

**Discuss how feminist theory can help explain women's experiences of health and or sport.**

Within this essay I am going to discuss how feminist theory can help explain women's experiences of sport. I am going to give a brief outline of four feminist perspectives and then look at how some of the perspectives help explain women's experiences of sport, specifically Formula 1 motor racing. Feminism is concerned with understanding the oppression and trying to put right the inequalities of women, in an essay entitled What is Feminism? Rosalind Delamar suggested that "at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order". (Delamar in J Mitchell and A Oakley eds, 1986:8) (Introduction to Sociology, O'Donnel, M p189). There have been no female drivers in Formula 1 since 1992, even though 48% of the 30-million licenced drivers in the UK alone are female. I am therefore going to look at how women are viewed and portrayed within the context of F1 racing from a feminist perspective and try to understand why no women are involved at the present time.

Marxist feminist theory is concerned with class and believes that gender inequality is created by capitalism, that class relations determine the nature of gender relations. Women serve the needs of a capitalist economy by reproducing children, by doing domestic chores, looking after the wellbeing and the nurturing of men in an unrecognised and unpaid capacity. Marxist feminists would argue that the role of housewife is as important as any paid employment done by men as it cares for the workforce and keeps it health and functioning and keeps the wheels of industry turning. In a male dominated (patriarchal) society women are expected to work in the home for no pay, the male role is that of bread winner, the head of the household and the man controls how much money his wife has access to. Women are kept in their place by lack of funds which in turn leads to lack of opportunities for taking in part in sport and leisure activities. Lack of affordable child care is another reason women find it difficult to partake in sporting activities. "Patriarchy in capitalist society reinforces and complements capitalism. The fundamental nature of female oppression is economic" (Introduction to Sociology, O'Donnel, M p194).

Liberal feminism is concerned with the empowerment of women through changes in legislation. For equal rights and opportunities brought about through changes in laws and focuses more on political rights as opposed to economic rights. Liberal feminist theory believes that women should have the same rights as men in all walks of life; the same rights to an education, equal pay for doing the same job, the same rights to choose their own path in life without the constraints of legislation. The same rights to fulfil their potential. Through lobbying and demonstration liberal feminists have brought about such changes as The Sex Discrimination Act 1985 which gives females and males the same treatment in the main structures of public life although sport was exempt from this.

Black feminism, although concerned with the oppression of women in general, is more concerned with the fact that black women and women of colour do not hold views

identical to those of 'white feminists', that 'white feminists' need to "understand more fully the intersection of racism, sexism and classism in the lives of black women" (Feminist Thought, Rosemarie Tong p217) Black feminism takes into account the cultural differences between races, that what is important in one culture is not necessarily as important in another. That these differences make all women individual and unique and therefore cannot all be grouped together as one. Black feminism sees the oppression of women as much to do with racism and the stereotyping of black women as to do with sexism, and that all issues need to be addressed before the emancipation of all women, regardless of ethnicity, will occur..

Radical feminism developed out of the radical politics in the 1960s and 70s. It believes that we live in a patriarchal society, a system of domination through which men benefit, that men are the heads of society, men have power over women in terms of their structural position, for example, that a man is the head of the household. Radical feminism also argues women's bodies are controlled by men, that they are objectified, viewed as objects, that sex and gender system is the fundamental cause of women's oppression. According to Rosemarie Tong "radical feminists reject the assumption there is or should be a necessary connection between one's sex (male or female) and one's gender (masculine or feminine). Instead, they claimed that gender is separable from sex and that patriarchal society uses rigid gender roles to keep women passive ("affectionate, obedient, responsive to sympathy and approval, cheerful, kind and friendly") and men active ("tenacious, aggressive, curious, ambitious, planful, responsible, original and competitive"). Thus, the way for women to dispel men's unjustifiable power over women is for both sexes first to recognise women are no more destined to be passive than men are destined to be active, and then to develop whatever combination of feminine and masculine traits best reflects their unique personalities".

In a patriarchal society the dominant ideas or the hegemonic markers of femininity are those of someone who is weak, passive, emotional, fragile and non-competitive, someone who is more suited to a caring, supportive role in life rather than one who can compete in the sports area. Femininity is also based on sexual attractiveness, bodyshape for example, the dominant ideas of society that conclude women should be thin, that women's bodies are weaker and less able than men's but can be moulded and objectified in the media and on television to fit in with what society considers to be the norm. The hegemonic markers of masculinity on the other hand are all the exact opposite of femininity, that men should be hard, strong, aggressive, competitive, etc, that it is a man's natural role to compete with others, to be the dominant power. In motor racing the skills required are "strength, stamina, concentration, competitive will, quick reaction/reflexes, excellent eyesight, cardio fitness, leanness and more to be a world class championship-calibre race car driver. Yet none of these qualities are defined by gender" ([www.lynstjames.com/lynstjames/ecclestone](http://www.lynstjames.com/lynstjames/ecclestone)). Unfortunately in a patriarchal society nearly all these skills are linked to the hegemonic markers of masculinity.

The image of F1 (Formula 1) is that of a glamorous sport with a playboy image, the racing drivers are seen as rich and flamboyant, on a par with movie and popstars. This attracts a lot of media attention to the sport as well as to the private lives of the racing drivers themselves. Women involved with F1 are also viewed as glamorous but not in the same risk-taking, competitive way as the drivers, but in a supportive, secondary role.

“One of the most common sights at races is that of ‘grid girl’. These women form part of the pre-race grid formalities, their typical role includes presenting the flags of all the competitors for their national anthems. Dressed in the race sponsors colours the ‘grid girls’ are famous for their short and revealing outfits. The models represent the Western ideal of feminine beauty - tall, thin, attractive and the majority are white” (The Representation of women in Motorsports [www.halfmoon0.demon.co.uk/womenrep](http://www.halfmoon0.demon.co.uk/womenrep)). Bernie Ecclestone, Formula 1 boss, is quoted “In all likelihood a woman driver will never get the opportunity to race in Formula 1 because no one will ever take them seriously. . . therefore they’re never going to get into a competitive race car. So where will they come from? No women drivers will be able to make their way up in the sport. Even if a woman could raise the money to buy a drive, she would be unlikely to find a team willing to take her on.”([www.lynstjames.com/lynstjames/ecclestone](http://www.lynstjames.com/lynstjames/ecclestone))

A radical feminist would argue that this image of women in motorsports is one of the reasons that there are no female F1 drivers, that women are viewed as sexual objects, there to offer support to the drivers and teams and to attract media attention, to be packaged up in the name of corporate sponsorship and paraded around the track, but not allowed to get inside a race car. Women are therefore not taken seriously enough to be signed to a race team because the image of women within the world of F1 is not as an equal but as a lesser creature, one to be exploited by the sponsors to increase the media coverage of the sport, not as a serious race contender, but as a bit of glamorous decoration to further increase its playboy image in the eyes of the world. “The images of ‘grid girls’ is regularly shown in both the broadcast and the print media, especially in the specialised print media for motorsports, these are regularly used on the front covers with such ‘taster’ headlines as ‘all the girls, all the glamour’ as a selling tool” “The imagery of women in motorsports may make current potential female participants feel uneasy or discouraged.”(The Representation of women in Motorsports [www.halfmoon0.demon.co.uk/womenrep](http://www.halfmoon0.demon.co.uk/womenrep))

“You have to go back 22 years to find the last woman driver to qualify for a Grand Prix - Lella Lombardi and it was 15 years before that that Maria-Teresa de Fillippis raced. Divina Galacia, Desire Wilson and Giovanna Amati all tried to qualify but failed to make the grid. We have not seen a girl try to qualify for a race since Amati drove a Brabham at the start of 1992. When she left she was replaced by Damon Hill and he didn’t do much better than she had done at the time. . .” (In-flight magazines and sex in Formula 1 [www.grandprix.com](http://www.grandprix.com) ) Earlier this year, however McLaren, in an attempt to promote F1 in America and attract media attention for the sport, got American female racing driver, Sarah Fisher to do a demonstration run in their MP4-17 car, this run being the first woman to drive an F1 car since Amati in 1992. David Coulthard, McLarens regular driver when asked for his opinion of females in F1 said “As far as I’m concerned, its a question of genetics, look at it this way, you buy little boys a tractor to play with and little girls a doll. Try it the other way and it just doesn’t work” (<http://uk.sports.yahoo.com>). There are no genetic or physical reasons why a woman cannot drive a car as well as a man. From a liberal feminist perspective this idea that boys should be given tractors and girls dolls would further instill the notion that from an early age boys and girls are guided in the direction of socially constructed gender roles. Girls are given dolls to play with to encourage the nurturing and caring role which they will take on in later life when they

become wives and mothers, boys on the other hand are given tractors to encourage them to take an interest in masculine things and prepare them for their working role of breadwinner. Liberal feminism argues that “children's worlds are structured in ways that encourage them to behave in a ‘gender appropriate’ manner” ([www.wkac.ac.uk/edstudies](http://www.wkac.ac.uk/edstudies)).

In conclusion I have looked into and tried to establish reasons for there not being any female racing drivers in F1. I have suggested that this could be down to the portrayal of women within the realms of F1, that women are viewed as sexual objects and that any participation of women in the role of race contender could be trivialised and undermined by this imagery. Also gender stereotyping, cars and racing are viewed as a male domain and from a young age children are guided into the areas that are typically viewed as male and female, these socially constructed gender roles therefore guide children in to what is acceptable for boys and girls, that certain sports are not seen as being feminine, like motor racing for example, and girls should not be encourage by being given cars to play with. So, until the boundaries of stereotypical gender roles are broken and all children are encouraged to fulfil their potential, no matter what direction, women will not be encouraged towards male dominated sports. The lack of any role model for budding female drivers to aspire to may have a negative effect on the sport, by not breaking down the barriers and prejudices around F1 and allowing women through on to the circuit the sport is cutting itself of from half the population. Surely if a woman can sail around the world single-handed she can drive a F1 racing car around a track?

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