Five things to know about women and sport

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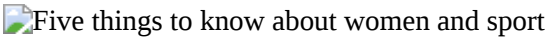

Co-authored by UN Women

Women's sports are on a winning streak, reaching new heights and shattering records. From the Olympics achieving gender parity to the growing audience for women's sports, there is much to celebrate and explore. Yet many gender gaps remain. Here are five key things to know about women and sport:

1. Women’s sport is growing

For the first time in Olympic history, women athletes will have as many places in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games as male athletes. This achievement shows the extraordinary trajectory of women’s sport since the first modern games featuring female athletes in 1900, where women represented just 2.2 per cent of competing athletes.

Audiences are also growing, with 7 out of 10 people now tuning into women’s sport. Almost 73 per cent say they watch women’s sports at least a few times a year, not far behind the percentage who watch men’s sports with the same frequency (81 per cent). The FIFA Women’s World Cup Australia and New Zealand 2023 was a huge success with record attendance. The event attracted the largest audience for women’s sports in history, reaching approximately 2 billion people, highlighting the growing popularity and changing attitudes towards women's sports.

2. Girls who play sport gain life-long benefits

Girls who play sport tend to stay in school, delay pregnancy, and get better jobs. Playing sport boosts their confidence, resilience, and teamwork skills. These benefits extend into their daily lives, empowering them to take initiative and attempt things they never imagined were possible.

A recent survey found that 80 per cent of female Fortune 500 CEOs played sports in their formative years, emphasizing the impact of early exposure to sport on the development of young women. A 2023 Deloitte report also revealed that 85 per cent of surveyed women who played sports as children believed the skills they developed were crucial to their professional success. This rises to 91 per cent for women in leadership roles, and 93 per cent for those earning USD 100,000 or more. Additionally, 92 per cent of global audiences agree it is important for girls to play sports, with 61 per cent considering it “very important”.

Despite the positive data, girls drop out of sports by age 14 at twice the rate of boys due to social expectations, lack of investment in quality programmes, and other factors. For example, 21 per cent of female professional athletes have experienced sexual abuse at least once as children in sport, compared with 11 per cent of male athletes. Efforts to track and respond to such cases are increasing worldwide, but gaps in the magnitude and prevalence of violence in sports persist, and prevention efforts are often lacking.

3. Women athletes are impactful role models

Although media coverage of female athletes has nearly tripled in the last three years, women still receive far less coverage (just 16 per cent of total sports coverage) than their male counterparts. Increasing the visibility of female athletes is essential to providing more role models in sports who can inspire girls to continue playing.

A recent survey by Parity Now found that 88 per cent of sports fans regard pro women athletes as impactful role models for young women. There is also a commercial imperative, as fans are 2.8 times more likely to purchase a product recommended by a woman athlete rather than by another type of influencer. According to World Athletics, female athletes enjoy a 14% larger social media following than male athletes and recorded a four per cent spike in the number of Google news searches of female athletes in 2023 compared to 2022.

4. Women lead the future of sport

Women are taking on more leadership roles in the sports world, driving better policies and increasing investments. This leadership has led to record attendance and coverage of women’s sporting events and increased attention to women’s demands, from narrowing the pay gap to addressing various forms of violence and abuse.

Despite these strides, barriers and gender bias persist. According to the Sport Integrity Global Alliance’s most recent survey in 2023, only 26.9 per cent of executive positions in international sport federations are held by women. The same study reported that of the 31

International Sports Federations surveyed just three had women at the helm.

In the International Olympic Committee, 41 per cent of members are female, with more diversity in terms of age and regional representation. Gender-equal representation on IOC commissions was reached in 2022, a historic high and 100 per cent increase since 2013.

The number of women on the World Athletics Council has grown from eight members to 13, including one female Senior Vice President, achieving gender parity four years ahead of the body's target set for 2027. There is also a goal to increase the number of female coaches to at least 20 per cent by the World Athletics Championships Tokyo 2025.

However, a real gender gap still exists among coaches and leadership roles within the athletes' entourage. Although Paris 2024 will break new ground, the representation of women holding leadership roles such as Chef de Mission, Technical Official, and coach remains remarkably low. At Tokyo 2020, only 13 per cent of coaches were women.

5. Equal play for equal pay

Unequal pay in sports is a long-standing inequality. A global sports salary survey by Sporting Intelligence in 2017 showed that, among elite athletes, women earn on average only 1 per cent of what men earn. No women feature among the Forbes 2024 list of 100 highest-paid athletes in the world and prize money for women's sport continues to lag behind men's. For example, in 2023 the Women's World Cup awarded USD 150 million in prize money, a 300 per cent increase over 2019, but still only about a third of the USD 440 million the men got in Qatar 2022.

Prominent athletes and teams have led the push for pay equity. Tennis was the first sport to guarantee equal prize money for major tournaments. The US Open started this in 1973, due to Billie Jean King's advocacy and the creation of the Women's Tennis Association. Since then, all four major tennis tournaments (US Open, Australian Open, French Open, and Wimbledon) have adopted equal prize money. The Professional Squash Association, World Surf League, and a handful of other professional sports have also equalised men's and women's prize money.

In the world of football, Norway became the first country in 2017 to offer male and female football players equal pay when representing the country in international games in a standard-setting move that has since been adopted by other football associations across the world including Brazil, Wales, and Australia. In 2022, the US Women's National Soccer Team secured a landmark equal pay settlement after a years-long legal battle that set an equal pay rate in all international games, including the World Cup, going forward. The settlement also included USD 22 million to compensate players for past discrimination.

However, many women's teams still struggle with deep inequality. The average monthly salary for female footballers in Argentina's Primera División is USD 225, while the men's national team, winners of the 2022 World Cup, took home USD 42 million. Wage theft is also an issue, with women's teams in Jamaica, Colombia, Nigeria and South Africa reporting unpaid salaries. A recent study by FIFPRO, the global professional footballers' union, found that 29 per cent of women players who responded had not received any payments from their national teams for World Cup qualifying tournaments.

The sky is the limit

The recent progress and achievements in women's sports are nothing short of extraordinary. As the world stops to celebrate these triumphs, the voices of women in sports must continue to resonate across the planet. Their stories of resilience and determination will inspire future generations of girls to dream big and pursue their passions.

Keep cheering, keep investing, keep believing in the incredible potential of women in sport. Let's create a world where every girl knows that the sky's the limit, both on and off the field.

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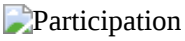

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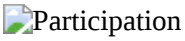

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