



THE UNEVENNESS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN WOMEN'S SPORTS IN THE UNITED STATES: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Cheryl Cooky, PhD
Professor of Sports Studies, Purdue University, United States

INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUALIZING SPORTS

A common misperception, particularly among sports fans, is that sports are simply a form of entertainment, an escape from reality, or a neutral social institution based primarily, if not solely on meritocratic ideals (i.e., awards/ rewards are based on merit, hard work equals success, success comes from hard work). Yet, sports historically have provided an important social function in the re-affirmation and challenging of gendered beliefs, norms, and expectations in society.³ Sports studies scholars have conceptualized sports as a 'contested ideological terrain' wherein gendered cultural meanings are constructed and resisted.⁶

Participation Opportunities

The participation of girls and women in sports has dramatically increased since the passage of Title IX.^{10,11} Yet despite this trend, girls and women continue to face barriers to their participation.^{3,10,11} These barriers also vary by race/ ethnicity, sexuality/ sexual orientation, gender identity/ expression, social class, citizenship/ immigration status, dis/ability and other social identities.¹¹

- What is Title IX?^{7,8}
- Participation statistics for high school and college sports^{7,8}
- Barriers to participation^{3,10,11}
 - Structural barriers (e.g. inequalities in resources, equipment, economic support for women's sports)
 - Cultural barriers (e.g. sports' linkage to masculinity; gendered beliefs, expectations, and stereotypes)
 - Political barriers (e.g. anti-trans participation laws, restrictions on reproductive freedom/ access to reproductive health care)
 - Policy barriers (e.g. eligibility criteria in women's competitive events)

Media Coverage of Women's Sports

The past four decades of sports media studies scholarship has found a lack of coverage of women's sports, particularly in legacy sports media.^{1,2,4} A misperception is sport media content reflects viewer/ fan interest and/ or demand. The role sport media plays in building and sustaining audiences is often overlooked.²

- The increase in participation in women's sports, and interest in women's sports among sports fans has not been fully reflected in the content / coverage of women's sports, particularly in legacy sports media.^{1,2,3}
- Historically, women's athletes and women's sports have been trivialized, marginalized, or objectified in sports media coverage.^{1,2,3}
- Representations of women athletes and women's sports frequently draw upon gender stereotypical roles and/ or images, although recently there has been a shift towards representations that emphasize women athletes' strength, competence either instead of or alongside of stereotypical representations.^{2,4}
- Social media may provide athletes with more agency/ autonomy over their image, and allow athletes more control over content,^{5,6} yet engagement metrics may inadvertently produce similar imagery of women's athleticism as in the past.

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Why Sports Matter

- Benefits of sports participation¹¹
- The role of sport in gender equality⁸
- Link between sports and leadership skills⁷

CONCLUSION: WOMEN'S SPORTS IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS

There are a few emergent dynamics that may shift the landscape of women's sports⁶ in the next 10 years.

- Increase in women athletes advocating for and investing in women's sports (equal pay advocacy, social media platforms, business of women's sports)
- Recognition among sports industry leaders in the 'value' of women's sports^{5,6}
- Emerging media platforms devoted to covering women's sports⁵
- Increase in corporations addressing gender inequality in sports (advertising campaigns, promotional events)

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