



Undercovered and Underpaid: Policy Solutions for Women's Sports

Abstract

Despite decades of progress in gender equity legislation in sports, inequities still persist due to uneven media coverage and significant salary discrepancies. In 2019, women's sports accounted for only 5.4% of total sports media coverage, a modest increase from 5% in 1989 and 5.1% in 1993. Although women's share of sports coverage rose to 15% in 2023, this figure still remains disproportionately low given that women participate in roughly half of all competitions in the United States. Two foundational gender equity laws, such as Title IX and the Amateur Sports Act, still struggle with implementation and educational gaps to sustain overall effectiveness. Policy interventions, such as gender equity training for coaches and coverage metric disclosures, would strengthen compliance and visibility. Additionally, ensuring that funding allocated to collegiate athletes is distributed equally and in compliance with Title IX is similarly crucial. Without these deliberate policy recommendations, gender equity in sports will continue to be supported in law but denied in practice.

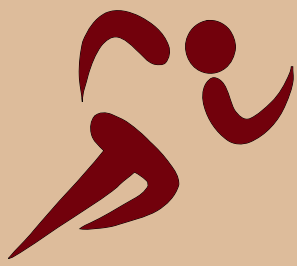


Table of Contents

04 PROBLEM DEFINITION

06 CURRENT POLICY CONTEXT

08 ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

10 RECOMMENDATIONS

13 CONCLUSION

Problem Definition

Despite decades of progress in participation and protections of women in sports, there are still significant **pay inequities** that exist across leagues and restrict the possible growth of women's sports. Women are often snubbed of proper media coverage, which is an under-addressed but crucial piece to pay equity and expansion in professional and collegiate sports. The buzz around sports directly influences who watches, and thus, **who is seen**. Fewer eyes on the sport means fewer televised events, smaller rights deals, lower advertising funds, and tighter salary caps, which, over time, accentuates the gap between men's and women's compensation. In the current sports environment, **visibility determines financial benefit**, and women in sports continue to be structurally disadvantaged by the historical media scene that has boosted men's experiences while suppressing women's for decades.

AVERAGE ATHLETE COMPENSATION BY GENDER (ADELPHI UNIVERSITY, 2023)

BASKETBALL



● NBA \$10,776,383

● WNBA \$113,295

SOCCER



● MLS \$471,279

● NWSL \$54,000

GOLF



● PGA \$1,042,917

● LPGA \$346,360

TENNIS TOP 100

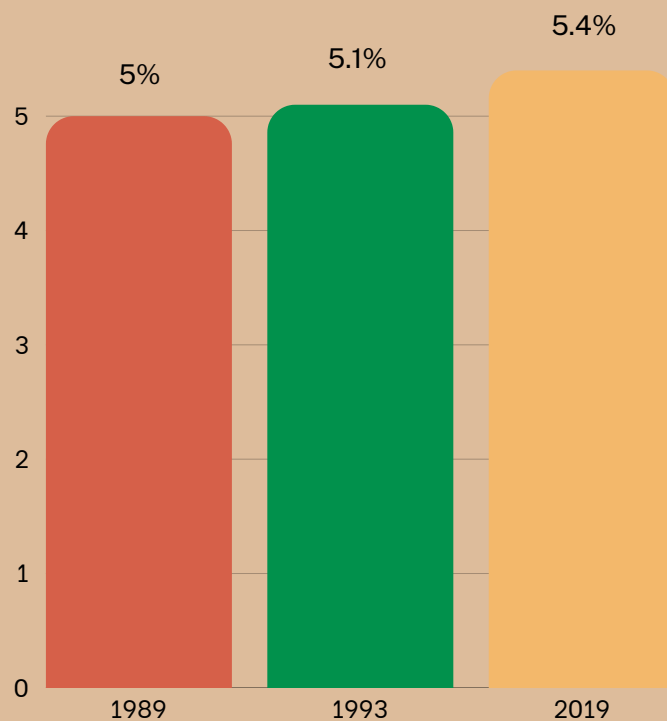


● ATP \$1,589,024

● WTA \$1,039,141

Problem Definition

In 2019, women’s sports made up **5.4%** of sports coverage, which is only up from **5.1%** in 1993 and **5%** in 1989 (Singh & Tai, 2025). This is a trend that has been stagnant for three decades. A 2023 study shows that those once immobile numbers increased drastically in just a few years, with women’s share of coverage soaring to **15%** (Wasserman, 2023). While that’s great progress, it still leaves women’s sports dramatically underrepresented when they account for roughly **half of all competitions** in the United States. This persistent gap puts a constraint on the ability of women’s leagues to compete with men’s leagues, regardless of athletic performance.



PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL SPORTS COVERAGE FOCUSED ON WOMEN'S SPORTS

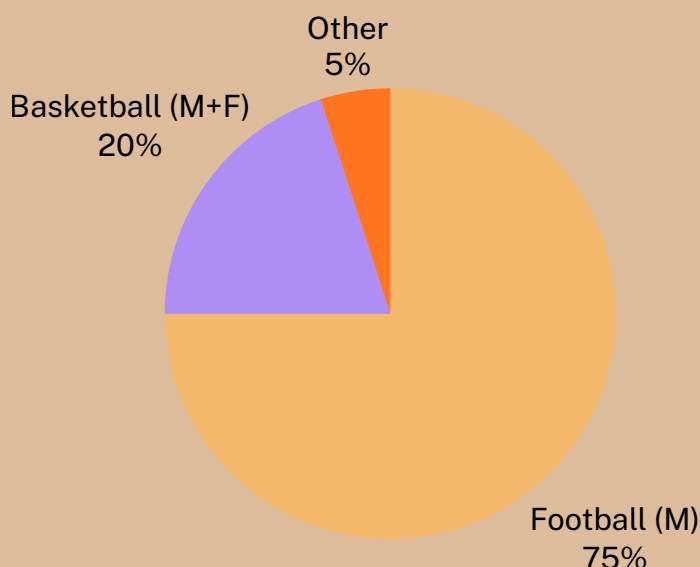
Inequity in media goes much further than screen time. Women’s events are often scheduled in **low-visibility timeslots** or in direct competition with men’s leagues that already have a heavily established fanbase. Women’s events have long been scheduled as the “**warm-up**” to men’s events in competitions as big as the Olympics. There is also a clear discrepancy in the quality of coverage received. Men’s coverage often has **better production**, better commentary, more camera angles, better instant replay, and more shots to cut to. It is no wonder people often find men’s sports more exciting.

Current Policy Context

CURRENT EXECUTIVE ACTION

Following the wake of the USA Women's Hockey Team's Olympic gold medal win and the subsequent snub received from the President and the Men's Team, policies surrounding equality in women's sports are of the utmost importance. This recent controversy occurred during a locker room celebration after the Men's Hockey Team's gold medal win at the Winter Olympics in Italy. A video surfaced showing a **phone call** with Donald Trump and the Team as he made a joke about having to invite the Women's Team to the **State of the Union Address** in addition to the Men's Team. This behavior directly **contradicts** what has been framed as a positive attitude on women's sports held by the Executive Branch, making any recent efforts appear insincere. President Donald Trump has previously vowed to protect female athletes, an element of his campaign that, from the point of view of his supporters, was a positive movement. The president executed this attitude by "**keeping men out of women's sports**" with the angle of protecting women's sports by simultaneously **discriminating** against transgender athletes (Branstetter, 2026). In an executive order, Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports, issued in 2025, the President aimed to ban transgender athletes of all ages from competing in female sports (The White House 2025). The President had also claimed to be making positive strides for female athletes in other ways. In a separate order, Donald Trump vowed to expand collegiate **athletic scholarships for women**. In the order titled "Saving College Sports," President Trump stated that athletic departments with more than \$125,000,000 in revenue during the 2024-2025 season must provide more scholarships in non-revenue sports than offered at that time (The White House 2025). Women's college athletics are often considered "non-revenue" because they typically do not generate additional revenue, with women's basketball often being the exception. While this portion of the Executive Order offers potential for expansion of collegiate scholarships for women, the main purpose was to try to re-establish a heavily disputed anti-name, image, and likeness (NIL) agenda.

Current Policy Context



DISTRIBUTION OF PLANNED HOUSE V. NCAA SETTLEMENT
(REID & SMALLEY 2025)

NIL APPEAL

Regarding NIL, there have been recent disputes over the settlement of **House v. NCAA**. This ruling went into effect July 1, 2025, and allowed collegiate athletes to be compensated for their name, image, and likeness (Reid & Smalley 2025). In addition to compensating current athletes, this settlement arranged for a **back-pay** of almost 3 billion dollars to athletes who competed at the division one level within the last 10 years (Reid & Smalley 2025). Controversy over this ruling arose when a group of eight female athletes **filed an appeal** to this ruling on the basis of a Title IX Violation (Brown 2025). The back-pay initially was planned to be distributed mainly to football and basketball players, as they traditionally bring in the most revenue. But this leaves a large gap in the gender distribution of the funding (Nuckolis 2025). If the NCAA is going to comply with **Title IX**, then it would have to come to a new agreement fairly distributing funding between male and female athletes.

Role of Government

There are two federal laws that paved the way for gender equality in the male dominated institution of American sports (Lopiano, 2000)

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972

This law prohibits discrimination in educational programs and educational institutions who receive federal funding. Title IX covers sponsored extracurricular activities, club sports, and varsity athletics.

In 1974, Congress passed the **Javits Amendment** which included intercollegiate athletes into the dialogue. Due to unclear enforcement mandates, the **Office for Civil Rights** created compliance measures for academic programs based on financial assistance and meeting the interests and abilities of both male and female students. **The 1979 Policy Interpretation** states that compliance is based on program areas such as scholarships and publicity distribution (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office for Civil Rights, 1979). Male and female athletes should receive equivalent benefits and opportunities in these categories. For example, access to publicity resources and the quantity and quality of publications and other promotional materials featuring men's and women's sports programming.

Amateur Sports Act of 1978

This law was created because of increased gender equity consciousness that arose from Title IX and unfair national team selections that were occurring for world championships and international sporting events like the Olympics. During the time of the legislation, women, persons of colors, and people with disabilities were underrepresented in the sports industry. The Amateur Sports Act banned discrimination against identities such as gender, race, and disabilities.

Role of Government



Figure 2

However, there are still inconsistencies in understanding of the law.

“The lack of a consistent and systematic education mechanism may explain the tensions that arise so frequently around these issues within college and university athletic departments” (Rubin and Lough, 2015, p.116). Athletic personnel, including coaches, need to have a stronger basic understanding of federal laws.

Although federal laws such as Title IX and the Amateur Sports Act have implemented a strong foundation for gender equity in sports, **their current effectiveness measures are limited due to poor enforcement and education methods.** The federal government, specifically the Department of Education and its corresponding Office for Civil Rights, need to strengthen compliance with stricter oversight and enforcement and require Title IX training for athletic personnel. When federal leadership is inconsistent, athletic personnel at a collegiate or national level are handed the responsibility of interpreting convoluted mandates on their own. This has resulted in uneven protections for women athletes around the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

01.
**Gender Equity
Training for Coaches**

02.
**Fairly Distribute
Backpay Funding**

03.
**Segmented Media
Statistics**

RECOMMENDATION 1

A comprehensive training and education program for coaches on federal laws pertaining to gender equity is needed to strengthen the implementation of Title IX mandates. This would be a program similar to certifications that coaches must complete on recruitment, sexual harassment, and CPR.

One existing model is the Girls Positive and Safe Coaching Pathway program, which is a global initiative from The Association for International Sport for All (TAFISA) and Nike. It promotes gender equality in the sports industry by providing training and resources for athletic coaches. Even though it's operated as a global program, its approach is tailored to local context through host organization partnerships (Positive Safe Coaching, n.d.)

A key challenge that the program is facing is limited capacity due to poor host organization planning (Mait et al., n.d.). To fill this gap, the long-term recommendation is to integrate similar gender equity programs into U.S. athletic systems. High school and collegiate athletic departments, as well as school districts and academic institutions, could serve as host organizations that administer the training.

This bottom-up approach allows local athletic programs to reinforce federal standards. Awareness and compliance on equal treatments, resources, and publicity would improve.



Figure 3

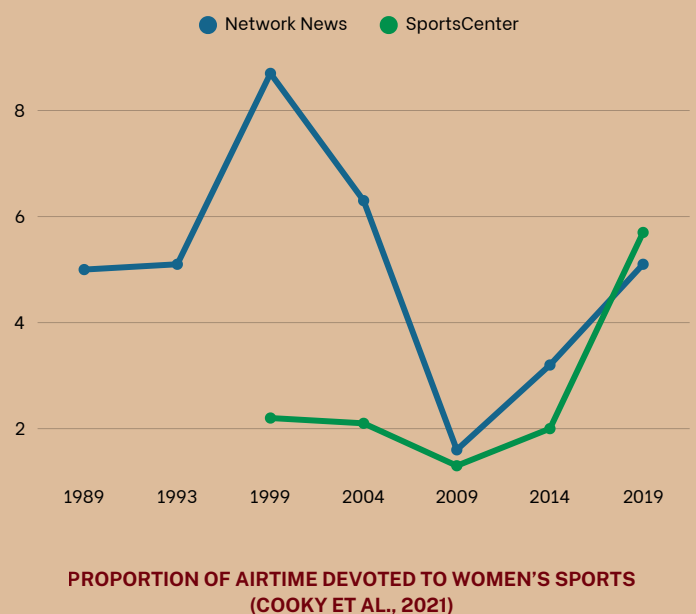
RECOMMENDATION 2

In the wake of the **House v. NCAA** settlement that went into effect July 1st, 2025, much of the backpay funding has still been suspended due to disputes. There is currently **2.8 million dollars** available to be paid out to former and current Division One athletes, but after the appeal filed by 8 female collegiate athletes on the basis of **unequal plans for distribution**, this money remains frozen (Green 2025).

To help ensure that female and male athletes are treated and respected **equally** moving forward, this appeals process should require a fair compensation schedule that does not proportionately benefit male athletes. Since this funding is scheduled to be distributed at the collegiate level, both universities and the NCAA must comply with current Title IX regulations in place to ensure women are not discriminated against.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Sports media companies should be required to publicly disclose sports coverage metrics like share of women’s coverage across networks, quality of airtime, timeslot visibility, and promotional investment for women’s sports. Headline figures mask the nuance in the quality of coverage that women’s sports receive. A standardized transparency mandate would create a clear picture of visibility discrepancies and provide a stronger foundation for tailored solutions that support the growth of women’s sports.



Conclusion

Without stronger federal enforcement and gender equity program implementations, women's sports will never get the ability to be fully integrated and prioritized in the sports industry. However, requiring sports media institutions to report media statistics is a meaningful first step. Additional ways to make progress surrounding Title IX enforcement is to require a comprehensive training and education program for coaches and educators to better uphold Title IX, in addition to ensuring that NIL backpay funding is within these regulations. Real progress requires intentional action.

Pay equity will continue to evade women's sports if the current system continues to suppress the visibility of female athletes. Deeply rooted gender bias, societal prejudice, and discriminatory systems plague women's sports and limit their ability to grow in the same way men's sports were able to decades ago. It is not a question of "are men's sports better than women's sports?" but rather "have the systems in place disproportionately benefitted male athletes for over a century, and how can we replicate that environment to foster the rise of women's sports in the same capacity?"

References

- Branstetter, G. (2026, March 2). Bans against trans athletes will not “save women’s sports.” American Civil Liberties Union. <https://www.aclu.org/news/lgbtq-rights/bans-against-trans-athletes-will-not-save-womens-sports>
- Brown, C. (2025, November 7). House v. NCAA: Title IX appeals explained. Christine Brown Sports Law. <https://www.christinebrownsportslaw.com/news-insights/house-v-ncaa-title-ix-appeals-explained>
- Green, T. (2025, June 14). Why female athletes are challenging the NCAA’s \$2.8bn. settlement. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2025/jun/14/ncaa-nil-settlement-title-ix-explaine>
- Lopiano, D. A. (2000). Modern history of women in sports: Twenty-five years of Title IX. *Clinics in sports medicine*, 19(2), 163-173.
- Mait, R., Mothibi, G., & Kim, S. (n.d.). Girls positive and safe coaching pathway. Gender Equality in Sport Knowledge Hub. <https://genderequalitysport.org/girls-positive-and-safe-coaching-pathway/>
- Nuckols, B. (2025, June 11). Female athletes appeal landmark NCAA settlement, saying it violates federal antidiscrimination law. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/ncaa-house-settlement-appeal-female-athletes-e2864d7bcdf74d0c538c1f2e6c98fe6c>
- Positive Safe Coaching. (n.d.). Girl’s positive and safe coaching pathway. <https://positivesafecoaching.com/>
- Reid, A., & Smalley, A. (2025, June 9). What the NCAA settlement means for colleges and state legislatures. National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/what-the-ncaa-settlement-means-for-colleges-and-state-legislatures>
- Rubin, L. M., & Lough, N. L. (2015). Perspectives of Title IX pioneers: Equity, equality, and need. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 8(2), 109-130.
- The White House. (2025, July 4). Saving College Sports. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/07/saving-college-sports/>
- The White House. (2025, February 5). Keeping Men Out of Women’s Sports. Şimşek, B. (2025). GENDER-RESPONSIVE SPORTS REPORTING HANDBOOK. UN Women. https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/202508/gender_responsive_sports_reporting_handbook.pdf

References

Şimşek, B. (2025). GENDER-RESPONSIVE SPORTS REPORTING HANDBOOK. UN Women.
https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/202508/gender_responsive_sports_reporting_handbook.pdf

U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office for Civil Rights. (1979, December 11). Policy interpretation: Title IX and intercollegiate athletics. Federal Register. <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/civil-rights-laws/federal-register-notices-and-regulations/policy-interpretation-title-ix-and-intercollegiate-athletics>

Cooky, C., Council, L. D., Mears, M. A., & Messner, M. A. (2021). One and Done: The Long Eclipse of Women's Televised Sports, 1989–2019. *Communication & Sport*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795211003524>

Singh, A. (2025, January 31). Women's sports continue to receive less media coverage than men's sports. *El Estoque*.
<https://elestoque.org/2025/01/31/sports/womens-sports-continue-to-receive-less-media-coverage-than-mens-sports/>

Wasserman. (2023, October 24). NEW STUDY: WOMEN'S SPORTS COMPRISE 15% OF SPORTS MEDIA COVERAGE. Wasserman.
<https://www.teamwass.com/news/new-study-womens-sports-comprise-15-of-sports-media-coverage/>

Adelphi University Online. (2023, October 23). Male vs female professional sports salary comparison. Adelphi University Online.
<https://online.adelphi.edu/articles/male-female-sports-salary/>

Figures

Cover Image

Blomquist, J. (2022). Illustration of girls representing Title IX and gender equity in sports [Illustration]. In A. Powell, *How Title IX transformed colleges, universities over past 50 years*. *The Harvard Gazette*.
<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/06/how-title-ix-transformed-colleges-universities-over-past-50-years/>

Figure 2

England, B. (2022). Illustration of a female basketball player and protesters [Illustration]. In A. Rice, *Title IX: 50 years later, what does gender equality in sports look like?* *Healthline*. <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/title-ix-50-years-later-what-does-gender-equality-in-sports-look-like>

Figure 3

Positive Safe Coaching. (n.d.). Girl's positive and safe coaching pathway.
<https://positivesafecoaching.com/>