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Sports: A Stepping Stone Toward Gender Equality?

 BY [LUCY LI](#) on **OCTOBER 16, 2018** • [\(0 \)](#)

During the 2018 U.S. Open Women's Final, Serena Williams, arguably the greatest female tennis player ever, became embroiled in yet another controversy. After receiving a warning for "illegal coaching" and losing a point for smashing a racket, Williams became verbally abusive to the chair umpire. She went on to call him a "liar" and a "thief," prompting the umpire to give her another code violation for "verbal abuse," resulting in a [game penalty](#). A visibly upset Serena cried to the referees, "This is not fair. There are a lot of men out here that have said a lot of things, but because they are men, that doesn't happen."

And she's right. Society has consistently treated women as less than men while holding them to higher standards. They are given less credit than they deserve in many ways. Women generally earn less because they more commonly go into [lower-paying majors and jobs](#). "Pregnancy discrimination" and its possible effects on future pay and promotions can widen this gap, and in addition, women often hit the "glass ceiling" when vying for promotions. Cultural changes that began in the 1960s have helped lay the foundation for changing the role of women in society, but sexism continues to happen everyday and everywhere and is often ignored. Sports, as one of the most public forums for people to witness sexism, has the potential to call attention to the issue and enact progressive change.

While Venus Williams is known for her own successful career and rivalry with her sister Serena, off the court she became an important advocate of equal pay for equal merit in tournaments. [In 2005, Venus and Roger Federer won Wimbledon; while Federer collected \\$1.13 million, Venus only received \\$1.08 million.](#) According to Wimbledon chairman Tim Phillips, the difference in prize money was justified because men played longer, more physically demanding matches than women. Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, two well-known male tennis players, have argued that women are paid less because they bring in less revenue and spectators.

The idea that prize money should be contingent on effort spent or revenue is a valid argument. Yet in other sports, this isn't the case. In April 2016, five women of the U.S. women's national soccer team filed a [pay discrimination claim](#). U.S. women's soccer has consistently been one of the top teams in the world; they have won the gold medal in three of the last four Olympics and were the most recent FIFA World Cup champions. In contrast, the U.S. men's soccer team have failed to qualify for the World Cup more times than they've participated, with their best result being a third-place finish in 1930.

Despite the obvious fact that the women's team is more successful than the men, their prize money doesn't reflect that. The winning women's team at the 2015 World Cup split \$2 million; the men's team that lost in the round of 16 in 2014 split \$9 million. The women brought in \$20 million more in revenue than the men's team in 2015, yet still only earned a quarter of what men do. The U.S. women's soccer team should not have had to file a pay discrimination suit in order to receive the credit and reward they deserved in the first place. If society judged females and their performance the same as men, there would be no need to cry about sexism.



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One possible explanation for taking attention away from the achievements of female athletes is how they are portrayed. The media is often complicit by tending to judge their appearances rather than acknowledging their accomplishments. Gymnast Gabby Douglas made history at the 2012 Summer Olympics by becoming the first American gymnast to win gold in both the team event and individual all-around, yet the Internet bashed her “unkempt and unsightly” hair. When she returned four years later for the Rio Olympics, she was yet again criticized for her hair. Chloe Kim, at age 17, became the youngest woman to win an Olympic snowboarding medal when she won gold on the halfpipe; all that one San Francisco sports radio host could comment on was how Kim was a “little hot piece of ass.” An NBC commentator attributed Hungarian swimmer Katinka Hosszu’s world-record win in the 400m individual medley to her husband, calling him “the man responsible.”

The media couldn’t even label Simone Biles, who is the most decorated American gymnast with four golds and one bronze from the 2016 Olympics alone, as anything more than the next Michael Phelps or Usain Bolt. How are people supposed to applaud female athletes and their achievements if the media inherently focuses on degrading their appearances and finding any excuse to compare them to men?

While sexism is most prominent in areas such as the wage gap and appearances, in sports especially, it is also seen in stereotyping and justifying unequal treatment. Women that play sports typically dominated by men are often labeled as “lesbians”. This type of prejudice can deter girls from entering some sports for fear of being mislabeled. As a serious example of a double standard, male tennis players are allowed to change their shirts on the court, but a female tennis player who quickly reversed hers after realizing it was on backward received a violation. The decision to officially sanction her is a blatant display of how women are often unfairly judged based on a double standard.

Despite all this, there have been some strides in gender equality in sports. Wimbledon gave both women’s and men’s champions equal prize money the year after Venus became an equal pay advocate. The passage of Title IX, among other conditions, gives female athletes equal access to resources, like scholarships.

Female athletes have shed as much blood and sweat as men both on the court competing, and off the court fighting for their right to compete; their gender should not determine their worth. Their recent efforts to slam back at organizations, media, and individual people that try to diminish their achievements resonates with ordinary women. Female athletes suffer on an international stage in the public eye, yet this doesn’t stop them from fighting for what they know they deserve. Their courage is inspiring. With its universal nature and ability to connect people around the world, achieving gender equality in sports might just be the beginning to overarching, societal change.

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