

TFI SCREENING SERIES:
GENDER, IDENTITY & SPORTS

LITTLE MISS SUMO

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LITTLE MISS SUMO

Directed by Matt Kay

Documentary | Running Time: 19 minutes

ABOUT THE FILM

Banned from competing professionally, Hiyori will have to retire at the age of 21. Simultaneously juggling newfound revelations whilst preparing for the biggest tournament of her life, Hiyori is forced to question the reason women are banned from professional wrestling and why most are forced out of amateur wrestling before their peak.

She has the drive and ambition, but is that going to be enough to succeed in a country and sport that is overwhelmingly led by tradition and protocol?

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Matt Kay is an award-winning documentary filmmaker based in London. He co-founded Walks of Life Films in 2011 after making his first feature documentary *Over The Wall* about a British football team's journey to play in Palestine and has continued making socially conscious, character led documentaries. In the past eight years he's directed and shot a variety of projects for broadcast, festivals and online. He has filmed in over ten countries including Egypt during the Arab Spring, a Brazilian favela during the World Cup and Japan for his latest project *Little Miss Sumo*, which premiered at the London Film Festival, won Best UK Film in Manchester Film Festival and has its North American premiere at Tribeca Film Festival in April. His work has been featured on Ch4, BBC THREE and The Guardian.

ABOUT THE CURRICULUM WRITER

Shirley Rodriguez is a New York-based arts educator, still and motion photographer and media producer. She has provided educational services for The Tribeca Film Institute, Film Society/Lincoln Center, Educational Video Center, Girl Scouts, Dreamyard, Manhattan Youth, & The Brooklyn Children's Museum. Her work has appeared in places such as The New York Times Online, Latina, Vibe, El Diario and with brands like Pantene, Covergirl and Olay. She is co-founder and Creative Director of Create The Remarkable, Inc., a production company specializing in short form video production and photography.

KEY TERMS

SUMO: Sumo is a form of traditional competitive wrestling originating in Japan, where a wrestler (rikishi) attempts to force their opponent out of a circular ring or into touching the ground with anybody part other than the soles of his feet. Its origins date back to the eighth century as part of a Shinto religious act dedicated to the kami (spiritual beings or sacred power) for a good harvest.

SHINTO: Shinto is the traditional/indigenous religion of Japan that practice devotions to invisible spiritual beings and powers called kami via various rituals including those to distance evil spirits by purification, prayers and offerings to the kami. It remains Japan's major religion alongside Buddhism and a strong connection between present day Japan and its cultural past. Shinto means the way of the gods.

BAN: To be legally or officially prohibited.

DOHYŌ: The sumo ring where sumo wrestling occurs. During tournaments, it is ceremoniously purified and blessed by a Shinto priest.

RIKISHI: A Rikishi (also known as a Sumotori) is a Sumo wrestler. The word rikishi literally means "strong man."



FILM IN CONTEXT

Most of the world does not know about the existence of female sumo wrestlers - including Japan. This is because professional sumo in Japan bans women from competition and ceremonies. According to tradition, a woman who enters or touches the sumo wrestling ring is a violation to the purity of the dohyō or sumo ring. The film *LITTLE MISS SUMO* follows 20-year-old female sumo wrestling prodigy Hiyori Kon. Because Hiyori is a woman she is banned from professional competition.

In 1990 Mayumi Moriyama, the first woman to hold the position of chief cabinet secretary to a Japanese Prime Minister, was banned from presenting a trophy at a sumo tournament in Tokyo. In 2000 Fusae Ohta became Japan's first female governor when she was chosen to lead Osaka, Japan. Every year Osaka hosts one of the six major matches of Japan's Grand Sumo Tournament. Traditionally at the end of the tournament the governor of the district or "prefecture," where the tournament is held, steps inside the sumo ring to present the champion with the "Governor's Prize." Because of the ban on women entering



the ring, Ohta was required to present the award outside of the ring; either from a walkway adjacent to it or by sending a male representative to present it on her behalf. She repeatedly challenged the policy by requesting to be able to fulfill her role as governor as any other governor would be allowed to. The requests were never honored throughout her term in office which ended in 2008.

In April 2018, the mayor of Maizuru, Japan collapsed in the middle of the dohyō during a non-tournament sumo event in Kyoto, Japan. Two medical professionals, who also happened to be women, rushed to the mayor in an attempt to provide emergency medical treatment. As they administered medical care the referee repeatedly requested that they leave the ring. This event caused major controversy and generated a public conversation regarding the policy, leading ultimately to the chairman of the Sumo Association to apologize for what he referred to as an inappropriate response while stating appreciation for the women's efforts.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Whether you're an educator, administrator, parent, student, or just someone who wants to learn more about media literacy, you can use this study guide as a way to discuss and explore themes in the film. We understand that educators are multifaceted artists in their own right, so we encourage you to utilize your own artistic experiences to spark dialogue. The in-class activities are all optional and can be easily tailored to your students' specific needs and learning levels.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The world of professional sumo will not allow women to enter the ring, much less be recognized as professional wrestlers. Traditionally, a woman entering a ring was believed to compromise the spiritual purity of the ring linked to Shinto origins.

The view of those who question the “men-only” policy is that it is discriminatory and oppressive. The view of the Sumo Association is that the ban is a tradition that has been firmly maintained throughout centuries, and to change it would be a dishonor to their ancestors.

1. In 2019, is allowing women into the ring (either to wrestle or be part of any ceremony) an issue of equal rights, or should it be seen as an important way to preserve Japanese culture and tradition?
2. The popularity of sumo has declined to the extent that fewer Japanese born men and boys are interested in pursuing sumo professionally. Considering this, can the inclusion of women in the sport serve as a new way to preserve the sumo tradition?

POST-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION

The ring can be seen as a symbol for “the inner circle,” and banning women from entering it can be seen as keeping women out of the “loop” of opportunity and experiences. In sumo, the wrestler or rikishi is literally fighting to keep their place within the ring by trying to push opposition out or down. In LITTLE

MISS SUMO, Hiyori is fighting both as a wrestler trying to win a match and symbolically as a woman trying to establish her right within the larger sumo ring.

QUESTION:

Name other “rings,” “inner circles,” or exclusive places that exist which exclude people of a certain demographic; where certain groups of people are deliberately left out. What are the reasons given for the exclusivity? Who is kept out and why? How does this affect the individual, and society as a whole?

Should access be expanded in these cases? If so, what has or can be done to expand access?

POST-SCREENING ACTIVITY – Expanding the Ring

On a large sheet of paper with a pencil, lightly draw a large circle. Allow enough space to be able to write outside of the circle as well. Within this circle, write words associated with the concept of being inside of the circle (example: belonging).

On the outside of the circle write examples where individuals are often not permitted to participate or be part of a circle.

Draw lines serving as bridges between the words in the outer circle and the inner circle. On these lines, write solutions and action words that can create bridges between the inner and outer circle. Whenever a bridge line and part of the circle intersect, erase that part of the circle.

REFLECT:

- *How many different bridges were you able to create?*
- *Were any of the solutions the same or similar?*
- *In history, when have these methods been used to create change?*

POST-SCREENING ACTIVITY – Exploring Juxtaposition & Contrast

Sumo wrestling consists of many contrasting elements. It

is extremely fast paced and powerful but can be graceful, methodical and strategic.

The film uses a lot of juxtapositions, or the act of positioning two or more things side by side in order to compare or contrast them. The film often does it subtly such as when we see the vast outside with cold weather and snow contrast with the coziness of the small home and the warmth of Hiroyi's family.

OBSERVE:

- *Where else can we see examples of contrasts in the film?*
- *Where do we see contrasts in ourselves and in our lives?*

Exercise: Using images and words from magazines, print outs or even drawings, create a collage of contrasting ideas, words and images. Feel free to explore contrasting textures, elements and themes.

POST-SCREENING ACTIVITY – Stereotypes

A stereotype is an over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people.

EXPLORE:

What stereotypes exist around women in terms of ability, character, personality? According to stereotypes, what should women naturally excel in or to have difficulty with or no interest in? What stereotypes exist around women in regard to sports?

Name behaviors or traits that are more easily accepted in men than in women. What behaviors or traits are more easily accepted in women than in men? How does this affect how people are viewed, treated, and where they are allowed access? How does this affect people who identify with either of these genders?

FURTHER EXPLORATION:

How do gender stereotypes affect individuals who are non-gender conforming?

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS & TEACHERS

FURTHER READING

The Ashahi Shimbun | **Sumo's Ban on Women Appears A Centuries-long Evolution** | May 1, 2018 | <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201805010003.html>

Author Unknown | **Governor Butts Heads with Sumo Ban on Women** | March 26, 2000 | <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/.../governor-butts-heads-with-sumo-ban-on-women.html>

McCurry, Justin | **It's exhilarating': Japan's female sumo wrestlers take on sexism** | The Guardian | June 18, 2018 | <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/19/its-exhilarating-japans-female-sumo-wrestlers-take-on-sexism>

Gunning, John | **Time for Sumo to Ditch Ban on Women in the Ring** | The Japan Times | April 11, 2018 | <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/sports/2018/04/11/sumo/time-sumo-ditch-ban-women-ring/>

Rich, Motoko | **Women Barred from Sumo Ring, Even to Save A Man's Life** | The New York Times | April 5, 2018 | <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/05/world/asia/women-sumo-ring-japan.html>

Yoshida, Reiji | **Women Tending to Collapsed Mayor Told To Stay Out Of 'Sacred' Sumo Ring** | The Japan Times | <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/04/05/national/social-issues/women-told-to-stay-out-of-sacred-sumo-ring-during-emergency/#.XIKvRBNKiRs>

FURTHER WATCHING:

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN (Directed by Penny Marshall, running time: 124 minutes) is based on the real-life 1940s All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. It illustrates a historic time in history when women were allowed to professionally participate in the traditionally all-male sport, preserving the American tradition of baseball during wartime, which did not become a permanent league. The film was released commercially and is available via DVD or streaming services.

THE WAR TO BE HER is a documentary distributed by POV about Maria Toorpakai, an elite level athlete and international squash champion. She is from an extremely conservative region in Pakistan controlled by the Taliban, where women's rights are extremely limited and playing sports is forbidden. As she begins to gain more notoriety as an athlete, she and her family receive death threats.

The following is a link to the 4-minute Classroom Clip, provided on the POV website, where we are introduced to Maria and her story: <https://www.pbs.org/pov/watch/wartobeher/video-wartobeher-classroom-clip-meeting-maria-toorpakai/>

ABOUT TRIBECA FILM INSTITUTE

Tribeca Film Institute believes in the power of storytellers to bridge communities and spark meaningful change. We work to ensure that filmmakers and creators from systemically excluded communities have a platform and access to the resources and tools they need to tell their stories, connect with audiences, and build thriving creative careers.

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