

Chasing Equity:

The Triumphs, Challenges, and Opportunities in Sports for Girls and Women

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Full Report Introduction

During the summer of 2019, the harvest from the seeds of women's empowerment sown in the United States sport system nearly 50 years earlier with the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was on full display for the world to see. The U.S. Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT) was chasing its fourth Women's World Cup title in decisive fashion in Lyon, France. That same weekend, the U.S. Softball Team put in a gold-medal-winning performance at the USA International Softball Cup, and the U.S. Women's Volleyball Team won the FIVB Nations League Championship (Andrejev, 2019). Tennis star Serena Williams, two years after having her first child, was back at Wimbledon finishing second in women's singles competition while pairing with Scottish player Andy Murray in mixed doubles. The University of California at Los Angeles women's softball team won their 12th Women's College World Series title. And U.S. women's gymnast Simone Biles continued to elevate the sport by becoming the first in history to land a double-twisting, double-somersault dismount off of the balance beam at the 2019 U.S. Gymnastics Championship, in the process winning her sixth national championship (Asmelash & Muaddi, 2019). She followed this by extending her record-setting world medal total to 24 (Clarke, 2019).

Along the way, records were set not just in terms of team and individual athlete performances but also in economic and cultural impact. Inspiring a boost in Nike team apparel sales, USWNT home soccer jerseys outpaced sales for men's jerseys (Mello, 2019). According to an official licensed seller, Fanatics, "...this is the top-selling U.S. Soccer national team jersey, men's or women's, of all time, with sales more than 500% greater this year vs. the same period (through the semifinals) in 2015" (VanHaaren, 2019). In 2019, across 17 games, including the Women's World Cup championship game against the Netherlands, the team drew an average audience of 2,706,412 per game (Dockery, 2019).¹ Just under 14 million viewers watched the final game on Fox Sports (Dockery, 2019). Worldwide, a record 1.12 billion viewers tuned into the tournament.

In turn, long-time tennis analyst Pam Shriver considered the pairing of Williams and Murray as the "most talked-about mixed doubles draw in the history of tennis" (Maine, 2019). And according to Sports Media Watch, the Women's College World Series (WCWS) final game between UCLA and Oklahoma was the fourth most-watched baseball or softball game on cable television, only falling behind Sunday Night Baseball games

¹ The 17 games noted here were broadcast on one of these channels: ESPN2, Fox Sports 1 (F1), or FOX.

featuring Major League Baseball (MLB) teams the Red Sox and Yankees; Atlanta and Philadelphia; and the Cardinals and Cubs (Paulsen, 2019).

Even as U.S. women athletes shone on the world stage, the spotlight focused not only on their accomplishments but also on the barriers that they faced as they ascended to the best in the world. While the USWNT battled on the field for their place in soccer history at the Women's World Cup, prevailing over Netherlands to win their fourth championship and second in a row, they were battling their own federation at home over equal pay and other equal employment issues. This stark reality prompted 50 members of the U.S. Congress to write to the U.S. Federation expressing disapproval for indefensible treatment of the USWNT and demanding that a plan be implemented to address the lack of parity between the men's and women's teams (Spier, Frankel, Lawrence, Escobar, & Haaland, 2019). And they were not alone. American middle distance runner Alysia Montano (2019), a gold medalist in both the World Relay Championships and the Pan Am Games in 2015, brought attention to the fact that companies like Nike and Burton, key sponsors of elite female athletes, had a policy of reducing pay if female athletes got pregnant and made no provisions for female athletes dealing with pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity issues. In response to Montano's concerns, Nike clarified that they had adopted a new policy regarding support for pregnant athletes and that the terms of that policy would be written into new endorsement agreements with female athletes (Safdar, 2019). All of that was happening under the dark shadow cast by the failures of U.S. sport federations, college athletic programs, youth sport organizations, and sport media companies to protect female athletes and female employees from sexual assault and harassment and to respond empathetically and appropriately when sexual violence against girls and women occurred (Cook, 2018b; Guinee, 2019; North, 2019; Tracy, 2019).

This report addresses five broad areas: participation of girls and women in U.S. sport; the benefits of sport participation for girls and women; barriers that limit and/or hinder participation; Title IX and athletics enforcement; and women working in the sport industry and sport media. Each part of the report has been organized into two or three sections: an overview and sampling of selected findings; complementary findings from our survey where appropriate; and a list of recommended calls to action.

Part 1. Sport Participation for Girls & Women in the U.S.

A. Participation Opportunities for Girls and Women in the U.S.

Whether in mixed-sex teams or all-girl environments, girls seek places to explore their passion for playing, learning new sports, engaging in competition, and feeling the camaraderie that comes from being a member of a team. The WSF report *Coaching Through a Gender Lens: Maximizing Girls Play and Potential* (Zarrett, Cooky, & Veliz, 2019) found that coaches who offered girls realistic goals and challenges to strive for and who created positive environments where girls felt supported by the coach and each other fueled girls' enthusiasm for the sports they played.

Some research continues to show that all-female sport environments can facilitate higher levels of comfort, raise confidence levels, and increase the levels of physical activity participation when compared to mixed-gender environments (Bean, Forneris, & Fortier, 2015). However, the mythology that girls can only thrive in single-sex sport environments has been debunked as growing numbers of girls and boys over generations have played together on T-ball teams, at soccer camps, in physical education classes, and in other settings (Channon et al., 2016; Eldred, 2019).

The offering of mixed-sex teams provides an avenue for boys and girls to play in communities where there isn't enough support for sex-segregated teams. Sex-integrated teams also represent expanded sport opportunities for female athletes. Those who support mixed-sex teams argue that such environments hold the potential to foster mutual respect, more appreciation, and greater understanding (Channon et al., 2016; Eldred, 2019). Mixed-sex teams also have the potential and capability of providing a showcase to demonstrate that female athletes are the equal of male athletes. As Goldschmied and Kowalczyk (2014) found after looking at seven years of data about female and male athletes in the sport of riflery who competed in NCAA championships in mixed competition, there was no statistical difference in performance between those athletes on the basis of gender. In their reflection on the future of women's sport, Hall and Oglesby (2016) recommended that it was time to "think anew about sex-segregated competition categories" (p. 272).

Girls enjoy participation opportunities at all levels from grassroots and youth sport to professional sport in the U.S. While there is much more work to be done, progress has been made in fostering more inclusive sport spaces

"When someone says 'you play like a girl,' ask them 'which one?'"

**— U.S. Women's Soccer player
Mallory Pugh**

for girls from marginalized groups in some sectors of the industry. According to female sport leaders in our survey for this report, the climate for immigrant girls; girls of color; girls with disabilities; lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) girls; and gender non-conforming girls has gotten better or much better from 10 years ago in some areas (see table below for details), but there are also pockets where climates have remained what they were and in some cases, gotten worse. Overall, the views of our women sport leaders precisely reflect what scholar Vikki Krane (2019), who has studied LGBTQ issues in sport for decades recently wrote, "...there is evidence in today's sport culture that there are highly inclusive climates, highly prejudicial climates, and a myriad of climates in between" (p. 3) (see table below for details).

Although many sport opportunities coincide with educational experiences, the emphasis placed on participation in physical activity outside the school setting provides girls and women many of the same benefits as school-based sport participation.³ From the grassroots to professional levels of sport, girls and women in the United States are taking advantage of sport opportunities and pursuing passions with the ability to strive for and attain professional careers.

³ *Sport participation opportunities should be understood as opportunities only, and not a true measure of the number of female athletes because a female athlete may participate in more than one sport opportunity.*