LESSON PLAN
Developing Informed Opinions in the World of “Likes”

OVERVIEW
In this climate of instantaneous thumbs up and thumbs down, students can easily lose sight of the difference between spontaneous judgments and informed opinion. This lesson lets students experience the distinction. After viewing clips from the film The War to Be Her, a profile of Pakistani athlete Maria Toorpakai, who beat the odds under Taliban rule to become an international squash champion, students will be guided through several steps of discussion, question generation and research. They’ll compare their initial reactions to the film with their conclusions at the end of the lesson.

Because Toorpakai’s story involves the Taliban, Islam (often misrepresented in U.S. media) and a female athlete (subject to gender stereotypes), students will be wading through “hot button” issues. Outside of class, discussions of such issues often devolve into unproductive Twitter wars or worse. Their goal will be to arrive at well-informed opinions about whether or not the Taliban is completely responsible for Toorpakai’s challenges.

OBJECTIVES
In this lesson, students will:

- Reflect on the discrimination that female athletes have experienced historically and, in many cases, continue to experience
- Write short research reports about aspects of female participation in sports
- Engage in a classroom discussion designed to help students learn the distinction between being judgmental and expressing an informed opinion

GRADE LEVELS: 9-12

SUBJECT AREAS
English/Language Arts Research Skills
Global Studies Sports/Physical Education
History Women’s Studies/Gender Studies
Media Literacy

MATERIALS
- Clips from The War to Be Her and screening equipment. Students will need to access the film clips outside of class as well as during class.
- Reflection handout (three copies for each student)—see end of lesson
- Students will need Internet access for research

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
Three 15-20 minute in-class discussions (on different days), plus homework in between

FILM CLIPS
Film clips provided in this lesson are from The War to Be Her. Access the streaming clips for free on POV’s website by visiting www.pbs.org/pov/educators. Borrow the full film from our DVD

Lending Library by joining the POV Community Network: communitynetwork.amdoc.org.

**Clip 1: “Meeting Maria Toorpakai” (3:25 min.)**
The clip begins 30 seconds into the film, with Toorpakai in a car with her eyes closed. It ends at 3:55 (just before the title appears on screen). We are introduced to Maria Toorpakai, an elite level athlete and international squash champion. The clip includes footage of Waziristan, Pakistan, where Toorpakai grew up, along with her description of what it is like for girls and women who live there under Taliban authority. She explains that for her, playing sports is an “extreme act” of rebellion. The film uses common techniques, such as music and sound, zooms, framing and close-ups, to heighten the drama and elicit an emotional response.

**Clip 2: “Life Goes On” (12:00 min.)**
The clip begins at 17:00 with Toorpakai saying that her day is “just like a friend.” It ends at 29:00 when she says, “If you fall, you know how to stand up again.” The clip covers several topics that will be important to review with students:

- **The importance of parental support and in Toorpakai’s culture the centrality of a father’s support**: Toorpakai’s father enthusiastically supports his daughter’s athletic ambitions.
- **Living in a culture where you can’t trust others**: changing the license plate so the family car isn’t identified by spies on the street, Toorpakai’s father telling the Taliban he has disowned her and sent her abroad and so on.
- **The links between the Taliban and poverty**: Toorpakai says, “The tribal areas need a lot of attention. These Taliban groups or militants or rebels, all they want, money, all they want, power. Nothing else. They don’t care about religion. They do not care about humanity. When these kids will grow up without education, without any hope of life, they will become militants. They will become Taliban. That Taliban who do not, who cannot differentiate between the real Islam and the Islam that they follow.”
- **The challenge isn’t Islam**: Toorpakai and her family continue to practice Islam and they see the Taliban’s version of Islam as an extremist distortion of the religion.
- **The benefits of sports**: Toorpakai uses squash to reach girls and help them develop confidence. We meet a rising squash star who was inspired by her.
- **The differences between urban and rural communities in lifestyle and attitudes**: Islamabad is not the same as the tribal areas in terms of culture and wealth.

**ACTIVITY**

**Stage 1: Initial Reactions**
In the first of three stages, you want students to react as if they were coming across Clip 1 on YouTube or via a social media post. No context. No one there to provide discussion prompts or guidance. Jump right in by saying simply that you have a video clip from a documentary about a sports champion that you want to share.

Play Clip 1. After the clip, invite students to share reactions. If they need a prompt, ask them to imagine that they’ve come across this on YouTube. Would they give it a thumbs up or thumbs down? Would they leave a comment (and if so, what would it say)?

After a short discussion, let students know that this is the first step in an exercise they’ll be doing on “metacognition,” i.e., being aware of how we learn and how we come to know what we know, and think what we think. Distribute the Reflection handout—just one copy for now for each student. Ask them to complete it and hang onto it. They’ll need it later in the lesson. As
homework, assign students to view Clip 2. They should be ready to discuss it in their next class (like a flipped classroom activity).

OPTIONAL: Before assigning the homework, replay Clip 1 and ask students to identify the techniques the filmmaker used.

**Stage 2: Developing Questions**

In the second of three stages, invite students to share their reactions to Clip 2. After a brief discussion, pose this question: If the Taliban didn’t exist, would Maria Toorpakai still face challenges in her quest to be an international champion that a male athlete would not likely face?

Rather than asking students to offer their opinions, ask: What questions would you need to get answers to, in order to answer this question?

Either as a full class or in small groups, generate a list of questions. Help students link their questions to the information they are seeking, and tweak wording as needed. Also, if needed, guide formulation of questions with prompts asking students to consider what they would need to know about:

- Pakistan
- The Taliban
- Squash
- The physical demands of elite level athletic competition
- Beliefs about or social construction of “proper” gender roles
- The effects of poverty

Once a substantive list of questions has been generated, distribute another copy of the Reflection handout to each student and again ask students to complete it and hang onto it. As time allows, invite students to share any changes they’ve noticed in their responses. What do they think accounts for the changes?

**Stage 3: Research**

Invite students to consider how often they react to things, including social media posts, without really stopping to ask themselves whether they have adequate information. Have they asked good questions before responding? We don’t want to mute our emotional reactions, but when we express an opinion, why might we want it to be informed by more than emotion?

Note that the more information we have, the better informed our opinions are. Assure students that this is not about convincing anyone to change their opinion. Most often, when students are asked to analyze media, what they are being asked to do is to criticize the content of the media and show why it is problematic. But a media-literate person questions all media—including things with which they agree. *The War to Be Her* offers a rare opportunity to examine deeply a piece with which most of us will actually agree and still be able to go from a mostly emotional response to a well-informed, well-reasoned response.

As the final task that gets us from purely emotional reaction to well-informed response, assign students to write brief research reports that add relevant information to their knowledge base.
You can set up the parameters of the assignment: length, citation requirements, submission form and due date. The topic is also somewhat flexible. You could give all students the same topic: The history of Title IX and its influence on girls'/women's participation in sports.

Or, you could offer some choice of topics:
- History of girls’ athletics in your school (recommended only for schools founded prior to the 1970s);
- History of girls'/women’s participation in sports in a particular country; or
- History of girls'/women’s participation in a single sport.

Wrap Up
On the day the research reports are due, invite students to share some of the things they learned and to discuss how additional information influenced the way they think about the question.

Distribute the third copy of the Reflection handout and give students a minute to fill it out. Have them compare the third version to the two versions they completed previously. They can discuss any changes they notice and/or reflect on the changes in a short free write.

EXTENSIONS/ADAPTATIONS
Continue the discussion with this prompt: Why should people care whether or not girls or women have athletic opportunities?

Deconstruct common stereotypes about Islam and the role of women.

Compare the gender issues that arise in the film with historical comments on construction of gender already familiar to the students, e.g., this excerpt from a famous 1851 speech by Sojourner Truth:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman?

Examine U.S. policies related to fighting the Taliban. Discuss whether Taliban denial of education and other opportunities to girls/women is justification to go to war with the group.

Study the history of Pakistan and how its colonial and ethnic history influences current events.

Examine the status of girls’ sports at your school. What’s the level of participation? How do things like resources, media coverage, booster support and fan attendance compare to the same things in relation to boys’ teams? How are female athletes viewed by the rest of the student body?

RESOURCES
POV: The War Before Her
http://pbs.org/pov/wartobeher - The site includes a general discussion guide with additional activity ideas.

Women/Girls in Sports
The Sport Journal: “History of Women in Sport Prior to Title IX” and TIME: “She Exposed the Discrimination in College Sports Before Title IX. Now She’s a Women’s History Month Honoree”
http://thesportjournal.org/article/a-history-of-women-in-sport-prior-to-title-ix/ and http://time.com/5175812/title-ix-sports-womens-history/ - Both of these articles provide accessible information on attitudes toward women’s athletic activities and how they have changed over time.

Women’s Sports Foundation
www.womenssportsfoundation.org – Focused primarily on women and girls in the U.S., the Women’s Sports Foundation provides important research on the benefits of girls participating in sports.

Islam and Women’s Rights

Maslaha
islamandfeminism.org - The website for this organization based in the United Kingdom includes a list of links to articles and related organizations.

Musawah
musawah.org - The website of this advocacy organization founded by Muslim women provides examples of how to make the case that the Koran supports equality for women, girls’ education and more.

Sisters in Islam
sistersinislam.org.my - Sisters in Islam is a Malaysian activist organization fighting for women's equality within Islam. The website includes summaries of debates over issues such as the hijab and age of marriage.

Media Literacy

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films
pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

Project Look Sharp
projectlooksharp.org/Resources%202/keyquestions.pdf – This website offers a downloadable handout of media literacy analysis questions.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects (http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

SL.11-12.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

W.9-10.1, 11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W.9-10.2d Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

W.11-12.2d Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary and techniques such as metaphor, simile and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

W.9-10.4, 11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Content Knowledge: (https://www2.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.
United States History, Standard 31: Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World (Corwin, 2012) and past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 250 independent films.
REFLECTION

I based my opinions primarily on sources that are (check all that apply):

- personal (people you know or your own experiences)
- academic (research, textbooks)
- news
- entertainment media
- other: ____________________
- I don’t know where my ideas on this topic come from