

## "Girlfriends of the Court"

### Amicae Curiae

equality, Sport, Women, women at work

## Don't Call Me Girl. I'm a Woman.

In Career, Guest Post, media, TV, twitter, Uncategorized, women on **August 1, 2012 at 10:20 am**



([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Girl\\_in\\_curls\\_with\\_bow,\\_2nd\\_pose.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Girl_in_curls_with_bow,_2nd_pose.jpg))

Is this how we wish to represent women athletes? (image courtesy Wikimedia Commons)

Twitter has been abuzz since the start of the Olympic coverage, with the observation of Australian commentators' use of 'girl/s' (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/sport/london-games/tv-callers-fail-to-get-in-swim/story-e6frgdg6-1226438077592>) to describe women competitors. The complaint that women have about this language is its capacity to diminish women's athletic achievement and infantilise them. Many disagree with this interpretation, pointing out that our male athletes are also called 'boys' or 'lads'. So why do many women feel so strongly about being called 'girls' in this context?

As the swimming has dominated Australian coverage in the early days of the Games, so too has reference to 'our girls' in the pool. In the ABC's live blog (<http://www.theage.com.au/olympics/live-blog-london-2012/live-coverage-london-olympics-day-3-20120730-239kx.html>) for example, women swimmers Stephanie Rice and Alicia Coutts are referred to as 'girls'. While these swimmers are aged 23 and 24 respectively, what about young women such as the 16-year old Chinese swimmer? Shiwen Ye competed in the women's event in a time better than that of the fastest man in the men's event. Headlines proclaimed (<http://www.smh.com.au/olympics/swimming-london-2012/the-girl-who-left-the-men-in-her-wake-20120730-238lr.html>) 'The Girl Who Left the Men in Her Wake'. I recognise that as a teenager and with her astonishing achievement, such a headline might be warranted – though I note that another article (<http://www.smh.com.au/olympics/swimming-london-2012/faster-than-phelps-chinese-girls-mighty-finish-is-the-talk-of-the-games-20120730-23a6w.html>) stated that her feat was 'the first time for a woman'. The girl of the headline becomes a woman in the text. That this was the first time for a woman means that her age was not relevant.

One social research blog (<http://notenoughgood.com/2012/07/lets-hear-it-for-the-girls/>) has identified use of such language as 'gender marking'.

The way television stations and commentators frame sporting events linguistically also makes a difference, whether we realize it or not. By allowing commentators to continue to refer to many female athletes as "girls" is to say that they don't deserve the same treatment as "men", who are the "real athletes". It perpetuates the stereotype that female athletes are at the end of the day, just "female athletes". Inferiority is what is implied.

Unlike references to 'boys' or 'lads', reference to 'girls' rather than women occurs against other charges of sexism in the Olympics (<http://sports.nationalpost.com/2012/07/29/london-2012-steps-toward-gender-equality-steps-backward-at-olympics/>). The Australian women's basketball team travelled premium economy while the men travelled business. Attention on Leisel Jones' weight (<http://www.theherald.com.au/blogs/jeff-corbett/fat-favouritism/2639453.aspx>) has likewise been seen as sexist commentary.

There was also controversy in the lead up (<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/sport/london-olympics/time-for-australia-to-choose-a-female-flag-bearer-for-games-says-natalie-cook/story-fn9dheyx-1226431962908>) to the selection of the Australian flag bearer, when beach volleyballer Natalie Cook said that it was a 'no brainer' that the flag bearer should be a woman: the first since 1992. Other commentators (<http://www.theroar.com.au/2012/07/24/for-equality-sake-ogrady-must-carry-the-flag/>) believe however that gender equity would be best achieved by the appointment of a man.

In what might be considered to represent a more intrusive form of sexism, Olympic processes to test women athletes for their 'woman-ness' have also attracted criticism (<http://jezebel.com/5919250/heres-why-olympic-sex-verification-is-a-bad-idea>) – not least because it seems that the basis of the testing represents disputed science.

While this seems like a lot of focus on women athletes in such a short period of time, that is probably because of the invisibility of women athletes and women's sports in non-Olympic times. A casual read of the newspapers will reveal this reality, but it is also borne out by research (see eg: here (<http://www.ausport.gov.au/participating/women/resources/issues/media>); here ([http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/media\\_releases/op\\_ed/20100521\\_women.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/media_releases/op_ed/20100521_women.html)); and here (<http://www.nowuc.com.au/2011/11/21/women-at-top-of-their-game-still-on-cutting-room-floor/>)). Men's sport gains far more exposure in media and attracts far more sponsorship, while women's achievements are under-represented and attract

less sponsorship.

It is this weight of 'otherness' of women athletes that I think prompts such a strong response to being called 'girls' in the Olympic commentary. At such a high profile event, surely it is time for our 'girls' to come of age?

### **But they didn't mean any harm...**

I doubt that any commentator is deliberately trying to belittle women athletes. My view on the use of this language stems rather from our apparently universal blindness to what it means to call a woman a 'girl' – in contrast to calling men 'boys' or 'lads'.

I acknowledge that sometimes it might be OK to be 'one of the girls'... I use the term to refer to my women teammates or close women friends. For former women team members now commentating on their sport at the Olympics, it may likewise be acceptable during an interview to refer to 'the girls'. It should not however be *presumed* that any woman athlete can acceptably be referred to as a girl.

Attitudes to women that are subtly reflected in how we use language in public events such as the Olympics spill over into other areas of life – they reinforce gender stereotypes and are reinforced by them. For example, in one of my former workplaces, a senior (male) practitioner referred to me as 'Miss Muffet' in a meeting with a QC (who subsequently became a High Court Judge). I think that most people would recognise how damaging this was to me in this professional context; and also how it reflected my male colleagues' views of my place in the (gender) hierarchy.

So perhaps this is the Olympics at which our commentators can take a stand, and work on their terminology: women athletes are women. Not girls, not ladies, but women.

Do you think 'girls' is harmless enough?

Guest author [Kate Galloway](http://www.jcu.edu.au/law/staff/JCUDEV_002672.html) ([http://www.jcu.edu.au/law/staff/JCUDEV\\_002672.html](http://www.jcu.edu.au/law/staff/JCUDEV_002672.html)) teaches law at James Cook University. Follow her blog at [Curl](http://katgallow.blogspot.com/) (<http://katgallow.blogspot.com/>), and on twitter at [@KatGallow](https://twitter.com/#%21/katgallow) (<https://twitter.com/#%21/katgallow>)

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