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# Game On: Accessibility and Equality in Women's Sports

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## Abstract

After Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 passed, the number of women participating in sports dramatically increased nationwide. However, female athletes lack equal opportunities in sports broadcasting, scholarships, and on-field play. Title IX noncompliance hinders the ability of female athletes—especially women of color—to participate in higher level sports programs. This gender inequity compromises the success of women's professional and collegiate sports. In a 2004 study published in *Mass Communication & Society*, researchers discovered that the ratio of male to female sports stories on ESPN's SportsCenter was "about 25:1" in 1995, and by 2002, the ratio had worsened to "more than 48:1" despite the successes of professional women's soccer and basketball (Adams and Tuggle 243). Over the last decade, female athletes have begun to speak out against sexism in sports. In March 2019, the United States Women's Soccer Team, led by Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan, sued the U.S. Soccer Federation for gender discrimination, alleging that the more successful women's team received only a third of the World Cup bonuses and one fifteenth of the prize money of the less successful men's team (Bachman, "U.S. Women's Team"). Due to widespread Title IX noncompliance, institutionalized sexism, and unequal access to resources and opportunities, female athletes have lower quality and less accessible broadcasts, and they have fewer opportunities to compete at the highest levels. Though their presence on major sports

networks is increasing, widespread gender inequality within the sports industry reflects the historical and pervasive gender discrimination in America.

*Keywords:* Title IX, Gender Inequality, Discrimination, Women's Sports, Gender, Sports, Women, Sexism, Gender Discrimination, Sports Accessibility, Sports Media

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Sports is a constant form of entertainment, occurring year-round with considerable variety. Professional and collegiate championships garner millions of views and billions of dollars. Men dominate athletics, but female athletes existed in the shadows until the 1920s, when professional and record-setting female athletes first appeared. After Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 passed, the number of women in sports increased, as did women's intercollegiate sports and professional leagues. Though successful, women still lack athletic equality, delegitimizing the American Dream and gender equality. Thanks to varied success, the number of women in sports continues to increase; however, female athletes still lack equality in sports broadcasting, access, and opportunity. Fortunately, women in sports are speaking up against sports inequality and proposing solutions to reduce gender inequality in sports.

Gender inequality in sports disproves the metaphor of the American Dream due to its endorsement of false notions of equal opportunity and access. While many female athletes achieved equality, access, and opportunity through Title IX, the quality and number of female sports is significantly lower than men's sports due to institutionalized sexism within the sports industry. When compared to male athletes, female athletes clearly lack comparable support or

resources from outside parties, challenging female athletes' opportunities to play at the same level with equal treatment and respect. This makes the American Dream of equality, access, and opportunity difficult for female athletes, and the American Dream does not exist because it contradicts social and historical patterns (Mantsios 349). Moreover, women lack the "equal opportunity to succeed" in and outside of sports because institutionalized sexism and discrimination reduce their possibilities in male-dominated fields including sports (Mantsios 361). Furthermore, "inequality in the United States" persists, and social habits, the results of historical gender discrimination, support gender inequality (Mantsios 362). This leads to the addition of a gender-specific prefix for female athletes and sports, further proving the existence of gender inequality. Consequently, the American Dream contributes to gender inequality in sports by not supplying the means for women to achieve equality, access, and opportunity.

Gender inequality in sports also dismantles the idea of gender equality by suggesting female athletes have equal opportunity and access to sports. While women are not entirely powerless, women do not have equal opportunity or access to male-dominated areas or sports (Johnson 531). The predominance of gender discrimination leads to "women [experiencing] the effects of sexism" in nearly every aspect of their lives in a variety of ways (Mantsios 364). Members of society often judge women by their conformity to a stereotype, and their degree of conformity can result in sexual harassment. Due to stereotyping, the stigma against female athletes started with the idea that they were not feminine, but they were simultaneously feminine enough to have male members of the sports industry harass and sexualize them. This is especially relevant when considering the multitude of sexual assault cases from within the sports industry. From Jenn Sterger to Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics, women in sports

constantly face this double standard and are at risk for sexual assault from other athletes and coaches. The extent of media coverage of women athletes has been minimal, and male reporters are sometimes dismissive of their athletic achievements or sexualize them; perhaps the most famous example of the sexualization of female athletes is the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition. The sports industry also treats female athletes with children badly, as recent criticism of Nike has shown. Reporters often ask women about trivial subjects related to their gender rather than their athletic accomplishments. This unfavorable coverage harms the public image of women's sports, traps female athletes into narrow stereotypes, and diminishes their importance to the sports industry. Furthermore, the glass ceiling limits female athletic success; women's sports have yet to achieve the same broadcast quality or exposure as men's sports. Throughout the 2021 college lacrosse season, men's lacrosse games on the B1G Ten streaming platform had multiple camera angles, announcers, and graphics while the women's lacrosse games on the platform had one camera angle, no announcers, a broken clock, no graphics, and no score tracker, even during a Top 20 matchup. While leagues pay male athletes millions of dollars, they pay female athletes significantly less for equal or better play, which is inherently unequal. These instances demonstrate that gender equality does not exist in the sports industry or for female athletes.

Working to reduce gender inequality in sports, the federal government passed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 with varying degrees of compliance. Admittedly, Title IX compliance is difficult and costly, and critics argue that Title IX forces colleges to cut men's sports. However, institutions can meet the Title IX criteria without cutting sports programs and "opportunities for male athletes," arguments many have used to fight Title IX and the

reallocation of funds for men's sports to women's sports (Sigelman and Walbeck 519). Title IX prohibits discrimination based on sex in federally funded programs, such as sports and education. Typically, institutions associate Title IX compliance with collegiate sports accessibility. To be Title IX compliant, institutions must pass a three-part test. The most important test states that sports programs must be proportionate to the student gender ratio (Sigelman and Walbeck 520). If the institution follows proportionality, then it does not have to pass the other tests. If the program fails proportionality, the institution's history of program expansion or their accommodation of the underrepresented demographic determines their level of compliance (Sigelman and Walbeck 521). Title IX compliance extends to facilities, opportunities, and financial resources like scholarships for underrepresented athletes. After Title IX, the percentage of female athletes increased from 8% to 69% (Pickett et al. 79-80). Based on initial observations, the data suggests that Title IX has significantly improved the sports opportunities for women.

Despite progress made by Title IX, a substantial proportion of universities do not meet the Title IX requirements for equal access to sports, though some noncompliant universities may be unable to comply due to "structural issues" or extraneous factors (Anderson et al. 238). However, these institutions have had fifty years to be Title IX compliant with equal opportunities for underrepresented athletes. The "improvements in gender equity" of college sports are smaller than expected given the massive expansion and successes of women's sports at the college level (Anderson et al. 245). Many noncompliant institutions share similar characteristics, suggesting that institutions with one or more of these characteristics are more likely to be noncompliant than institutions without these characteristics (Anderson et al. 245).

For instance, Division I colleges have better “compliance figures” than Division II or III colleges, though many institutions in all divisions remain noncompliant (Anderson et al. 226). Colleges with large football programs receive a significant percentage of the athletic budget and scholarship quota because college football makes a massive profit compared to most sports, resulting in a higher proportionality gap (Anderson et al. 230, 237). Also, historically Black colleges or universities (HBCUs) generally do not meet proportionality requirements due to the funneling of black athletes into physical sports (Anderson et al. 230, 237). Due to widespread Title IX noncompliance, underrepresented college athletes have limited athletic opportunities.

Despite increased opportunities, the level of participation for female athletes of color has declined, reflecting their unequal access to sports and scholarships. While some female athletes of color, like tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams, are incredibly successful, individuals concerned with sports reform have infrequently addressed “the extent to which women of color” benefit from Title IX (Pickett et al. 80). Since 1990, the participation rate of female athletes of color has declined, affecting the overall representation of female athletes of color (Pickett et al. 84-85). Asian girls were 20% less likely and Hispanic females were 30% less likely to play high school sports in 2002 than white females (Pickett et al. 86). Furthermore, schools with large minority populations have limited sports programs. Specifically, HBCUs tend to offer a smaller range of sports due to the “funneling of black female athletes” into basketball and track while they funnel black male athletes into basketball, track, and football (Pickett et al. 88; Anderson et al. 237). When observing offered high school sports, researchers learned that schools with a high proportion of black females were more likely to offer girls’ wrestling, highlighting the influence of racial stereotypes on sports accessibility (Pickett et al. 87). These

schools also offered a smaller range of sports and were “less likely to offer the ‘growth sports’ leading to college athletic scholarships” (Pickett et al. 87). High school sports inequality influences the accessibility of collegiate scholarships for female athletes of color because the athletes that receive scholarships are not representative of the student population. Black female athletes are not “proportionately represented” in this category, making participation in collegiate athletics difficult (Pickett et al. 81). Without equal access to collegiate sports, female athletes of color are less likely to play professionally, and the diversity of professional female athletes then declines. Unequal access to opportunities and scholarships for female athletes of color highlights inequality in sports based on the “double jeopardy” of race and gender.

The growth of women’s professional sports has increased since the success of the 1999 women’s soccer team, yet these high-level athletes still receive inadequate pay. Women’s sports are extraordinarily successful, yet professional female athletes still receive unequal pay. In 2019, “more than 200 players” in the professional women’s hockey league threatened to boycott the upcoming season to “secure better pay and benefits” (Bachman, “In 2019”); since then, the players received a higher salary and an equal split in league sponsorships. Likewise, players in the women’s basketball league owned by the NBA successfully finalized two collective bargaining agreements for higher pay since the league pays them a tenth of what players make in Russia and China (Bachman, “In 2019”). Around the same time, the United States Women’s Soccer Team sued the U.S. Soccer Federation for gender discrimination and lower pay “despite having the same job responsibilities and ... more success” (Bachman, “U.S. Women’s Team”). Led by Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan and with popular support, the team alleged they received a third of the men’s World Cup bonuses and one fifteenth of the men’s

World Cup prize money (Bachman, "U.S. Women's Team"). Professional athletes highlight the gender pay gap and inspire action against this discrimination due to their visibility.

As women's sports grew more popular after Title IX, the amount of televised women's sports declined rather than increased. Though NBC "accounts for 23% of all women's sports programming on television" due to their Olympics coverage, this amount of airtime for women's sports is abnormal in comparison to other networks (Battaglio). Men and their interests heavily dominate the sports industry, and the ratio of male sports to female sports on television reflects this trend. In a 1995 study, the ratio of male to female sports stories on ESPN's SportsCenter was "about 25:1," and in 2002, the ratio had worsened to "more than 48:1" (Adams and Tuggle 243). While men are the main audience, many women identify as sports fans and watch these programs. During 2002's Women in Sports Weekend, ESPN's SportsCenter aired a male to female sports story ratio of 60:1, which seems inappropriate given the theme (Adams and Tuggle 243). While this statistic may be less representative of modern SportsCenter as the interest in women's sports increases, the data suggests SportsCenter may be less proportional than ESPN in its content. Certain sports are easier to watch than others, which changes the proportion of broadcast time available; college sports networks, with several minor women's sports, are unavailable in the western United States, but women's college basketball has major television slots due to its popularity. Other sports lack television deals, negatively affecting the televised presence and accessibility of women's sports. Due to several variables, the accessibility of televised women's sports varies in airtime ratios.

As the attitude towards women's sports changes, some leagues are increasing the number of women in high-ranking positions. While the sports industry is more diverse than it

has been, leagues must actively facilitate women's entry into broadcasting and men's sports to actively avoid the funneling of women into stereotypical jobs. In the professional football league, women function as coaches and scouts for successful teams. In 2015, Sarah Thomas began acting as the league's first female referee, and the Miami baseball team hired Kim Ng as general manager in 2020. In March 2020, a female crew called and produced a national hockey "game in the United States for the first time" (McCarthy). While these women help break the glass ceiling in male sports, there are still positions and sports where women do not yet have a presence. The growing diversity of ESPN better reflects the roles of women in sports media, but "there was no racial diversity" in the hockey broadcast (McCarthy). Such opportunities and improvements must continue to be accessible to increase diversity in sports.

Changes in the sports industry aim to improve the accessibility of televised women's sports. While the increase in airtime will sideline other sports, making women's sports accessible to a wider fanbase and spreading women's sports may be more important in the long term. Certain sports networks have chosen to broadcast women's sports through streaming services. Recent data states that "70% of American households" subscribe to at least one streaming service (Nielsen qtd. in Battaglio). Major networks like ESPN and NBC have successfully streamed minor and women's sports through their streaming platforms ESPN+ and NBC Sports Gold, inspiring other platforms and networks to utilize this resource (Battaglio). Another solution for increased access would involve major networks like ESPN giving women's sports prime-time slots to frame them as "an important part of sports" (Adams and Tuggle 246). Increased broadcast time on major networks could determine the future success and the expansion of women's sports on both the field and on television.

Because of widespread Title IX noncompliance, institutionalized sexism, and unequal access to resources and opportunities, women's sports suffer in quality, access, and popularity compared to men's sports. Though the diversity of sports broadcasters and televised sports programs on major sports networks is increasing, gender inequality within the sports industry highlights the long history of gender discrimination within American society. The institutionalized sexism of American society and sports further disproves the existence of an attainable American Dream for female athletes and women in the sports industry.

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