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Representation Analysis: Women in Sports

The sports industry is composed of many working components that come together to create a vastly male dominated field. The industry is comprised of athletes, coaches, referees, commentators, news outlets, sports fans, and more. Women in sports mirrors that of many other fields in our society in that there is a clear discrepancy in the treatment and opportunities available to them versus their male counterparts. There are many aspects in the field that account for said discrepancies, which include representation in officiation of sports, gender composition of sports news casters/commentators, pay gaps between players for men and women's sports, prioritization of peak broadcast times for male versus female sports, and general attitudes and opinions society holds for female athletes versus male athletes.

Historically there are gender differences in sports that date back to the 19th century and beyond. The Olympic Games, one of the most widely recognized sporting events globally, established a place in ancient history as a male only event, and had its first modern rendition take place in 1896 in Athens, Greece (History.com Editors, 2010). Women were not allowed to compete at all in the initial games; it was not until 1900 that women were permitted to participate, and even then, it was only 12 out 1,066 athletes and for events categorized as being traditionally feminine (Retrieved from JCRWS). Women in sports have come a long way, but there are still countless gendered issues that are present today.

Serena Williams, arguably one of the most widely known Tennis Players (male or female) in the U.S., has been a figure head for women in sports and has had to face issues not only concerning being female, but also being a woman of color. At 40 years old Williams is currently ranked 11th globally for women's singles, but boasts an additional repertoire of hitting

the number one rank for women's singles in 2002 and the number one rank for women's doubles in 2010 (WTA Tennis, 2021). There is no question that Williams is an incredible athlete, and yet she faces a hypercritical lens from both the sports industry and general public. One can acquire a general understanding of how the public often views women in sports by going to an online answer form. To the question of where Serena Williams would rank in male rankings, a form user is quoted saying, "If she played the men's tour for an entire year - probably not in the top 500." (Subram, 2018). There is obviously a lack of regard for her skills in this assumption, and automatically accepts her male peers as more capable than she is athletically. However, the takeaway from this is less about what the actual outcome to this theoretical question would be, and more about why the question is even being asked in general. Women in sports, especially those who are exceptional in their field, often face hypercriticism such as this that their male counterparts are simply not subject to.

Pay gaps and differences in recognition for accomplishments in men versus women are far from exempt from the sports industry. In 2019, all 28 players on the United States Women's Soccer Team sued the U.S. Soccer Federation on grounds of, despite performing better, unequal pay in comparison to the United States Men's team (Kelly, 2019). The players had issues with the lawsuit due to issues with contract agreements, and claims that state that said agreements account for the pay gap as opposed to deliberate discrimination. While this is a definite possibility, it fails to acknowledge that female players are often not allotted the same negotiation leverage to get the better deals that men's teams can be privileged to. Regardless of that, the global stage presents an enormous pay gap between men and women players for the FIFA world cup. The United States Women's Soccer Team won the most recent FIFA World Cup in 2019, which served as their second consecutive win and fourth win overall (Baxter, 2019). The

Women's 2019 FIFA World Cup brought \$30 million worth of victory earnings, allowing the female winners to walk away with about \$4 million each. This serves as a staggering contrast to that of the Men's FIFA World Cup 2019 prize pool which sat at \$400 million and allowed the winners to walk away with \$38 million each, more than that of what was awarded to the entire women's winning team (Kelly, 2019). This extreme gap serves as an indicator to the disparity of respect given to female athletes and women in the sports industry not only in the U.S. but also on a global stage.

Despite all of the struggles facing women in sports, progress is always being made and strived for. Very recent news regarding women in sports comes in the form of the first female referee for the Super Bowl. Sarah Thomas is making history by serving as the first female down's judge, previously known as "head linesman" (Swinton, 2021). The gender neutral term was created to encourage women in the field and to honor Thomas and her accomplishments. The first Super Bowl took place in 1916, and it's not until 2021 (105 years later) in Super Bowl LV that a woman is officiating the event. Thomas has an impressive history with officiation with the sport and is considered to be exemplary in what she does. It is certainly something to celebrate breaking this barrier in gender representation for women in sports, but it's difficult to ignore that historically men have only needed to be good at their job to officiate the super bowl, whereas to be the first female official, Thomas had to be beyond good and serve as being remarkably exceptional. This is not uncommon when challenging gender related barriers and moving from the present into the future of women in sports, hopefully representation will continue to balance out and become easier and more inviting for women of all skill levels to participate in.

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