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The Economic Analysis of Gender Pay Gap in Sports

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the causes of the gender pay gap in the sports industry. It looks at the many factors affecting the wages of female athletes by highlighting the role of sponsors, industries, labour markets and media. It also reflects the presentation of women in sports using sexual connotations, the limited opportunities and reduced investment they receive, which restricts their skill development and therefore the wages they earn. This research paper emphasises how earnings are not due to lack of performance or athletic abilities, but due to institutional inequalities present in sports industries consisting of women, thus they are not a true reflection of the performance of female athletes.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Sports Industry, Limited Sponsorships, Restricted Opportunities, Labour Market Economics.

INTRODUCTION

Sports are played around the world by both genders, but why is it often observed that female players are paid less than male ones? "Professional female athletes are constantly being asked to do more with less. They are asked to perform better and attract more viewers, often with less pay, less media coverage, and fewer sponsorships." (Gersch 149) The gap in pay showcases the societal ideas against women, and the motive of sports organisations, media or sponsors behind more revenue generation by male players, due to higher demand and more professional opportunities for sportsmen. "There are nearly fifty individual teams throughout the sports industry valued at a billion dollars or more. Each of these teams are all male dominated teams." (Ramdat 46). "In order to close the gender pay gap, the U.S. must alter its sports ecosystem to give professional female sports an equal part in broadcasting and sponsorships." (Gersch 149). These provide equal exposure of women to external resources and opportunities, also showcasing how much the media values women to advertise their products and represent them. Additionally, one example of women being paid a fraction of what men are being paid is the WNBA. "The average salary for a Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) player is \$120,648. A fantastic number, until one observes that the minimum salary for a National Basketball Association (NBA) player is \$898,310. While the WNBA does not make even a fraction of the NBA's revenue, the WNBA pays out only 23% of the league's revenue to players. The NBA pays approximately 50% of the league's total revenue to players." (Burns 1) and "The highest paid male basketball player is Stephen Curry who earns \$40 million per year compared to the highest paid female basketball player, Brittney Griner, who earns \$113,500 per year (Jope, 2019)." As for a historic example, a tennis match between Billie Jean King and renowned men's champion Bobby Riggs, took place in 1973. "The values associated with women's sports are often inscribed on the bodies of circumscribed female athletes and the discourses surrounding them. Billie Jean King provides a fascinating example of an individual athlete's agency with regard to social change. She teeters on the indistinct boundary between athlete activist and individual brand, someone who at moments of convenience has aligned herself with broader social movements and who, during moments of personal embattlement, has withdrawn her identification from second-wave feminism and the battle for LGBTQ equality." (King 26). King's victory marked the beginning of women's empowerment in sports and proved that women can compete equally at the highest levels of sports.

This research paper delves into the economic aspects as to the gender pay gap in sports, including the history of sports, representation and media, differences in revenue generated and the labour markets.

ESTABLISHING EQUALITY

"According to an investigation in the GDR, 56 per cent of the male population, but only 37 per cent of females, engaged in sport at the beginning of the 1980s. With increasing age, the proportion of girls and women participating in sport steadily decreased, but already amongst young people sex-stereotypical differences in sporting engagement were demonstrated." (Hardman and Naul 172). Women were not included in sports early on, signifying the lower opportunities for women to develop their skills and gain qualifications, decreased labour participation and inequalities, also presenting a further economic inequality. Additionally, one of the instances where women have competed with men and won, is the renowned tennis match known as 'The Battle of Sexes' between Billie Jean King, one of the top female players worldwide, and the former number 1 player and Wimbledon and US Open Champion, Bobby Riggs. This match took place on the 20th of September, 1973 in Texas. "The American woman's World number one professional Tennis player, in the Battle of the Sexes (Liston, 2005). Billie Jean beat Bobby Riggs in straight sets, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3, and earned the winner-take-all prize of \$100,000." (Vaz 1). This caused a shift in societal perceptions of women in athletic fields. Furthermore, it enabled women in tennis to earn equal pay, due to the realisation of an outstanding achievement. "In 1973 when women's professional tennis reached a landmark agreement to grant gender equal pay in major matches, more female tennis players who dreamed of pursuing a career in professional tennis saw this as a new opportunity."

(Winslow 6) and “Billie Jean King, a dominant female professional tennis player in the 1960-70s, sparked a movement for gender pay equality in tennis. In 1973, she threatened to boycott the U.S. Open which prompted the USTA to grant equal prize money (Bodo, 2018). “The winners in this event in 1973 earned \$25,000. Today, the male and female winners of the U.S. Open receive \$3.8 million.” (Winslow 30).



(Luther et al.)

Another instance was an exhibition boxing match between Jackie Tonawanda and Larry Rodania that took place in 1975 at Madison Square Garden. She also received a professional boxing license in New York. “Jackie Tonawanda, often called The Female Muhammad Ali, was probably the most famous of these pioneering women. In 1975, she defeated Larry Rodania with a second round knockout, earning praise from some reporters.” (Cox et al.) This challenges the assumption that women are biologically incapable of defeating men in sports and physical activity. Ultimately, 17 year-old Jackie Mitchell beat Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in a baseball match, initially organised as a public stunt, which took place on 2nd April, 1931 in Tennessee. “Jackie Mitchell found herself on the mound facing none other than the great Babe Ruth. Ruth took a ball then swung and missed the next two pitches. The next pitch was a called third strike and an enraged Ruth threw his bat and stormed off to the dugout. She went on to strike out Lou Gehrig who swung and missed at three in a row.” (Gersch) Overall, a few of many instances when women have established equality in front of men, such as The Battle of Sexes, the boxing match between Jackie Tonawanda and Larry Rodania, and the baseball match between Jackie Mitchell and Babe Ruth, proves their capabilities, further highlighting that women should be given equal opportunities, support and recognition. “These stories range from old legends like Jackie Mitchell striking out Babe Ruth, Billy Jean King beating Bobby Riggs in a tennis match, and Jackie Tonawanda knocking out Larry Rodania, to modern examples of women competing on NCAA Division I football teams and joining professional baseball teams. If women are already competing with men despite the limited opportunities to do so in segregated sports, it would be fair to hypothesize that more women would prove themselves able to compete in integrated sports.” (Turner 71). These situations and others alike also indicate economic effects of increased pay, still with remnant inequalities and gaps.

REPRESSIVE REPRESENTATION

Female athletes are often represented by sexual connotations, and their mental health often ignored, overall receiving far less coverage than men by the media. This may cause demotivation of sportswomen, causing them to train less effectively, burnout and other mental health related problems, lowering their productivity, and decreasing investment in sports industries representing females. Firstly, the famous tennis player Serena Williams, wore a catsuit to the 2018 French Open due to medical reasons, for which it was criticized to be disrespectful and inappropriate. “In the summer of 2018 Serena found herself at the brunt of two media controversies. First in June 2018 for wearing a controversial ‘catsuit’ at the French Open and secondly in September 2018 for getting into an altercation with an umpire at US Open Women’s final.” (Ewen 3). This sparked up many insights as to the gender inequality present in sports, and how emphasis is placed on how women look, instead of how they play.

Another such case was a beach-handball championship in Norway, where women refused to wear bikini bottoms, which was the standard attire of the sport. “In the media, we often see strong reactions to examples of discrimination based on gender, such as during the 2021 European Beach Handball Championship, when the Norwegian women’s beach handball team was fined by the European Handball Federation for refusing to play in bikini bottoms during their final matches.” (Hyde Clarke and Fonn 1). This caused them to be fined, portraying how rules based on uniform contribute to the sexualisation of women in sports. “For instance, until 2022, the regulated attire in women’s beach handball was a bikini, which led to an unwarranted focus on the athletes’ bodies both in the media and among the public.” (Hyde Clarke and Fonn 1) Additionally, men are often used to set the benchmark for how women perform in sports. “When the athletes excelled, it was found that the women were only compared to the likes of successful men of the game, rather than any other woman athlete (Weiller & Higgs, 1999).” (Kustok 28). This highlights how men are predominantly represented in the sports industry, contradicting the individual achievements of women, and valuing them only when it is compared to those of men.

Women are also represented less overall than men in sports journalism and related fields, showcasing the inequality further. This imbalance of representation of men and women done by the media showcases the lower market value of women, affecting their wages, sponsorships and other such aspects. “In total 75 headlines relating to athletes were found during the championship; 76 per cent (57) of these headlines referred to male athletes and 24 per cent (18) to female athletes.” (George et al. 96), portraying a clear disparity in coverage, and the lower amount of recognition and public attention they receive. Next, “In total 165 photographs were published during the championships in the newspapers selected; 73 per cent (121) of these were of men and 27 per cent (44) were of women.” (George et al. 96) This displays limited exposure and reduced opportunities for advertising oneself, restricting the ability of brands and firms to gain profitable deals and sponsorships, due to a sense of unpopularity and lower recognition between sportswomen. “A total of 18,314.45 standardised lines were written during the championships about male and female athletes in the newspapers selected. Male athletes received 13,172.48 lines of coverage (72 per cent) and female athletes received 5,141.97 lines of coverage (28 per cent).” (George et al. 96). This also reflects a lower coverage and marketability of women. All these instances represent further inequalities and economic gaps. Lastly, the gender gap presents how females in sports face constant emotional pressures, including stringent expectations to behave and present oneself a certain way in front of the public, objectification and mental health issues are often faced by all sports players.

“In the elite athlete population, the prevalence of mental illness ranges from 5-35% annually, which is comparable to that of the general adult population (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019; Gorczynski, Coyle, & Gibson, 2017). However, the deterioration of women's mental health is seen more in them than their male counterparts. “Rates of mental illness amongst elite female athletes are, however, higher than their male counterparts and the general population (Kuettel & Larsen, 2019).” (Perry et al. 3) and “For example, a study of US college athletes (n = 257) found that 19.2% of male and 25.6% of female athletes surveyed reported elevated symptoms of depression.” (Gulliver et al. 255). This reflects that even at stages such as college, women face mental health issues early on, which may result in reduced opportunities for sports later on. Social media can also contribute to these discrepancies, as they are widely used platforms, they can cause lower motivation, high stress levels, and thus lower productivity of athletes if used inaccurately. “Social media is primarily used by athletes for promoting themselves, their sponsors and supporting vital matters such as mental health, race and gender issues. Above all, social media provides a direct link to fans, promoting interaction, and thereby providing a sense of intimacy. On the other hand, press conferences provide a platform for journalists to directly quote athletes and their communication. Such a format invariably leads to interpretation and at times, adversarial framing, which in turn can have a negative impact on the athletes’ mental health (Faustin et al., 2022).” (Cox et al. 8). Additionally, an example of a sportswoman Naomi Osaka, getting fined due to refusing to interact with the media “Tennis champion Naomi Osaka was fined \$15,000 after she announced that she would not do media interviews during the French Open, saying she was prioritizing her mental health.” (Madani) proving how unfair and insensitive the media, and also sports industries can be to their female athletes. “Osaka announced on social media Wednesday that she would not take part in media sessions at Roland-Garros stadium because she “often felt that people have no regard for athletes’ mental health.” ” (Madani) and “Officials at the French tournament asked her to reconsider her position and tried unsuccessfully to speak with her to check on her well-being but were unable to engage with Osaka, according to the joint statement.” (Madani) displays how the mental health of Osaka was not considered, due to public reactions and receiving a financial penalty. Furthermore, this highlights the treatment of female athletes, where showing vulnerability or prioritising mental health is presented as a challenge to media and industries concerning sports.

RESTRICTED REVENUE

After a detailed literature review, noticeable differences in the distribution of revenue, ticket sales, and brand value were found between male and female athletes. Firstly, the prize money received by females and males maintained a huge gap, about as much as double, and albeit being mended, there are still more prize ranks for male athletes compared to female ones. “Before prize money was divided equally between the sexes, the men’s winner received twice as much prize money as the women’s winner for the reason that there were twice as many male athletes competing (Rimkus, 2018). For the same motivation, it still happens quite often – also in triathlon – that there are more prize ranks for men than for women.” (Martens and Starflinger 2). “Another example of a large pay gap between male and female professional athletes was the 2019 U.S. Women’s Open, which is operated by the United States Golf Association (USGA) and had a prize fund of \$5.5 million. Meanwhile, the prize fund for the Men’s U.S. Open was \$12.5 million.” (Gersch 156). Commentators often attribute this higher prize money due to male athletes attracting higher sales and a larger number of brands, allowing higher prize money and salaries. Furthermore, this reflects higher demand for watching male sports and consumer preferences towards them, thus allowing sponsors to earn more revenue and allocating more prize money. However, this roundabout justification proves that women gain less viewership opportunities, relating to how they are advertised is directly proportional to the revenue they generate, due to lower coverage by media and brand deals, resulting in lower visibility and opportunities. Men are significantly paid higher than women in context of wages and salary. An example of the NBA and WNBA can be taken, “average salaries in the NBA (\$8,264,922) and considerably higher than average salaries in the WNBA (\$73,738).” (Baker 1). This reflects how participants in the WNBA gain a lower average salary because of possible reasons like how they may not enable brands and sponsors to earn higher profits due to players being in a market where lower demand, lower media coverage and limited sponsorships is observable. Adding on, “In 2018, Forbes reported that no female athletes appeared on the list of the 100 highest-earning athletes. In 2019, the top ten highest-paid female athletes earned a combined \$105 million, while the top three highest-paid male athletes alone earned a combined amount greater than \$105 million.” (Gersch 155) A form of analysis used for generalising the gap in ticket prices between female and male athletes was hierarchical regression analysis, “Hierarchical regression analysis was used to predict the price of tickets from the gender of the team, after controlling for contextual variables that could potentially affect ticket prices (see Becker & Suls, 1983; Pan, Gabert, McGaugh, & Branvold, 1997).” (Hebl et al. 229). This analysis proved the gap to be significant, showcasing an inequality and possible popularity towards male matches compared to female ones.

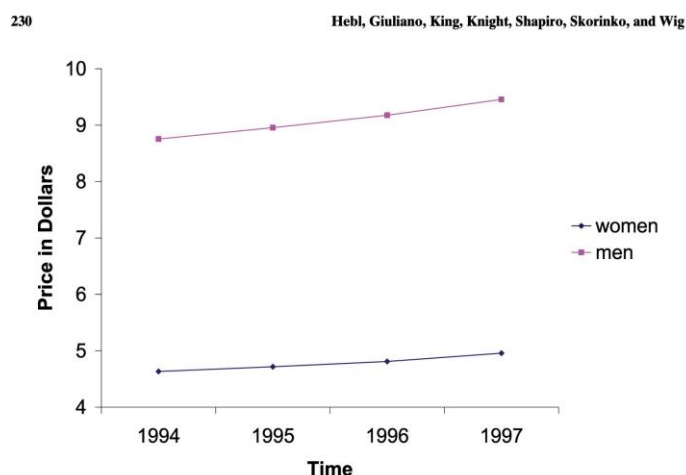


Fig. 1. Team gender differences in the price of college basketball tickets over time.

(Hebl et al. 230)

LARGELY UNREGULATED LABOUR MARKETS

“Empirical studies inevitably find that better performing professional athletes earn more money.” (Rosen and Sanderson 9). This statement is not factually correct as there are various other factors and perspectives that come into play, such as the amount of sponsorships, investment, bargaining power, media coverage and representation, and number of opportunities. This claim attributes wages mainly to performance, however labour markets in professional sports, especially for females, are unevenly structured.

Firstly, there is a lack of human capital investment in labour markets consisting of females. “Limited access to training facilities, coaching, and competitions specifically tailored for women hindered their progress” (Tanni and Khan 43) representing this lower investment in human capital, which helps women train and perform better, gain more skills and present more opportunities to them. These disparities further reflect inequality and possible gender bias in the allocation of resources and investment done by clubs or other entities towards female athletes. In a labour market, a monopsony is defined as a single dominant employer being present for a specific type of labour. “In many countries, the women’s football market is less developed, with only a few clubs having the resources to offer professional contracts. This imbalance provides clubs with significant leverage in determining wages, as they become the “single buyers” of female football labor in their leagues.” (Mehta 9) As a result of this, clubs face limited competition for female athletes, which allows them to pay wages both lower than those in a competitive market, and the value they add on to the club. This under-represents sportswomen because even with high quality performance and productivity, proving that earnings do not directly reflect their contribution in the sport. Additionally, a monopsony decreases the players’ bargaining power, due to the presence of fewer alternative opportunities, coming from restricted competition. This gives monopsonies power to manipulate the wages given to female athletes, and undermines their contribution to performance and revenue.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this research, on the basis of literature and statistical reviews, and using supporting historical evidence, media analysis and revenue patterns, the gender pay gap in sports does not exist due to low performance or productivity, but social and economic inequalities within the sports industry, such as bias, unequal regulations and expectations, monopsonistic labour markets, ticket pricing gaps, under-representation in media and limited sponsorships and opportunities.

Women’s participation in sport has been significantly lower than that of men, restricting early skill development, qualifications and access to professional opportunities. As their age increased, the proportion of girls and women who played sports decreased, although with young girls, sex-stereotypical gaps in playing sports were visible. Historically, there were instances where women competed with men and won, proving their ability to perform well, and hence should be treated at par with men. This changed societal viewpoints about female athletes, and allowed female tennis players to earn similar pay as their male counterparts.

Females in sports industries are often presented with sexual connotations and a disregard towards their mental health is shown, which causes them to receive lower coverage by the media than men. This lack of equal representation can lead to sportswomen being demotivated, lowering their productivity and therefore causing a lower investment in female dominated sports industries. Situations sexualising and criticising women initiated perspectives about the gender inequality involved in sports, and how attention is directed towards how they look, rather than how they play. Additionally, men are represented in the sports industry at a wider scale, undermining the achievements of women in the same industry. Women also receive lower representation in general in fields such as sports journalism, reflecting the extensive impact of inequalities present. This also has an effect on their market value, sponsorships, wages and other areas. Continuous emotional pressures are also faced by female athletes, such as expectations to present oneself and behave a specific way in front of the public, and other mental health related issues, for which they are often criticised.

There are evident gender gaps in the revenue generated by athletes, men generating almost double the revenue of women, as male athletes attract larger sales, including those of tickets to games, more brands, enabling them to be paid higher. It reveals higher demand and consumer preferences towards viewing male sports, letting sponsors earn more and allocate more money to their prizes.

However, this roundabout justification proves that women gain less viewership opportunities, relating to how they are advertised is directly proportional to the revenue they generate, due to lower coverage by media and brand deals, resulting in lower visibility and opportunities.

Overall, the claim that better performance leads to higher earnings does not rely on the many factors affecting earnings. Wages of athletes are also decided upon due to sponsorships, opportunities, representation, media coverage and other such causes. In sports industries dominated by females, lower investment in human capital, which has the potential to help athletes strengthen, gain new skills and abilities and grow, thus restricting their ability to earn higher wages. Additionally, the presence of monopsonies reduces competition for sportswomen and limits wages even when they perform well. Therefore, the earnings of female athletes do not reflect their performance.

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