The construction and enforcement of traditional feminine and masculine identities are found within many social institutions in any given culture. Those characteristics stem from gender socialization at a young age and the social construction of feminine and masculine identities. According to Kate Liston (2006) the concepts of feminine and masculine traits in regards to female athletes, their bodies and gender notions placed upon them, is the emerging reason for inequality (620). Research by Dworkin and Messner (2002) have found that women receive 30% fewer sport opportunities, $1.1 million less funding at the high school level and $133 million less in college athletic scholarships in post-secondary education than their male counterparts (348). This inequality is a result of femininity and masculinity binaries that begin with gender socialization and reinforcement of gender role and expectations in the educational system. Utilizing theories of gender acquisition from Sandra Bec and Candace West and Don Zimmerman, and theories of gender prominence in educational sports from Iris Young, are crucial in understanding the role gender socialization plays in education. Thus, in this paper I will argue that the inequality facing women in professional sports reflects an institutional and social issues that begins within the educational system, be perpetuating traditional female roles through gender socialization and the construction of femininity. By exploring the role of gender construction in educational sports further, we can have a better understanding of how females in professional sports face inequality and what steps society as a whole must take in order to ensure their inclusion at a professional and educational level.
One of the most pervasive ideas connected to sports and gender is the association of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” sports for men and woman. Appleby and Foster (2013) discuss in their article “Gender and Sport Participation” how sports emphasize feminine qualities in sports such as beauty and grace in gymnastics, dance and figure skating, while masculine traits are often associated to sports involving physical contact, violence and aggression including football, boxing and hockey (14). These notions of what becomes acceptable for each gender, stems from a deeper understanding and embodiment of social gender roles and identities. Sandra Bem’s (1974) gender schema theory can be used to explain these perceived differences between male and female athletes. She argues that through learning gender identity, we in turn utilize those views to understand gender as a whole. As we grow and learn, our gender performance, or our schemas, are reinforced by societal notions and norms (71). This theory is expanded upon by Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1998) in their concept of “doing” gender. They argued that gender is not fixed and static, but rather a product of our social interactions with one another and that gender is something that one does, in performing and exhibiting the traits of that specific gender that has been prescribed (127). These notions of performing gender that results from socialization with others, directly reflects the ways sports are geared towards a specific gender. As young boys and girls are socialized with each other, they are taught and adhere to “masculine” and “feminine” traits that idealize strength, aggression and physical contact for boys and grace, beauty and modesty for girls. These ideas are harmful as they negate trans identities and perpetuate gender binaries and become so deeply internalized that they reflect the toys young children play with, the types of imaginary games they play and when they reach school age, what kind of sports they become involved in.
Understanding gender socialization is a crucial step in identifying the inequality women encounter in sports. Most likely, the first time children encounter organized sports is in the beginning of their school years. Dunbar (2002) found that even though the 1972 enactment of Title IX in the United States, which mandated federal funding of educational programs to allocated equally by sex, the discrimination women faced while engaging in sports outweighed the gains they received in equal funding (353). This finding supports the gender role stance which purports that while women are equally funded the discrimination faced by women pursuing sport-based careers in male dominated sports illustrate the larger issue of gender-based biases based on expectations and norms for women. Buysse and Ember-Herbert (2004) studied the constructions of gender in sports through photographs at the intercollegiate level. Their research is crucial in understanding how the media contract and reinforce gender stereotypes to maintain gender inequality in the sporting world. Their research found that male athletes were portrayed by popular media in terms of their physicality, muscles and abilities while female athletes were feminized and their achievements trivialized (68).

In sports such as gymnastics, the gender inequality and representation gap can be clearly seen. While gymnastics is overwhelmingly dominated by women and commonly seen as “female” sport, it was found that women are most commonly judged on their artistic abilities, beauty and performance, while men are judged on their strength and physical abilities. Their research found that the men were photographed on the court 57% of the time compared to woman at 41%, men were in action 62% of the time and women 41%, and themes of true athleticism favoured men at 59% compared to women at 39% (73). While women may be
athletes in a post Title IX world, they are females first and athletes second. They way women are represented in sports, legitimizes the way educational institutions favour male superiority; through the preservation of gender differences and systemic hierarchy that works to undermine female athletes and limit their power at an educational level.

Research by Brown, Ruel and Medley-Rath (2011) shows how high school students’ attitudes about girls sporting opportunities are reflected in the fame and male student population. In general, they found that high school students were supportive of increased opportunities for girls to participate in sports, but that male competitive athletes show the most negative attitudes towards opportunities for girls to participate in sports typically dominated by men (239). Their research observes that students hold stigmatizing attitudes towards athletes who participate in gender non-traditional sports, such as female students participating in karate or football and were subsequently described as being more masculine (240). This finding implies that while it is okay for women to physically engage in sporting activities, when woman try to participate in sports not traditionally labeled as “feminine” men feel threatened with their presence and are less likely to support their participation. This speaks to a larger issue of perceived equality that is built on a foundation of tokenism and gender prejudice. Therefore, competitive female athletes experience a conflict between being and feeling feminine as well as being an athlete. This shows that ideas about separate spheres of functioning, where males and females work within their own “appropriate” sport category are supported; this ultimately reasons why it is commonly accepted the women play sports in modern society, so long as they are performing femininity first and athleticism second.
A similar student was conducted by Dunbar and Shakib (2002) that studied the roles of female and male high school basketball participants within a two-tier system. They argue that sport is powerful because it reproduced patriarchal gender relations, where social notions of masculinity and femininity meet and are exercised. The sporting institution maintains an understanding that supporting gender inequality through the construction of “difference” between men and women in ways that appear natural, is better than the actual result of systemic social conditions evident in educational institutions (355). Their study of high school basketball plays found that there was a heightened focus on the differences between the way boys and girls play basketball, ultimately placing a higher social value on the boys’ style of play that conforms to dominant hegemonic ideas surrounding masculinity (360). Rather than view the differences between the way boys and girls play basketball as a means of expanding the game, the participants conceptualized girls basketball as a version less real than boys, and therefore incomparable to the boys’ game and not challenging them (360). Dunbar and Shakib (2002) concluded that this “two-tiered” game based on sex, trivializes women in sports, starting in schools and moving into media representations of women (360).

Based on gender stereotypes surrounding females, women’s performance in sport becomes interpreted as less competitive and weaker. Basketball has become a sport that derives its core from masculine performativity in ways that have become normalized and despite female success within the field, they are not capable of performing masculinity in a way that is socially acceptable because they have been identified as girls. In turn, hen they do perform too close to masculinity their sexuality is called into question. This research shows how sports at the educational level provides boys with the scaffolding to reproduce ideas around masculinity,
while simultaneously reinforcing gender norms that de-emphasizes and limits female abilities, and in doing so reproduced the dec that differences between male and female athletes exist. Because concepts of femininity and socially valued characteristics are not aligned, Dunbar and Shakib (2002) found that being successful in a male-identified behaviour such as sport, is considered deviant to the female gender and works to maintain subordination and reproduce male agency over women (362). According to Messner (2011) essentialists assume natural biological differences between groups of people and categoricalism is the belief that all members of a group are a specific, defined way (154). This essentialist thought is applied to female and male athletes within the educational system, by stating the differences are natural and that sports play towards these differences. Messner (2002) argues that “the centrality of the body in organized sports exposed the ideological limits of binary constructionism and the feminist strategy of individual equal opportunity. In sport, the presumption of bodily difference between boys and girls — in effect, a creeping back in of essentialist beliefs — precluded a strategy of desegregation of youth sport, serving instead as a foundation for the creation of a kind of ‘separate-but-equal’ ideal of sport for male and females” (157).

He understood this in terms of the different treatment that was given to boys and girls from their coaches; the gendering process that shape boys and girls and naturalized by the gender-specific roles and treatment they are given throughout their education, which ultimately re-establishes the ideology of gender essentialism (164). It is through the educational system that gender roles and the inequality facing female athletes is established and reinforced, and with contemporary female representations, the media works to support gender order by placing an emphasis on femininity while diminishing their athletic ability and strength.
As sport has become an area in which masculinity is defined, the social world has adhered to these perceived differences between men and women as natural and in turn has been internalized by those “doing gender.” Iris Young’s (1980) essay “Throwing Like a Girl” found that girls in modern societies throw and in turn use their bodies awkwardly because of “basic modules of feminine body comportment, manner of moving and relation to space” (317). Fundamentally speaking, girls learn to use and interact with their bodies different from the way boys do. Based on societal expectations, girls learn how to hold themselves modestly and underestimate their physical capabilities. Young argues that this is because of a self-objectification ritual learned by girls at a young age and only through a gendering process. She contented that the physical ability that requires hitting a baseball or moving with a vast range of sports, requires the body to move freely, a distinction that girls have withheld themselves from because of societal expectations taught to them about what it means to be feminine. This works to undermine female athletes in their ability as having these preconceived notions of femininity limits women within the sporting world in areas typically dominated by men. This would however mean that they would excel in areas that are traditionally female, furthering the binary between male and female sports and the discrimination faced by women who venture outside of the bubble given to women in sports.

The educational system works as foundation for which gender inequality is projected and reinforced back into society. From one gendered institution of education, inequality branches out into areas of media, representation and professional athletic sports of women, all of which they
continue to be marginalized in. Andrea Eagleman (2015) examines the portrayal of male and female gymnasts in the US newspapers during the 2012 Olympic Games in London, England to determine what differences existed between the way media frames each gender and how it sought to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.

The 2012 London Olympics had the highest percentage of female athletes of any summer games at the time (44.3%) (235). While the number of female participants was at its highest, Eagleman (2015) found that television broadcasts sexualized the bodies and faces of female gymnasts, while simultaneously blurring the distinction between being depicted as young girls or powerful women (235). Despite the women on the US Olympic team being world class athletes, the media tended to focus on the attractiveness and feminine qualities of the athletes (236). By focusing on this commentary as opposed to their physical capabilities and technique, the representation of the female athletes' ability became diminished and their skills and accomplishments trivial.

Research indicates that there was a strong audience response that believes women’s gymnastics had become too physically demanding and that it should return to the joyful sport it once was (241). This sentiment was further reiterated when many articles were written concerning the lack of female gymnasts smiles and the displeasure with the frowned looks of concentration of female gymnasts faces while performing extremely difficult tasks (244). This desire to have female gymnasts smile and look beautiful while performing remarkable athletic feats, serves to objectify them as pretty little things, only there to ring joy to audiences and entertain the masses. This form of micro-aggression not seen in the commentary of male gymnasts, further stereotypes female gymnasts. In addition to already being scored on their hair,
outfits and overall grace, they are often described in terms of their personality, beauty and experience while men were described in terms of succeeding due to concentration, strength and courage. Likewise, men were also described as failing due to lack of composure, a male stereotype that draws upon the perceived male inability to stay focused for long periods of time (236). Men continued to be praised for the size, shape and strength of their bodies and reviews of their performance included more technical language that recreated the routine for readers and audiences with accurate names for skills, whereas women were described in overly simplified terminology that depicted them as children on a playground (239). This technique of oversimplifying the work of female athletes infantilized their bodies and abilities, while continuing to minimize their accomplishments.

The power that media outlets hold over the way female and male athletes are represented on an international platform is enough to recreate gender binaries and reinforce traditional gender expectations and stereotypes taught in school.

While these sources reflect the inequality female athletes face starting from gender socialization to educational institutions to professional sports, there are limitations to their findings. Much of this research neglects to understand how race and socio-economic status for an individual reflects the way gender is acquired, how available education is for lower income families and students and how accessible sports, equipment and support are. These intersections of interest need to be fully addressed to properly understand the breadth and limitations of researching female athletes in schools and within professional sports.
To change the way educational institutions depict female athletes and in turn marginalize them would not solve the inequality they face. While society and institutions at large are gendered, men and women who have already been socialized through a gendered process enter into those institutions and have notions of femininity and masculinity reinforced to them. In what appears to be a cycle of gendering, institutions reinforcing gender norms and consequently becoming a societal norm, the initial issue remains with the gender socialization of children. The marginalization that female athletes continue to face, is not because of a lack of funding or opportunities for them, but because of strict gender mores and definitions of femininity that society as a whole has adhered to and prescribed towards female athletes. While the gender binaries felt within the educational system and later on in the professional athletic world reflect an issue of inequality, it also reflects a larger societal issue of gender acquisition, performance and expectations placed upon women and therefore female athletes.
References


