

## **Gender Roles in Motorsport and Modern Car Culture**

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### **Abstract**

Herein is a generalized summary of the historical, present, and hopeful future situational report on gender roles—specifically female roles—in motorsport. We will explore the reasoning behind motorsport having an impressively level playing field between genders, the significance of gender stereotypes on both driving and support careers within auto racing, and touch on various ongoing debates, such as the controversy of a female-only racing series and the cancellation of Formula One's grid girls.

*Keywords:* gender roles, gender equality, sports, motorsports, Iron Dames, Mouton

## **Gender Roles in Motorsport and Modern Car Culture**

Unlike many other forms of sport, those with a motor allow for a much more level playing field between genders, as a large portion of the result is based upon the vehicle used—a factor which can easily be standardized between competitors. Almost all forms of motorsports have been largely dominated by men for the past 120 years, but because of such a naturally fair arena of competition, women were racing against men long before most other sports were even considering inter-gender competition. The first lady racers competed against each other on motorized tricycles around a horse-racing track in the late 1890's (Gilboy, 2018). Since then, both men and women have risen to stardom in the world of motorsport. Names of many more men than women are commonly known to the average fan of auto racing, but the disparity is far less than is found in other sports—such as basketball—where far fewer fans who know a star professional male player also recognize the name of a professional female athlete. While motorsport is a much broader category of sport than professional basketball, it can be proven that within a specific segment, such as the World Rally Championship, the most famous female driver (Michèle Mouton) is only slightly less well known than Walter Rohl, reasonably the most famous male rally driver (and Mouton's teammate for Audi in 1982). This is only one small piece of evidence that goes to show that—especially when compared to other forms of sport—motorsport has a much older history of equal opportunities for women to compete. However, this history does not change the fact that roughly 99% of motorsport competitors—professional and amateur—are male (Kochanek, 2020). Herein I will study only a few possible explanations of this disparity, with no intent of making politically fueled claims or laying blame on any one organization or society.

Before women in motorsport can be discussed, we must explore both the traditional and modern relationships between women and the automobile in America. I have already written extensively on this topic in an analysis of E. E. Cummings' poem "she being Brand," and those literary ideas apply directly to the way in which American society has viewed women and cars for a hundred years. "Alkalay-Gut gives specific examples of how Cummings' use of pronouns and common automotive terminology of the 1920's can be read as metaphors for intimate human relations, as well as citing numerous studies which exhibit the commonly accepted connection between women and the automobile in parts of early twentieth century culture other than poetry" (Haas, 2021). These views—like many views of women should be—are changing. In 2021, female mechanics are no longer an absurd idea, and evidence of this can be seen in both motorsport and the car world at large. According to Ivy Decker of Anthony Thomas Advertising Agency, "66% of automotive enthusiasts are male... young women (18-34) also make up a large portion of the DIY community, with 54% performing their own automotive maintenance" (Decker, 2019), and in motorsport, many skilled women have fought for and found a place in the traditionally male world of motorsport. Corrinne Burns of The Guardian interviewed three women who participate in motorsport, not as drivers (only one in roughly forty people involved in racing a single car is a driver) but as engineers and mechanics. "Teena Gade is a vehicle dynamics researcher at Coventry University and a consultant to the motorsport industry... her career has already encompassed stints as an aerodynamicist with the Williams Formula One team, and working as a rally engineer with Prodrive" (Burns, 2012). Until only 2018, the Formula One racing series (one of the few privately owned top-tier championships) featured female models, known as grid girls, surrounding each car before each race—a relic of eras bygone if ever there was one. They were banned only a few weeks into the 2018 season, and

Matt Bonesteel of the Washington Post reports, interestingly enough, that the party most upset with this change was the models themselves. “ ‘Ridiculous that women who say they are ‘fighting for women’s rights’ are saying what others should and shouldn’t do, stopping us from doing a job we love and are proud to do. PC gone mad,’ now-former grid girl Rebecca Cooper wrote on Twitter” (Bonesteel, 2018).

As stereotypes change, so should the level of participation by women in motorsport. However, the issue is far more complicated than men who are afraid of losing simply not allowing women to compete. Although the stereotypes against female car enthusiasts and engineers are disappearing, it is a simple fact that far more men than women are interested in risking their lives as race car drivers. Whether this can be blamed on a century of societal norms keeping the interests and hobbies of men and women separate, or it is an evolutionary artifact of men seeking to conquer danger is difficult to say, as cultural learning and evolution play equally important roles in shaping a society. Beyond the issue of wanting and being allowed to compete, higher classes of racing, such as Formula One, bring into question physicality. In the modern era of F1 cars, drivers will experience four to five times the force of gravity during cornering (Sagal, 2017) and maintain highly demanding training schedules,—akin to and often exceeding those of other professional athletes. It has been proven in many other arenas that women are equally capable of the athleticism and endurance of men, and it can be assumed that Formula One is no different. In fact, five women have started an F1 race, the first in 1958 and the most recent in 1992 (Seas, 2016). Even with such high demands, Formula One remains like all other motorsport in the fact that success therein depends on far more than the skill and athletic ability of the driver.

For women like Mouton and Gade, motivation is not an issue, and with motivation comes the defeat of any societal barriers placed—intentionally or otherwise—in front of these women.

Physicality is no issue either, however the matter of an entirely level playing field comes into question again when comparing the most important element of motorsport; the machines. In the 2019 running the 24 Hours of Le Mans endurance race, roughly fifteen teams entered in the Le Mans Grand Touring Endurance Pro (LMGTE Pro) class, one of which was an all-female team running under the name “Iron Dames,” consisting of drivers Michelle Gattling, Manuela Gostner, and Rahel Frey. (Marin, 2021). The Iron Dames were able to finish the 2019 race within the top ten in LMGTE Pro, a result which any team would be more than happy with after the most difficult 24 hours of the motorsport calendar. One can imagine that, if given a chance in that year’s winning Toyota car and team, it is only fair to say that Gattling, Gostner, and Frey could have taken home an overall victory. This kind of unpredictability is exactly what draws some to endurance racing, but it is also exactly what former Lotus Formula One development driver Carmen Jorda cites as perfect reasoning for an all-female, highly regulated racing series, along the lines of Formula One. The idea originally came from the then-owner of Formula One Bernie Ecclestone in 2015, but as Luke Smith for NBC points out, “Other sports divide themselves into male and female brackets – take tennis, soccer, athletics – so why shouldn’t motorsport? In short: because women do not need to be separated in motorsport. Because they have already proven they can fight on a level playing field for several decades” (Smith, 2017).

There is much to be said for Jorda’s all-female racing series, and the likeliness of such an idea coming to fruition within the next ten years is high. However, I have confidence that whatever the series begins as, it will only be a stepping stone to needing only one series within a division of motorsport, where all genders can compete against each other in equal numbers and with equal chances. Rallying has been the closest to achieving this for some forty years, especially offstage as well as in the driver (and co-driver) seats. In the realm of motorsport, the

necessity for gender equality is much less a topic of disagreement than in other examples of sport, and yet such a widely agreed upon subject remains a prominent issue, right alongside the future of nonrenewable fuels in motorsport. This paradoxical situation is not occurring only in motorsport, although that is the field wherein the lack of progress may be the most confounding. Why can't we just be good to each other? Why don't women race with men? NASCAR star Danica Patrick is a clear example that the business-oriented and image-concerned side of motorsport has nothing to fear from the presence of women, and Michèle Mouton was winning proof that teams take no bigger risk in signing a female driver than a male driver. The issue remains, but steps towards a solution are not far around the corner. I hope—with the same confidence I say Mercedes will win the F1 championship this season—that I will live to see (and if I'm lucky report on) the day when the first woman wins an grand prix, and the first all-female team dominates the 24 Hours of Le Mans. And if I'm twice as lucky, I will never have to come up with the words to explain to my future daughter that she can't conquer danger and drive fast only because the world is a silly, illogical place, because it's not one. It has been proven time and time again that women can race cars, fix cars, design parts, and change tires just as quickly and efficiently as any man.

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