



How gender disparities affect women's sport and fan engagement

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Abstract:

Despite notable progress in women's sport over the past decade, historical advantages, unequal media representation, and social and cultural gender stereotypes continue to limit recognition of female athletes and undermine their growth in their professional leagues. Using the WNBA and NBA as central examples, this paper examines the ongoing disparities in fan attendance, media coverage, and public perception, exploring how these factors reinforce each other and contribute to the gender gap in professional sports. Men's leagues like the NBA have had more years to build a loyal fan base, traditions, and financial support. In contrast, the women's league faced significant challenges, like banning women from playing affiliated pitches. Women's sports also get far less media coverage and are often shown in a way that focuses on their looks rather than their true skills. Cultural and social gender stereotypes enhance the idea that men's sports are the standard, making it harder for female athletes to be taken seriously or valued compared to male athletes. Surmounting these challenges through fair and consistent media coverage, increased funding for women's leagues, and youth development programs is essential to building lasting growth in women's sport and receiving fair and genuine gender equality in professional athletics.

1. Introduction

Sports have been a major part of our society and culture, shaping national identity, sparking public conversation, and enhancing community pride. From the Olympic Games to professional leagues like the NBA or Premier League, the global sports industry has sparked and captured the attention of our society today. However, not all athletes receive the same attention from society, especially when comparing men's and women's professional sports leagues. While both men and women dedicate themselves to training hard daily, the amount of attendance, media coverage, and overall engagement they receive differs dramatically.

1.1 Background

Organized sports began to form at the beginning of the 19th and early 20th centuries, with men's leagues forming way earlier than women's leagues. For instance, the professional men's basketball league (NBA) began in 1946, while the WNBA did not launch until 1996. This early start gave the men's league decades to build a fan base, tradition, loyalty, engagement, and advantages that still shape the sports industry today. Historically, women's sports were highly discouraged by society, with no females officially competing in the 1896 Olympics. Until the 20th century, bringing change through women's sports movement in Europe and North America, initiatives like the Women's Olympiad (1921-1923) and Women's World Game (1922-1934), and milestones such as Title IX in the us (1972), which prohibited gender stereotypes and discrimination in female participation.

Historically, the male sports league has benefited from a stronger foundation for building fan engagement and financial stability than the women's league. The football association (FA)

recognized men's football in 1863, giving them an advantage for building traditions, attracting media coverage, and building loyal supporters before the FA Women's Super League launched in 2011. This long head start allowed the men's league to develop extensive commercial partnerships and well-organized supporter clubs that can enhance community identity and match day experiences. In contrast, the women's football league has faced many institutional barriers, including the FA's 1921 ban on women's playing on affiliated pitches, which mitigated public exposure and revenue opportunities. As a result, the men's league entered the modern era with fan engagement and fan loyalty. In contrast, the women's league has struggled to develop ways to enhance fan loyalty and fan engagement.

Today, this history contributes to the core problem: a significant and persistent fan attendance and engagement gap between women's and men's professional sports leagues. This disparity affects revenue and growth potential and strengthens the outdated social perception towards female athletes, where they are undervalued compared to male professional athletes.

Gender disparities in media coverage remain a persistent and global issue, with male athletes receiving far more coverage, higher quality media, and greater recognition compared to female athletes. Research shows that women's sports only make up 4% of ESPN coverage and about 11% in global newspapers, and even when covered, reporting on female athletes is often shorter, less detailed, and more focused on appearance, emotions, and personal life rather than their actual true athleticism (Yingang and Guoliang, 2023). Historical male dominance in traditional competitive professional sports, combined with cultural and social gender stereotypes, has limited visibility for women's competition. Pay inequality reinforces this disparity between women's and men's sports legacy—such as the US women's soccer team generating more revenue than the men's team between 2015 and 2019, yet receiving 38% of their salary, reducing chances of performance opportunities, and receiving less media attention. Looking beyond soccer, this imbalance also coordinated with the WNBA and NBA systems. In 2023, the average WNBA salary was approximately \$120,000, while the NBA players earned an average of \$9 million, meaning NBA athletes earn more in a single game than WNBA players earn in an entire season (Báčová, 2022). Even WNBA star players, whose salary is around \$235,000, take home less than a NBA rookie in their first year. This wage gap between men and women is simply not a reflection of league revenue but also a structural inequality in sponsorship deals, prize money, broadcasting contracts, and even attracting viewership. These salary gaps, media coverage, and opportunities keep women's sport from growing at the same rate as men's. Without change, the cycle will continue, leading to less attention from fans.

1.2 Purpose

While the rise in women's professional sports have been notable for the past 5 years, the consistent disparities in fan attendance and viewership in men and women's league, especially in the NBA vs WNBA league, can be factored by historical differences, unequal media representation, gender stereotype focused on females, and the sexualization of female athletes that continue to undermine female athleticism. This research paper explores the

reasons behind the disparity in fan attendance, media coverage, and public perception between men's and women's athletes in professional leagues, focusing on the WNBA and NBA as central case studies. Despite women's sports being notable in recent years, women athletes still face significant challenges in gaining equal recognition in sports compared to men.

As the disparity between men's and women's professional sports continues to persist, it is important to look at this deep problem from multiple lenses. In the following section, the paper will explore how unequal media representation limits exposure to female athletes and enhances outdated perceptions through narrative. It will then analyze how deeply cultural gender stereotypes impact both the perception and treatment of female athletes, leading to unequal pay and decreasing professional opportunities. Finally, towards the end, it will investigate the timeline of the origination of WNBA and NBA and analyze how it has provided the men's league with more multigenerational advantages that enhance fan loyalty and engagement today.

2. Media Coverage

One of the biggest factors contributing to the disparity between fan attendance and viewership between men's and women's leagues is media coverage. According to Yingang and Guoiliang (2023), only 4% of sports coverage on ESPN is dedicated to women's sports in general, and globally, just 11% of all sports news coverage focuses on women's sports. The lack of media coverage of women's sports reduces the opportunities for fans to connect to women's sports, which can reduce viewership.

However, going deeper into the problem, we see that women aren't just underrepresented; they are also trivialized by the media (Trolan, 2013). Instead of highlighting their athletic achievements and performance, the media focuses on superficial aspects like their looks or personal lives, which have little impact on what they do in the field. For instance, the media consistently presents women as "Women first, athletes second", which minimizes their actual capability of playing professionally and fosters gender stereotypes. Digging specifically into the problem, a study by (Hölttä, 2024) was further emphasized in the World Cup. For example, a Finnish newspaper *Italehti* published 278 articles on men's World Cup games, but only 70 on women's games. In comparison, men's games were covered 4 times as much as women's, even during major events like Germany's early disqualification from the World Cup.

Not only does the quantity vary between women's and men's, but the quality also differs, including contrasts in media platforms, credibility of sources, and content. Historical data shows that this issue has been going on for a long time. For instance, in the 1990s, only 9.7% of the *Sports Illustrated* coverage featured women, and those portrayals were often sexualized (Schmidt, 2016). Furthermore, ESPN's *SportsCenter* only dedicated 5 to 9% of its airtime to women's sports between 1989 and 2004, which later dropped more than 2% in 2009 (Cooky et al. 2013). This pattern transcends football. Zhang et al. (2011) found that despite the effort put into the WNBA to promote fan attendance, the league struggles with fan engagement, financial support, and media coverage. Today, these differences extend to digital platforms and broadcasting choices as well.

A study by Chen. et al. (2016) examining the official website and social media pages of Southern Conference (SC) schools found that the women's basketball team had more photos on Twitter and Facebook than the men's team. Despite men's teams having more followers, up to 77 times more in some cases, women's teams generate more content. This suggests that social media can enhance visibility and support for women's sports when used properly. However, even with more posts posted, it still showed that men's teams were slightly favored overall in official website articles (53% for men vs. 47% for women), and the coverage quality often still learned traditional gender stereotypes. This highlights the need for equal content volume and international efforts to show how women are portrayed—focusing on athletic performance and professionalism rather than their physical appearance or personality. This lack of comprehensive and quality reporting limits exposure for female athletes and reinforces outdated perceptions, ultimately hindering the growth and fan engagement of women's professional sports.

3. Cultural and Gender Stereotypes

Another major factor contributing to the gap between men's and women's sports is the way cultural gender stereotypes shape public perception of our female athletes. Although women athletes try their best to prove their athleticism, society still views men's sports as the standard. According to Dickson et al. (2015), female athletes are judged by their appearance rather than their athletic performance. In her experiment, where she interviewed male and female athletes, people tended to give negative feedback about the females' clothes or looks, while the male athletes were taken seriously. This bias in gender stereotypes can reflect a deeper meaning. (Mannion, 2016) reinforces this bias by explaining that female athletes are frequently sexualized in the media, which “delegitimizes their ability to perform” and drags the viewers away from their genuine athletic capability. This gender stereotype and media portrayal discourage viewers from appreciating women as serious athletes and enhance the idea of typical gender stereotypes that will continue in the future unless they are mitigated.

Moreover, Thibulat et al. (2010) demonstrated how a typical gender gap in athletic performance has remained since 1983 across Olympic sports, averaging around 10%. While the performance outcome mainly varies because of muscle mass and aerobic capacity, the media and public perception often wrongly interpret this as proof that women deserve less attention in sports. This portrayal directly impacts viewership by creating a perception that women's sports are less about athletic prowess and more about appearance, deterring serious sports fans.

These biases in terms of gender stereotypes extend into financial disparities as well. The average WNBA player earns about \$147,000 compared to the NBA players with about \$11.9 million, and even though the WNBA is rapidly growing, women athletes still receive only about 9% of league revenue under the current bargaining agreement (Meskers, 2025). Juliet Meskers notes that “a 91–9 revenue split? That’s not just a gap — it’s a structural failure.” This demonstrates that even with the rise of fan engagement and media coverage, players remain trapped in a system where they never got the chance to raise their voice.

The controversy of this inequality is further reflected by professional women's basketball players like Angel McCoughry, a former WNBA star and two-time Olympian, who spoke out

against the gender pay gap in sports. We have to stop paying people based on gender when people can do the job,” she not only advocated for equal pay, but she also highlighted how Black women in particular faced discrimination. “Black women deserve to be paid equally as well. Not just women, but Black women”. Her words meant something deeper. The fight for fairness in women’s sport is not just about how well women perform but also how they are shown in the media and treated by the system. She’s not just spitting out for equal payment, she is showing how these unfair systems affect real people and explaining why things need to be changed now. Consequently, these entrenched stereotypes not only affect how female athletes are perceived on the field but also translate into intangible inequalities in compensation and professional opportunities, creating a systemic barrier to their advancement. These pervasive biases limit media exposure, perpetuate unequal pay, and discourage serious viewership, hindering women’s professional sports’ overall growth and recognition.

4. League History and Legacy

League history significantly shapes its public perception and fan engagement today. Specifically in the NBA and WNBA, the men’s league started many years earlier than the women’s league, which helped build a larger fan base and make more money. As Leonard (2022) explains, the NBA was originally formed in 1949, nearly 50 years before the WNBA was established in 1996, giving it a multigenerational advantage in building fan engagement. This multigenerational advantage has allowed NBA teams to generate profound roots in communities, build strong fan bases, and pass down team loyalty through families, cultivating a strong cultural presence that enhances fan engagement. Meanwhile, women’s teams have faced repetition of financial instability and even franchise collapse due to low fan engagement and support rates. The WNBA’s limited growth, still operating with just 12 teams in 2021, compared to the NBA’s 30, highlights the structural legacy gap in historical gender exclusion.

Technology advancements and the relocation of game experiences have also affected engagement levels based on game location. According to (Glebova et al, 2022), fans no longer attend games in person. Instead, experiences have shifted to global stadiums, live streaming, and immersive technologies. This shift has changed how leagues generate fan loyalty, making social media image and digital interaction essential for athletes and teams to grow fan bases, especially for women athletes who may not receive the conventional attention compared to male athletes. Home and away games’ dynamics have been impacted. This historical head start has allowed men’s leagues to build a deeply ingrained cultural presence and multigenerational fan loyalty that women’s leagues strive to establish amidst ongoing structural and financial challenges. Therefore, addressing the historical and structural disadvantages women’s leagues face is crucial for fostering equitable growth and fan engagement in the future of professional sports.

5. Future Direction

While significant strides have been made in understanding the disparities in professional sports, much remains to be explored regarding sustainable strategies for fostering fan engagement and equitable growth in women’s leagues - both in the sports realm and in academic evaluations of these relationships.

While progress has been made in expanding opportunities and visibility in women's sports, a significant gap remains in fan attendance, fan engagement, and overall social perception towards women professional athletes. The historical disadvantages faced by female athletes continue to shape present-day disparities. Mitigating these challenges will need immediate interventions and long-term cultural change.

Future research should be conducted on how early exposure influences lifelong viewing habits. If children predominantly watch male athletes growing up, they are more likely to follow men's leagues as default. Targeted youth initiatives, such as inclusive and well-promoted sports programs, could foster balanced engagement across genders from a young age. Additionally, experimenting with mixed gender leagues may offer valuable insights into breaking stereotypes, providing women with greater platforms and opportunities to show their true athleticism.

Another priority is scrutinizing the long-term benefits of increasing investment and visibility in women's sport, particularly its impact on promoting gender equality in a broader cultural context. This means looking at how greater visibility of female athletes can break down traditional gender roles, inspire young girls to pursue their goals, and change how society views women's abilities in leadership and STEM. Addressing these areas can help break the cycle of inequality and set the stage for lasting growth and recognition inside women's professional leagues.

6. Conclusion

Examining the WNBA and NBA as primary case studies, this research has examined the ongoing gender gap in professional sports. The core problem remains that the women's league, despite the progression over the past years, continues to face unequal media coverage, historical disadvantages, and social and cultural gender stereotypes.

First, the analysis of unequal media coverage showed far less visibility than men's, with limited coverage and often trivialized reporting that focuses on their physical appearance rather than their athletic skills. This underrepresentation from women prevents fans from building a stronger community and strong connections with women athletes, limiting fan viewership and engagement. Second, the exploration of gender stereotypes revealed how women athletes are often sexualized, judged by appearance, and undermined compared to male athletes. These stereotypes not only undermined the respect towards women athletes but also increased structural inequalities, such as pay gaps or limited professional opportunities in the future. Lastly, the investigation of league history and legacy emphasized how professional male leagues had the opportunity to start developing multigenerational fan bases, deep cultural traditions, and financial security, while the female leagues have come across barriers and challenges to build those factors because of their late initiative in building women's leagues. These factors directly affect women's professional sports and careers by preventing potential, enhancing old stereotypes, and slowing growth. Fixing these issues is critical to make sports fairer, give women equal chances, and support progress toward gender stereotypes. With better



media coverage, fewer stereotypes, and more investment towards leagues, women's professional careers can grow stronger, gain more fans, and allow female athletes to be valued more or similar to male athletes.

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