

Gender Inequalities in Professional Sports

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Gender inequality is widely expressed in the professional sports arena. As stated by Jim Brown (2008: no pg #), "Gender inequality has plagued professional sports since its inception." Another source wrote, "Sport is a microcosm of society in which the discrimination and inequalities of wider society are evident" (Seiverling, Harvey, Wessells, and Valenti 2002; no pg #). A popular belief to why inequalities exist in sports is that males are more athletic than females (Frankl 2005; DCOMM 2006). Because gender inequality is such a prevalent form of discrimination, it is important to study why and how it exists and what can be done to suppress and eliminate it. The gender inequalities that will be discussed in this paper include the wage gap between male and female athletes, Title IX and its impacts on gender inequality, unjust stereotyping of female athletes, media roles, and the positive aspects that may arise from suppressing inequalities.

The most evident inequity in professional sports is the wage gap between male and female athletes (DCOMM 2006). Different sources argue multiple reasons for this wage gap, including the differences in the level of play between men and women and the amount of spectators each sex draws in (Frankl 2005; Way 2002). "Top women tennis players earned 59 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts...women bowlers earned 70 cents for every dollar earned by a male bowler...professional female golfers earned 36 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterpart" (Frankl 2005: no pg #). The wage gap found in society is inflated in professional sports (Seiverling et al 2002). When comparing salaries between athletes in the NBA and the WNBA, women made a

small percentage of the salary made by male professional basketball players. The minimum salary for rookies in the NBA is \$316,969, whereas the minimum salary for rookies in the WNBA is only \$26,500 (Seiverling et al. 2002). As Seiverling et al. (2002: no pg #) stated, "Salaries are just part of the unfair equation, the distribution of endorsements, budgets, benefits, and scholarships is also unequal." Ottem (2007), in response to "Students on the Streets," argues that endorsements, aside from salary, are a major cause of economic gender inequalities in professional sports. On the other hand, "The main reason for the salary difference is that people are willing to pay a larger amount to see an NBA game" as opposed to a WNBA game (Way 2002: no pg #). I believe that these reasons accurately depict why female athletes are paid less than male athletes but do not *justify* paying them less. Female athletes work just as hard as male athletes at what they do and should be compensated in the same manner.

Although Title IX does not directly apply to the field of professional sports, it has made tremendous impacts on the inequalities faced by female athletes. Title IX prohibits discrimination in athletic programs on the basis of sex at educational institutions. Title IX grants the opportunity for equal facilities and funding for both male and female athletic programs. "Title IX opened doors for females to play sports, but it opened sex-segregated doors, effectively limiting women's athletics to second-class status" (OUP 2007: no pg #). The budgets for women's teams are lower; tickets for their games are cheaper, and publicity for men's teams still far exceeds the publicity that women's team receive (OUP 2007).

To aid Title IX's effort to alleviate discrimination among gender in sports, male and female athletes must play on the same team to completely eliminate this inequality ("Gender in Baseball" 2005). The article stated, "Polarizing the genders always gives way to value statements about the level of play, and I have found that when male and female players are coached on the same team, their level of play is relatively equal" ("Gender in Baseball" 2005:no pg #). In my opinion, this (unknown) author is correct. Title IX has helped females in the sports industry take one step closer to reaching equality, but we are still miles away. In order to reach equity among athletes, male and female athletes should be given the opportunity to train under the same trainers, play under the same coaches, and participate alongside one another on the same teams.

I also believe that because Title IX has granted equal access to funding, facilities, and equipment, it has created opportunities for women to participate in professional sports. The International Olympic Committee (2000: no pg #) wrote that "[t]he current women's professional team sports explosion in the United States, the performance of women's team sports in the '96 Olympics and the growing popularity of collegiate women's sports are other results of Title IX." For example, there is now a *Women's* National Basketball Association, a *Women's* Professional Golf Association, and a *Women's* Professional Bowling Association. Michelle Wie has even had the opportunity to play on the Men's PGA tour.

Women have been unjustly stereotyped due to their participation in athletics. The attitude of America toward female athletes is that they are supposed to be "feminine" and graceful (Banas 2002: no pg #). If they do not

participate in sports that are viewed as feminine, such as figure skating, they are often stereotyped as being lesbian (Banas 2002; "Gender in Baseball" 2005). Banas (2002) said, "It is not surprising that sports such as hockey, boxing, and weightlifting, which resemble masculine athletics, have the greatest need to attract audiences and the fear of lesbianism is most prominent." The author of "Gender in Baseball" (2005: no pg #) reminded that historically, "any athletic activity for women was looked upon as suspect unless it contributed to the general health of a woman." Furthermore, "women who didn't conform to cultural definitions of femininity or who appeared unattractive ran the risk of being labeled masculine, a freak, or homosexual" (Berlage 2000:72).

The media, in large part, has contributed to the great inequality between male and female athletics. The mass media depicts ideologies about how female athletes should be and what roles they should play. For instance, "the media displays female athletes far less often than male athletes and with a different intent – when female athletes are displayed, they are often depicted as sex symbols or mothers, not as athletic professionals" (Seiverling et al. 2002: no pg #). DCOMM (2006: no pg #) wrote that "The most apparent inequalities between male and female professional athletes can be measured in pay and media coverage." ESPN, the world's largest sports broadcasting station, clearly illustrates gender inequalities in professional sports. The network's show *Sports Center* only depicts women's athletics in 1 out of every 4 highlights (Nelson 2000). Nelson (2000: no pg #) also stated that women "rarely show up in aired press conferences" on ESPN.

Despite remaining inequities, many positive aspects have grown out of women breaking through the barrier of inequality in sports. Female athletes have helped women gain respect in other aspects of life (International 2000). “The economic power of female sports participants reflects the more equal treatment of women in the American workplace” (International 2000: no pg #). As DCOMM (2006: no pg #) states, “The more women take positive, leading roles as athletes, trainers, journalists and decision-makers, the more women will see that gender inequalities can be overcome – not only in sports but in all professions.”

According to the International Olympic Committee (2000), women have also gained knowledge and passion for sports. Because women have become more knowledgeable and passionate about sports, they comprise 35-45% of the audience of men’s sports and are specifically targeted in sports marketing campaigns (International 2000). The more women push the boundaries and participate in athletics, the more doors that will be opened to future generations: “There are positive aspects to women competing in non-traditional sports. They open the door to something new, that although it may not be socially acceptable right now, may be in the future and they are working towards providing younger generation women more opportunities in sport” (Banas 2002: no pg #). In addition, DCOMM (2006: no pg #) stated that “winning in sports...also involves a race toward combating social stereotyping and reaching the goal of gender equality.” Personally, I believe that the more involved women become in both male and female athletics, the closer they will come to reaching gender equality in sports.

Even though women have been making progress in eliminating the inequalities they face in professional sports, remaining discrimination still outweighs their progress. Women continue to receive only a small percentage of the wages and endorsements that male athletes receive. They face unfair stereotyping that may prevent them from participating. The more women test the limits of male-dominated sports, the more likely they are to be stereotyped as masculine or homosexual. Female athletes also face inequalities in the media's portrayal of them. They are portrayed as sex symbols, discussed as housewives, and are put on major sports networks less than half as much as male athletes. On the positive side, Title IX has paved a way for women to start defeating the inequality they face as it has granted that female athletic programs have equal access to facilities and funding. It also has given women their own professional leagues, although they still are not allowed to participate in the men's athletic leagues.

Other positive aspects have resulted in women challenging the gender barriers. Females, both athletes and non-athletes, have gained economic respect, along with a knowledge and passion for sports. As the author of "Gender in Baseball" (2005: no pg #) wrote, "If we continue to base our strategy on separate programs, we will continue to receive the short end of the stick." On the other hand, "Gender equity in sport is possible, but only if we are aware of the problem and address the many aspects – ideologies, media, polity, economy – which contribute to its perpetuation" (Seiverling et al. 2002: no pg #).

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