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MOVEMENT

Toxic Gymnastics Culture's Impact On the #MeToo Movement:  
Sexual Abuse Survivor Aly Raisman's Trauma Fosters Fight for Change

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This paper was prepared for the FYS course Backwards and in Heels: Gender Inequity,  
taught by Dr. Jeanne Buckley.

## TOXIC GYMNASTICS CULTURE'S IMPACT ON THE #METOO MOVEMENT

### Abstract

This paper explores how female gymnasts, particularly Aly Raisman, have sparked the gymnastics world's involvement in the #MeToo movement. It briefly touches on Raisman's beginnings with gymnastics and how she became an elite U.S. gymnast but promptly dives into her #MeToo story, focusing on her traumatic experiences with Olympic doctor Larry Nassar. Furthermore, her story brings to light how she and other survivors of sexual assault have faced credibility discounting, also known as gaslighting, for sharing their truth. By sharing parts of Aly Raisman and other survivors' testimonies, this paper highlights not only the trauma and pain they endured while facing their abuser in court, but also the unity and community they found during the process. Most importantly, Aly Raisman's ongoing fight for change and awareness regarding sexual abuse within workplaces and the sports world has sparked other survivors to find their courage to speak out as well.

*Keywords:* #MeToo, Aly Raisman, gaslighting, credibility discounting, sexual abuse, USAG, USOC, Larry Nassar

## TOXIC GYMNASTICS CULTURE’S IMPACT ON THE #METOO MOVEMENT

### Toxic Gymnastics Culture’s Impact On the #MeToo Movement:

#### Sexual Abuse Survivor Aly Raisman’s Trauma Fosters Fight for Change

The female I chose to conduct research on is Aly Raisman, since I see some aspects of myself in her. She is Jewish American like me and the same height, 5’2”. This may not be important to others, but to me it was inspiring to witness a female with the same roots and stature as me become prominent in the sports world and celebrity culture. I grew up spending my summers watching her compete at the Olympics and present herself as a fierce young woman to her viewers. Not only did I admire her in the sports world, but I also admired her for being brave enough to speak out about her experiences with sexual abuse at the hands of Dr. Larry Nassar.

Before Aly Raisman went on to become a famous elite gymnast, she resided in Newton, Massachusetts with her big Jewish family. When Raisman was only eighteen months old, her mother enrolled her in a “Mommy and Me” class at a local gymnastics club. As she grew continuing to pursue the activity, she realized gymnastics was not only her favorite sport, but also her passion in life. She proceeded to participate in competitions during her teenage years, but her career seriously took off when she helped the U.S. gymnastics team win the 2011 World Championships. Recognized for her choreographed floor routine to “Hava Nagila,” a Jewish staple song, Raisman became an inspiration to Jewish people like me and other young females. Afterwards, she represented and earned medals for the U.S. gymnastics team at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London and 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio, allowing the world to see her roots, impressive talent, and strong character.

Aly Raisman’s relationship to the #MeToo movement is powerful, since she was one of the first gymnasts to speak out publicly about her experience with sexual abuse by Larry Nassar,

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a former renowned doctor who worked with gymnasts. Her #MeToo story began when she was sixteen years old, while competing at the 2010 Pacific Rim Championships in Australia. In her book *Fierce*, Raisman reveals that after suffering injuries while competing, an official with USA Gymnastics referred her to Nassar and insisted, “You have to see him. He’s the best there is, and it’s a huge honor that he agrees to work with the team. Seriously—you won’t regret it” (Raisman 87). However, when Nassar came to her hotel room to perform his treatments, she thought, “There was something about the massage that made me uncomfortable, but the staff member’s words stuck in my head.” The problem after Nassar saw Raisman was that she did not realize there was even a problem, since there were always people in power protecting his reputation.

At first, Aly Raisman saw Larry Nassar in a positive and helpful light. He would console her when she was stressed and overworked, saying things like “USA Gymnastics sometimes goes overboard with their expectations” and “They shouldn’t push you as hard as they do” (Raisman 88). By directing the conversation to relate to what she is going through, he was distracting her from realizing that his treatments were not normal. In *PEOPLE Magazine*, Raisman reflects, “I didn’t know I was being molested. You think, ‘This must not be happening because he’s a doctor.’ But I was a textbook victim, brainwashed to believe I was fine” (Dodd and Johnson 62). Nassar not acknowledging his sexual abuse on girls like Raisman led them to believe that since he was highly recommended by officials who work with USA Gymnastics, his methods of treatment were typical and not considered sexual assault.

After the championships in Australia, Raisman continued to see Larry Nassar, even when she did not expect to. At the 2010 World Championships in Rotterdam, Netherlands, she was competing in her first year at the senior level in gymnastics and traveled without her family to

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the competition. On one of the nights, Larry Nassar knocked on her door and said to her, "I thought you could use a massage" (Park 28). Raisman disclosed that Nassar rarely used gloves when working on her and other girls, offering invasive massages under the guise of therapy. Nassar's inability to recognize his sexual abuse of adolescent and naive girls proved how he had the power and status to get away with whatever he wanted to, further hiding the reality of how toxic the gymnastics world was. The fact that people maintained Nassar's reputation made him think that he could do whatever he wanted and would still be seen in the public eye as a prestigious doctor.

In the Spring of 2015, Aly Raisman's life spiraled into the world of the #MeToo movement when a female coach overheard Raisman and USA Gymnastics teammate Maggie Nichols talking about Nassar's behavior. The coach reported what she had heard to USAG authorities, and they subsequently notified the FBI. Although the USAG organization said they would handle the accusations of sexual assault, they "did not alert the U.S. Olympic Committee or Michigan State University, where Nassar had his practice" (Helling 45). By dismissing Nassar's behavior and not immediately alerting his places of employment, the USAG organization proved to be an example of how males abused their power and did not care about who they were hurting in the process. Therefore, the allegations continued to be kept a secret, and there was no public mention of them until the FBI interviewed Raisman in the Summer of 2016, more than a year later. Initially during the interview, Raisman made excuses for Nassar; however, when the FBI investigator left, she thought back on her encounters with Nassar, realizing that the treatments had not only been inappropriate in nature but also that she had been sexually abused. When she called USA Gymnastics back the following day and asked to speak to

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the investigator again, she received a text from an official asking her to stop talking openly about her experiences with Nassar, so she would not jeopardize the investigation. While Aly Raisman was told not to voice her truth, she revealed, "I continued to check back with [USAG], and they said they were handling it. I was wrong to trust them" (Helling 46). Raisman desired to fix the gymnastics world to make it a safer place, free from sexual predators like Larry Nassar, but it was difficult for her to fight for change with males in authority abusing their power.

When her story was eventually published with her name attached to it, Aly Raisman experienced credibility discounting, also known as gaslighting, from those who criticized her for speaking out about a powerful doctor and why she waited so long to speak her truth. Raisman expressed, "People will say, 'Why didn't she tell her mom? Why didn't she say anything?' But those questions are unfair. I didn't really know it was happening to me. I would never have imagined that a doctor would abuse me or manipulate me so badly" (Park 29). Sexual assault survivors experience disbelief that they even endured such trauma in the first place, and people who did not go through sexual assault experiences of their own truly did not relate to Aly Raisman. Not until her story went public and was talked about everywhere did the USA Gymnastics organization express, "We are appalled by the conduct of which Larry Nassar is accused, and we are very sorry that any athlete has been harmed during her or his gymnastics career. We are committed to doing what is right, and we want to work with Aly and all interested athletes to keep athletes safe" (Park 29). Actions speak louder than words, and Raisman recognized that what they said was not enough for change to be made. Raisman's relationship with USAG and the Olympic Committee was irreparably broken, and she realized, "They put

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reputation, medals and money above everything. They just didn't care because we were winning, and that's disgusting. I can't understand how anyone can sleep at night" (Helling 46).

However, the day finally came when Raisman's stories were supported, believed, and understood by other sexual abuse survivors. On January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018, she and 156 other female athletes shared to Judge Rosemarie Aquilina not only their stories regarding Dr. Nassar's abuse, but also the complete disregard the USAG and USOC organizations had when they were told of Nassar's behavior. In her powerful twelve-minute testimony directed at Nassar, Raisman professed, "Your abuse started 30 years ago, but that's just the first reported incident we know of...Over those thirty years when survivors came forward, adult after adult—many in positions of authority—protected you, telling each survivor it was okay, that you weren't abusing them. In fact, many adults had you convince the survivors that they were being dramatic or had been mistaken" (Savarese, 2018, 128). The credibility discounting of Nassar's victims' stories by males in power was the problem and the reason why Larry Nassar was not detained earlier for his monstrous behavior.

Consequently, more than 150 women from Michigan State University came forward with their stories of how they "told MSU administrators, explicitly and more than once, that Nassar was sexually abusing them during medical appointments...But when those women said there was a problem—that this didn't feel right, that they were hurt—the administrators didn't believe them" (Epstein and Goodman, 2019, pp. 458-459). Instead of believing the countless number of victims, the males in charge abused their power and discounted the victims' credibility, telling them that "He's an Olympic doctor" or "You must be misunderstanding what was going on." Larry Nassar's case further illustrates that male abuses of power made the survivors' experiences



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more painful and hard to overcome because they were constantly getting gaslighted for speaking their truth. On the contrary, they rose above their critics and leaned on each other to prove how the #MeToo movement can bring about unity and community for those who need it. Raisman declared, "Being in that courtroom was life-changing. To be around such strong young girls and to see that I'm not alone. We are an army of survivors" (Helling 45). After sentencing Larry Nassar to 175 years in prison, Judge Aquilina uttered to Nassar, "I just signed your death warrant," and commented that "despite her belief in the rehabilitation of criminals when possible, she believed that rehabilitation is not possible with Nassar as '[he doesn't] get it' and remains a danger" (Edelman and Pacella, 2019, p. 473). Raisman and other survivors of Nassar's sexual abuse saw their fight for change being made, since they witnessed Nassar's behavior no longer being ignored.

Aly Raisman helped people gain enough courage to speak out about their own #MeToo stories. For instance, she received an email from a 14-year-old girl who said Raisman's statements had given her the courage to tell her mother that her father had been sexually abusing her and said, "That email is more important than any Olympic medal. If I can help in some way, then that's a no-brainer for me" (Dodd and Johnson 63). Raisman being one of the first female gymnasts to speak out about Larry Nassar also triggered other gymnasts to make their voices heard too, like Rachel Haines. Haines recalls in her own novel that they, the sister survivors, "made something positive out of something negative. [We] drew attention to the thousands of women who are abused, silenced, and ignored" (Haines 122). In spite of obstacles in her way, Aly Raisman has inspired other sexual abuse survivors to feel empowered to speak out and fight for change, proving that victims can find their voices and community in the #MeToo movement.

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