendered socialisation, see Young (1980). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The United Kingdom’s Equal Pay Act (1970) made it illegal to pay a woman less than a man for the same work. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Benatar (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Davis (2012, 11) observes that “masculine hegemony has very effective rapid response weapons at its fingertips, developed over literally thousands of years.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Edwards and Jones (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Edwards, Jones and Weaving (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Tim Horton sponsors minor hockey across Canada, and the jerseys have the word “Timbits” written across them. Timbits are donut holes. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)