



# THE UNEVENNESS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN WOMEN'S SPORTS IN THE UNITED STATES: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

**Cheryl Cooky, PhD**

School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Purdue University, USA

## KEY POINTS

- Title IX, U.S. legislation passed in 1972 that bars discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs and activities, has had a positive impact on girls' and women's sports leading to significant increases in opportunities to participate.
- Despite the increased participation rates of girls and women in sports at the youth, high school, and collegiate levels, gender equity has yet to be fully achieved.
- Disparities exist in terms of resources, funding and promotion of girls' and women's sports, and cultural beliefs regarding gendered expectations continue to shape our understandings of athleticism in ways that can constrain girls' and women's participation in sports, and opportunities to participate have not been evenly distributed across all demographic groups.
- Girls from marginalized communities (e.g., race/ethnicity and socio-economic status) have few opportunities and girls who are differently abled, immigrant girls, LGBTQ+ athletes, and trans athletes have not fully benefitted from Title IX.
- Media plays an important role in women's sports, in terms of promoting and building audiences for women's sports events, yet research on legacy sports media consistently finds content and coverage centers primarily on men's sports, while ignoring or minimizing women's events and women athletes.
- Girls and women, and society writ large, benefit when girls and women participate in sports. Given the myriad benefits, which include improved health, social, psychological, academic, and career outcomes, investing in girls' and women's sports is critical for the next 50 years.

## OVERVIEW

Since the passage of Title IX,<sup>1</sup> there has been a dramatic gender transformation in sports in the United States. This transformation is most visible in the increased participation opportunities for girls and women, particularly in youth and school-based sports. Yet, this transformation has also been accompanied by barriers that run counter to the achievement of gender equality. This Sports Science Exchange (SSE) article discusses the dramatic yet uneven change in women's sports in the United States and concludes with a discussion of why sports matter and the possible shifts in the landscape of women's sports.

## INTRODUCTION

The historical trajectory of girls' and women's sports participation in the United States has been characterized by simultaneous progress toward gender equality alongside continued discrimination, barriers to participation (both structural or cultural), and persisting forms of inequality (for an overview see: Cooky & Messner, 2018). Scholars and women's sports advocates credit Title IX, along with other equity laws, for the dramatic increase in participatory sporting opportunities for girls and women in the United States. Subsequently, the influx of girls and women in sports corresponded with important cultural shifts regarding gendered meanings and expectations. Yet, gender equality

in sports continues to be struggled over. Thus, there is an unevenness of social change; progress in women's sports has not (and does not) occur in a linear manner. Progress in some areas (e.g., participation) has not corresponded to progress in others (e.g., access, resources, compensation, promotion, media coverage). Inequalities that girls and women faced 50 or 100 years ago persist today. Importantly, not all girls and women, or those individuals who do not conform to the gender binary of sports (or of Title IX) have benefitted from Title IX. Understanding the dynamics of the unevenness of social change in women's sports is crucial to both scholarly inquiry but also advocacy efforts driven by empirical evidence and the translation of knowledge for practical applications. The objective of this SSE article is to offer insights into the historical and contemporary context of girls' and women's sports with the end goal to help girls and women gain the support and resources they need to be successful athletes. Moreover, there are important benefits to girls and women and to the wider society when they participate in sports. Thus, understanding the landscape of women's sports should be a goal for athletic trainers, sports dietitians, sports nutritionists, sport scientists, sports science students, medical doctors, clinicians, educators, coaches, and other professionals who are involved in sports health education, counseling, and treatment.

<sup>1</sup>In June 1972, President Nixon signed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 into law. Title IX is a comprehensive federal law that has removed many barriers that once prevented people, on the basis of sex, from participating in educational opportunities and careers of their choice. It states that: No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance (Title IX Legal Manual, Department of Justice).

## RESEARCH REVIEW

### Title IX: Participation and Opportunity

The year 2022 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Title IX, a significant moment in the history of women's sports in the United States. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 states: *No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation, in be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.* Title IX fundamentally changed the landscape of education in the United States by prohibiting sex-based discrimination which opened opportunities for women to enter historically male-dominated professions such as medicine and law. Although not explicitly stated in the legislation, Title IX also opened opportunities for girls and women in athletics. Prior to 1972, boys and men received the overwhelming majority of sports opportunities. For example, according to data from the National Federation of State High School Associations (2019), in 1971-72, over 3.6 million boys participated in high school varsity sports, compared to only 294,015 girls. By 2018-19, the number of girls participating had risen to 3.4 million. Boys' participation rates similarly increased during the same time frame, with over 4.5 million boys participating in 2018-19. This trend has been identified as the "gender gap" in high school varsity sports participation (Sabo & Veliz, 2008) and is an important point to counter myths that Title IX has taken sports opportunities away from boys. Similar trends are observed in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) varsity sports participation. According to the Women's Sports Foundation (Staurowsky, et. al., 2022), in 1971-72 there were 29,977 women competing on teams sponsored by NCAA institutions compared to 215,486 in 2020-21. The percentage of women athletes competing on college teams has risen from 15% in 1972 to 44% during the 2020-21 academic year.

Despite the increased participation numbers of girls and women participating in sports since Title IX's passage, a gender gap exists in participation opportunities. According to the U.S. Department of Education, as cited in a Women's Sports Foundation 2020 report (see: Staurowsky et. al., 2020), only 8.6% of NCAA Division I institutions offered athletic opportunities relative to their enrollment. Moreover, 8.7% of all three NCAA divisions offered disproportionately higher rates of athletic opportunities to male athletes relative to their enrollment. These numbers indicate most NCAA institutions are not in compliance with Title IX, specifically regarding the "proportionality test." To determine whether an institution's athletic program is in compliance with Title IX, an institution must demonstrate that the athletic opportunities offered satisfy one of the following parts of the three-part test; Part 1: substantial proportionality, Part 2: history and continued practice of expanding opportunities, and Part 3: accommodation of interests and abilities. While a detailed explanation of the three-part test is beyond the scope of this article and has been discussed elsewhere (Staurowsky et al., 2020; 2022), most institutions base compliance on the proportionality test, and if they are unable to do so, will rely on the other two parts of the test. The proportionality part of the compliance test can be met by an institution demonstrating that the distribution of its athletic opportunities is proportional to the overall student

enrollment. For example, an institution whose overall student body is 60% male and 40% female would be in compliance if 60% of the athletic opportunities went to men's athletics and 40% went to women's athletics (within several percentage points). Contrary to popular myths, Title IX does not dictate that boys/girls, men/women receive equal (i.e., 50%-50%) athletic opportunities. The U.S. Department of Education data mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph indicates most NCAA institutions would not meet the proportionality test of Title IX. One challenge in ensuring compliance is that there is little to no enforcement of Title IX, and individual students must file a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights which can be a lengthy and arduous process.

### Barriers to Girls' and Women's Sports

Despite the increases in athletic opportunities in high school, college, and professional sports, in part due to Title IX's passage, there are significant barriers to girls' and women's participation. Barriers to girls' and women's sports include structural, cultural, political, and policy barriers. Moreover, as indicated earlier, not all girls and women have benefitted equally from the legislation. Title IX only addresses discrimination based on sex, the law does not take into account the ways in which sex discrimination intersects with other forms of discrimination (e.g. race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, gender identity, disability, and immigration status, among others) (Brake, 2010; Staurowsky et al., 2022). Thus, it is often girls and women who are white, identify as heterosexual and cisgender, with no disabilities, and are from affluent, suburban communities that benefit most from Title IX (Staurowsky, et. al., 2022; Sabo & Veliz, 2008). The ways in which barriers manifest and impact girls and women vary based on the above-noted social identities and social locations (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, and so on). Given the brevity of this article, the discussion below offers a broad overview of the barriers girls and women encounter in their sports participation in the United States. Although girls and women from other countries certainly face similar types of barriers and constraints, there may be important cultural, economic, and social dimensions that differentially shape those barriers and constraints.

### Structural Barriers

Structural barriers to girls' and women's participation in sports include but are not limited to unequal distribution of resources between girls'/women's and boys'/men's sports, differences in quality and quantity of equipment/uniforms, and overall economic support for sports participation. Specifically, at the collegiate level, according to a Women's Sports Foundation report in 2019-20, only 30% of the overall recruiting dollars went to female athletes, male athletes also received \$252 million more in athletic scholarships, and a pay gap existed for coaches of women's teams, who earn 19% of what coaches of men's teams at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions earn, for example (Staurowsky et al., 2022).

There are barriers to the marketing, promotion, and media coverage of girls' and women's sports. Unfortunately, there are very few studies that examine how athletic departments distribute resources to promote

men's and women's collegiate sports programs, and the research at the high school level (on this topic among others) is nearly non-existent. The research that does exist indicates disparities in the marketing and promotion of women's sports (Staurowsky et al., 2022), particularly with respect to media coverage. And although Title IX does not apply to the editorial decisions of media outlets to broadcast and cover women's sports, the vast differences in the quantity and quality of coverage of women's sports (whether broadcast or news coverage or social media content) indicate an ecosystem that creates and sustains interest and audiences for men's sports (Cooky et al., 2021) which subsequently translates into resources and opportunities.

This ecosystem does not exist separate from the governing body of most collegiate sports in the United States: the NCAA. During the 2021 NCAA Final Four basketball tournament, Sedona Prince, who played for the University of Oregon, posted several videos on social media depicting the stark inequality between the extensive weight room for the men in contrast to the small stack of hand-held weights in the corner of a room available for the women (Nierenberg, 2022). Other inequities were noted, including food (pre-packaged meals vs. full buffets), and the differences in quality of gift bags, among others. Prince's posts went viral and generated national news media coverage, which precipitated an external investigation of the NCAA. According to the external report, the contract for the television rights fees for the NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament is negotiated as a single property and is worth \$1 billion in revenue a year with CBS Sports and Turner Network. The contract for the TV rights fees for NCAA Division I women's tournament is not a single property, and instead is bundled with 29 other NCAA championships, and is worth \$34 million per year. Importantly for the purpose of this article, the external report found the value of the women's basketball tournament to be undervalued and is estimated to be worth \$84 - 112 million, if the NCAA negotiated it as a single property, as it does with the men's tournament. According to the report, "the NCAA's broadcast agreements, corporate sponsorship contracts, distribution of revenue, organizational structure, and culture all prioritize Division I men's basketball over everything else in ways that create, normalize, and perpetuate gender inequities" (Kaplan et al., 2021).

### Cultural Barriers

In the United States, modern sports emerged during the late 19th/early 20th century, a time characterized by massive social changes to key structures, including the economy, work, family, and education, among others. These changes were precipitated by urbanization and industrialization, coupled with shifting gendered power relations (Cahn, 1994; Cooky, 2022; Messner, 1988). There was also a decline in the centrality of physical prowess in the labor market and military; this was a decline that was not accompanied by a similar decline in the psychological need for ideological gender difference. As such, spectator sports, which symbolically illustrated the strength, virility, dominance, and power of the male body, rose in prominence to culturally reassert and reaffirm "natural" gender differences and men's dominance over women (Cooky, 2022; Messner, 1988). Thus, throughout the 20th century, "sport was clearly one of the less contested, core institutions

in which heterosexual men's embodied power was enabled and celebrated in ways that supported and naturalized patriarchal beliefs in male superiority and female inferiority and dependence" (Messner, 2002.). This historical gendered legacy regarding the development of modern sports in the United States and its links to cultural masculinity continues throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

### Political Barriers

Politics in the United States (and elsewhere) create new barriers or exacerbate existing ones to access and opportunity in girls' and women's sports. According to National Public Radio (NPR), in 2021 and 2022 there were over 300 bills introduced in state legislatures targeting LGBTQ+ populations, 86% focused specifically on trans youth (Nakajima & Hanzhang Jin, 2022). These bills seek to prevent access to gender-affirming healthcare, require students to use the bathroom of the sex assigned at birth, and/or prohibit trans girls and transwomen from participating in girls' and women's sports. Bills restricting participation in girls' and women's sports to athletes who were identified as female at birth often cite the need to protect girls and/or to ensure a level playing field. Conversely, some critics cite a report from *The Associated Press* that found sponsors of these bills were unable to cite a single instance in their state or region where trans participation in sports was a problem (Crary & Whitehurst, 2021). A Women's Sports Foundation report (Staurowsky et al., 2022) suggests that assuming trans girls/transwomen will have an advantage over cisgender girls is problematic. First, it assumes generalized, categorical differences between boys and girls and conflates cisgender boys with trans girls. While there may be some boys who are stronger, taller, and faster than some girls, not all boys are stronger, taller, or faster than all girls. As the Women's Sports Foundation report notes, "when we tell cisgender girls that they are categorically disadvantaged relative to transgender girls, we unnecessarily reinforce sexist stereotypes that lead to girls' self-perception as athletically inferior, which in turn limits their athletic development" (Staurowsky et al., 2022. p. 56).

In addition to anti-trans bills prohibiting transgirls' sports participation, the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v Wade*, which ended the constitutional right to abortion, serves as a barrier to access and opportunity for women's sports participation. In September 2021, over 500 women athletes filed an amicus (friend of the court) brief in support of *Roe v Wade*. The athletes included members of the Women's National Basketball Players Association, the National Women's Soccer League Players Association, as well as Olympic, Paralympic, and collegiate athletes (2022). According to the Brief, all of the Amici have exercised, relied on the availability of, or supported the constitutional right to abortion care in order to meet the demands of their sport and unleash their athletic potential. Amici are united in their deeply-held belief that women's athletics could not have reached its current level of participation and success without the constitutional rights recognized in *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) and *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992). Among other arguments, the Brief noted that the ability to control whether and when to get pregnant is "critical" for athletes, given the "limited window

of time” athletes have to compete. As argued in the Brief, if forced to carry pregnancies to term, many women would have no choice but to sacrifice playing their sport—a sacrifice not required of their male counterparts, despite their equal role in engendering a pregnancy.

### Policy Barriers

Sport’s governing bodies write, implement, and enforce policies that serve as a barrier to participation in women’s sports. For example, eligibility criteria to participate in women’s events has historically relied on contested assumptions including sex as a binary category, sports as a level playing field, and athletes who do not classify as ‘women’ according to these policies as having an unfair advantage (Cooky & Dworkin, 2013; Henne, 2014; Pape, 2020; Pieper, 2016). Critics of eligibility criteria policies for women’s competitions note athletes from the Global South are more often subject to policies (Karkazis & Jordan-Young, 2018) given that the policies are informed and shaped by histories of colonialism and scientific racism (Hoad, 2010; Nyong’o, 2010).

### 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 sport media (Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al., 2021; Crouse, 2013). Historically, women’s athletes and women’s sport have been trivialized, marginalized, or objectified in sports media coverage. For example, Bruce (2013; 2016) systematically examined over 30 years of research in gender, media, and sport and identified several major patterns regarding the ways in which sportswomen are covered and represented by sports media, including trivialization and marginalization. Bruce (2016) noted that media 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 stereotypical representations. The implication of this body of research is that representation is an important indicator of not only gender equality (or inequality) in media coverage itself, but an indicator of gender in/equality in the larger sports context as well as in wider society.

A longitudinal study examining coverage quality and quantity of men’s and women’s sports on local and national televised news and highlight shows found that over the 30-year period studied (1989-2019), the coverage of women’s sport did not exceed percentage double digits (Cooky et al., 2021). Moreover, the percentage of coverage of women’s sport did not change over the time period investigated, with 5% of the coverage in 1989 and 2019 devoted to women’s sport. The study also captured shifts in the media landscape and specifically added an analysis of online and social media content. Similar patterns in coverage existed on those platforms as well, with women’s sport garnering 5.4% of coverage online and 4.2% of coverage on Twitter.

Although the study found a continued dearth of coverage of women’s sports, the ways in which women’s sports were covered shifted over the 30-year time frame (see: Cooky, et. al., 2021). From 1989-1999 coverage of women’s sport was characterized by humorous sexualization

and trivialization of women and women’s sport. For example, in the coverage analyzed in the 1999 analysis, there were several lengthy stories on women’s sports, including coverage of the 1999 US Women’s World Cup Soccer win. The stories focused on U.S. player Brandi Chastain who removed her jersey after the match in celebration of the team’s win. Much of the coverage focused on this, rather than the match itself, describing the moment as a ‘strip tease.’ In the 2004-2009 iterations of the study, there was a noted decline of overtly insulting framing of women and women athletes alongside an emergence of women and women athletes framed in stereotypical ways, as either mother, girlfriend, or wife. In the 2014-2019 iterations, there was almost no sexualization or trivialization of women and women athletes. However, the coverage of women’s sports was mostly dull. We noted that most of the women’s stories were presented by commentators with far less verbal pop and excitement than had typically characterized their men’s sports stories. Routinely delivered in a dull monotone, women’s sports stories, we observed, were usually presented as just boring. We labeled this type of coverage “*gender bland sexism*” (for a discussion see: Musto et al., 2017). A misperception is that sports media content reflects viewer fan interest and/or demand. The role sports media plays in building and sustaining audiences is often overlooked (Cooky et al., 2021). 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. Indeed, according to a survey conducted by Nielsen research (Douglas, 2018), 84% of sports fans (over half of which were men) indicated interest in women’s sports. The perception that no one is interested in women’s sports, thus why the media does not cover or broadcast it is not supported by empirical evidence. Social media may provide athletes with more agency/autonomy over their image and allow athletes more control over content (Deloitte Insights 2021, Douglas, 2018), yet engagement metrics may inadvertently produce similar imagery of women’s athleticism as in the past.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

### Why Sports Matter

- Benefits of sports participation (Staurowsky et al., 2020)
  - Physical/ health: lower risk of obesity, lower blood pressure, higher levels of cardiovascular fitness, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, reduced risk of breast cancer.
  - Social/ emotional: improved psychological well-being, greater life satisfaction, stronger sense of belonging, improved self-esteem, reduced symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression.
  - Academic/leadership: improved academic achievement, higher high school graduation rates, higher college attendance/retention, greater involvement in extracurricular activities, increased opportunities for leadership.

- The role of sports in gender equality (International Olympic Committee, 2021)
  - “Sport is one of the most powerful platforms for promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls, and sports coverage is very influential in shaping gender norms and stereotypes.”
- Link between sports and leadership skills (Ernst & Young, 2018)
  - 94% of women executives have a background in sports, over half at the university level.
  - 80% of women Fortune 500 executives had played competitive sports.
  - 74% of all executives believed playing sports helps a woman progress faster.
  - 61% of the women executives who responded believed playing sports contributed positively to their career success and advancement.

## SUMMARY

Anniversaries are important for reflecting on the past and imagining the future. As demonstrated in this article, since Title IX in the United States was passed 50 years ago there has been a dramatic increase in access and opportunities for girls and women in sports. Yet, as argued, progress is not linear and social change is often uneven (Cooky & Messner, 2018), accompanied by stagnation, backlash, or resistance. Indeed, as noted in the 2022 Women's Sports Foundation report on Title IX, there is much work left to be done. There are a few emergent dynamics that may shift the landscape of women's sports and usher in further progress and change. For example, there is a growing number of women athletes advocating for and investing in women's sports through equal pay advocacy, creating social media platforms dedicated to women's sports, and investing in the business of women's sports. There is also an increased recognition among sports industry leaders in the 'value' of women's sports, emerging media platforms devoted to covering women's sports (e.g. Just Women's Sports, the Women's Sports Network), and an increase in corporations addressing gender inequality in sports (e.g., in advertising campaigns and promotional events) (Cooky & Antunovic, 2022). The 2022 Women's Sports Foundation report, “50 Years of Title IX: We're not done yet” referenced throughout this paper (Staurowsky et al., 2022), suggests the next 50 years will depend on the extent to which we invest in girls and women's sports and fully address the persisting forms of social inequality (a few of which were discussed here). The report offers targeted and detailed policy recommendations for stakeholders; for example, public policymakers, education administrators, sports governing bodies, coaches, students, parents, and researchers. Readers are encouraged to access the report to find out how they may address change in girls' and women's sports to ensure that in the next 50 years, full equality can be achieved for all girls and women athletes.

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