Sports: Gender Pay Gap

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Women as a group are paid less than men. This is true in multiple areas, including sports. While there is a gender pay gap in multiple sports, it is most prominent in soccer. The example that I was given for the issue of the gender pay gap in sports is the United States Soccer equal pay fight. For a very brief history of this saga, the players of the United States Women’s National Team (USWNT) filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in March 2016, which escalated to a lawsuit in 2019. The 4-time World Cup champions, including 2015 and 2019, finally settled their lawsuit with the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) in February 2022. On September 6, 2022, the United States men’s and women’s national teams signed a new collective bargaining agreement with the USSF, which essentially splits the prize money and commercial revenue from both teams equally among every player from both teams (*U.S. Women’s, Men’s Soccer Make CBAs Official*, 2022). The worldwide fight for better treatment in women’s soccer is nowhere near over. For example, just last week, the Jamaican women’s national team’s players boycotted CONCACAF Gold Cup qualifying matches due to not receiving their share of the prize money from reaching the knockout phase of the World Cup this summer. They have now received their payment, but it was still extremely late (*Jamaica WNT Paid after Boycott, Federation Says*, 2023). Defending Olympic champions Canada nearly boycotted that World Cup over a treatment and pay dispute with their federation (Erin Smith, 2023).

This issue is not just in soccer. In 2023, tennis celebrated “50 years of equal pay,” a celebration of the US Open giving equal prize money to men and women starting in 1973 (*2023 US Open to Celebrate 50 Years of Equal Prize Money*, 2023). All four of the Grand Slams now have that policy, but there are significant conditions and pay issues just one step down, with a good example culminating in Cakegate at this year’s Mutua Madrid Open (Dunn, 2023).

At that level, every athlete, male, female, or otherwise, has poured countless hours of blood, sweat, and tears and sacrificed any sense of a “regular” life to get to where they are. Many argue that there should not be an impossible level of glory and financial success for half of the greatest players in their sports. But there is another set of arguments against it.

One argument is that in almost every sport, the men at the very top levels of the sport are significantly better than the women at the same level. At the surface level, the facts behind this argument are true. Billie Jean King may have beaten Bobby Riggs, but, at least today, the top men are bigger, faster, and stronger than the top women. Serena Williams, arguably the greatest female tennis player of all time, agrees. When asked about a challenge from all-time great Andy Murray, who, while not yet retired, has a metal hip, she said, “…if I were to play Andy Murray, I would lose 6-0, 6-0 in like five to six minutes, maybe 10 minutes” (Chandel, 2023). Tennis has a universal ranking system called UTR, which assigns everyone a score based on who they have played and how they performed. The #1 ranked woman in UTR, Iga Swiatek, has a rating of 13.13. This would rank fifth among men in the U16 category (*UTR Tennis Ratings/Rankings & Player Search*, n.d.). There are many potential responses to this argument. My favorite is that people love college sports, yet the greatest college football teams of all time might be good enough to be 40-point underdogs in a hypothetical matchup against the worst NFL team in an average year. This argument also returns to the point that, for some, there should not be an unachievable level of glory and financial success for people playing the same sport at the same level.

Another argument is an economic one. Some claim that people do not watch women’s sports at the same level as men’s sports. This is also true much of the time. A good example of this argument appears in tennis. The 2019 Wimbledon women’s final had a viewership rating of 1.7, while the men’s final had a rating of 2.7 (Wong, 2021). There are many confounding factors to this fact. The first is coverage. In 2019, a Women’s World Cup year where the eyes of the world were on women’s soccer for a month, women’s sports received 5.4 percent of sports airtime (Bubel, 2023). With the lack of access, proper coverage, and the ability to establish real storylines, these women’s sporting events have no chance of getting eyes on them. The coverage itself is also often considered to be of a lower quality (Bubel, 2023). Next is that the 2019 Wimbledon men’s final was one of the greatest matches in tennis history, featuring arguably the two greatest tennis players of all time in Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer playing the first final set tiebreaker in a final in Wimbledon history. Yes, Serena Williams played on the women’s side, but Simona Halep was dominant on the day. A third argument is opportunity. In tennis, the Grand Slam finals are played on different days. The women play on Saturday, while the men play in the prime slot on the Sunday (Burack, 2023). This pattern holds in a lot of places across the sporting environment, leaving women’s sports organizations without the opportunity to establish the brand loyalty and consistent viewership of their male counterparts. With that opportunity, events like Nebraska volleyball breaking the women’s sports attendance record happen (Voepel, 2023).

Barriers to communication involving the sports gender pay gap involve two major topics: the intersection of politics and sports and the gender pay gap itself. On the issue of politics in sports, there are two major debates: whether politics and sports intersect and, if they do, whether they should intersect. Starting with the issue of whether politics and sports intersect, the two entities exist together. The effect started well over 55 years ago, but as far back as 1968, sports have shown themselves to be very political. In October of 1968, the summer Olympic track meet took place in Mexico City, Mexico. American Thomas Smith took gold over 200 meters, with a World Record time of 19.80. Australia’s Peter Norman took silver, and another American, John Carlos, took bronze to round out the podium (IOC, 2022). The most noticeable of the two Americans’ actions on the medal stand during the playing of the Star-Spangled Banner was that the two of them were wearing black gloves and standing with raised fists as a protest against treatment of African-Americans in North American society (Nittle, 2021). It continues to this day, when the National Football League (NFL) dedicates every November as Salute to Service Month (*NFL Continues to Strengthen Commitment to Military Community through Salute to Service | NFL Football Operations*, 2023). The second issue is whether sports and politics should intersect. The Olympics, the very event at which Smith and Carlos did their now-iconic protest, have a rule in place against political displays. For example, an image was banned from the helmet of the goalkeeper of the combined North and South Korean hockey team at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. In that same 2018 Olympic ice hockey event, the United States team had helmets depicting the Statue of Liberty, which could similarly be seen as a political symbol (“Ice Hockey: South Korean Goalie Upset about Image Ban,” 2018). The second topic is the gender pay gap. There are significant misunderstandings and miscommunications regarding the gender pay gap in the workplace. Firstly, the pay gap does exist, and over the entirety of the job market, that gap exists in every tax bracket. However, many people hold the belief that men and women are paid equally (Hess, 2019). For some, that belief is based in prejudice, while others hold this misconception based on a simple misunderstanding. The nature of the debates about the intersection of sports and politics creates anxiety. This anxiety forces people to focus on that and themselves rather than the communication that they are trying to uphold, creating a barrier to communication (Jandt, 2020). The pay gap itself creates anxiety among women, both with and without children. It enforces a power imbalance between genders, on top of creating anxiety predicated on not having the money that pay on the same scale as the men would get them (Hess, 2019). Some people’s beliefs about the gender pay gap are based in prejudice. Both anxiety and prejudice are barriers to communication in the workplace (Jandt, 2020).

Theoretically, the easiest way to solve those barriers to intercultural communication would be to eliminate the pay gap, paying male and female athletes equally. However, this is not a real solution for multiple reasons. First, there is significant difficulty in agreeing on what “equal pay” looks like in practice. For example, after the United States Men’s and Women’s National Soccer Teams signed their most recent Collective Bargaining Agreement, many, including the players, celebrate it as equal pay (*U.S. Soccer Federation, Women’s and Men’s National Team Unions Agree to Historic Collective Bargaining Agreements*, 2022). There are, however, some places where it does not guarantee equal pay, including the coaching staff (Seager, 2023). As long as the overall pay gap exists, there will be issues in sports somewhere down the line. The second reason is that it does not solve the issues underscoring the barriers to intercultural communication created by the gender pay gap in sports. Issues around the intersection of politics and sports would simply pop up somewhere else, and issues surrounding the overall gender pay gap would by no means go away if the issue were rectified only in sports. Therefore, any solution here must come on the side of communication, rather than the issue itself.

            One barrier to communication created by the sports gender pay gap is related to the gender pay gap itself. The pay gap creates anxiety among women and enforces the imbalance of power that exists between genders. It also creates anxiety by increasing financial pressure on women, who are unable to use the money that they are not paid. A major barrier to intercultural communication created by the pay gap stems from the lack of a universal understanding that the pay gap exists at all (Hess, 2019). A solution to this issue is for people to be more open with each other in revealing their compensation levels to each other. According to Forbes, being more open about pay makes it painfully obvious to everyone within a company that there is a problem, which both eliminates misunderstandings regarding the existence of the gender pay gap and helps to close the pay gap (Elsesser, n.d.).

            The second source of barriers to intercultural communication created by the sports gender pay gap is the mingling of politics and sports. The nature of debates regarding the existence and necessity of the intersection of politics and sports creates anxiety. some people want politics and sports to be separate. They want to turn on the television and watch incredible feats of athleticism while their team hopefully wins as often as possible (Malik, 2021). However, sports and politics are intertwined, they have been that way for a very long time, and they will be that way into the future. So, the issue is how to alleviate anxiety over communication about it. For most political statements in sports, they do not come out of the blue. Athletes either announce that something will happen, or they speak about it when directly asked in a press conference. Therefore, the source of anxiety is not the political statements themselves, but the politics behind them. That is significantly more difficult to manage, but it likely must be done on a case-by-case basis. It will involve monitoring of the political statements that have been leaking into sports and having a plan ready to manage any communication issues that arise regarding those statements in the workplace. This could either encourage avoidance of those discussions or be woven into a more general emphasis on diversity and communication through political differences in the workplace.

            People cannot agree on the exact nature of the dilemma when it comes to the sports pay gap. Therefore, taking action to reduce the gap is important and necessary, but as with many dilemmas involving sports, this is larger than sports and therefore cannot be solved by any actor related directly to a sporting organization. Therefore, general communication issues must be managed through encouraging openness between coworkers about pay and having a plan for when political discourse emerges regarding topics that are brought up in a sporting environment.

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