IS OLYMPIC COVERAGE SEXIST?

From basketball to archery, gymnastics to football, and boxing to fencing, in the 2016 Olympics, women athletes participate fully in almost every sporting event. Overall, 45% of the Olympic competitors are women. This year, the U.S. Olympic team includes the largest contingent of female athletes any nation has ever sent to the Olympic Games, featuring 292 women. At the same time, with all this progress and success for women athletes, there is a perception that the media coverage and commentary about the Olympics has been sexist and overloaded with stereotypes about girls and women including comparing women to men, giving their husbands credit for their successes, patronization and focusing on women's bodies and appearance.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the 2016 Olympics, reflect on what they've seen and heard, and assess the extent to which there is sexism and stereotypes in the coverage of the 2016 Olympics.

See these additional ADL resources: *Current Events Classroom* "Stereotypes of Girls and Women in the Media," "Athletes and Activism" and "Mo'Ne Davis and Gender Stereotypes" and The Gender Wage Gap.

Grade Level: grades 6–12

Time: 45 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Speaking and Listening, Language

Learning Objectives:

- Students will explore their thoughts and feelings about the 2016 Olympics.

- Students will reflect on definitions of sexism and stereotypes and apply that understanding to the coverage of the 2016 Olympics.

- Students will deconstruct at least one example of alleged sexist and/or stereotypical coverage and make their own assessment as to whether sexism is present.

Compelling Question: Was the coverage of the 2016 Olympics sexist and why does it matter?

Material:

- *Post-it Notes*® (3–4 per student)

- "Is some Olympic commentary sexist?" (*BBC News Magazine,* August 11, 2016, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37037050), one copy for each student

- "Top10 Most Sexist Things to Occur at the 2016 Rio Olympics So Far" (*The Huffington Post,* August 8, 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/top-10-most-sexist-things-to-occur-at-the-2016-

rio_us_57a88bfce4b0c94bd3c9fb86), print out article and cut each of 10 examples into strips for distribution to small groups)

- Sexism Assessment Worksheet (one copy for each student)

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's "Glossary of Education Terms.")

- commentator
- cringe-worthy
- criticism
- demeaning
- disproportionately

- feat
- mentality
- mutually exclusive
- offensive
- patronized

- sexism
- significantly
- stereotype
- unintentional

INFORMATION SHARING AND CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

1. Explain to students that they are going to discuss the 2016 Olympics in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil from August 3-21. Ask: *What are the Olympics?* Explain that the Olympics are international sporting events held every two years in a different country. They take place in the summer ("Summer Games") and then two years later in the winter ("Winter Games") in a different location and thousands of athletes from around the world participate in a variety of sports competitions. The Olympic Games are considered to be the world's foremost athletics competition with more than 200 nations participating.

2. If space is available in the classroom, create concentric circles by assigning half the class the number "1" and the other half the number "2." Have the "1" students come to the center of the room and form a tight circle. They should be facing inside. When they are situated in the circle, have them all turn around so they are facing outward. Next, have the "2" students come and have each one face a "1" student so that two concentric circles have formed with each student facing another student. Explain that concentric circles provide an opportunity to have short conversations with several different people.

   NOTE: If concentric circles are not possible due to logistics or spacing limitations in your classroom, you can create two parallel lines of students facing each other. If that won't work, have students change partners by talking with students in front, back and on each side of them if seated in rows or tables.

3. Explain to students that you are going to ask a question and each pair will respond to the question by taking turns talking. They should decide who talks first before responding. When time is up, you will give instructions as to who moves and how. Read the following four questions one at a time and give 60 seconds for the pair (30 seconds for each student) to respond to the question. Let students know when 30 seconds are up and it is time to switch roles so the speakers become listeners and vice versa. After each question is completed (i.e. both students have talked), have either the inner circle ("1" students) or outer circle ("2" students) move one or more places to the left so that they are facing a new student.

   - Did you watch the Olympics and if so, what did you see?

   - If you watched, what was your favorite sporting event or moment during the Olympics and why? If you didn't watch, what did you hear about it from family, friends or in the news?

- What bothered you or what is something you didn't like about the Olympics and why? If you didn't watch did you hear about it from family, friends or in the news?

- Were there any controversial issues that you noticed or heard about? If so, what?

4. Have students come back to their seats and ask if any students would like to share something they discussed in the concentric circles and engage in a few minutes of sharing.

   If it doesn't come up in the discussion, explain that one of the controversies in this year's Olympics was that there was a lot of sexism and stereotyping of women in the media coverage of the Olympic Games. Ask students if they heard or saw any of that.

SEXISM AND STEREOTYPES

1. Ask students: *What is sexism?* Define sexism as: "Prejudice and/or discrimination against people based on their real or perceived sex. Sexism is based on a belief (conscious or unconscious) that there is a natural order based on sex." Ask if students have any questions about the definition. Then ask: *What are some examples of sexism you have seen either in interpersonal (one-on-one) relationships or in society?* Record those on the board/smart board.

2. Then ask students: *What is a stereotype?* Define stereotype as: "An oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences. Even seemingly positive stereotypes that link a person or group to a specific positive trait can have negative consequences."

3. Ask aloud: *What are some common stereotypes of girls and women? How are they perpetuated in the media?* Explain to students that they are going to brainstorm and share some of these responses. Distribute 3-5 post-it notes to each student and have them write down stereotypes about girls and women they have experienced, witnessed or seen in the media (including traditional or social media). Explain to students that media can include: TV shows, news, and commercials, movies, YouTube videos, radio, Internet, social media, online news, billboards, video games, podcasts, magazines (paper or online), music videos, newspapers (paper or online), ads on apps or computer games, Internet shows.

   After students have written down their words, or phrases, put them on the board/smart board and cluster words that are similar or connected.

   NOTE: Some students may feel reluctant to express stereotypes for fear that people will think they believe those stereotypes. Emphasize that the words students share do not necessarily reflect their actual beliefs but they underscore how deeply ingrained stereotypical thinking is in all of us. Assure students that they should share without fear of judgment.

4. Have students look at the list of words and phrases (or read them aloud) and engage students in a discussion by asking:

- Are the words or phrases mostly positive or negative?

- How do you feel looking at these words?

- What are the overall messages that are being conveyed about women and girls?

5. If it makes sense and reflects what stereotypes students recorded, share these overall categories, explaining that these stereotypes about girls and women are prevalent:

- Women and girls are weak, emotional and/or helpless.

- Women are not strong, not good at fixing things and tend not to be skilled in math and science.

- Women and girls are primarily concerned with relationships and, as they grow up, are more focused on romantic/love relationships and their roles as mothers and caregivers, sometimes at the exclusion of other aspirations.

- Women and girls must value their physical and sexual attractiveness first above everything else. They have to look flawless and the standards of beauty for women are very different than those for men (i.e. it is acceptable for men to have physical flaws, show signs of aging, be a normal weight or overweight, etc.).

READING ACTIVITY

Distribute a copy of the article "Is some Olympic commentary sexist?" to each student and give them 10–15 minutes to read silently. Engage students in a discussion by asking:

- What are some examples of sexism discussed in the article?

- Do you agree or disagree with their assessment of sexism? Please explain.

- In what ways does the article argue that female participation in sports and the overall coverage is getting better?

- Based on the article, what is you conclusion about the prevalence of sexism in the coverage?

SMALL GROUP WORK: ANALYZING EXAMPLES OF SEXISM

1. Divide students into small groups of 5-6 students each. In advance, cut out each of ten examples from Top 10 Most Sexist Things to Occur at the 2016 Rio Olympics So Far into strips and give one or two examples to each small group, depending on how many groups you have (i.e. if you have five groups, each group can get two examples). You can also use other examples in the articles in the "Additional Reading and Resources" section.

2. Instruct each of the small groups to read their specific situation(s), discuss what happened and share their thoughts with each other about it. Then, as a group, respond to the following questions using the Sexism Assessment Worksheet to record their responses. The questions are as follows:

- What happened?

- Do you think the example(s) you reviewed are sexist or stereotypical? Why or why not?

- If sexism does exist in your example(s), what impact do you think it has on viewers and readers?

- What are some alternative words/phrases that the commentators can use instead of what they said?

3. Because each small group will present their responses with the whole class, instruct the groups to decide in advance how they will present their responses to the questions (e.g. one person will share back all of it, each student in the group will share one response, etc.). When students have completed their small group work, have each group present their situation to the class, sharing what they discussed in their group and their responses to the questions. After each small group's presentation, ask all of the students if they have any additional questions or thoughts.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- "3 infuriating examples of sexist Olympic coverage" (Go Kicker, August 9, 2016)

- "14 of the Most Sexist Moments From the 2016 Olympics (So Far)" (*Cosmopolitan,* August 15, 2016)

- Olympics: Rio 2016

- "For Many Viewers, the (Sexist) Games Have Indeed Begun" (*The New York Times,* August 11, 2016)

- "Is some Olympic commentary sexist?" (BBC News, August 11, 2016)

- "Katie Ledecky broke a record. Michael Phelps won silver. Guess who won the headline?" (Vox, August 17, 2016)

- Rio 2016: Complete coverage of the 2016 Olympic Games (*The New York Times*)

- When an athlete's relationships are more important than success in her sport (Mashable)

- Women and Girls (Media Smarts)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Standard 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
Language
Standard 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using content clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

SEXISM ASSESSMENT WORKSHEET

1. What happened?

2. Do you think the example(s) you reviewed are sexist or stereotypical? Why or why not?

3. If sexism does exist in your example(s), what impact do you think it has on viewers and readers?

4. What are some alternative words/phrases that the commentators can use instead of what they said?