

# Sexism in Sports

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On July 30, 2002, WNBA player Lisa Leslie of the Los Angeles Sparks became the first woman to dunk in a professional basketball game. This was a transcending moment for many who followed the progression of women's basketball, and the progression of acceptance of women in society. In an April 2019 article, "What if a girl can dunk," reporter Roberta Rodrigues discusses the significance of Leslie's dunk. Rodrigues writes, "A dunk is, most of the time, seen as a man's thing. At least that's what those who still have something to express against women's basketball say with the much primitive argument that the women's game has no dunk" (Rodrigues 2019). The 'dunk' has historically been considered a prominent masculine feature of men's basketball however, when Leslie became the first to dunk in a women's game, she effectively broke down the sexist barrier of women's athleticism. For so long, the criticism of women's professional basketball was that it was too boring, too slow, and overall not as entertaining as men's basketball (Rodrigues 2019). These criticisms come from sexist

stereotypes of women and their athletic abilities. However, sports like basketball give women the opportunity to disprove many historic sexist beliefs unlike any other profession, it's the power of sports.

The power of sports is something that has not been discussed enough in social circles. In fact, sports have the power to inspire and unite people from all walks of life. Sports promote good health, leadership skills, teamwork, self-reliance, and continuous improvement. Former South African President Nelson Mandela recognized the power of sports in a 2000 interview. Mandela said, "Sport has the power the change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where there was only despair" (weforum 2019).

The social impact of organized sports has always served an important role in society. Sports unite society and have broken down historical barriers of racism and prejudice throughout the years. In 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in professional baseball, by becoming the first African American to compete in the pro game. By enduring harsh forms of racism and prejudice, Robinson was a trailblazer for generations of African Americans seeking opportunities in the sports world. The sports industry is indeed a multi-billion-dollar business employing millions of people around the world. Millions of people every year participate in different sports on recreational and professional levels. College and professional sports bring in a worldwide audience, where millions watch live in person and on television. In fact, the current coronavirus pandemic has shown how important sports are in providing sources of income to families around the world. Sports also provide a much needed sense of social community and connection. Sports provide incomes not only for the athletes, coaches, and trainers, but to stadium and arena workers, local concession workers and more. Sports are truly a galvanizing entity,

especially to Americans, but one cannot ignore the institutional problems and barriers that exist among it. Sports have become more inclusive than ever but, sexism and gender discrimination continue to be an issue in today's sports world. This case study will focus on the sexism and the lack of gender diversity in the sports industry. Although society has made major progress in gender equality, the sports industry shows how that progression can grow to new heights if one seeks it. This case study will also examine Title IX; its political and social impact on women's collegiate and professional sports.

Sexism and the lack of gender diversity in the sports world continue to have major effects on the ability of everyone having equal opportunities to advance in all areas in sports. Sexism is defined as any prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination typically against women but can apply to males as well (Masequesmay 2019). Sexism and the lack of gender diversity continues to occur at all levels in sports and is not only reserved for athletes and those who compete. Women are often underpaid in the sports industry at the highest levels. According to [blackenterprise.com](http://blackenterprise.com), WNBA players in the upcoming 2019-2020 season will earn about 20% of the minimum salary of an NBA player even though they are essentially doing the same job, according to [CNBC.com](http://CNBC.com). In fact, rookie WNBA players earn a minimum of just \$50,000 per year, while the minimum starting salary for NBA players is about \$580,000 (Salam 2019). The gender pay gap affects every sport on all levels from junior league to professional. The lack of diversity in sports media coverage is also a continued problem in America. According to [dailyeverygreen.com](http://dailyeverygreen.com), 90 percent of sportscasters in America are men, with almost 5% of NFL sports reports being women. Sexism continues to be an oppressive barrier for men and women seeking careers in the sports industry. Although sports can bring us together unlike any other thing, it can also divide us in the fight for gender equality. Sexism and discrimination in sports continues to be an oppressive barrier for future

opportunities for men and women, despite the progress made politically and socially in the sports world

The struggle for women's equality in the political, social, and economic spheres dates back to the suffrage movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For as long as traditional democratic societies have existed, women have desired to be treated equally amongst their male counterparts in economic, social, and political environments. These long struggles for women's equality continue in today's sports industry. The state of today's women's equality in sports mirrors the historic struggle for women equality in society. In fact, the struggle for women's suffrage and equal rights can be traced back to Olympe De Gouges's 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of Women*, where she publicly demanded natural rights for women and the right to vote and hold equal opportunities under the law. As noted, De Gouges devoted her life to the cause of women's rights until her execution by guillotine in November of 1793. The legacy of women's rights was continued generations later through suffrage leaders like Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as they attempted to abolish the barriers of women oppression through access of voting rights and equal representation under the law. The suffrage movement saw their goals achieved in 1920 with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment that granted women the right to vote. The fight for women's equality continued years later with the second wave feminist movement.

The rise of the second wave feminist movement had profound effects on the sports world. This second wave movement led by women's rights activists such as Betty Friedan, Liz Carpenter, and Gloria Steinem wanted to focus on issues of equality and discrimination. The second wave feminist movement could be best placed between the period of the 1960s-1980s. The second wave movement came during a time of increased women's participation in the sports industry. More and more women began participation in high

profile sports leagues and Olympic events. The intersectionality of the second wave feminist and sports had a profound impact on women empowerment in the sports industry, as women sought to gain further societal independence through sports. The first wave feminism movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century focused on issues of women's property and voting rights, whereas the second wave sought to identify women's social and political inequalities through the slogan, "The Personal is Political" (Drucker 2018). The height of the second wave feminist movement for many was the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas. Funded by the Carter Administration, it would become the largest gathering of women and those committed in the advancement of the women in American history. The documentary, *Sisters of '77* was very informative on the second wave feminist movement and its lasting legacy. As we saw in the video, from November 18-21 more than 20,000 people gathered to discuss current problems and obstacles facing women in society. This historic women's conference included a 26-plan resolution on women's issues including childcare, minority rights, reproductive freedoms, sexual freedoms, and the ever so important ratification for Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) (Sisters of '77 2005). Although the ERA still has not been fully ratified, the National Women's Conference was instrumental in promoting equality for women in all areas of the social, political, and economic spheres. Terry H. Anderson, author of *The Sixties*, discussed the effects of the women's movement during the era of mass social movements. Anderson states, "Feminists liberated occupations and the professions. Most conspicuous was television. Before the sixties, men reported on women and actresses played housewives, but after the era, females have become the reporters while actresses are portraying professionals, from lawyers to doctors to presidents. Most state and local governments legalized the concept of equal pay for comparable worth, and since then the amount females make compared to males, the earnings gap, has

been narrowing” (Anderson 2018, 212). This mass feminist liberation of occupations also occurred in the sports industry during this time. Women began playing more sports and applying for job positions in the sports industry. Anderson is correct, women are now being paid more comparable to men and the gender pay gap is narrowing but, there continues to be institutional barriers of sexism that prevents many women from getting fair opportunities in the sports industry and other fields in society.

Women became more empowered to pursue their own ambitions separate from the traditional ideals of womanhood. As well known, the intersectionality of social and political issues was very common during the feminist movements. This intersectionality came to its head in 1972 with the congressional passing of Title IX. Women have long sought equal opportunities in the field of sports and education; Title IX effectively opened the doors for women in the once male dominated areas. Title IX was an amendment to the 1965 Higher Education Act and protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive Federal financial assistance (US Department of Education 2020). According to govtrack.us, Title IX legislation passed the U.S. Senate with a vote of 88 to 6 on March 1, 1972 and passed the House of Representatives 275 to 125 on May 11, 1972. The Title IX of the Education Amendments states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance”(NCAA 2014). Title IX applies to all educational institutions, both public and private, that receive federal funds. Title IX became such a landmark amendment for women because it mandated that women and men be provided equitable opportunities to compete in college sports. This act did not only benefit women but men as well, as the law requires “educational institutions to maintain policies, practices and

programs that do not discriminate against anyone on the basis of gender” (NCAA 2014). Title IX’s impact on sports was profound, it opened the doors for inclusion of women in all areas of education and athletics. Sexism and discrimination before Title IX was rampant throughout the country. Before the passage of this act, only 1% of college athletic budgets went to women’s sports and at the high school level, male athletes outnumbered female athletes 12 to 1 (Billie Jean King, n.d.). Since the passage of Title IX female participation in high school sports has risen by 1057 percent and by 614 percent at the college level according to [billiejeanking.com](http://billiejeanking.com). Title IX is still the only law that grants women any kind of equality in America and helps set the stage for women professional sports such as the WNBA and the Olympics.

On April 24, 1996, leaders of women’s basketball announced, “We Got Next” as the NBA Board of Governors approved the concept of the “WNBA” (Women’s National Basketball Association) to begin playing in June of 1997 (WNBA 2002). The announcement of the WNBA was a transcending moment for women collegiate players seeking to pursue a secondary level of basketball while being compensated for it. Before April 24, 1996, women have long desired the ability to compete professionally in basketball like their male counterparts. With the increased participation of women in college sports due to the passage of Title IX, the need for a professional level of basketball for women in America became an even more popular discussion. However, sexism and discrimination constantly interfered with the initial attempts of a women’s professional basketball league. The NBA (National Basketball Association) in the 1990s was doing better than ever, in ratings and arena sellouts. The rise in worldwide fame and popularity of Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls, the NBA was experiencing a major economic boom and growth in their worldwide marketability. In fact, the fame of Michael Jordan and the Bulls was so profound it facilitated the NBA into changing game rules to favor players like Jordan. The 1998

NBA finals between the Chicago Bulls and Utah Jazz was the highest-rated Finals in NBA history at a rating of 18.7 according to [bleacherreport.com](http://bleacherreport.com). The popularity of the NBA during the 1990s changed televised sports in America. Bleacher report states, at the beginning of the decade, the NBA was receiving about \$56 million per year in national broadcasting rights. By the end of the decade, the NBA national broadcasting rights had swollen to more than \$620 million per year. With the major boom of the NBA around the introduction of the WNBA, many people believed that a women's basketball league wouldn't last and could hurt the men's basketball product. These beliefs about the WNBA were rooted in sexist biases about the women's game. As discussed, sexism in women's basketball continues to be problematic to the pursuit of gender equality in the sports world. Many believed women's basketball would be too boring to watch due to the sexist belief on women's athleticism. Many also believed that the league wouldn't last and that only women would watch the WNBA. However, since the introduction of the league in 1997, the WNBA continues to thrive to a national audience. According to [wnba.com](http://wnba.com), the arena average gender breakdown is approximately 70-30 female-male, with the TV audience about 50-50 female-male. The league also experiences a strong percentage of non-adult viewers. The WNBA has since expanded from eight teams to sixteen teams and continues to grow and expand its brand across the globe. Title IX has had a profound impact on the WNBA by empowering women to pursue professional careers in athletics, thus overcoming many sexist beliefs.

Every four years marks a tremendous event when over 200 countries from around the world meet for the annual World Olympics. The world Olympics dates to 776 B.C. in ancient Greece, although historians believe the games may have started sooner. The Greeks stage the games every fourth year for over seven hundred years until it was abolished in the Christian era but later brought back in 1896 (Benagh,



n.d.). The Olympics has since expanded to feature the Winter Olympic games include sports like snowboarding, figure skating, and more. The Olympic games show the power of sports in society, a power that supersedes many political or social differences between countries. In fact, out of nearly three hundred years of its modern existence, the Olympics has only been cancelled during the times of World War or recently due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Olympics is a truly unique sporting event that brings together different people and cultures to one location to compete and represent their home country. The Olympics have long worked to promote more diversity, primary by including women into the games more than a century ago. According to [topendsports.com](http://topendsports.com), women participated in the Olympics for the first time at the 1900 Paris Games in lawn tennis and golf. Since then, the IOC (International Olympic Committee) has worked to include more gender diversity in the Olympics by expanding women sporting events and promoting women's games to a worldwide audience. The IOC's promotion of gender diversity has led to an increase in women competing in the Olympic games. In fact, women competing in the games has increased significantly over the last 30 years; from 26.1 % at the Seoul games to a record 45.2 % in 2016 at Rio (International Olympic Committee, n.d.). Title IX has been influential in inspiring women participation in the World Games by allowing them to compete on the college level. Today thousands of men and women Olympic athletes from countries throughout the world, train year-around to compete in sports such as basketball, tennis, swimming, track, and more. Some athletes compete for individual glory, while others only seek to represent their country at the highest level. This great progress in Olympic gender equality has been made by balancing the total number of athletes competing at the Games, while offering leadership development, advocacy and awareness campaigns, and more

appointing more women to administrative leadership roles according to the official Olympic Games website.

Title IX has indeed made a major impact in the pursuit of gender equality in sports and abroad. However, there continues to be institutional barriers of sexism and discrimination that is oppressing the ability of equal opportunities in society. Despite mass increases in participation in sports and other professions, women continue to be underpaid, underrepresented, and subject to unfair forms of sexualization and gender bias. These forms of women oppression in sports are not only exclusive to the athletes that compete, but applies to the coaches, trainers, reporters and broadcasters, and those in administrative positions. Administrative positions include general managers, athletic directors, school and team presidents, assistants, and more.

As stated, the gender pay gap continues to have major impacts on the ability of women to gain fair pay for positions. In fact, according to the *New York Times*, the U.S. women's soccer team filed a gender discrimination lawsuit against the United States Soccer Federation in March of 2019. This was the latest move in the fight for gender pay equality for professional soccer as all 28 players stood together to protest the injustice of gender discrimination. The U.S. women's soccer team has been very successful over recent years, outpacing the men's team in wins and revenue. The *New York Times* gathered information, details, and interviews regarding the U.S. women's soccer team's lawsuit against the Soccer Federation, as well as information regarding the gender pay gap in sports. In 2015 after winning the world cup, the U.S. women's team brought in more than \$23 million in game revenue, \$16 million more than the Soccer Federation projected while the U.S. men only brought in \$9 million in revenue (Salam 2019). Despite this major outpace in revenue, the highest paid women soccer player made about \$1.2 million from 2008 to 2015, while the highest paid male made

around \$1.4 million during that same period. Those figures may not seem too far away however, during that same period, the 25<sup>th</sup> highest paid female player made just under \$341,000 while the corresponding male player made around \$580,000 according to U.S. soccer's official records. Also, from the 2008 to 2015 pay period the 50<sup>th</sup> highest paid male player made 10 times more than his female counterpart at \$246,238 to \$25,516 (Salam 2019). Head to Head pay for men's and women's soccer pay shows the underlying sexism that exists in the sport. There is a perception that women in sports should be happy with the pay they receive, however if one considers the mass revenue in which the institutions profit off women in sports their pay should be comparable to their economic value. In a capitalist society, the employment pay should best equal the economic value of an individual or group. When employment pay does not equal or unfairly devalue the economic value of an individual or group, it is the duty of society to call for major institutional reform regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Sexism and discrimination have created an unfair economic valuing system of female athletes and women across all professions.

Title IX has done a lot for the progression of women in the sports industry. Today more women are attending and graduating from college than ever before. In 1940, only 3.8 percent of American women attending college (Duffin 2020). College attendance for women gradually rose as society began to challenge the traditional roles of womanhood. Education has always been highly valued in society, and women saw the need for equal educational opportunities for all sexes. Education equality gave rise to more female participation in higher learning institutions. In fact, in 2019 36.6 percent of women in the United States had completed four years of more of college (Duffin 2020). Due to the surge in college female attendance, more women are competing in sports. However, women are still being unrepresented and oppressed outside the areas of team or individual performance in

sports. These areas include coaches, trainers, media members, and those in administrative positions. The Olympics has done a great job at promoting more women to major positions, but women continue to be unrepresented in Olympic coaching staffs (The International Olympic Committee 2020). According to the IOC, since 2010 women game time coaches has not reached over 11% in either the Winter or Summer games. In 2014 91% of the Sochi Winter Games coaches were men, and in the 2016 Rio Summer games 89% of Olympic coaches were men as well (The International Olympic Committee 2020). The inclusion of female athletes in the Olympics has indeed increased over the last 30 years, however women continue to be underrepresented in areas of coaching. This trend of underrepresentation continues in the field of sports broadcast and journalism. Professor Tammy Crawford, a longtime faculty member at Washington State University performed a study on gender and stereotypes in the sports industry with the hope to draw attention to the gender inequality in the media field. According to Crawford, “as of 2014, 90 percent of editorial roles, 90 percent of assistant editorial roles, 88 percent of columnist, 87 percent of reporters and 95 percent of anchors are men.” Of the 183 sports talk shows, there are currently only two female hosts (Paramo 2017). Some would ask, why such a blatant discrepancy in female sports media members?

This discrepancy in female sports media members, speaks to the inherent sexism and discrimination that exist in the sports industry. As we discussed in class, women have historically found it difficult to enter the traditional masculine, male dominant, space in politics and other professions in society. The sporting world screams masculinity. Professional sports like the NFL and NBA are the most popular professional sports in America and display obvious forms of sports masculinity. For basketball, it's the superior athleticism of dunking, rebounding, defense, and the overall speed of the game. In football, it is the high contact nature of tackling, blocking, and physical play unlike

any other sport that draws this dominant masculinity. In fact, college and professional football are not only the two most popular sports in America but are the two most obvious displays of masculine culture. Women have been historically downplayed in the masculine sports because of sexist beliefs regarding traditional womanhood and high contact sports. Because women are perceived too small, too weak, or lack the proper understanding of the game, how can one expect them to effectively broadcast or interview football players? Since the launch of NFL network in 2003, only 12 percent of their broadcasters have been women (Paramo 2017). Women have been historically excluded from major sports broadcasting. In fact, it took until September 11, 2016, for announcer Beth Mowins to become the first ever woman to call the play-by-play in a nationally televised NFL game according to NPR. While this was a historic moment for women in sports, according to the *Daily Evergreen*, in the NFL's then 97-year history, there have been just three other women to serve in non-sideline media positions. Sexism continues to oppress the ability of women to gain high administrative roles in sports as well. In an article by Kendall Baker at [axios.com](https://www.axios.com), found that out of the all 65 Power 5 colleges (ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, SEC), only four schools employ a female athletic director, and speaks to the continued underrepresentation of women in high positions in sports. Power 5 schools are college institutions with high profile athletic programs that bring in large amounts of revenue to the school (Doughty 2020). Since the passage of Title IX, women make up nearly half of the all college athletes, but only four female athletic directors currently exist. Patti Phillips, CEO of Women's Leaders in College Sports made an interesting statement regarding this issue. Phillips stated, "The Power 5 level is the most male dominated part of college athletics because of the money and because of big-time football and basketball, which have traditionally been sort of the male, boy's club things. It's much harder for women to break into these roles because of

that” (Baker 2019). Women continued to be discriminated against for high positions in the top national colleges. However, some progress has been made outside the Power 5 schools in terms of female athletic director employment. According to Baker, 68 women were hired as athletic directors or conference commissioners in non-Power 5 programs in 2018, up from just 19 back in 2002. There has been some progress made in gender employment, but institutional sexism continues to oppress future career opportunities for women in the sports industry. For women to gain more opportunities in the top college administrative jobs like athletic director or school president, sexism and discrimination must be overcome by promoting positive substantial gender equality reform.

Sexism continues to be a major problem not only for the sports industry, but for society as well. Sexist beliefs oppress the opportunities for women who desire to enter in careers across the globe. In America, the power hierarchy has also been white male dominant, as they control our political institutions and private industry such as collegiate and professional sports. These sexist beliefs intersect with women in politics and the obstacles female politicians must overcome to serve in highly elected positions. Although women have shown the ability to be elected and effectively hold a government office, many Americans still believe that men are naturally more capable at running government offices than women. Discrimination and sexism against women in politics and society continue to be a relevant issue despite now having 20 women serving currently serving in the U.S. Senate. Politics and sports have also intersected with each other on social issues regarding civil rights, gender equality, and sexual equality. Sexism must be overcome not only in sports but society as well if we desire to have equal pay and equal opportunities for all. According to iwpr.org, the gender wage gap in weekly earnings for full-time workers in the United States widened between 2017 and 2018. “Women’s median weekly earnings for full-

time work were \$789 in 2018 compared with \$973 for men (Courey, 2018).

The current political hierarchy that has traditionally been white male-dominant, men have affected issues on women's equality. Some men have historically worked against the movement despite the positive effects that would come from the advancement of women through gender equality. Gender equality for women would not only benefit individual lives but families and the communities entirely. With more women having equal workplace opportunities, it would trigger competitive competition in the job market thus benefiting this capitalist society. Those opposed to women's rights have often been men unwilling to give up their traditional power hierarchy or position. The resentment of gender equality has constantly been met by those unwilling to support the advancement of women in the political, economic, and social spectrum. However, men in positions of power should care about gender equality because it is morally right. The basic beliefs of this Democratic country are that everyone regardless of race, color, sex, or religion have equal rights and opportunities under the law. Women and minorities have long fought to have those beliefs fully achieved in America, and until those needs are achieved there will always be a need to speak against them. The sports industry displays the current gender inequality through mechanisms of sexism and discrimination. However, the power of sports is truly unique because it brings people from all walks of life together to celebrate and cheer for the sport they love. Due to power of sports, they must be the example of progressive gender equality by abolishing mechanisms of institutionalize sexism and discrimination.

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