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Same Work but Different Pay: Gender Inequality in the Professional Sports Industry

Alyssa Burt

This essay provides an in-depth analysis of the media representation and pay that women receive in the professional sports industry. While women face several challenges in the workforce, this paper specifically focuses on pay inequality. Different from previous literature, this piece will be concentrating on how pay inequality is perceived by female college athletes. I conducted two interviews with college softball players, and based on my analysis, I argue that college athletes believe the lack of media representation for female athletes is perceived to have an impact on their received pay. Despite women's successes, they typically get overlooked due to the heavy focus sports media puts on male athletics. This lack of representation hinders the attention they receive from the public, which then affects their incomes.

How do female college students view the pay gap in the professional sports industry? When looking at professional sports, one can see the lack of attention women's sports receive. The first women's professional sports league was formed in 1978, and although significant progress has been made, women's sports are still not treated equal to men's sports. Women are not given the same recognition as men in athletics, even if their abilities and accomplishments are just as impressive (Harrison et al. 2010; Carter-Francique & Richardson 2016). In turn, female athletes suffer from salary discrimination (Kahn 1991; Flake et al. 2012). The professional sports industry therefore makes it more difficult for women to be considered equal to their male counter-parts.

I will be approaching these injustices from a new angle. Within this piece, I will address how the pay gap in this industry is perceived by female college students. First, I will discuss previous research on the media surrounding professional female sports and salary discrimination. Then, I analyze interviews with two college softball players. My findings indicate that female college

athletes perceive the pay gap as unjust and find the lack of media representation to have a strong relationship with this injustice.

MEDIA AND WOMEN'S SPORTS

Historically speaking, sports were deemed "unladylike" for girls and women within the United States culture. This caused female athletes to be extremely under-represented in the media, and has led girls to be more likely to shy away from sports early on because of the negative connotation that came along with being a female athlete (Harrison et al. 2010). More recently, however, many improvements have been made when it comes to women's athletics, including Title IX. This policy aimed to provide girls and women equal athletic opportunity, all while prohibiting discrimination based on gender (Harrison et al. 2010; Carter-Francique & Richardson 2016).

Following Title IX, however, there was still a lack of female representation in the athletic industry. The sports industry is run by white men, and although the employees of this industry continue to get

more diverse, those in charge control how and when marginalized groups get promoted (Carter-Francique & Richardson 2016). For example, a major source of sports media coverage is Sports Illustrated magazine, yet women are featured on only 4.9% of 716 Sports Illustrated covers from 2000-2011 (Weber & Carini 2012). Additionally, Sports Illustrated rarely displays women as the sole individual on their published covers. Instead, female athletes are featured with men. They share the ‘spotlight,’ are depicted in minimizing ways, are part of a collage background. Women are depicted in ways which promote socially acceptable “feminine” sports, or in sexually objectified ways (Weber & Carini 2012). These portrayals minimize women’s sports and take away from the true talent that these athletes hold. This lack of and misrepresentation promotes the message that female athletes are “less than” their male counterparts.

The way in which athletes are represented in the media has a huge impact on the public’s judgement (Harrison et al. 2010). Media representations, such as Sports Illustrated covers, constantly connect aspects of femininity to women’s sports, thus extending the perceived gap between men and women’s talents, and making it seem as if women are not capable of the same athletic achievement as men. Furthermore, sports media has made female athletics seem less intriguing to the public, affecting fan turnouts, revenue, and the credit women receive for their accomplishments. Despite increasing successes and accomplishments in women’s sports, those in control of sports media continue to diminish women through poor imagery, pitiful narratives, and lack of representation (Carter Francique & Richardson 2016).

SALARY DISCRIMINATION

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Economists have been drawn to studying pay inequality in the professional sports industry because of the opportunity it provides to examine discrimination, while also being able to view the athletes’ productivity (Kahn 1991). In tennis, both genders share the same employer in many tournaments, making gender discrimination in pay easier to examine for economists. Tennis is arguably one of the more popular women’s sports, but despite their successes, women’s tournament earnings are lower than their male counterparts (Kahn 1991; Flake et al. 2012). Despite the popularity and economic success of women’s tennis, a pay gap issue still prevails. That said, imagine the implications this has for other women’s sports that have yet to be examined (Flake et al. 2012).

METHODS

I interviewed two participants regarding their perspectives on the pay gap between men and women in the professional sports industry. I asked them questions regarding their perspective to the pay gap and how they perceive mass media’s impact on the issue. I then read the interview transcript, looking for recurring themes or “codes,” and the codes that stood out were media representation, unjust treatment, and pay. For this paper, I assigned the interviewees pseudonyms, “Sarah” and “Kelly.”

DISCUSSION

Media representation

Despite both interviewees acknowledging that female athletes have made leaps in the sports industry compared to where they started, they both find that work still needs to be done to achieve equality. Both interviewees noted that they find themselves watching women’s sports only when it comes to the major tournaments or events. Typically, when one finds

themselves scrolling through their cable channels, women's sporting events are not easy to find as men's sporting events are, as Sarah mentioned. My interviewees blamed their miniscule amount of watching women's competition on the lack of promotion female athletes receive in the media. Sarah stated,

"I find that when female athletes are seen in the media, they typically aren't the main focus, and the female athletes who get the privilege to be showcased are the ones seen as the most successful and marketable."

Even though the more memorable female athletes receive a bit of attention, it is nothing near the amount men receive. Kelly added,

"I feel like I see them more than I realize, but because they are downplayed in the media so much, I don't find myself remembering their events."

These two comments demonstrate that lack of media coverage makes female athletes less memorable to viewers.

Unjust treatment and pay

Both interviewees felt that female athletes' successes should be reflected in their pay, yet women do not receive the same opportunities as men to have their accomplishments publicized. Sarah stated,

"[t]hey try to justify the lower pay of women by arguing that they don't bring in enough revenue, but they can't bring in any revenue if they are not televised."

Kelly added that she

"... thinks it's really unfair that men are typically in the spotlight even if a woman's accomplishments are just as impressive or better."

Overall, both interviewees agreed that female and male athletes need to be given the same publicity before pay based on revenue could be considered fair.

CONCLUSION

Female college athletes believe that media representation plays a major role in the pay professional female athletes receive. However, the lack of promotion and spotlight women experience in *Sports Illustrated* (Weber & Carini 2012) is just one of many areas of media that lack female representation. When it comes to watching sports on television, one must go out of their way to find the channels airing women's sporting events, whereas men's sporting events can be found on the mainstream sports channels. This difficulty in finding women's sports is problematic because high ratings and increased viewership bring in revenue, which increases the pay received by a team or athlete. Because women's athletic events are harder to find on cable, they typically have fewer viewers, which contributes to lower pay for female athletes. Thus, female collegiate athletes see this lack of media coverage as discriminatory. Gender inequality is clearly widespread in this industry, and to achieve equality female college athletes find that equal opportunity must be present.

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