SNAPSHOT ANALYSIS
SOCIAL MEDIA COMMENTARY OF SPORTSWOMEN AND SPORTSMEN

This snapshot analysis from Plan International Australia looks at social media commentary around sportswomen, compared to sportsmen in Australia.

It examines variations in the nature of comments on social media posts regarding sportswomen and sportsmen, as well as responses to comments and discussion among social media users, and identifies common themes.

OVERVIEW

About Plan International Australia

Plan International Australia is a leading girls' rights agency. We champion girls' rights because we know that there is nowhere in the world where girls are treated as equals. Plan International Australia is the local office of Plan International, which works in more than 75 countries to help create a just world that advances children's rights and equality for girls.

Plan International Australia is committed to ending harassment and violence against girls and young women. To achieve gender equality, girls and young women must be able to participate in public life and online spaces free from violence and abuse.

This snapshot analysis is an extension of Plan International Australia's research and advocacy work on harassment and violence. It comes after the 2016 research report *Don't Send Me That Pic*, which found that girls and young women face endemic online abuse and harassment. Further research was then carried out looking at street harassment through Free to Be, a map-based online social survey tool designed by girls and young women working with Plan International, Monash University's XYX Lab and digital consultancy CrowdSpot. The Free to Be findings were revealed in a series of research reports, including *Unsafe in the City: Sydney*, which found girls and young women face incessant street harassment, and *Unsafe on the Streets* (2018), which looked specifically at group harassment, finding that groups of boys and men use street harassment as a form of entertainment and male bonding.

METHOD

This analysis looked at social media commentary on Facebook posts shared by major sports news broadcasters in Australia, including: Wide World of Sports, 7 Sport, 10 Sport, Fox Sports, and ABC Grandstand. Data was collected from 26 March to 2 April 2019, and the posts analysed had been shared by the broadcasters in the past 12 months.

For each sports news broadcaster, 10 x posts were analysed involving sportsmen, and 10 x posts were analysed involving sportswomen, with more than 1,300 comments analysed overall – 634 comments involved sportsmen, and 682 comments involved sportswomen. The analysis also looked at responses to comments and discussion between social media users, as well as the use of emojis, GIFs and multimedia. Posts were selected for the analysis if they had a significant number of comments, while posts that attracted no comments were not included. A range of sports were captured in the analysis, including AFL and AFLW, NRL, ice skating, boxing, WWE, cricket, tennis, and soccer.

The analysis examined variations in the comments and identified common themes, focusing on negative comments. A range of types of abuse were searched for, including around racism and prejudice against minorities. However, not enough instances were counted of these forms of abuse in order to identify themes.

A number of themes emerged from the analysis.

RESULTS

Overall, sportswomen attracted more than three times the number of negative comments than sportsmen – 8.52% of all comments towards sportsmen were negative, while 26.98% of comments towards sportswomen were negative.

Female: Common themes among negative comments towards sportswomen include -

Sexist – 23.37% of all negative comments towards sportswomen were sexist in nature.

This includes comments referring to traditional gender stereotypes or negatively commenting on an athlete's gender.

Women should be in the kitchen.

Shut up lady, the footy is on.

Get women back to being bare foot and pregnant!!!

I'd like to speak to the man in charge.

Stick to netball you dribbler…

You wanted equal rights sweetheart, don't cry when it's too even.

Get back in the kitchen and then on your back in the bedroom.

Go play a women's sport if you can't handle the attention.

Belittling sportswomen – 20.11% of negative comments were derogatory towards women's sports and their athletic abilities and skills.

Sorry girls..... Men do it better....

No interest in this crap sorry but Had a look no . No offence ladies.

Its like watching grass grow,

Seriously, who is even interested in this rubbish?

Sexualised – 13.59% of negative comments were sexual in nature.

She took it good little bitch

Gee would love to see her box

Wouldn't mind getting her in the end zone

I had heard they eat each other

Victim blaming – 3.26% of negative comments criticised sportswomen for speaking out against negative treatment of women athletes, and advocating for equality in sport.

She knew exactly what she was doing. Plain and simple. Now she must deal with the backlash that SHE has created for Herself

Stop being professional victims.

After some media attention? Well done girl

Male: Common themes among negative comments towards sportsmen include -

Drugs – 25.93% of all negative comments towards sportsmen were about illegal drug use in sports.

A self confessed drug cheating grub

Sack the coach on drugs

Cheating – 48.15% of negative comments were about cheating in sports.

Cheating dwarf

Sandpaper army cheats

Cheating dogs

Sexist – 14.81% of negative comments referred to traditional gender stereotypes about the way men should behave, particularly focused on those that deem they should not display emotion.

Go to Woolies and buy some tissues ya sook

Have a spoonful of cement !

Hurts him selfs has a cry

In contrast to the comments regarding sportswomen, none of the negative comments about sportsmen were sexualised, or victim blaming.

Responses to negative comments and trolling

A range of methods to address and respond to negative comments and trolling were both employed and discussed by social media users. These include:

- Humour – some social media users responded to negative comments with sarcasm and humour, including the use of emojis, GIFs and memes.

- Facts – some users corrected negative comments that included inaccuracies.

- Support – in some instances, users banded together to support each other in the face of trolls.

- Policing – users discussed reporting trolls to page owners, so they could be dealt with and blocked if necessary.

- Ignoring – social media users regularly spoke of ignoring trolls and not engaging with them, to avoid 'giving them air'.

One social media user said:

It will take us ALL to take responsibility for each other to stop this type of trolling happen. The minute you see derogatory comments, report it and report the profile. Don't respond to them (it just gives them more air). The sooner their comments are deleted, the better it is. We just have to get automatically used to calling people out on their BS. Only way it's going to stop.

IMPACTS

Online abuse and trolling of sportswomen has significant negative impacts – not only for the victims, but also for girls and women in the broader community who may be exposed to the abuse and commentary surrounding it.

1. Lower participation rates of girls and women in sports.

Online abuse and trolling of sportswomen may contribute to substantial existing gender gaps in sport.

Plan International Australia's *Dream Gap* research (2017) found that, more than any other setting, girls aged 10 to 17 see sport as the space where they receive unequal treatment to boys.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has found that young women engage in significantly less physical activity than young men. While the reasons for this are complex, it has been linked to traditional gender stereotypes around girls' and women's behaviour and appearance, such as that they must not appear 'too masculine' or 'unattractive'. It has also been suggested that traditional school uniform policies which force girls to wear dresses and skirts discourage physical activity.

Around the world, sportswomen are also paid significantly less than men. The 2017 Dream Gap report found that this pay gap weighs heavily on the minds of girls in Australia, with

many of the survey respondents referring to the disparity in pay. As one 12-year-old girl said, *"I hate the act that male sportsmen are paid more than females. There is a huge difference in income between for example a male soccer player and a female netball player."*

2. Silencing girls and women and restricting their involvement in public life.

Worldwide research has found that misogynistic online abuse has a silencing effect on women, impeding their right to speak out and engage in online spaces[1]. It can silence not only the victim of the abuse, but also the broader community of girls and women, through contributing to a picture of public spaces as being dangerous and risky for girls and women, which dissuades them from becoming involved – whether in sports, social media, activism, politics or any other public space where they may fear abuse.

3. Harming mental health and performance.

Online abuse and trolling is also known to have serious consequences on the victims' mental health and wellbeing, and their ability to perform at their best. A 2010 study of Australian and Swiss adolescents found that online abuse and harassment was linked to lower self-esteem, poor school attendance and performance, and in some instances, increased depressive symptoms[2].

CONCLUSION

The snapshot analysis found that sportswomen face a far higher number of negative comments on social media posts shared by sports news broadcasters, compared to sportsmen. The common themes among negative comments towards sportswomen reflect harmful sexist stereotypes around women's behaviour and appearance, which may discourage girls and women from playing sport, or speaking out in public. Negative comments towards

sportswomen were most often sexist, belittled women's sports, or were sexual in nature.

On the other hand, negative comments towards sportsmen most often displayed moral attitudes around athletes' conduct and good sportsmanship, such as those about illegal drug use or cheating. None of the comments analysed involving sportsmen were sexualised. However, the negative comments towards men also referred to harmful traditional gender stereotypes around men's behaviour, such as that they must not display any signs of weakness or emotion.

Online abuse and trolling of sportswomen can have significant negative impacts – both for the victims, as well as for girls and women in the broader community who may be exposed to it. Misogynistic online abuse is known to have a silencing effect on girls and women, restricting their involvement in public life and leadership opportunities – be they in sports, politics, or any other high profile arena. Online abuse and trolling may also contribute to the lower participation rates of girls and women in sports, as negative comments towards sportswomen tend to perpetuate sexist gender stereotypes around the way girls' and women's behaviour and appearance, such as that they should not appear 'too masculine'. Finally, it can also have serious consequences on the victim's mental health, wellbeing, and performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Girls and young women have the right to participate in public life, including to be safe online, and free to speak up without fear of harassment or abuse.

Plan International Australia has developed the following recommendations for the technology sector, social media companies and governments to improve equality and freedom for girls and women online.

[1]Seelhoff, C. "A Chilling Effect: The Oppression and Silencing of Women Journalists and Bloggers Worldwide." Off Our Backs, Vol 37. No 1 (2007): 18-21

[2] Perren, S. Dooley, J. Shaw, T. and Cross, D. "Bullying in school and cyberspace: Associations with depressive symptoms in Swiss and Australian adolescents." Child and adolescent psychiatry and mental health, Vol 4. No 28 (2010): 1-10

1. Stronger reporting mechanisms for gender-related abuse.

The lack of regulation online, particularly on social media, is putting girls and women at risk. Technology and social media companies need to prioritise girls' safety, including by creating stronger reporting mechanisms for gender-related abuse.

2. Include girls in developing technology.

Unless girls' and women's perspectives are taken into account in developing technology, any new tools created may amplify existing inequalities. Concrete steps are needed from the technology sector, social media platforms, and governments to promote girls' and women's entry to working in ICT and creating technology, and ensure that girls and women are included in design processes.

3. Challenging harmful gender stereotypes.

Governments, civil society and the private sector should work together to initiative behaviour change campaigns that address harmful gender stereotypes, the root cause of abuse and harassment online – and in all spaces. Boys and men need to recognise this behaviour is intolerable, and that harassment and abuse is not harmless fun – it is frightening, disempowering and completely unacceptable, no matter where it occurs.