

Junior Speaks 2019 Speech

How many female foot ballers can you name? What about female rugby players? I bet the answer to these questions is one, if any. Why is this?

It certainly isn't because there aren't any. It certainly isn't because they aren't successful.

The reason lies in the fact that society is riddled with stereotypes, so it's hardly surprising that stereotypes, like gender roles, are also rooted within sport. Typically, men are viewed as the athletic and physically dominant sex, with strength being viewed as a masculine trait.

"We play for a nation that doesn't even know our names." That's the tagline of Germany's women's football team in their official advert for this year's World Cup. It's a shocking admittance of invisibility, given the team has eight European Cup victories, two world championships and has helped Germany achieve second-place in the Fifa Women's World Rankings. These are women who play to win. They are smart, talented and undeniably competitive. However, there is something deeply troubling about their own nation's ignorance towards their work.

Maybe social media is to blame? There is an expectation for girls to look and behave in a particular manner. Images of women playing sport often focus on appearance rather than their actual physical involvement. A prime example of this is when Serena Williams came back to play at the French open, after the birth of her baby, she was ridiculed for her compression outfit rather than commend for her athletic achievement.

The media must also be held accountable, there are significant differences in the media coverage given to women's and men's sports. Women in Sport research found that coverage dedicated to women's sport amounts to less than 4 per cent of global sports media.

However, things are changing, female athletes are beginning to establish themselves in the sports world. Women are pushing through the boundaries. Research shows that the number of girls and women participating in recreational and competitive football, boxing, and wrestling, has grown.

One factor that may contribute to this is the increase in media coverage of women's international football and cricket matches. Creating visible role models and encouraging professional sports playing, will lead to girls wanting to participate in sport because "if you can see it, you can be it".

Of course, we are not expecting every girl to be the next Jessica Ennis, however there is strong evidence that integrating sports into the everyday lives of girls' breaks-down gender stereotypes, improves self-esteem and contributes to the development of leadership skills.

England's World Cup Lionesses are proof that strong girls become strong women through sport!

Women are standing up and challenge prejudices in sport and their voices are beginning to be heard. However, can the same be said about challenging male stereotypes?

Many of you will remember the public outcry when Lara Spencer, America's ABC broadcaster, made insensitive comments about Prince George taking up ballet. Why should boys not dance? Why should girls not play football? It's not that they can't; it all about the ingrained stereotypical images of dancers and footballers

Society has been "trained" to think of sports in terms of masculine or feminine. Men are encouraged and taught to participate in strenuous, aggressive, competitive team sports, while women are commonly steered toward individual aesthetically pleasing activities such as gymnastics and figure skating.

The term 'man up' needs to change. Dance is essentially another form of expression; but for many young boys, properly expressing themselves is a difficult task. Society pressures men to "man up" but in these macho images, there is little room for showing poor mental health. Alarmingly, 76% of suicides are men under 35. *This* needs to change.

Women are far more visible in sports today than at any previous point. Now it is time to make men more visible in sports such as dancing. We need to begin at grassroots levels to ensure that children challenge gender stereotypes in sport and to do this conversation and education are essential

Sport is a world language, a common denominator that breaks down all the walls, all the barriers. It is a worldwide industry whose practices can have widespread impact. Most of all, it is a powerful tool for progress and for development.

Nike's recent tagline is 'This girl can', we need to be challenging advertising firms to consider a more non gender specific slogan because it is time for us to start recognising '*anyone* can'.