Social Impacts of Gender on Sports: Gender Inequality in Professional Sports

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Women in professional sports do not receive equivalent treatment to men in the same careers. In an analysis based on median hourly earnings in 2018, the Pew Research center found that men earn 15% more than women in the United States (Brown, Graf, & Patten, 2019). Though this gap may be attributable to factors besides gender, such as job type, experience, education, and strength of professional networks, women in the U.S., on average, are still earning less than men (Pew Research Center, 2013). In professional sports, this trend is clear. In 2019, *Forbes* released its list of the 100 highest-paid athletes; at number 63, Serena Williams was the only female (Badenhausen, 2019).

Beyond the pay gap, women in professional sports have faced discrimination. Full channels are dedicated to sports discussion and sports events (Bazić, 2018). However, women’s professional sports teams tend to be featured less on sports networks. Could this delta in screen time between men’s and women’s professional sports teams contribute to inequality in sports in general? Eime et. al (2008) found that in rural areas a lower proportion of adolescents, particularly females, participate in sports. But, participation in sports is beneficial. Participation in sports at a young age can improve physical wellbeing as well as social and psychological health (Eime et. Al., 2013). Team sports produce similar benefits across all age groups (Dollman, 2018). Given such benefits, access to and participation in sport should be equitable across all groups.

To advocates of pay parity, the differences in pay are symptomatic of entrenched social inequities, but to their critics the disparities are seen as fair simply because they are the status quo. How are critics of gender inequality in professional sports and their opponents competing to
promote change or to defend the status quo? Participants in this debate are professional sports teams like the United States Women’s National Team (USWNT) and the Women’s National Ice Hockey Team; governing and legal bodies like the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), the International Association of Athletics Foundations (IAFF), the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), the United States Soccer Federation (USSF), and USA Hockey; and individuals like professional tennis player Serena Williams or those debating in online discussion pages. These participants are seeking influence over the issue of inequality in professional sports through legal systems, online discussion and debate, and celebrity endorsement.

Review of Research

Researchers have demonstrated inequalities in professional sports. Forsyth et al. (2019) found that barriers still obstruct female athletes pursuing careers in sports and exercise. The study, which included high school, undergraduate, and graduate students, took into account both internal and external barriers to success like self-confidence. In a related study, Trolan (2013) found that media portrayal of female athletes promotes inequality between males and females in sports.

Another study on gender in boxing conducted in Norway looked at perceived differences in coaching styles between men and women coaches. Tjønndal found that barriers exist for women in boxing, particularly for female coaches: “For women coaches, a central challenge today is gaining acceptance and [being] respected as 'real' and capable coaches with valuable knowledge and experience in a male dominated sport. Secondly, they face the barrier of being ‘prisoners’ of their sex [which] mean[s] that women boxing coaches today are expected to promote certain types of leadership styles associated with gendered ideals of femininity” (2019).
For female boxing coaches, the barriers are tangible. It is still harder for these women to earn respect and acceptance in this male dominated sport; however, the study concludes positively, noting that progress has been and will continue to be made by female participation in the sport of boxing (Tjønndal, 2019). This paper will look at ways in which women in other professional sports have made progress towards equality outside of participation alone.

Not only is it harder for women to succeed in sports, but fewer studies have been conducted on women in sports than on their male counterparts. Women in sports may be physiologically less understood. According to Costello et al. (2014):

Female participants are typically under-represented in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine, American Journal of Sports Medicine* and *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*. The absolute number and percentage of female participants (39%) are significantly lower than males, and the average ratio of male to female per articles is almost two-fold greater (~65:35) across the three leading journals.

The study includes journals published between 2011 and 2013 and concludes that consumers of these studies should be aware of this gender disparity (Costello et al., 2014). It is unclear as to why fewer women participate in these studies than men. Could this be another symptom of the undervaluation of females in sports?

Further examination of these themes will be discussed in this paper, looking specifically at the unfair treatment of women in professional sports through pay, benefits, and other actions.

**Women’s Professional Teams Appeal to Sports Federations in Pursuit of Equality.**

One related dispute is the gender discrimination lawsuit between the U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF) and the U.S. Women’s National Team (USWNT). Recently, the Women’s national team has produced more revenue than the men’s team (Abrams, 2019), but the players earn less. The USWNT spokesperson claimed, “It is clear that USSF…fully intend to continue to
compensate women players less than men” (Gajanan, 2019). The USSF responded: “We are undaunted in our efforts to continue discussions in good faith” (Coddington, 2019). The lawsuit will be heard in May 2020 (Lewis, Hanna & Sterling, 2019).

The Women’s Sports Foundation, a nonprofit “dedicated to creating leaders by ensuring girls access to sports,” has faced similar challenges as an advocate for women in sports (WSF, 2019). In 2019, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), “an institution independent of any sports organization which provides for services in order to facilitate the settlement of sports-related disputes through arbitration or mediation” (CAS, 2019), upheld the eligibility regulation for female classification issued by the International Association of Athletics Foundations (IAAF) in 2018 (IAAF, 2019). The regulation, which restricted women with levels of testosterone exceeding a certain threshold from competing in several mid-distance and hurdle races (IAAF, 2019), prompted CEO of WSF Deborah Atoine to react: “Today’s CAS ruling is deeply disappointing … . We will continue to speak out and demand change to this discriminatory policy” (WSF, 2019).

The National Women’s Hockey League has had conflict with its governing sports federation, USA Hockey, as well. In March of 2017, just a few weeks before the International Ice Hockey World Championship, the Women’s National Team took to social media in opposition to the low salaries in the National Women’s Hockey League. The Women’s National Team made it clear that its members intended to boycott the championship until demands were met:

The members of the U.S. Women’s National Hockey Team announce that we will not be playing in the 2017 IIHF Women’s World Championship in Plymouth, Michigan unless significant progress has been made on the year-long negotiations with USA Hockey over fair wages and equitable support. We have asked USA Hockey for equitable support as required by the Ted Stevens Amateur Sports Act.
Specifically, we have asked for equitable support in the areas of financial compensation, youth team development, equipment, travel expenses, hotel accommodations, meals, staffing, transportation, marketing and publicity… (Knight, 2017).

The National Team asked for USA Hockey to comply with the Ted Stevens Amateur Sports Act, which calls for “equitable support and encouragement for participation by women where separate programs for male and female athletes are conducted on a national basis” (US Olympic Committee, n.d.). After another two weeks of negotiations, USA Hockey and the Women’s National Team came to a compromise. The agreement provided more support for the Women’s National Team over the next 4 years, and met many of the demands of the National Team (U.S.A. Hockey 2017). The Women’s National Team agreed to play in the 2017 IIHF Women’s World Championship.

The WNBA has been challenged by the Women’s National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA) in recent years. The WNBPA, a union for professional women’s basketball players, was established in 1998 (WNBPA, 2019). The organization’s goal is to: “unite, in one labor organization, all WNBA players eligible for membership in a manner that not only promotes a high sense of loyalty among all members but is also diverse, inclusive and a direct reflection of our core principles” (WNBPA, 2019). The president of the union played an important role in a new 2020 WNBA contract:

We had to be incredibly innovative with this. And to be honest, with what the league wanted, we understood that it would take some novel change to get the league where we want it to go. We wanted to ensure that it is still allowing players the opportunity to get the salaries that we are used to getting in both markets while also phasing in a system that will hold the league as a certain priority (Megdal, 2020).
This contract is described more in the following sections. It is planned to roll out over the next several years and, in addition to improving pay and benefits for players, restricts players from entering WNBA training late (Megdal, 2020).

**The Internet Provides a Forum for Discussion of Gender Equality in Professional Sports.**

An online debate on the question of whether women should be paid the same as men in sports reveals key positions of both advocates and critics within the discussion. Groups critical of pay equality offer statements such as: “they just don’t play as well,” and “men’s games tend to attract bigger crowds” (Debate.org, n.d.). Advocates of pay equality contend: “women aren’t receiving enough sports coverage,” and “women work just as hard as men” (Debate.org, n.d.). High-profile conflicts like those between the USWNT and the USSF and the WSF and the CAS, the women’s national ice hockey team, and in the WNBA, also provoke discussion online.

According to Berri (2018), in 2018 the salary of players in the WNBA made up less 25 percent of the league’s estimated earnings, while NBA players made about 50 percent of the league’s earnings. This has been an online controversy for the past several years. In July 2018, WNBA player A’ja Wilson tweeted in response to Lebron James’ high profile deal with the Los Angeles Lakers (Borzi, 2018): “154M .......... must. be. nice. We over here looking for a M but Lord, let me get back in my lane” (Wilson, 2018). Women in the WNBA asked for the same percentage of league profits that NBA player received.

This spurred backlash from those opposed to increased pay, while others rallied to support the cause. One response in opposition to equal pay received over 100 likes: “When women’s basketball draws the audience the NBA does or the sponsors y’all will make the money but WNBA is boring I love and appreciate female athletes but it’s just not entertaining” (Ilas,
2018). Another reply, receiving over 480 likes, denied that the issue stemmed from gender discrimination: “But this isn’t a gender pay gap issue. They have two different jobs bringing in two different revenues. I want them to get paid more and love the wnba, but this isn’t an example of gender pay gap” (Stewardson, 2018). Replies like these ignore evidence that gender discrimination stems not only from a gap in pay but a gap in opportunity and hide behind false claims of support.

In a few cases, fake tweets circulated about the topic. WNBA player Brittney Griner posted a photo on her Instagram page in August of 2018 displaying an image of herself beside the words: “You have a bunch of keyboard warriors that never picked up a ball a day in their lives talking bad about the NBA. You have mediocre players like Tyler Johnson making almost $20 million a year. We deserve more respect.” Her caption to the photo (Griner, 2018) reads:

Never said this BTW I do believe we should get paid more in the WNBA before players decide to only play overseas and rest our bodies during the summer. However, I never called out a NBA player. I have said that they make a crazy amount of money and it would be nice to make even half of what they make. Also (no disrespect but I don’t even know who he is) wouldn’t call out anybody I don’t know. Especially don’t know what he makes. I just know we don’t make shit.

Talk of equal pay and benefits for WNBA players led some online participants to fabricate social media posts aimed to sow division not only between WNBA and NBA players but among other online participants as well. In reality, many NBA players were supportive of the WNBA’s fight for equal treatment. Social media campaigns like this that aim to polarize online participants create further barriers to progress.

Many other tweets were in support of the women. One heart-warming response to A’ja Wilson’s tweet read: “Crazy…. when I told my 15 year old daughter your contract vs nba contract…she was SOOOO angry. Love seeing her passion for women’s rights/equality and
you’ve been a big part of that the past few years” (Carey, 2018). Fellow ACES player Kayla McBride tweeted her support as well: “I don’t wanna hear anything or anyone who doesn’t walk in my shoes every day talking about salary in the WNBA. We deserve more. Period. If you don’t like it. Or watch it. Or whatever. Stay in your lane homie because you not out here hoopin every night. Like I Am” (McBride, 2018).

The Women’s National Hockey Team also used social media and online debate to help their cause. The team used twitter to announce their decision to boycott the 2017 IIHF Women’s World Championship, inciting controversy. Two tweets capture the general theme of these two conflicting groups. One user responded, “You should be paid based on TV Ratings/Viewers. Not because you are Women & want same as Men. You are NOT worth $7.3M a year (Khaos, 2017).” Another replied, “My 9-year old daughter is in the @usahockey program, and I fully support your boycott. Courageous move. #BeBoldForChange” (Wolfe, 2017).

In both the case of the WNBA and USA Hockey, athletes used social media to advocate for equal treatment and fair pay in their sport. Responses fell into two general categories similar to those found on Debate.org: those in support of equality/better pay and those opposed. Those opposed tend to claim that women’s sports are less interesting, get fewer views, or generate less income while advocates highlight that the pay gap still exists and that women deserve to be compensated fairly.

**Professional Player Status is used to Call Attention to Gender Equality Cases.**

In tennis the pay gap has been mitigated. In 1973, Billie Jean King, cofounder of the Women’s Tennis Association, boycotted the U.S. Open for awarding unequal prize money to men and women. The U.S. Open responded by becoming the first major tournament to offer
equal winnings to both genders (Barajas, 2016). In all major tennis tournaments today women
and men are awarded equal sums. Serena Williams, whose advocacy for equal pay at Wimbledon
contributed to equal pay at the tournament in 2007 (Barajas, 2016), spoke concerning the
USWNT: “It’s a battle, it’s a fight. I think at some point, in every sport, you have to have those
pioneers and maybe it’s time for soccer. I’m playing because someone else stood up and so what
they are doing right now is hopefully for the future of women’s soccer” (Reuters, 2019).
William’s words echo the sentiment of many supporters of fair-pay in the USWNT.

However, fair pay doesn’t necessarily mean equality. In the case of women’s professional
tennis, opponents of equal pay are still taking a stance. As recently as 2016, Novak Djokovic,
first in the world in men’s tennis stated, "I think that our men's tennis world, ATP world, should
fight for more because the stats are showing that we have much more spectators on the men's
tennis matches. As long as it's like that and there is data and stats available upon who attracts
more attention, spectators, who sells more tickets and stuff like that, in relation to that it has to be
fairly distributed” (Boren, 2016). Yet such data may themselves reflect social inequalities. Male
major sports leagues dominate television sports networks, making it difficult for women’s sports
teams to get visibility and ultimately earn as much as their male counterparts (Abrams, 2019).

The WNBA case, though based in online discourse, used the status of professional
players to further its cause. In addition to A’ja Wilson and Brittney Griner, others have shown
support. Some NBA players took a stand to support their female counterparts. NBA player Isaiah
Thomas wrote in September 2018: “To put it really simple: If you don’t respect women’s
basketball, you’re a joke. You’re a joke, man” (Thomas, 2018). In July 2018 the Las Vegas
Aces reposted a photo (fig. 1) on their Instagram page of Lebron James wearing a Las Vegas
Basketball t-shirt (ACES, 2018). Laker player Josh Hart also donned the Aces jersey (fig. 2) in support of the WNBA and was featured on their Facebook (WNBA, 2018).

Perhaps in response to actions like these, the WNBA announced in January 2020 a new contract for the 2020 season. This agreement, mentioned in the previous section, will increase the salary of players by over 50 percent. It includes maternity benefits and changes to season structure (Young, 2020).

This announcement too, was met with support from NBA players, using their professional status to support their female counterparts. Stephen Curry retweeted a post from Good Morning America in January of 2020 adding clapping emojis: “BREAKING: @CathyEngelbert from the @WNBA announces a new landmark deal for female athletes. ‘We’re hoping to lift, not just women in sports and women in basketball, but women in society’” (Curry, 2020). Similarly, Boston Celtics player Grant Williams retweeted a post with the hand clapping emojis: “Landmark day in the WNBA: New collective bargaining agreement that has raised average salaries to six figures for the first time ($130,000, up to $500,000 for top players), improved travel and marketing opportunities, and fully paid salary on maternity leave among other changes” (Williams, 2020). That same morning, Ja Morant retweeted The New York Times: “The W.N.B.A. and its players’ union have agreed in principle on a new collective bargaining agreement that would nearly double the maximum salary and provide paid maternal leave” (Morant, 2020). Positive feedback like this over social media reinforces the idea that online campaigns can produce results for gender equality in professional sports, and further the cause of gender equality in a more general sense.
Figure 1. Lebron James wearing a Las Vegas Basketball t-shirt (ACES, 2018).

Figure 2. Laker player Josh Hart in an Aces jersey in support of the WNBA; featured on WNBA’s Facebook page (WNBA, 2018).

Conclusion
Proponents of gender equality in professional sports compete with those fighting to maintain the status quo through online discussion and interaction, lawsuits and appeals to sports federations, and celebrity appeal through the status of professional athletes. Both those working for gender equality and those working against it use these tactics, and, in many cases, several tactics are used in conjunction. For instance, the Women’s National Hockey Team appealed to its governing body, USA Hockey, while using a social media campaign to engage users in an online debate. Similarly, players in the Women’s National Basketball League took their plight to social media and garnered support from well-known NBA players to gain credibility while, at the same time, establishing a following for its cause online.

In general, the battle for gender equality in professional sports is fought on a sport by sport basis. Women’s tennis made achievements in gender equality decades before many other professional sports, making strides towards equality in the 1970’s through the advocacy of Billie Jean King and others. Yet, many of the disputes cited in this paper are still occurring or occurred within the past several years. As one player, one team, or one sport makes progress, the establishments of other professional women’s sports do not automatically change; however, this is not to say that efforts made in one sport do not impact efforts made in other sports. In recent years there have been victories across many sports on the road to gender equality, but roadblocks to an equal playing field still exist. Those attempting to maintain the status quo in women’s professional sports do not take the shape of one omnipotent oppressor, but rather many people, organizations, and networks working across sectors to, for many reasons, restrict change.

Future research on this problem could be conducted at the amateur level. Professional sports leagues make up a fraction of those competing in sports, and it would be interesting, though maybe more difficult, to study those competing for gender equality at all levels of sport.
Gender inequality in other sectors could be an area for increased study as well, particularly how the improvements in one area (like women’s professional sports) might impact improvements in another area (like the pay gap in other sectors). Though inequalities still exist today, many professional athletes have made strides towards equality, and are continuing to effect positive change every day.
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