

## Girls Can't Play Soccer

When I was in third grade I wanted to play soccer.

I wanted to run, wanted to have fun

But I couldn't play soccer because of my gender

Even in third grade the sports I wanted to play have been gendered

"Girls don't play soccer"

    "Girls can't play soccer"

        "Girls shouldn't

            wouldn't

                couldn't play soccer"

They nagged and so I nagged back.

And apparently the nagging of an eight year old was enough to break this gender barrier

Or so I thought.

My presence was kept discrete

No scrimmages for me

No games for me

No matches for me

I couldn't even touch a ball

This is the only game of soccer where touching the ball was forbidden

Off-limits

Out of bounds

It was fine though

I didn't know any better

I was just grateful because I could play

Play the game of soccer where touching the ball was forbidden because

That's just the way it is.

When I was in fifth grade I beat all the boys.

I beat all the boys in a test at the end of the soccer season

The soccer season where I could not touch a ball

I remember that day

    The day I beat all the boys

Like it was yesterday

Ready.

    I bent to a kneeling position

Set.

    I raised my hips

Go.

I ran.

400 meters later I proved sexism wrong  
It felt like the whole school was watching me in awe  
Unable to believe what they just saw  
    A girl beating all the boys  
Disbelief filled the air for the next few days  
With swallowed pride and hidden dismay  
The boys never spoke about that day again  
Embarrassment sank into their brains  
As they tried swallowing their pride in exchange for praise because  
That's just the way it is.

When I was in ninth grade I joined the varsity soccer team.

“What?”

    “Really?”

        “Real soccer?”

Were the responses I got  
I was used to it at this point because  
That's just the way it is.

When I was in tenth grade I started going to the gym.

I entered the section  
The section no girl dared to touch  
But I broke through  
Broke through the invisible “no girls allowed” barrier  
And I entered  
I entered the section  
The section no girl dared to go  
I stood with glares behind me that felt like daggers on my back  
As I sat on the machine  
Set my desired weight  
And lifted

Reservations and doubts and critiques filled the air like fog in a winter morning  
It was discrete but present  
Silent but deafening

As I began to pull the weight the boys couldn't even do  
It was as if I was in fourth grade again  
Constantly having to prove myself to people who don't want to be proven wrong  
To a society that doesn't want to be proven wrong  
Reservations soon turned to respect  
Doubts turned to disbelief  
And critiques  
Critiques turned into superficial comments of praise that were spitefully said behind half-hearted smiles  
I was surprised to see how surprised they were  
But then remembered  
That's just the way it is.

Now once upon a time  
I had a once upon a dream  
In a once upon a night  
About a once upon a day  
Where girls and boys  
Are different but not treated unjustly  
Are distinct but treated equally

"But progress!"

Progress.

8 letters signifying change

8 letters signifying complacency

It's a common misconception you know  
A common misconception that discrimination has disappeared  
Disappeared but the truth is  
The truth is it has not  
It merely mutated into a less obvious form  
A form that allows our society to maintain complacency and reject true progress  
A form that allows our system to abuse our sex to shape our outcomes

Now let's look at a recipe  
A recipe that made me and all the other girls like me  
A recipe that has been passed down through generations  
A recipe I call 'How to: inferiority'  
In a bowl, add two X chromosomes

A few tablespoons of estrogen and progesterone  
A sprinkle of testosterone  
And a pinch of societal expectations  
Then add 2 drops of color  
Mix them  
Once, twice, three times  
Let rest  
Seven, eight, nine months  
Grow up  
Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen  
And that's how you can end up being at the bottom  
The bottom of the social hierarchy

But no.  
I want to move upstream  
Closer to the problem  
Closer to the solution  
Because the issue still persists

“Stop your complaining”  
    “And stop your nagging”  
        “Stop your crying of a thousand cries for something that's not changing”  
But what they mean is stop trying  
    Stop your fussing  
Because complying to the way it is, that's what they're demanding

Girls don't experience sexism  
I'm sorry I complain  
I'm sorry I nag  
I'm sorry I cry a thousand cries  
And I'm sorry I try  
And fuss  
And don't comply  
But no  
I'm not sorry I spoke up  
I'm not sorry I want to play soccer  
I'm not sorry I beat the boys  
I'm not sorry I fought back

I

am

done

saying

sorry.

Realizing sexism still exists in this world and is not just a thing of the past is a start

A start to begin real progress

And if we keep continuing to have these little beginnings

Bit by bit

It will accumulate

Accumulate to a mountain of beginnings

And maybe finally

Finally,

We can call it an

Ending.

## Project Statement

For this project I chose to do a slam poetry about the struggles I have faced surrounding sexism in sports. I knew I wanted to do slam poetry because I believe it is one of the most thought-provoking and emotional works of art. After a conversation with both Dr. Ocobock and Dr. Canada, I had no doubt about the topic I was going to cover; my experience with sexism in sports (aka. my journey as a woman loving sports in a country that didn't love women in sports). As an Asian female, I am not the first person you would think of when you think about sports, and this definitely translated all my life. The way I was treated really resembled the struggles faced by Jenn McClearen, author of "Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC". McClearen faced the same struggles all women do, especially since she came from a very conservative family. Her cultural norms taught her that women were weaker than men and are therefore treated differently (McClearen in Luther, 2021). She grew up being told what "femininity" should be by the media and her surroundings, and this definitely influenced the way she was treated in her sport, just as I was. Dr. Cara Ocobock's article on being a female powerlifter, and the constant pressure to prove herself was also something I could relate to (Ocobock, 2019). I decided to take this experience as an opportunity to shed light on this, often forgotten, issue. Writing about my own experience will provide a work of art that is most authentic.

First, I want to state that this poem is specific to the prejudices faced by those who are born, raised, and treated as female, just like me. I am writing based on personal experiences and do not wish to write about the struggles of those I don't identify with or those whose experiences I am unfamiliar with, as it is not my place. This clarification is specifically for the recipe segment of my poem, where I stated "two X chromosomes" as an ingredient to become "the bottom of the social hierarchy". I tried to make sure that this refers to those who are female-representing, not necessarily female-identifying, by specifically stating "girls like me". I am aware that not all female-identifying persons carry the traditional attributes associated with being female (especially biologically) (Ainstworth, 2018), so I tried my best to only speak for myself or females like me.

The approach I took for this slam poem is to take the reader on a journey of my experiences with sexism as a woman in a very traditional country. I did this by having the first few stanzas start with an anaphora of "when i was in..." which illustrates a storyline and makes the poem personal from the start. The poem then continues by going deeper into the issue of sexism as a reason why these series of events in my life have happened, and will continue to happen unless there is some sort of accountability.

The main goal of my slam poetry is to utilize tone and rhythm to emphasize my message. Tone is such a powerful device and is able to invoke a lot of emotions. Tone was manipulated through different volumes to express exasperation such as when I spoke in increasing volume when saying "Play the game of soccer where touching the ball was forbidden because", and then drastically drop the volume when saying "That's just the way it is". I also manipulated tone through speed by speeding up while saying "girls shouldn't wouldn't couldn't play soccer" to

emphasize the many rules and expectations set upon girls in sport. The rhyme of these words also helps group them together to imply how these words have the same underlying concept of control. Rhythm was primarily conveyed through repetition in this poem. Repetitions effectively emphasize certain points and can also directly compare something to highlight how similar, yet different they are, showing the irony, hypocrisy, and double-standard nature of sexism. Repetition was used for structural purposes as well. I utilized repetition in creating a pattern between stanzas to segway between lines. For example, I repeated the last few words of every line as the beginning of the next line, like “I entered the section/The section no girl dared to touch/But I broke through/Broke through the invisible “no girls allowed” barrier”. Another use of repetition was the anaphora of “once upon a...”. This repetition emphasizes the difficulty of fighting against sexism by comparing it to something fictional, like a fairytale. This innocence also raises awareness of how little girls who did nothing wrong are the ones who face this issue.

The triadic structure is commonly used throughout this poem. This rule of threes is a very powerful device to captivate the audience because it is audibly aesthetic, and emanates credibility and confidence in the claim. My use of punctuation- particularly the period- was also strategically placed to create pauses in the poem and to convey a tone of finality. This can be seen by “that’s just the way it is.” Another stylistic device used were quotations. They were used to suggest someone else’s words, so when “girls don’t experience sexism” is written without quotations, I want to suggest the extent of societal influences. The series of “I’m sorry”’s as a response to that further amplifies the effects of society, but is conveyed in a more satirical manner. To mirror the “I’m sorry”’s, I followed it with a series of “I’m not sorry”’s, which referenced specifically to the real life events at the beginning of the poem, tying it all together. This immediate unapologetic behavior following an apologetic one emphasizes the courage of all these girls facing sexism against an entire society.

Another device I used for rhythmic purposes is alliteration. In the longer lines, like “Critiques turned into superficial comments of praise that were spitefully said behind half-hearted smiles”, I utilized the alliteration of “s” (a.k.a. sibilance) to audibly elongate the sentence and to emphasize the negative connotations of the sentence since sibilance is often used to suggest slyness or negative tones due to its resemblance to hissing. The separation of my lines, including indentations, were also used for tone and rhythm. In my recording, I eliminated any breaks between the line above the indentation and the indentation itself because speeding them up conveys a sense of urgency and frustration.

Ultimately, sexism is a very pertinent issue today, but it is often overlooked by ignorance. The idea of progress- or a lack thereof- that I mentioned in the poem resembles another concept mentioned in McClearen’s interview about the importance of representation. She argued that despite the importance representation plays in setting a positive change for females in the sports industry, we often overestimate the degree of this change (McClearen, 2021). I wanted to delve deeper into this idea by suggesting that we often mistake change for complacency. And it doesn’t

help that feminism in itself has a lot of negative connotations. Being a 'feminist' means to strive for equality and fight against sexism, yet people often use it as a derogatory term, often calling feminists, "sensitive". People seem to misinterpret our fight for equality as a fight against men. There may be hypocrites out there, but feminism in itself is a fight for equal rights and opportunities, regardless of gender. Hopefully this poem is able to shed light on why we fight for equality by highlighting some of the struggles faced by women in sports. I believe using works of art is a good way to convey these messages in a more subliminal way because sometimes, letting people interpret the message on their own is the way for them to finally understand.

### **Work Cited**

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## Self-Assessment Questions

### What did you learn?

It's funny because the first thing I learned happened even before starting this poem. I was brainstorming ideas with Dr. Canada and Dr. Ocobock for this unessay, and our conversation reminded me that I have faced some relevant issues in regards to sport. Essentially, I was asking whether it would be problematic to write about racism in sports (particularly faced by a black person) or being a trans athlete in sports as someone who is not either of those things. But then they pointed out how the most authentic works of art usually come from personal experiences. And that's when it hit me. I am a minority. Realizing that I am in fact a minority (an Asian female) is of course not something I *just* learned. But what surprised me was how the first thought in my head when it came to minorities in sports wasn't myself. There might be two possible reasons as to why:

1. I'm ignorant and just forgot
2. I have finally accepted and normalized this label I am given, which is why it didn't even register to me that this was and still is a problem I am facing

Writing this poem taught me how truly ingrained sexism in sports is in my life, and how it has affected me ever since I was in third grade (and probably before that too). Articulating these events allowed me to critically think about what happened, how it affected me, and what it suggests about the world we live in. These three are definitely the major takeaways from this poem.

1. What happened: sexism has been like a shadow in my life. Its presence is not necessarily invisible, but it's something you get used to and end up ignoring because of how common it is. Being an asian female, people's first impression of me in regards to sport were never aligned to reality, especially back home in a country that was systemically engrained to glorify Caucasians males whenever it came to sports. However, my persistence in proving them wrong eventually changed my label in my school community. I stopped being an uncertainty and started being an anomaly. I took it as a win though, because at least now I was considered an actual athlete. But what I failed to admit to myself was how backhanded this was. It's sad that I had to prove myself twice as hard, or maybe more, just to be at an even playing field with the guys in my school.
2. How it affected me: as mentioned above, this normalization of sexism led me to almost forget that it still has a large effect in my life. I wouldn't say I am ignorant of the presence of sexism, but I feel like I sometimes forget or glaze over the microaggressions I am faced with just because of my gender.
3. What it suggests about the world: sexism is so deep within our roots that sometimes we forget that it shouldn't be a norm. This shows the dangers of normalizing an existing issue

because normalization often leads to ignorance and complacency since the price of change is too much for society to handle. It's too uncomfortable.

### **What challenges did you face while completing this assignment?**

The most challenging part of this assignment was trying to convey my message without sacrificing the tone and rhythm of the poem. The beauty of a slam poem is its auditory aesthetics, so I had to make sure that the content I wanted to convey did not sacrifice the way in which it was presented. However, I also know how important the message is, so throughout writing it, I felt like I was in a constant battle between making it sound good and making sure the message was conveyed. Overall, I felt like I did my best to do both, but there were definitely times where I had to prioritize one over the other. For example, I prioritized aesthetics over meaning behind the recipe segment because I felt that the structure was very creative and unique, and it actually ended up being one of my favorite segments of the poem.

Speaking of the recipe segment, this was also a challenge I faced when writing this poem. It was difficult to effectively convey the desired message, but still maintain the auditory effects of the poem itself. In the recipe section, I implied that adding 2 X chromosomes would yield a female like me. I had some reservations about writing this verse because I was aware about the misconceptions surrounding biology and gender, and the problems with oversimplifying them (especially since we had a whole topic about sex and sports). For this reason, I needed to make sure that this wouldn't perpetuate ignorance of the complexity of biology and gender.

Finally, writing the project statement was also pretty difficult for me. I took this opportunity to explain the reasoning behind parts of my poetry (discussing the literary devices I chose, the structure, etc.), but it was difficult to cohesively articulate my explanations. There are so many reasons behind each line of the poem that I couldn't possibly fit it in a few pages. I knew coming into this assignment that this would be a challenge for me because I was never the best at being concise, but I can say that I spent a lot of time and effort editing this section.

### **How did you overcome these challenges?**

A lot of editing and actually saying the poem out loud. I feel like writing poetry comes sort of naturally to me, which is why I had no doubt in the first place that this is what I would be doing for the unessay. There were definitely moments where I struggled getting the right words out, but by reciting the poem out loud, it made it easier for me to find the words because I can actually hear the desired tone, rhythm, and overall feel of the poem. If you could see me when I was writing the poem, you might think I was kind of crazy because I would often start speaking in gibberish or just repeating "na na na" while tapping my hands on the desk to feel the rhythm of the poem.

I also overcame the challenge of the 'recipe' by adding "girls like me". This is my way to imply that this recipe (and this overall poem) is for girls like *me* (female-representing minorities) because this is based on my personal experience. By specifically targeting this group, I hope that I was able to remove the impression of ignorance about the "X chromosomes" part. I added explanations in the project statement to further clarify that this poem is about myself and my struggles because I don't want to assume other people's struggles.

I tried to improve my cohesiveness for the project statement by editing it multiple times to try and weed out the less important analysis. I essentially wrote down everything first (quite messily), and then went back after a few days and began editing or deleting the analysis. I often find that taking a step back from my written work allows me to view it in a different perspective, which helps me be less rigid in terms of editing.

### **How successful do you think you were with your final product?**

I read this poem to my mom and she cried, so I assume it's safe to say that it was pretty successful. In all honesty, I'm actually really proud of the poem I wrote. Poetry is really meaningful to me because it's such a powerful form of art that I don't often get to explore. What made this poem even more meaningful was that it was *very* personal. I think writing about myself and my experiences allowed me to convey a lot of emotions and authenticity that I wouldn't have been able to do if I wrote about something else.

I also really liked the way I structured the poem itself. The starting anaphora of "when I was in ... grade, I ..." was able to open the poem up with some anecdotal data to create this narrative tone. By doing this, I believe it would captivate the audience straight away and inform them that this will be a personal poem, essentially evoking their sense of empathy. The first few stanzas of the poem are more innocent and narrative-like, but it soon transitions to the more serious aspects of sexism. The more serious stanzas introduced several misconceptions and symbolism of sexism, both of which convey the body of sexism itself; what it is, how it works, and how it is perceived today. Then I ended it with strong, monosyllabic words to convey the fight we women have to fight every day in sports (and in everyday life) for the same rights as our male counterparts. I believe the ending is really strong because it brings it to a real world situation and potential solutions that can be done. The reason I ended this poem by raising awareness for a solution was because it further emphasizes how sexism is *still* a problem. This ending also indirectly includes the audience, allowing a final captivating moment to make sure that the audience is engaged all throughout. The use of the word "ending" was also a double entendre to signify both, the ending of sexism and the ending of this poem.

I thought a lot about making the stanzas cohesive. This can be seen particularly by ending one stanza with “And that’s how you can end up being at the bottom of the social hierarchy” and beginning the next with “But no. I want to move upstream”. Using the antonyms of “bottom” and “up(stream)” is able to create this connection between both stanzas, making it flow better both aurally and conceptually.

I also think recording the slam poem itself and submitting that with the written poem pulls the assignment all together because, as I have mentioned countless times, the tone and rhythm of the poem is just as important as the content. The delivery of slam poetry is very specific to the writer’s vision, therefore I feel that a lot of the tone wouldn’t have been conveyed the way I intended it to be if it weren’t for the recording.

### **What do you think you could have done better?**

For the poem itself, there are some word choices that I don’t 100% like, but that’s just me being nitpicky. For example, I don’t like how I repeated “treated” twice in “Are different but not treated unjustly/Are distinct but treated equally”. I wished I found a synonym for treated because in this case, repetition wasn’t the purpose, I wanted to mirror the previous line instead. I also don’t particularly like the way some of the lines sounded, particularly “No scrimmages for me/No games for me/No matches for me”. This is an example of when I chose content over aesthetics because I knew that being too aesthetic or too symbolic may make the poem too abstract and I might sacrifice the message I want to convey. In spite of this reasoning, I still wished I found a better alternative that would be a compromise between content and aesthetics.

Despite multiple edits of the project statement, I still feel like my project statement is not as cohesive as I hoped because I did have a lot of important analysis to explain. I feel like I am well-articulated in the poem itself, but when it comes to analyzing, I am often superfluous because I have a lot to say and I find it difficult to make it concise. I did omit quite a few less important analyses, but if you guys want to know/ask me more about my poem, feel free to email me! I always love talking about the rationale behind my poems.

### **If you worked in a group, who were you partners? Was it successful? What were the advantages and disadvantages of working in a group on this assignment? How did you divide the workload?**

I worked alone :)