

2020

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Repository Citation

Kruthika N. S., *Esports and its Reinforcement of Gender Divides*, 30 Marq. Sports L. Rev. 347 (2020)
Available at: <https://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/sportslaw/vol30/iss2/4>

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ESPORTS AND ITS REINFORCEMENT OF GENDER DIVIDES

KRUTHIKA N. S.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Electronic sport has emerged from 1980s' video-game culture to what we see today: international leagues, campaigns for inclusion in the Olympics, and a projected billion-dollar industry. Also referred to as eSports or competitive gaming, it is often portrayed as an antithesis to conventional or *real* sport (“traditional sport”) due to its association with violent and antisocial behaviour.¹ However, eSports has increasingly been accepted for its better qualities such as emphasis on competition and problem-solving.² While the sporting fraternity is on the fence about it constituting ‘sport’, eSports stakeholders such as league owners, governing bodies, tournament organisers and professional gamers argue that most popular eSports (for example, World of Warcraft, League of Legends, and Counter-Strike) possess the characteristics of traditional sports.³ They cite similarities between traditional sport and eSports, such as a growing fanbase, training requirements, prize money, rankings, and gamification of virtual reality to support this stance.

Noting these likenesses between eSports and traditional sport, stakeholders have steadily pushed for it to be considered a “real sport” worthy of a slot at the Olympics.⁴ To this end, these stakeholders have continually tried to mould many

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1. Kalle Jonasson & Jesper Thiborg, *Electronic Sport and Its Impact on Future Sport*, 13 SPORT IN SOC'Y 287, 288 (2010).

2. *See generally*, Andrew K. Przybylski et al., *A Motivational Model of Video Game Engagement*, 14 REV. OF GEN. PSYCHOL. 154 (2010).

3. *See generally*, Seth E. Jenny et al., *Virtual(ly) Athletes: Where eSports Fit Within the Definition of “Sport”*, 69 QUEST 1 (2016).

4. C. A. Kates, *The Debate: For & Against eSports*, 10 ENGINEERING & TECH. 28 (2015); *See also* Jenny, *supra* note 3.

eSports games into a type that fits traditional sport. However, this proposal has faced much resistance from stakeholders of the Olympic Movement, which cites a myriad of factors for eSports' exclusion from the Olympic Games. Apart from arguments that stem from eSports lacking the qualities of "real sport", many opponents to such exclusion have pointed out to another concern: gender inequality in eSports.⁵ While many stakeholders in the gaming community are looking to embrace gender inclusion, there are several obstacles that the industry needs to address. Given that the eSports fraternity is inclined to gain Olympic recognition, this paper seeks to align eSports' challenges on the gender front, with the solutions that the Olympic Movement has found to similar challenges in traditional sports. Thus, the paper argues that if these issues are left unresolved, the eSporting space will remain unequal and discriminatory, and thus violative of Olympic ideals.

To this end, Part II of the paper will discuss the principles governing gender inclusion in eSports and well as the Olympic Movement. These principles will serve as a base to address the issues identified in the next Part III. In Part III, the paper will analyse how despite eSports offering a level-playing field (for various ages, genders, and levels of physical ability), a vast majority of professional eSports players, game developers, and fans are cis-men. It will delve into specific reasons for exclusion of women from eSports, and analyse the Olympic Movement's response to similar issues in traditional sport. Part IV of the paper questions if gender segregation in eSports would be beneficial to attain gender inclusivity, and finally Part V will conclude the discussion. Considering the interest of eSports stakeholders in gaining an Olympic slot, the paper argues that even if eSports industry proves to possess the qualities associated with traditional sport, it must actively work towards gender inclusion to truly show its commitment to the Olympic Movement.

II. TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

A. The Principles Cementing Gender Inclusion in eSports

The International E-Sports Federation (IESF) which is the international body that governs eSports across the globe, comprises members who are the eSports federations in different nation states. The IESF Statute of 2019, in its mission statement aims for growing eSports as a widely played sport, with the

5. See Jenna Pitcher, *Previously Male-Only Hearthstone Competition Now Open to All Genders*, POLYGON (June 14, 2017), <https://www.polygon.com/2014/7/3/5867015/international-esports-federation-reverses-gender-segregation-policy>.

spirit of real sport.⁶ Further, it has stated that its primary objective is to make eSports part of the Olympics, given its rising importance. Along with ambitions such as the banning of violence, the IESF Statute also acknowledges gender inclusion as an important aim. Article 5 of the Statute (Non-discrimination and Promoting Female Participation) acknowledges that like all sport is purported to be, the practice of eSports is a fundamental right.⁷ It further states that all parties related to the IESF's events, including its "Members and partners" shall take all "appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination" and elevate women's participation in eSports.⁸

However, the IESF Statute does not elucidate the exact nature of such "appropriate" measures, leaving it to the discretion of the stakeholders. It is also pertinent to note that individual eSports tournaments/leagues are primarily governed by private actors, and they perhaps fall under the term "partners", which remains undefined. These partners could include the league owners, tournament organisers, coaches, players, game developers, and any entity that is a stakeholder in the eSports environment. Such a loosely-worded term has a limited binding effect on these stakeholders; the binding effect is more limited than compared to Member federations who have explicit mention. With the lack of clear principles being defined by the eSports fraternity to foster gender inclusion, the Olympic Movement offers a worthy starting point. Traditional sport has faced (and continues to face) gender issues like those that plague eSports today, and is making an active effort to rectify them. Given that eSports is looking to enter the Olympic arena, it would be beneficial to the industry to show its alignment with Olympic values.

B. The Olympic Movement and Gender Equality

The freedom to play sport irrespective of sex or sexual orientation is recognised as a fundamental principle of the Olympic Charter.⁹ The IOC has acknowledged it has a responsibility to uphold gender equality, as it is a basic human right.¹⁰ Traditional sport has not always been gender-inclusive, and there has been much critique regarding the Olympic Charter and Games being a

6. International Esports Federation, *International Esports Federation Statutes*, IE-SF (Nov. 10, 2017), https://www.ie-sf.org/images/9j6q2plki25i/6bCKpCJUcgyqwae8a28ycQ/70bfb563c3a454ec94bb7b678fd241a4/IESF_Statutes_As_of_Nov_10_2017.PDF.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

9. International Olympic Committee, 2019 OLYMPIC CHARTER at 12.

10. International Olympic Committee, *IOC Gender Equality Review Project* (2018).

primarily masculine creation.¹¹ In fact, leading sports studies theorists have noted that the creation of the first Women's Olympics in 1922 is reflective of the gender inequalities entrenched in Olympic ideology and practices (Guttman 1992). However, traditional sport, and the Olympic Committee in particular has recognised this issue and to rectify the same, has made gender equality in sport a universal Olympic goal.

Many decades following the first Women's Olympics, in December 2014, the 127th IOC Session in Monaco witnessed the International Olympic Committee (IOC) agreeing to implement the Olympic Agenda 2020 ("Agenda 2020"). While the agenda looks into many aspects that must govern modern sport, women's empowerment and gender equality in sport form one of its core principles. Recommendation 11 of Agenda 2020 seeks to foster gender equality. The IOC hopes to do so by working with the various International Federations ("IFs") to achieve at least 50% female participation in the Olympic Games and to further women's participation and involvement in the sport by increasing their opportunities at the Olympic Games. Further, the IOC is looking to encourage the inclusion of mixed-gender team events to ensure there is balanced representation.

When it became clear that the pace at which the issues regarding gender parity were being dealt with was unsatisfactory, the IOC Gender Equality Review Project was set up in 2017 with a mandate to work towards global gender equality through "action-oriented recommendations for change".¹² For this project, the IOC's Project team comprised 11 members who worked with six stakeholder groups including, athletes, National Olympic Committee ("NOC") representatives, IF representatives; sports media professionals, academics specialising in sports studies, and business leaders from the private sector. After a comprehensive study of all available resources and over 40 interviews with stakeholders in women's equality matters, the Project presented 25 recommendations in a consolidated report ("IOC Equality Report"). Hence, it is pertinent to note that even in sports where the gender binary is substantiated using the biological argument (that men are more physically capable than women), the IOC is looking to close the gender gap.

III. GENDER ISSUES IN ESPORTS

Traditional (offline) sport has been wrought with gender stereotypes which cement the predominant belief that women are, simply put, inferior athletes. It

11. ALLEN GUTTMANN, *THE OLYMPICS: A HISTORY OF THE MODERN GAMES* (ILLINOIS HISTORY OF SPORTS) (University of Illinois Press 1992); J. HARGREAVES, *SPORTING FEMALES: CRITICAL ISSUES IN THE HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY OF WOMEN'S SPORTS* (1st ed. 1994).

12. International Olympic Committee, *supra* note 9.

has become a canon of sport that men are bound to outperform women due to fundamental biology¹³ especially in sports involving strength, power and speed.¹⁴ In eSports however, due to the triviality of physical prowess, one would suppose the stereotypes which discourage women's participation would be less valid in an online space, where winning an eSport game is independent of physical ability.¹⁵ With this entirely new paradigm of how we understand sport, many are optimistic of cyberspace opening up sport as we know it to "new forms of sport participation and sociality [which] can be created in terms of game-making, game-playing, and norm-making within game".¹⁶ Despite these new possibilities regarding sports participation, eSports is not exempt from existing societal gender issues related to sexism and exclusion. Rather, these gender stereotypes play out in a more complex fashion owing to the unique nature of the sport. This part of the paper analyses the current issues that plague eSports in relation to gender, and point out to similar issues in traditional sport. It then seeks to highlight specific recommendations made in the IOC Equality Report applicable to each identified issue. It must be noted that since these recommendations have been made with regard to traditional sports, some may add limited value to the eSports context, and are thus excluded from this discussion. Moreover, it must be noted that the issues and recommendations highlighted hereunder cannot hold force if merely directed at the IESF. Rather, they must be considered by all eSports stakeholders if inclusion is indeed a serious goal of the fraternity.

A. Gender Portrayal in Gaming

A frequently used phrase in online gaming is that "there are no women on the internet" which is often used to brush away gender as a subject in discourse.¹⁷ Studies from the early 21st century have revealed that female gamers had often been invisible in the gaming community. During its nascent

13. See generally, Julien E. Bois et al., *Mothers' Expectancies and Young Adolescents' Perceived Physical Competence: A Year Long Study*, 22 J. EARLY ADOLESCENCE 384 (2002); See also J.S. Eccles & R.D. Harold, *Gender Differences in Sport Involvement: Applying the Eccles' Expectancy Value Model*, 3 J. OF APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOL. 7 (1991).

14. A. Chalabaev et al., *Do Achievement Goals Mediate Stereotype Threat?: An Investigation on Females' Soccer Performance*, 30 J. SPORT EXERC PSYCHOL. 143, 144 (2008).

15. Jenny *supra* note 3.

16. Dennis A. Hemphill, *Revisioning Sport Spectatorism*, 22 J. PHIL. SPORT 45 (1995); Richard Loat, *The Once in a Lifetime Chance to Build a New Sport the Right Way*, SPORTANDDEV.ORG (Jan. 24, 2019), <https://www.sportanddev.org/en/article/news/once-lifetime-chance-build-new-sport-right-way>.

17. Anastasia Salter & Bridget Blodgett, *Hypermasculinity and Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public*, 56 J. BROADCAST. ELECTRON. MEDIA 401 (2012); see also Susan Herring, *The Rhetorical Dynamics of Gender Harassment On-line*, 15 INFORM. SOC. 151 (1999); see also T.L. TAYLOR, *PLAY BETWEEN WORLDS: EXPLORING ONLINE GAME CULTURE* (MIT Press 2006).

stages of development till this period in time, game designers, gamers, and researchers had avoided discussions regarding women in competitive gaming.¹⁸ Taking from this critique, later research reveals that women's presence in the industry is ancillary, rather than being the primary subject.¹⁹ It reveals that women are more welcome in roles such as cheerleaders, or as more common in eSports, "booth babes", leaving their representation to be more appealing to heterosexual men.²⁰ This study suggests that eSports may have been replicating the "ornamental" and "secondary" role of women in traditional sport at the time.²¹ While this may not be a blanket truth (women had well-established a primary role in sport by 2009, when this article was published), it makes an important observation: eSports had consistently been catering to the male gaze.

Studies on gender representation in gaming have revealed that there has been more representation of male than female characters.²² Female gamers are left with character options that are far from realistic and more often than not, sexualized.²³ For instance, female characters are often objectified and depicted in highly sexualised forms, and scantily clad although the game requires tough armour.²⁴ Often, female characters have hyper-emphasised sexual characteristics while male characters' muscular build is highlighted.²⁵ Although such unrealistic portrayal of men is also problematic and endorses only one particular image of masculinity, the problem with the portrayal of female characters is directly linked to them being objects of desire rather than subjects.²⁶ As a result, such portrayal tends to exacerbate gendered differences rather than reduce them.

Another issue is the kind of roles in which women are portrayed in these games. With female characters often being marginalised to make way for male

18. See generally, Jo Bryce & Jason Rutter, *Gender Dynamics and the Social and Spatial Organization of Computer Gaming*, 22 LEISURE STUD. 1 (2003).

19. See generally, Nicholas Taylor et al., *Cheerleaders, Booth Babes, Halo Hoes: Pro-gaming, Gender and Jobs for the Boys*, 20 DIGITAL CREATIVITY, 239–252 (2009).

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. Berrin Beasley & Tracy Collins Standley, *Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an Indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games*, 5 MASS COMMUN SOC'Y 279, 286 (2002).

23. Salter, *supra* note 14.

24. Beasley, *supra* note 22 at 290; Helen W. Kennedy, *Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis*, 2 INT'L J. COMPUTER GAME RES. 1 (2002).

25. Elena Bertozzi, *You Play Like a Girl!': Cross-Gender Competition and the Uneven Playing Field*, 14 CONVERGENCE INT. J. RES. NEW MEDIA TECH. 473 (2003).

26. T.L. Taylor, *Multiple Pleasures: Women and Online Gaming*, 9 CONVERGENCE 21 (2003); see also, Karen E. Dill & Kathryn P. Thill, *Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions*, 57 SEX ROLES 851 (2007).

protagonists,²⁷ the gaming environment has spawned into something where male characters are more revered than female characters.²⁸ Further, a 2014 study on portrayal of female characters in video games found that female protagonists are shown in strong, active roles, whereas the supplementary female characters are often portrayed as being defensive, the stereotyped damsel in distress and often sexualised.²⁹ Hence, it concluded that the portrayal of a female character is closely linked to the importance of the role the character plays. As a result of strong male character representation, young boys are likely to play and develop such games and fortify the dominance of men in the industry.³⁰ With such representation being conducive to the belief that gaming is primarily a male pastime, both men and women are disincentivised from challenging existing gender norms.³¹ As a result, femininity is viewed as a mere aesthetic rather than an agentic of eSporting capability, as highlighted in earlier studies.³² While there is a growing number of women playing eSports, MMOs continue to be marketed toward men, with the “cultural expectations of gendered play . . . [labelling] . . . ‘hardcore’ games as a masculine pursuit.”³³ In fact, challenging such cultural expectations could even lead to women being “punished” for doing so, and hence deter them from gaming.³⁴ This finding is particularly reminiscent of women’s entry into traditional sport, whereby women were often reprimanded for entering the male domain. Women were ridiculed for taking interest in masculine activities, harassed about developing a masculine physique,³⁵ and even looked down upon for wasting time and effort in sport which could have otherwise been used for motherhood.³⁶

27. See generally, Beasley *supra* note 22; see also, Bryce *supra* note 18; see also Edward Downs & Stacy L. Smith, *Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis*, 62 SEX ROLES 721 (2009); see also Lina Eklund, *Doing Gender in Cyberspace: The Performance of Gender by Gemale World of Warcraft Players*, 17 CONVERGENCE INT. J. RES. NEW MEDIA TECH. 323 (2011).

28. Dill, *supra* note 26 .

29. Paulina Ewa Rajkowska, *Roles of Female Video Game Characters and Their Impact on Gender Representation* (May 2014) (unpublished Master’s thesis, Uppsala University) (available at <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:720865/FULLTEXT01.pdf>).

30. Dmitri Williams et al., *Looking for Gender: Gender Roles and Behaviours Among Online Gamers*, 59 J. COMM. 700, 721 (2009).

31. See generally, Pam Royle et al., *Women and Games: Technologies of the Gendered Self*, 9 NEW MEDIA SOC. 555 (2007); See also, Bertozzi, *supra* note 25; See also, Dmitri Williams et al., *Looking for Gender: Gender Roles and Behaviours Among Online Gamers*, 59 J. COMM. 700 (2009); Eklund, *supra* note 27.

32. Kennedy, *supra* note 24.

33. Audrey L. Brehm, *Navigating the Feminine in Massively Multiplayer Online Games: Gender in World of Warcraft*, FRONTIERS IN PSYCHOL. 3 (2013).

34. Bertozzi, *supra* note 25.

35. JAMIE SCHULTZ, *WOMEN’S SPORTS: WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW* (Oxford Univ. Press 2019).

36. E.L. Wolven, *College Sports and Motherhood*, N.Y. TIMES, July 3, 1921, at 42.

Moreover, the depiction characters in specific games have been found to have a bearing on how women *perceive* such games. For example, research has even demonstrated a correlation between exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters and tolerance of sexual harassment.³⁷ Studies have concluded that female gamers may exclude themselves from participation in sports where the female body is sexualised, or if the game has sexist themes.³⁸ This is primarily because such objectification also led to unsolicited attention from male players. More recent research has confirmed such findings, and shown that playing video games that sexualized women result in sexist attitudes,³⁹ which plays out as negative stereotypes and online harassment. These effects will be detailed in the next parts of the paper. Even if such effects are not considered, an equal and balanced representation of women is imperative in sport. The Olympic Movement, through the IOC Equality Report has flagged issues surrounding equal representation as key points in building gender-balanced sport.

Olympic Values and Equal Representation

Due to men's and women's sport being segregated in most traditional sport, it has resulted in certain sports having far more men competing than women. To rectify this, Agenda 2020 has aimed for 50% representation of women in the Olympics. In pursuance, the IOC Equality Report has made various recommendations to ensure equal gender representation. In its first Recommendation, the Report has stressed that there must be complete gender equality ensured in terms of the number of teams and athletes that participate in the various team sports, disciplines or events, as well as in the case of individual events, equal participation in terms of the number of female and male participants. It also recommends that the athlete quotas and medal events are gender-equal in the upcoming Summer and Winter Olympic Games. Additionally, recommendations made in relation to governance, that is, Recommendations 18 to 24 discuss the importance of women in senior executive posts at the IF and NOC levels. These recommendations deal with how gender diversity cannot merely be grassroots or a player-centric approach, but also a top-down one where women are actively included in decision-making.

37. See generally, Beasley *supra* note 22; see also Karen E. Dill et al., *Effects of Exposure to Sex-Stereotyped Video Game Characters on Tolerance of Sexual Harassment*, 44 J. EXP. SOC. PSYCHOL. 1402 (2008); see also Downs, *supra* note 27.

38. Se Jin Kim, *Gender Inequality in eSports Participation: Examining League of Legends* (Aug. 2017) (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin) (available at <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/62914/KIM-THESIS-2017.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>).

39. Omar Ruvalcaba et al., *Women's Experiences in eSports: Gendered Differences in Peer and Spectator Feedback During Competitive Video Game Play*, 42 J. SPORT SOC. ISSUES 295, 298 (2018).

Further, through Recommendation 6, it calls to develop an action plan for a more gender-balanced representation of coaches and female entourage at the Olympic Games. Even with regard to non-sporting entourage, it has noted in Recommendation 5 that the percentage of accredited female Technical Officials in the Olympic Games has not crossed 29%, and has recommended that active hiring and capacity-building is the need of the hour. The eSports Industry faces a similar dilemma with regard to representation of female game developers, referees and trainees, and unlike traditional sport, is still in its nascent stage. Hence, eSports has a better chance of ensuring gender-representation in such positions, given that it puts gender-inclusion at the forefront of its hiring and training processes. If actualised, this would demonstrate the alignment of the industry's values with those of the IOC, and aid its mission towards an Olympic slot.

B. Negative Stereotypes

Research has shown that irrespective of women's capabilities in eSports, many undermine them merely due to their gender. In a study that examined the voice chat responses of male gamers to both female and male voices in the game Halo 3, it was found that the female voices received a third as many negative responses as compared to the male voices.⁴⁰ The study had made an effort to transmit only generic statements over chat like "good game" or "hi everybody." Further, the researchers had ensured that all players whose voices were transmitted were of similar skill levels. This study provides evidence of how women are received in this game, and shows how they are often dismissed merely due to their gender. Considering such treatment, there is reason enough for women to refrain from engaging in gendered discourse and avoid "outing" themselves as women.⁴¹

Further, in 2016, a professional *Overwatch* gamer SeYeon Kim alias "Geguri" was widely accused of having used an illegal program to enhance her performance. Her accusers had been so sure of the fact that a Geguri, a teenage girl at the time, could never have such good a skillset, that some professional gamers even announced that they would leave their gaming careers if she proved innocence.⁴² Despite death threats, Geguri went public, and donned a mask while she livestreamed herself showcasing her skills. After Blizzard, the company which created *Overwatch*, confirmed that she had used no

40. Jeffrey H. Kuznekoff & Lindsey M. Rose, *Communication in Multiplayer Gaming: Examining Player Responses to Gender Cues*, 15 NEW MEDIA SOC'Y 541 (2012).

41. Dill, *supra* note 37; Salter, *supra* note 14.

42. Luke McKinney, *The 7 Most WTF Scandals In eSports History*, CRACKED (Jan. 16, 2017), <http://www.cracked.com/blog/the-unbelievably-dark-sidecompetitive-gaming/>.

performance-enhancing program, the question remained as to why her abilities were questioned at all. Critics purport that had Geguri been a man, these doubts might have never arisen.⁴³ If a woman displays adequate skill in any game, some users even question if a real woman is behind a screen or using a male accomplice to play for her.⁴⁴

Research indicates that one of the main reasons for such gender stereotypes is the way in which different genders are portrayed in the media, documented reviews of new games, which provide insights into upcoming games for prospective players, tend to focus more on male than female characters.⁴⁵ Despite the underrepresentation of leading female characters, their sex appeal and attractiveness form most part of discussions on them in reviews. For instance, in a 2007 study wherein 479 images from leading gaming magazines were examined, 59.9% of the female characters were rated as being sexualized, as opposed to less than 1% of their male counterparts.⁴⁶

Much like traditional sports, research on effects of stereotypes has revealed that women's performance in gaming is negatively affected by negative stereotypes of women as gamers. For example, when female gamers were given information which stated that women were inferior to men as gamers, their performance was ranked lower than those women who were not given this information prior to play.⁴⁷ This is problematic today, as many women's capabilities are questioned in game chatrooms and social media. While this may seem to be an issue specific to eSports, negative stereotypes against women in traditional sport has also resulted in their systemic marginalisation from the sphere. However, the IOC is looking to reverse the trend.

Olympic Values and Media Representation

Traditional sport has had issues particularly with the level of media attention given to women's sport. To improve the low figures, Recommendations 12, 13 and 14 of the IOC Equality Report delve into the need for the equal, fair and balanced media portrayal of "both genders". Through these recommendations, the IOC has set forth its mission to include a Gender Portrayal Toolkit that can monitor media coverage, analyse gender audience data, and contribute to an IOC style guide for the development of gender-specific terminology used in sport.

43. *Id.*; Kim, *supra* note 38.

44. Ruvalcaba, *supra* note 39.

45. James D. Ivory, *Still a Man's Game: Gender Representation in Online Reviews of Video Games*, 9 MASS COMM. SOC. 103 (2006).

46. Dill, *supra* note 26.

47. Linda K. Kaye & Charlotte R. Pennington, "Girls Can't Play": *The Effects of Stereotype Threat on Females' Gaming Performance*, 59 COMPUTERS IN HUMAN BEHAV. 202 (2016).

Further, it is looking to work Organising Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs) to ensure balanced gender representation in all Host City Contracts and promotional material during the Games. Additionally, the Portrayal Guidelines for Gender Balanced Representation, 2018 have been released by the IOC as a set of guidelines to challenge gender stereotypes in sport. It addresses how gender must be portrayed, in terms of language, pictures, etc. across various forms of media and communication channels.

Moreover, with regard to appearance of players, Recommendation 3 tackles the need for the uniforms worn by both male and female athletes to have minimal differences, and only those differences which have a technical rationale. This shows that the appearance of players, irrespective of their gender is immaterial to the IOC. This is in sharp contrast to eSports, wherein as discussed, women (and female characters) are portrayed in a highly sexualised manner as compared to men, both in the media and in the games.

C. Real World Consequences: Discrimination and Harassment in Gaming

Women have so often been subject to misogynistic and sexist harassment in the world of gaming,⁴⁸ that over time, it has almost been accepted as a canon.⁴⁹ Despite the world of competitive gaming having earned a reputation as being male-dominant, stakeholders in the system have attempted to challenge these perceptions. However, any such engagement and discourse around gender and sexism has often resulted in belittlement, harassment and witch hunts for outliers.⁵⁰

For example, Anita Sarkeesian, a media critic was berated by many in the gaming community for documenting her research exploring tropes and stereotypes associated with female characters in games. The attacks included

48. Andrea Braithwaite, *It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity*, 2 SOC. MEDIA + SOC'Y 1 (2016); Kirk Hamilton, *Competitive Gamer's Inflammatory Comments Spark Sexual Harassment Debate*, KOTAKU (Feb. 28, 2012), <https://kotaku.com/competitive-gamers-inflammatory-comments-spark-sexual-h-5889066>.

49. Wesley C. King, Jr. et al., *Boys Will Be Boys (And Girls Will Be Girls): The Attribution of Gender Role Stereotypes in a Gaming Situation*, 25 SEX ROLES 607 (1991); Herring, *supra* note 17; Bertozzi, *supra* note 25; Dill, *supra* note 37; Henry Jenkins & Justine Cassell, *From Quake Grrls to Desperate Housewives: A Decade of Gender and Computer Games* in BEYOND BARBIE AND MORTAL COMBAT: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND GAMING 5 (MIT Press 2008); Kishonna L. Gray, *Intersecting Oppressions and Online Communities: Examining the Experiences of Women of Color in Xbox Live*, 15 INFORM. COMM. SOC. 411 (2012); Salter, *supra* note 14; Amy O'Leary, *Sexual Harassment in Online Gaming Stirs Anger*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 1, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/02/us/sexual-harassment-in-online-gaming-stirs-anger.html?r=0>.

50. Salter, *supra* note 14.

verbal harassment, threats, visual depictions of her being raped⁵¹ and even the creation of a game called “Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian”. In other instances, women who spoke out against the rape jokes made on a popular gaming website were “belittled, verbally assaulted, and harassed from many areas within the hardcore gaming public”.⁵²

Perhaps the most infamous controversy that plagued eSports is Gamergate. According to reports, women in the gaming industry who brought up the pressing need for gender equity in the video games industry were harassed online and even received threats of physical violence.⁵³ While some in the gaming industry rejected the critique of the industry as a whole, as these actions were carried out by a smaller group of individuals, these widely publicized events serve to create a hostile environment that may coerce female gamers to be excluded from competitive gaming.⁵⁴ This controversy also acted as a platform for certain gamers to voice their discontent with such that feminist criticism as they feared it could change games’ content, storylines and characters.⁵⁵ Opponents of such feminist critique feared that game developers would then be forced to cater to a wider audience, and have less resources and time to design games for the male gamers, or more accurately, the male gaze. Interestingly, similar opinions were voiced when women were allowed to participate in US college sports programs under an anti-discrimination law famously known as Title IX (Title IX of the Education Amendments 1972, Amendment to the Civil Rights Act 1964). However, studies have found that under Title IX, funding for men’s programs was not compromised due to the increased opportunities for women.⁵⁶ Researchers have urged that these examples ought not be considered as isolated incidents;⁵⁷ female gamers had resorted to posting sexist messages and remarks on a website called “Fat, Ugly,

51. Sociology Lens Admin, *The Attack on Anita Sarkeesian: From Media Analysis to Anti-Feminism and Online Harassment*, SOCIOLOGY LENS (July 2, 2012), <https://www.sociologylens.net/topics/communication-and-media/the-attack-on-anita-sarkeesian-from-media-analysis-to-anti-feminism-and-online-harassment/10036>.

52. Salter, *supra* note 14.

53. Nick Wingfield, *Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in “GamerGate” Campaign*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 15, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/16/technology/gamergate-women-video-game-threats-anita-sarkeesian.html?mcubz=1>; Shira Chess & Adrienne Shaw, *A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity*, 59 J. BROADCAST. ELECTRON. MEDIA 208 (2015).

54. Ruvalcaba, *supra* note 39.

55. Chess, *supra* note 53.

56. Schultz, *supra* note 35; C. Assunção, *Sportification of Professional Gaming: A Study on Gender and Technology*, ACADEMIA 16 (2019), https://www.academia.edu/36856324/Sportification_of_Professional_Gaming_A_Study_on_Gender_and_Technology.

57. Salter, *supra* note 14; Brehm, *supra* note 33.

or Slutty” from 2011 to 2015. These posts by aggrieved women include images and recordings of sexist attacks in games.⁵⁸

Further, studies show that sexual harassment and discrimination cannot be merely viewed as men being harmful to women, but also as a facilitator for women to harm each other. Researchers show that the prevalence of sexual discrimination increased the perception of competitiveness among women.⁵⁹ Such women also tend to remove themselves from a feminine identity and embrace more masculine characteristics, to compete aggressively for what they perceive to be “limited resources”, which is not experienced by men.⁶⁰ However, other studies have revealed an opposite effect. In traditional sports, research has found that a gender discriminatory environment has led women to overemphasise their femininity, which is termed as the “feminine apologetic”.⁶¹ Felshin describes this as a way of women to “apologise” for taking part in “masculine” pursuits, by compensating for it using their femininity. This stems from sport being viewed as a masculine pursuit, and the tendency to use it as a mode of heterosexualization.

Olympic Values and Harassment

Traditional sport has been riddled with cases of harassment during play particularly in relation to racism. Recommendation 10 of the IOC Equality Report provides for the inclusion of Prevention of Harassment and Abuse in Sport (“PHAS”) in the IOC Basic Principles of Good Governance. This Recommendation provided that the IOC along with the various stakeholders of Olympic Movement ought to investigate how athlete-safeguarding policies and procedures could be implemented with regard to harassment in sport. Following this Recommendation, the IOC launched a PHAS Toolkit in collaboration with various NOCs across the world.⁶² The primary objective of the PHAS Toolkit is to enable athletes to report any incidents of harassment or abuse in sport, to actualise their right to safe sport.

The eSports industry, on the other hand, mandates no such institutional framework. Moreover, the internet, which easily enables anonymity, forms a

58. Salter, *supra* note 14.

59. Belle Derks et al., *Gender-Bias Primes Elicit Queen-Bee Responses Among Senior Policewomen*, 22 PSYCHOL. SCI. 1243 (2011).

60. *Id.*

61. Jan Felshin, *The Triple Option . . . For Women in Sport*, 21 Quest 36 (1974); Schultz, *supra* note 35 at 35.

62. IOC News, *IOC Launches Toolkit For Olympic Movement To Safeguard Athletes From Harassment And Abuse In Sport*, INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE (Nov. 3, 2017), <https://www.olympic.org/news/ioc-launches-toolkit-for-olympic-movement-to-safeguard-athletes-from-harassment-and-abuse-in-sport>.

conducive ecosystem for discriminatory language and hostile behaviour towards marginalised groups, with women and non-binary persons often being at the receiving end. Such anonymity may create a “disinhibition effect” allows a person to dissociate their physical identities from their cyber ones.⁶³ With regard to eSports alone, almost half (49%) of adolescents have reported experiences with hateful, racist, or sexist behaviour.⁶⁴ Research has suggested that women can respond to online gender violence by remaining anonymous so as to not welcome attention, or name and shame the perpetrators.⁶⁵ However, as an athlete, one cannot remain anonymous and maintain a mere virtual presence. Even with regard to naming and shaming, the fact that perpetrators of online harassment may choose to remain anonymous or adopt pseudonyms could act as a barrier to the recourse. Hence, eSports faces the challenge of facilitating a safe sporting space, albeit in an online environment, while tackling issues such as anonymity. A possible solution is to address harassment by design. It has been shown that when platforms lack clear policies for acceptable behaviour, rules and norms become community-constructed,⁶⁶ which is not ideal in an already male-dominated online society. As a result, many platforms have found ways of addressing online violence by technological design. For example, automatic blocking of certain derogatory terms in chatrooms⁶⁷ could be the first step. Further, working with communities affected by such harassment, such as the athletes themselves, through participatory and purposeful design could prove beneficial.⁶⁸ It is critical for eSports game developers to take into account such issues from the direct stakeholders in the system, and incorporate solutions for a more gender-equal sporting environment.

63. Anita Gurumurthy & Niveditha Menon, *Violence Against Women Via Cyberspace*, 44 ECON. POL. WKLY. 19 (2009); John Suler, *The Online Disinhibition Effect*, 7 CYBERPSYCHOL. & BEHAV. 321 (2004).

64. Amanda Lenhart et al., *Teens, Videogames, and Civics: Teen's Gaming Experiences Are Diverse and Include Significant Social Interaction and Civic Engagement*, PEW INTERNET & AM. LIFE PROJECT (Sept. 16, 2008), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED525058.pdf>.

65. Anja Kovacs et al., *'Don't Let it Stand!' An Exploratory Study of Women and Verbal Online Abuse in India*, INTERNET DEMOCRACY PROJECT (Apr. 2013), <https://internetdemocracy.in/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Internet-Democracy-Project-Women-and-Online-Abuse.pdf>.

66. Casey Fiesler et al., *Reality and Perception of Copyright Terms of Service for Online Content Creation*, Proc. of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer Supported and Cooperative Work & Social Computing (2016).

67. Matt Kamen, *Twitch AutoMod Now Blocks Trolls and Hatespeech in Real-Time*, WIRED (Dec. 13, 2016), <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/twitch-introduces-anti-troll-automod-for-game-streams>.

68. Fiesler, *supra* note 66; Zahra Ashktorab & Jessica Vitak, *Designing Cyberbullying Mitigation and Prevention Solutions Through Participatory Design With Teenagers*, 3895 Proc. of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (2016); Jessica A. Pater et al., *Characterizations of Online Harassment: Comparing Policies Across Social Media Platforms*, JESSPATER at 369-74 (Nov. 2016), <http://jesspater.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Pater-Characterizations-of-Online-HarassmentComparing-Policies-Across-Social-Media-Platforms.pdf>.

D. Women's Access to Information and Communications Technology

The eSports industry is heavily dependent on the availability of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). However, in the Global South, and India particularly, the digital gender divide is glaringly visible which may further contribute to the gender gap in the eSports fraternity. A study of cross-sectional survey data from women in both rural and urban areas of six Indian states (Haryana, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh) revealed that there is considerable gender inequity in access to ICT.⁶⁹ The study found that while ICT has the capability to reduce gender inequality, women face barriers to access to such technology due to various systemic, socio-economic, and cultural factors. Further, women and girls are placed at a disadvantage to benefit from the ICT knowledge society as they face limited exposure to education and technology in general.⁷⁰ For instance, language of content acts as a barrier for non-English speakers⁷¹ thus dissuading from using the internet, and as a result, engaging in any online games. Social norms favour men, and allow them greater ease of access to ICT, whereas women are often questioned for such use.⁷² Such social norms are so entrenched that studies have indicated that one in every five women believes that the internet is inappropriate for women, that they would be reprimanded for using the internet, or that it is not beneficial to their lives.⁷³

Further, a report by the Internet Democracy Project which is specific to the South Asian context suggests that the experiences of women in online as well as offline spaces are gender-unequal.⁷⁴ Even when women have access to ICT, their lack of free time which ties in with traditional gender roles, reduced autonomy on the web,⁷⁵ and internet use being associated with “lurking”⁷⁶ could contribute to their absence from online spaces. India specifically has seen the increased policing of women’s activities online, especially by family members.

69. Sumnjeet Singh et al., *Women and ICT: A Study on Access and Perceptions in North India*, 12 INDIAN J. OF HUM. DEV. 401 (2018).

70. Samia Melhem et al., *Information Communication Technologies for Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment* (World Bank Working Paper Oct. 10, 2009), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/812551468148179172/pdf/518310PUB0REPL101Official0Use0Only1.pdf>.

71. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Understanding the Digital Divide*, OECD (Jan. 1, 2001), <https://www.oecd.org/sti/1888451.pdf>.

72. Kovacs, *supra* note 65.

73. *Women and the Web*, INTEL, <https://www.intel.com/content/dam/www/public/us/en/documents/pdf/women-and-the-web.pdf> (last visited May 15, 2020).

74. Kovacs, *supra* note 65.

75. Amy Antonio & David Tuffley, *The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries*, 6 FUTURE INTERNET 673 (2014).

76. Kovacs, *supra* note 65.

For example, technology, such as mobile phones, is viewed as an undesirable sexualising tool in the hands of young unmarried women.⁷⁷ As a result, any instance of women occupying public “spaces”, be it offline or online, is often questioned: in most communities, it is believed women must serve *some* purpose in order to occupy these spaces.⁷⁸ This translates into a system where women’s presence on the internet is met with questions and a need for a rationale behind the same.

Perhaps this explains the innumerable discriminatory messages and jibes faced by female gamers: when women take to online spaces for the purpose of playing sport, they are not only questioned why they are occupying a sporting space, which is meant for men, but also an online space, also meant for men. Further, strangers on the internet tend to police women’s clothing and behaviour, and this extends to sportswomen as well.⁷⁹ As a result, many girls are barred from engaging in any activity which may be public in nature, including sport. However, adequate training, sufficient practice and communication with coaches are important for growth in eSports, and any reduced access to such facilities would translate into a reduction in sporting capabilities. Perhaps this is similar to women’s offline treatment as well, where girls are often discouraged from taking up sport due to various reasons. These include their participation in late practice sessions, interaction with male athletes or coaches, and even the girls’ time and efforts being taken away from traditional gender roles ranging from domestic work to early marriage.⁸⁰ Field research has revealed that the gender gap in traditional sport in India is a result of rigid gender norms across the country.⁸¹ It shows that college girls in India are demotivated from participating in sport due to discouragement from family, traditional roles required to be borne by girls, the lack of female representation and a societal will to view women’s sport as important. It also found that women from government colleges expressed more constraints as compared to those from private colleges, showing that even class and caste play a role in who is excluded from sport, and how much. While class and caste disparities are out of

77. Judith Mariscal et al., *Bridging the Gender Digital Gap*, ECON. (Aug. 28, 2018), <http://www.economics-ejournal.org/economics/discussionpapers/2018-60>.

78. Kovacs, *supra* note 65.

79. HT Correspondent, *Mithali Raj Trolled: ‘Are You Porn Star?’ Twitter Shames Her, Questions Dress Sense*, HINDUSTAN TIMES (Sep 8, 2017), <http://www.hindustantimes.com/cricket/mithali-raj-body-shamed-yet-again-on-social-media-for-indecent-dressing/story-X6sqJQUXS7eziMTNKqOTRO.html> (Last visited on May 15, 2020); Peter Foster, *Fatwa for Tennis Star Who Wears Short Skirts*, TELEGRAPH (Sept. 10, 2005), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/1498093/Fatwa-for-tennis-star-who-wears-short-skirts.html> (Last visited on May 15, 2020).

80. Nalluri Srinivasa Rao, *Constraints of Indian Women Participation in Games and Sports*, 44 BRIT. J. SPORTS MED. 162 (2010).

81. *Id.*

the scope of this paper, further field research is required for a nuanced understanding of intersectional barriers.

Olympic Values and Access

The IOC Equality Report details the importance of access to infrastructure in relation to traditional sport. Recommendation 4 highlights the need for women to have access to the same equipment and apparatus used by men for training. Further, Recommendation 7 delves into the need for equal access to women's and men's events in all the venues. It highlights the importance of the same venues and fields to be used by men and women. With regard to eSports, which is heavily reliant on technology, women's access to such technology must be made a priority by eSports stakeholders to show their commitment towards these recommendations. Further, reading these recommendations with those relating to harassment, it is amply clear that equal access to such facilities cannot be achieved merely by women's physical access to these spaces, but also the safety of these spaces.

E. The Gender Pay Gap

Esports competitions see a large pay gap between the earnings of men and women participants. This can be largely attributed to the male dominant nature of most of the top esports events. The average lifetime earnings of the top 100 esports players (in terms of earnings) has been over USD 888,000 with most of these gamers being men.⁸² In contrast, the top 100 women by comparison have average lifetime earnings of USD 10,500, which translates to men having earned 84 times the earnings of women.⁸³ However, observations regarding the pay gap have often been criticised as being an unfair assessment due to the lack of female professionals at the top levels.⁸⁴ Further, this pay disparity is often disputed by some in the industry who claim that skill and not gender is to blame.⁸⁵ However, this rationale is symptomatic of a deeper issue in eSports: in a game where physical capability has almost no bearing on the result, how could men demonstrate skill so much greater, that they earn 84 times as much as women?

However even if one was to compare the top male and female esports players they would notice a distinct difference in pay. For example, in *Starcraft II*, the highest grossing male player has earned close to five times as much as

82. Nick Hagar, *Fixing the Earnings Gap in Professional Gaming*, PACIFIC STANDARD (Apr. 4, 2017), <https://psmag.com/economics/fixing-the-earnings-gap-in-professional-gaming>.

83. *Id.*

84. *Id.*

85. *Id.*

his female counterpart. However it must be noted that in a game called Halo: Reach, the highest-earning woman has made over twice as much as her male counterpart over their respective careers.⁸⁶ However, as one moves down the rankings, a noticeable pay gap emerges where their earnings are reduced to negligible amounts.⁸⁷ Despite winning several prizes in several championships and being the best in the field, the top ranked women in Counter Strike and Counter Strike: Global Offensive have earned only paltry sums to date.⁸⁸ As eSports is set to grow to be an industry worth USD 1.4 billion by 2020, critics have called for urgent attention to be accorded to its increasing gender wage gap.⁸⁹

Lessons from the Olympic Movement

The IOC Equality Report has highlighted that the gender wage gap remains a pressing concern in sport. Recommendations 15 to 17 emphasise on the need for IFs and NOCs to allocate specific funding to women's programmes. It has also directed the NOCs and IFs to establish mechanisms to address inequalities between genders in prize money or other athlete payments, and work with the IOC to identify discrepancies in prize money or other payments provided to athletes and develop transition plans to close the gender pay gap. It has also stated that the Olympic Movement shall allocate a portion of its operating budget to achieve its goals for gender equality in play, governance and administration, and also recommended an operating budget for specific projects focussed on gender equity. Further, it suggests that with the support of the IOC, this allocation of revenue must be monitored such that the outcomes are quantitatively evaluated against meeting the IOC's aims for gender equality.

IV. SEGREGATION: A SHORT-TERM SOLUTION?

In order to eliminate the palpable gender gap and to foster gender inclusivity in this sphere, explorations on women-only eSports tournaments have commenced to give women a platform to improve their skills in a more conducive environment. For instance, Valkyrie Challenge and StarLadder Female Stars Championship are initiatives taken to encourage female participation in CS:GO. Furthermore, the GirlGamer eSports Festival is another

86. Madeline Ricchiuto, *There's a 718% Pay Gap Between Male and Female Esports Champions*, BLEEDING COOL (Jan. 19, 2018), <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2018/01/19/pay-gap-male-female-esports-champions/>.

87. *Id.*

88. *Id.*

89. Simon Jones, *Esports Have a Gender Pay Gap Problem Too*, TECHFRUIT (July 24, 2017), <https://techfruit.com/2017/07/24/esports-gender-pay-gap-problem/>.

initiative to encourage participation in CS:GO and the League of Legends. Similarly, the Zowie Divina Female eSports tournament provides a women-only space for PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds.⁹⁰ In 2017, SimBin, the creators of various critically acclaimed racing games announced 'Women and Wheels' – the world's first female-only eSports car racing tournament.⁹¹ An interesting development in the offing is launch of the Women's eSports League, which assures that women can "play, socialize and compete in a hate-free environment".⁹²

Joanne Watson, the Division Manager at Maestro Esports has stated that women's only eSports provides an opportunity for passionate female gamers to showcase their talent and in the process, inspire other young women and girls to consider a future in competitive gaming. Furthermore, Alessio Florio, the Chief Executive Officer of Maestro Esports, has opined that female eSports has a long way to go to meet the standards of the "mainstream, male scene".⁹³ Florio has further stated that a separate eSports space for women can contribute to the growth of women in the field. Noting the grave repercussions of the gender gap, Sam Wright, who conceptualized the Valkyrie challenge, has stated that he created the tournament to "allow all-female teams the opportunity to start competing on bigger stages and, hopefully, light a fire to encourage them to pursue a possible trip overseas to compete".⁹⁴ However, Wright has maintained that despite the creation of segregated eSports leagues, the end-goal must be a level-playing field where men and women play alongside. While these opinions are valid, and perhaps even crucial to the development of women's eSports, they still beg the question as to why such segregation is necessary. It is inescapable that segregated eSports can a space free from the predominating norms, and this could be "empowering and beneficial, and even encourage more female players".⁹⁵ However, given that eSports in a way is challenging the traditional

90. W. Staff, *BenQ Announces DIVINA: PUBG eSports Tournament For Female Players Registrations Now Open*, WCCFTECH (Oct. 23, 2018), <https://wccftech.com/benq-announces-divina-pubg-esports-tournament-for-female-players-registrations-now-open/>.

91. Press, *SimBin Studio UK Announces World's First Women-Only eSports Racing Competition* (Sept. 5, 2017), ESPORTS MARKETING BLOG, <http://esports-marketing-blog.com/simbin-studio-uk-announces-worlds-first-women-esports-racing-competition/>.

92. Melany Moncav, *Challengermode and Female Legends Announce the Women Esports League*, ESPORTS INSIDER (Nov. 16, 2018), <https://esportsinsider.com/2018/11/challengermode-and-female-legends-announce-the-women-esports-league/>.

93. Poppy Ingham, *Women Only Esports Teams, Tournaments & Leagues*, FAST WEB MEDIA (Feb. 4, 2019), <https://fastweb.media/blog/women-only-esports-teamstournaments-leagues>.

94. Sam Wright, *We Need More Female Only Tournaments on Esports*, RED BULL (Aug. 10, 2019), <https://www.redbull.com/za-en/valkyrie-challenge>.

95. Interview with Carrie Oillaux (Jan. 31, 2019).

presumptions of male physical superiority, perhaps it must aim to do away with gender-based distinctions.⁹⁶

Gender norms in traditional sports mainly stem from the gender-based binary classification: men's and women's sport. This gender binary has been justified by using biological factors (that men are physically stronger), and largely accepted by women to enable "meaningful competition" in traditional sports. In contrast, from a purely sporting perspective, eSports offer a level playing field to all genders, as biological differences play a negligible to no role. However, due to non-biological factors discussed previously, gender discrimination in competitive gaming has resulted in some female gamers choosing to play outside of public gaming venues. In western contexts for example, women of colour have created exclusive groups for online matches to avoid harassment based their gender and race.⁹⁷ While some of these female gamers have expressed relief with such spaces, some have also felt discontented with their exclusion from mainstream gaming spaces. Although they believed they should not have to create a separate space to game, they often felt drained from having to constantly defend their abilities and identities from aggressive online gamers in conventional gaming contexts.⁹⁸ In summary, sexual harassment (and in this case racism as well) can keep women away from gaming performance and reduce the number of women who take up eSports.⁹⁹

This is extremely similar to what female athletes of colour faced in the pre-civil rights era in the US, in relation to traditional sport. Due to discrimination based on race, gender and class lines, these women often resorted to creating their own sporting spaces. According to sociologists, this was motivated by what they term as the "push-pull phenomenon", which involved both a pull of a shared minority culture, and the push by the dominant culture away from the mainstream.¹⁰⁰ While separate sporting spaces may offer a safe space for training and play, the comfort of common language and culture (the *pull* effect), one cannot neglect discrimination and ostracization that leads to creation of unwelcome spaces in the mainstream (the *push* effect). In eSports for instance, the issues identified with respect to gender inequality, and the responses thereto have made it amply clear that it is primarily the *push* effect at work: the main reason for the mushrooming of women-only tournaments is the inadequate representation of women, online harassment and stereotypes faced by female

96. *Id.*

97. Gray, *supra* note 49.

98. *Id.*

99. *Id.*; Ruvalcaba, *supra* note 39.

100. NICOLE WILLMS, WHEN WOMEN RULE THE COURT: GENDER, RACE AND JAPANESE AMERICAN BASKETBALL (CRITICAL ISSUES IN SPORT AND SOCIETY) (Rutgers University Press 2017).

gamers. Hence, we ought to question whether segregation is merely a quick fix for a larger systemic problem in the eSports industry.

Is Segregation Necessary to Conform with Olympic Traditions?

Due to men's and women's sport being segregated in most traditional sport, it has resulted in several changes in the rules and technical requirements between two classifications of the same sport. Some of the changes have been attributed to difference in physical capability of men and women (such as differing weights of the javelin for men's and women's Javelin Throw). However, the IOC Equality Report has noted that some of these changes are unnecessary. To rectify these effects of segregation, the Report has made several recommendations. For example, Recommendation 2 calls for competition formats and technical rules to be the same, and Recommendation 4 suggests that the sport-specific equipment and apparatus between men and women should be the same, wherever possible. In order to ensure this, it suggests that the IOC work with the relevant IFs and their respective Women in Sport, Technical and Athletes' Commissions to suggest corrections wherever possible, or explain the discrepancies in either the rule or the equipment with relevant medical/scientific/health and safety rationale. Hence, these recommendations expressly state that even if segregated, any change in rules must have adequate technical backing, and men and women play the *same* sport even if they play it separately. Another welcome change is that in Recommendation 2, the Report calls for the promotion of more mixed-gender sports and competitions. Hence, even if women do not compete with men directly, they can now do so in teams.

At this juncture, it is perhaps pertinent to question *why* some sports need to have segregated events at all. Gender-based segregation rests on the presumption that there are *two* genders. This presents a scenario where non-binary persons are excluded from participation. Further, traditional sport has faced instances where women have been questioned about having conventionally "masculine" physiology. In athletics for instance, this has resulted in a framework for testing women for "abnormal" testosterone levels, where if tested positive, they can either be forced to compete with men, or medically reduce the levels of androgen in their bodies.¹⁰¹ In sports where strength and speed play a pivotal role, sports governing bodies have argued that such segregation is necessary for women to have meaningful competition.¹⁰²

101. *Eligibility Regulations for the Female Classification (Athletes with Differences of Sex Development)*, IAAF, http://www.femede.es/documentos/IAAF_Eligibility_Regulations_DSD-2018.pdf. (last visited May 15, 2020).

102. *Dutee Chand v. Athletics Federation of India & International Association of Athletics Federation*, CAS 2014/A/3759, http://www.tas-cas.org/fileadmin/user_upload/award_internet.pdf.

However, with regard to sports wherein the physical capability of a person has negligible bearing on the outcome, one must question if a segregated space is even necessary (in sports such as archery and shooting). In this regard, eSports presents a classic case where such segregation is opted for merely due to factors outside the realm of sporting ability: the pay gap, stereotypes, and harassment.

V. THE WAY FORWARD

Notwithstanding the present challenges, it is pertinent to note, and perhaps even believe that eSports presents a myriad of positives.¹⁰³ The digital world has the capability to transcend borders which traditional stadiums have not been thoroughly capable of, and in turn reach a larger viewer-base. In fact, experts believe that eSports can facilitate activism, fundraising, and that the nature of the games could aid rehabilitation centres more effectively than traditional sports. Some non-profits have already begun to utilise such sports for aiding patients' recovery in hospitals.¹⁰⁴ eSports federations have been implored not merely to reach young people, but do so in a meaningful way by imbibing and conveying the values of traditional sport.¹⁰⁵ After all, traditional sports have been instrumental in aiding social change. However, as this paper has discussed, not all values of traditional sport regarding gender are particularly in line with the Olympic Movement. Even though the Olympic Movement is attempting to rectify some of these issues, it has much food for thought as far as gender-segregation is concerned. Hence, eSports presents a unique opportunity to remove the rose-tinted glasses sports enthusiasts have donned for decades, and question if our sporting values are truly gender-inclusive.

This paper has identified key gender-related issues in eSports, and presented the Olympic ideals as a starting point towards finding solutions. Despite the unwillingness of some in the eSports community to convert it into a regulated sporting sphere, any formal sporting recognition would necessitate a certain degree of regulation, including self-regulation. However, regulation does not necessarily mean interference, and this is firmly understood to be a principle of Olympism. Rather, it means upholding certain standards and values that resonate with vastly different sporting bodies. As far as gender inclusion is concerned, eSports has much to prove to show that its stakeholders are serious

103. Carrie Oillaux, *Esports for development?*, SPORTANDDEV.ORG (Nov. 27, 2018) <https://www.sportanddev.org/en/article/news/esports-development>; *see also* Chand v. Athletics Federation of India & International Association of Athletics Federation, CAS 2014/A/3759, http://www.tas-cas.org/fileadmin/user_upload/award_internet.pdf

104. Paul Hunt, *Are Video Games a Sport?*, SPORTANDDEV.ORG (Dec. 8, 2017), <https://www.sportanddev.org/en/article/news/are-video-games-sport>.

105. *Id.*

believers of the principles of Olympism upholding dignity and equality of various genders. It has great lengths to cover in actively ensuring that the digital realm is a safe space for girls to begin training, and an accommodative space for their growth into gaming professionals.