

Like a Girl: A Study in Feminist Theory

Danny Allen

Winner of the Student Writer Award Bronze Medal, Analytical Essay Category (1st-2nd Year)

In a commercial called #LikeAGirl from Always (Greenfield, 2014), when asked to portray the ideas of running, throwing or fighting "like a girl" several older teen girls as well as boys of different ages flailed their arms and legs weakly, complained about messing up their hair and pleaded with imaginary opponents to "stop, stop." When pre-teen girls were asked the same, they energetically demonstrated good form and effort. The teen girls then implored their peers to make the phrase a positive one and actively demonstrated their own athleticism. To fully realize this message and the attitudes it conveys, especially to girls on the verge of womanhood that are in the process of defining themselves, there are three main foci of this advertisement. These are the common attitude (the essentialism) that is portrayed; the initial reaction to this phrase - before that attitude has been ingrained in the minds of young girls; and the realization of young teen women that they don't have to limit themselves, hide themselves, or deny themselves because of the attitude they've seen and heard.

Feminist theory describes the former attitudes as something long believed to be true, that girls aren't athletic or smart or determined enough, and that to perform "like a girl" is an insult. There are common phrases like this one that insult or rebuke specific athletes, but actually degrade a set of individuals whose athletic abilities are not measured or familiar to the users of these phrases. Phrases such as "Wow, you run like a girl," "Ha, she totally fights like a girl," and "Dude, you throw like a girl" (Rogers, 2016), take what could be an opportunity to encourage or offer advice to an underachiever but throw it away by using a phrase that demeans not only the subject of the insult but half of the world's population, female individuals. In Always' commercial, after his demonstration of running "like a girl," a young boy admitted that it was an insult to girls, but denied that it was an insult to his sister (Greenfield, 2014). While there was no denying the general target of his attitude, the specific individual nature of his affront was

disassociated. This is the problem with slurs and offenses of any type. The whole population referred to is the target focused on, but the individual is the one hit with the bullet. The phrase "like a girl" isn't the only way this insult is used. In her Newsweek article, "What's Wrong With Playing Like a Girl?" Dorothea Stillman recalls the time a team of girls beat a boys' team in her son's basketball practice. The (male) coach berated them, "Are you going to let a bunch of girls beat you?" (Stillman, 1999). The general idea that is portrayed is that, no matter how you say it, there's no way girls can outperform boys. It seems like a built-in, automatic given that girls can't throw, run, fight, or think as well as boys can.

When you watch the young girls in the video hit, throw or run "like a girl," you see knees pumping in enthusiasm, arms slicing through the air, and imaginary objects being launched forcefully and accurately at a target (Greenfield, 2014). They seem to not know the stereotype. In fact, in her analysis of this scene, Katherine Marcus Reker says, "...by showcasing the responses of young girls, it shows that they are learned biases" (Reker, 2016). Other sources show that young girls can match the speed and stamina, not to mention physicality, of their male peers, perhaps because they haven't been told they can't. In a viral YouTube video from 2012, young Samantha (Sam) Gordon shocked viewers by outrunning, outmanoeuvring, and just outplaying her male football opponents (Greenfield, 2014). In an article about the video, Joon Lee remarked, "It was a striking visual- a girl with a ponytail slicing her way through an offensive line and dicing through the opposing defense" (Lee, 2017). Young girls, it seems, when they haven't been told that performing "like a girl" is a bad thing, don't perceive boundaries they'll encounter later in life.

Due to this attitude, a lot of girls abandon sports when they reach a certain age. In the Always video, there seems to be a turning point for the young girls. When asked if the phrase "like a girl" is a good thing, one girl says she doesn't know if it's good or bad, then concedes, "it sounds like a bad thing" (Greenfield, 2014). In his article on gender stereotypes, Daniel Reynolds offers the following thought,

Conditioning starts as early as the playground, where common taunts like "You throw like a girl" dissuade young people from being physically active and tapping into their bodies' full potential. (Reynolds, 2018)

Statistically, as girls mature, they begin to lose the enthusiasm that the young girls showed in the #LikeAGirl video. Shilagh Mirgain, Ph.D., states, "By the age of 14, girls drop out of sports at twice the rate of boys" and, "By age 17, more than half the girls - 15 percent - will have quit sports" (Mirgain, 2017). When society's stereotypes make it into young girls' minds and lives, they begin to believe the idea that they don't or can't measure up to boys, and they decide sports aren't for them.

In a study on the relationship between physical activity and self-esteem, which is greatly amplified by the common negative connotation of "like a girl," Lynn Jaffee and Sherri Ricker recorded the experiences of young girls in sports. Some of the complaints were that, when picking players for co-ed team sports, "The girls last. The girls are always last," and that in their experiences, "[the boys are] always putting me down." (Jaffee & Reker, 1993). Further sexist attitudes were expressed in the study by Hmong girls aged 13-17 in their culture, saying, "...girls would stay at home to 'cook, clean and take care of others' ...[but] boys can do anything they want" (Jaffee & Reker, 1993). The statements suggest that in their culture, there are sports and other activities where "like a girl" means no involvement at all. However, in the conclusion of the paper, it was stated that older girls that did participate in sports experienced higher self-esteem and held "a belief that girls in general are capable and able to play sports as well" (Jaffee & Reker, 1993). When given the opportunity to play in sports and appreciate a community of support without judgement of their capabilities, it seems that they can and do excel "like a girl." The recommendations of the study were to "Provide opportunities for girls in all kinds of sports, including traditional male sports" (Jaffee & Reker, 1993). Jaffee and Reker also make the point that attitudes and actions that downplay girls' chances and prospects in sports during the transition to young women make it much harder for them to persist in their goals in sports and careers. Changing attitudes in all people will enable girls to run, throw and fight just as well as boys (Jaffee & Reker, 1993).

Further in the video, after the young girls deny the stereotype of "like a girl," the older girls are given a chance to reflect on the negative meaning of the phrase. One girl says, "I think it definitely drops their self-confidence" (Greenfield, 2014). Given the chance to speak her mind, another teen girl displays a more post-feminist attitude in the equality of men and women in all they do. She says, "Yes, I kick like a girl, and I swim like a girl, and I walk like a girl, and I

wake up in the morning like a girl because I am a girl," (Greenfield, 2014) while clips are shown of the young and older girls demonstrating flawless technique and determination in several sports. The change in attitude is not only found in the girls' own thoughts on the subject, though. Parents, male and female, can change the old attitudes, encourage their daughters and alter the negative connotation of the "like a girl" concept. Dr. Mirgain relates a story in her article of her father teaching her baseball. When jokingly accusing her father of teaching her to throw like a boy, his reaction was, "No, I am teaching you to throw like a girl. This is how girls throw, just as good as a boy" (Mirgain, 2017). Redefining what a girl is by changing the phrase to mean they can do anything, "like a girl" is a turning point in the understanding of gender equality. Appreciating efforts of boys and girls, and not berating them by stereotypes when they fail, can change their attitudes and their futures.

Attitudes too often decide who qualifies for team sports, and adult professional sports provide too few opportunities for female athletes. The notion that the difference in running times and weightlifting capabilities between men and women means that sports are for men and that poor or inadequate performance is labelled "like a girl" doesn't hold true. When we label inadequacy with a phrase that demeans others, we miss an opportunity for encouragement and setting high personal goals. It provides a reason for young girls to give up dreams and reasons for boys to start a pattern of disdain for the women they grow up with, from the playground to professional sports arenas. The initial portrayal of the phrase "like a girl" to those with a negative connotation already ingrained in their minds contrasts with youth who take pride in their identity. Given a chance to reflect on their discrimination, young boys realize the insults they deliver in a three-word phrase that they grow up hearing. "Like a girl" used correctly means approaching life and opportunities with pride and determination. "Like a girl" should be used as a challenge; to make goals, keep them, and inspire others who face discrimination from early childhood. "Like a girl" should not be an insult to boys, but a guide to show the determination they see in their sisters, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. Feminism as a concept doesn't say that women are better than men or that all men demean women, but rather that equality is a goal for everyone. Challenges to women and phrases such as "like a girl" used insultingly are challenges to men and women, boys and girls that tried and wanted to improve but instead were met with archaic ideas and passed-down discriminations that limit everyone, not just girls and women.

References

- Always. (2014, June 26). Always #LikeAGirl. [YouTube Video]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjQBJWYDTs&list=PL-Arox5xSHoZJI0jvS_tKtu5PuFk3OYft&index=5&t=0s
- Jaffee, L., & Ricker, S. (1993). Physical Activity and Self-Esteem in Girls: The Teen Years. *Melpomene Journal*, 12(3), 19–26. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED395256.pdf>.
- Lee, J. (2017, Oct. 3). Sam Gordon, Viral Football Star, Opens Up About Her HS Girls Football Lawsuit. *Bleacher Report*. Retrieved from bleacherreport.com/articles/2718975-sam-gordon-viral-football-star-opens-up-about-her-hs-girls-football-lawsuit.
- Marcus Reker, K.B. (2016) 'Why Can't Run 'Like a Girl' Also Mean Win The Race?': Commodity Feminism and Participatory Branding as Forms of Self-Therapy in the Neoliberal Advertising Space. *Scripps Senior Theses*. Retrieved from http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/759
- Mirgain, S. (2017, Feb. 1). How to Keep Girls Playing Sports (And Why We Should). *Growing Up Healthy*. Retrieved from parenting.uwhealth.org/2017/02/keep-girls-playing-sports/.
- Reynolds, D. (2018, July 2) You Throw Like a Girl: Gender Stereotypes Ruin Sports for Young Women. *Healthline*. Retrieved from <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/gender-stereotypes-ruin-sports-for-young-women#1>
- Rogers, S. (2016, Dec. 2). Stop Using 'Play Like a Girl' as an Insult & Celebrate Instead. *TeamSnap Blog*. Retrieved from blog.teamsnap.com/editorials/stop-using-play-like-a-girl-as-an-insult-and-celebrate-instead.

Stillman, D. (1999). What's Wrong With Playing 'Like a Girl'? (One Woman Confronts Sexism in Children's Sports). *Newsweek*. (12), 10. Retrieved from search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edscpi&AN=edscpi.A54143403&site=eds-live.