

# The Women's Sports Leadership Project

## Concept

Recognize athletics as a potential tool for seeking gender equity on – and off – the field. Understand how the current gender/sports structure shapes social norms around leadership, competency, and power in fields in which women are under-represented, including business, politics, and math/science.

## Introduction

Sports have an enormous influence in our society. They are more than entertainment, fitness, or pastime. Organized athletics – from youth sports to professional leagues – define cultural attitudes, hierarchies, social relationships, and power structures.<sup>1</sup> Sociologists have argued that, “sports have replaced formal religion as a dominant force in the lives of many Americans.”<sup>2</sup> More Americans, for example, annually tune into the Super Bowl than the President’s State of the Union address.

Such popularity and cultural acceptance is not, however, neutral. Organized sports have been a visible and contested site for enforcing gender stereotypes and power. Since the rise of structured athletics in the late 1800s, sport has been embraced as a vehicle for conveying particular values. As the nation struggled with issues of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration in the early 1900s, for example, sports provided

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<sup>1</sup> Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano, *Playing with the Boys: Why Separate is Not Equal in Sports* (New York: Oxford, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Melissa M. Beck, “Notes: Fairness on the Field: Amending Title VII to Foster Greater Female Participation in Professional Sports,” *Cardozo Law Journal* 12 (1994): 244.

lessons of teamwork, preservation of physical strength and virility, demonstration of heroism and leadership that were viewed as critical aids to social challenges. Books of sport for young boys at the time made clear that the deeper purpose was training young men for nation-building.<sup>3</sup> The connection between athletics and the development of male leadership skills remains a recognized benefit of sports participation today. In particular, the lessons learned on the field are deemed applicable in other arenas such as politics, citizenship, and business.<sup>4</sup>

Women's athletics, on the other hand, lacks such clear history. At various times, female athletes have faced warnings that serious exertion and competition were counter to a woman's "natural" role, socially inappropriate, and even dangerous (including the societal "risk" to women's reproductive roles from imagined ills to organs). As opposed to the easy congruence between "male" and "athlete," female athletes have endured uncertain identities (female basketball players in the 1930s industrial leagues were required to wear make-up and perform in beauty pageants at half-time; today female athletes still struggle with social demands to appear "feminine" while performing with "male-like" intensity). The friction between women's social roles and athletic participation is less overt than in the distant past, but continues today, sending troubling messages to young women about their capabilities and their "appropriate" place.

There remain social, structural, and institutional barriers preventing women from participating in organized athletics on an equal basis as male athletes. Despite the passage of Title IX in 1972, for example, institutional support for male and female athletes is not equal; colleges still spend substantially more recruiting, and supporting male athletes than female athletes. Only 15 of 326 Division I colleges spend more on all women's sports combined than they do on football.<sup>5</sup> The average Division I-A school spends \$2.79 million on coaches for men's teams and \$1.26 on coaches for women's teams.<sup>6</sup> Even at the most amateur level, decades after girls were permitted to join Little League, female

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<sup>3</sup> Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano, 159.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Dyreson, "Nature by Design: Modern American Ideas about Sport, Energy, Evolution and Republics, 1865-1920." *Journal of Sport History*, Fall 1999, 460. See also, Elliot J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sport* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Welch Suggs, "The Cost of Empty Seats," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 4, 2005, A39.

<sup>6</sup> Figures from the 2001 NCAA Revenues and Expenses of Divisions I and II Intercollegiate Athletics Programs.

players remain rare, even on teams of first-graders, where little prior skill is required. This is not an effect rooted in biology or athletic ability, but in social conditioning.

More girls and women than ever are participating in organized athletics, but they are playing on the junior varsity field. Vestiges of entrenched beliefs about female gender roles, appropriate styles of participation, and worries of overexertion continue to define female athletics – and female play – as second-class to male play. The matter, however, is not merely about this double standard in sports, but the effect this has on women’s leadership and power sharing outside of sports.

There is plentiful evidence of the strong connection between male athletic experience and business and political arenas.<sup>7</sup> Presidents throw out ceremonial pitches, athletes are elected to Congress based on their sports success, and top firms recruit and promote particular athletes into their companies and leadership posts. There is, in other words, both the recognition of the worth of athletic skills themselves and a network of individuals in politics and business who value male sports play. (It doesn’t hurt that sporting events are a well-established venue for building business). This male sports network accepts that particular sports skills and relationships (team play, dealing with defeat, rivalry, competition, pressure, etc...) carry an “exchange value” outside of sports. The key point: Male athletic experience is viewed as a set of skills transferrable across traditional boundaries (presumed relevant in business and politics in particular).

This “athletic skill transfer” may also exist for women, but is less apparent, in part because there is less articulated flow across boundaries and there is a less developed female sports network. There is also a less recognition and appreciation of the experience of the female athlete, including what skills she acquires and how those may be applied in other arenas. In short, outside of a small group of knowing/involved female leaders, women’s athletics are more publicly viewed as second-rate to the male standard. It will be important to better understand beliefs surrounding the female sports experience and how that compares to presumptions surrounding the male athletic experience.

The larger matter is that where there exists an easily grasped image of male leadership (just as we intuit experience of the male athlete), we lack a parallel image of

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<sup>7</sup> The literature is vast. For a helpful review see Mike Cronin, “Playing Games? The Serious Business of Sports History,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, July 2003, 435-460.

female leadership. This is not to say that we have no qualified female leaders, but we lack the language and prototype to compel broad understanding of we mean by “leader” when that leader is female. Research, for example, supports resistance among males to the *idea* of female leaders, even when particular women are deemed acceptable, suggesting a broader social bias against women seeking top position of authority.<sup>8</sup> Leadership should not have a gender and there need be no definable “female leadership” model. Rather, it is apparent that bias against the notion of female leaders reflects the narrow cultural space women occupy. It is necessary to broaden the definition of “leader” so that more females may join male colleagues.

The matter is apparent in looking at these issues through Heider’s social balance theory (1958) commonly used to explain the feelings, attitudes and beliefs that social actors in different groups have towards one another, which can promote formation of stable social groups. When we consider the triad of “males,” “athletes,” and “leaders,” there exists structural balance between these groups, and, in fact, many might observe that these groups describe an effective network. Yet, when we consider a triad composed of “females,” “athletes,” and “leaders,” the result is uncertainty, even tension, rather than balance. The question is: Why? Do we fail to properly value or understand the experience of the female athlete? The female leader? Is there a cultural disconnect between female athletic experience and forms of leadership?

There are physical differences between males and females. But the fact of these differences has been broadly interpreted to require differentiating male and female activities and roles, even in arenas where actual physical differences are irrelevant. We can consider that sports remain the most sex-segregated secular institution in our society, more sex-segregated than the military. There are differences in male and female athletics – differences in equipment, style of play, rules, structures of leagues, ticket prices, status – that do not reflect actual physical differences, but socially – strategically – differentiate male and female athletics and, in turn, the status each enjoys.

If we recognize the powerful social, political, and economic role of organized sports in our society, it becomes apparent that rather than offering a vehicle for fair play,

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer A. Richeson, “Who’s in Charge? Effects of Situational Roles on Automatic Gender Bias,” *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, May 2001.

athletics are enforcing gender disparities with consequences far beyond the field. Up until now, women have been grateful for “progress” and fearful of losing ground. Likewise, the conventional wisdom that differences in treatment are rooted in biological differences between males and females has prevented serious scrutiny of the effect of unfair policies and practices. There is a pressing need to untangle the biases surrounding presumptions of male and female athletic experience and the acquisition of skills and experience that are relevant and applicable long after the game ends. If we all instantly grasp and accept the demanding dominance of “the quarterback” on those around him but cannot consider how a female can be a strong principal without being “a bitch,” it is clear that we need better ways of understanding and talking about gender, sports, and leadership.

### Project Goals

The Women’s Sports Leadership Project has the overarching goal of collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information on gender disparities in organized athletics for the purpose of articulating a new vision of female leadership that legitimizes and connects athletic experience to off-the-field skills. In connecting athletics with economic, social, and political power this project seeks recognition that organized athletics has a democratic role and responsibility to promote gender-equitable policies and practices.

There exists research on women’s leadership -- and research on women in athletics, (particularly surrounding benefits of sport for women). But there is a dearth of work connecting women’s athletic experience with leadership roles. Likewise, there is not a clear examination and comparison of how athletics experiences among women affect leadership opportunities and how that compares to men. A key question: What is the career/leadership trajectory for female athletes compared with male athletes?

This project will articulate a leadership prototype for women that connects athletic experience with off-the-field skills applicable elsewhere. As part of this effort, the project will uncover strategies useful to women seeking to break gender barriers (including in refereeing, coaching, professional sports management). It will be critical to

describe the network and relationships among male leaders in business, sports, and political arenas and understand to what extent a similar network does or does not exist for women and suggest how such a network may be built or expanded.

Central to this project is the belief that equity on the field is related to equity off the field. As a result, we will contribute both data to serve as “evidence” of disparities in need of redress as well analyses to frame questions critical to challenging gender inequities. This will include study of evolving case law and legal theory useful to challenging existing policies and practices. While the project has several distinct tasks – from collecting data on ticket prices for men’s and women’s college sports, to tracking legal challenges and results, and studying male and female athlete career opportunities – all areas support the larger project goal of understanding the relationship between leadership success and women’s athletic experiences.

## **THIS PART OF THE PROJECT:**

### **1. Keeping Score: Collecting Data on Sports Inequality.**

The chief obstacles facing women who object to differential treatment in athletics has been two-fold. On the one hand, we hear argued that “market forces” dictate the lesser status and support for female athletic play. On the other, differential treatment is justified by “physical differences.” Some scholars have described the taken-for-granted presumption of male athletic superiority as “gender logic.”<sup>9</sup> This belief system concludes that female athletes are naturally inferior to males, males are naturally superior athletes, and when females do play sports they are not as interesting to watch because they do not match male performance standards. Such a belief system is self-perpetuating, treating male athletics as high drama and female athletics as second-class.

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<sup>9</sup> Karen H. Weiller and Ctriona T. Higgs, “Television Coverage of Professional Golf: A Focus on Gender,” *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 8 no. 1 (1999): 83.

In everyday terms, “gender logic” plays out in that at ages in which research shows no physical gender-based differences, we continue to find rule, treatment, and financial differences whose only visible purpose is to enforce different status for male and female play. For example, USGA youth rules call for 12-year-old girls in golf tournaments to play 9 holes while 12-year-old boys play 18. In college soccer (a non-revenue-producing sports) we find public institutions charging \$4 to watch the women’s soccer team and \$7 to watch the men’s soccer team, a difference that does not substantially affect the bottom line, but labels one play as more legitimate than others (research has shown correlations between what fans pay for sporting event tickets and how they regard the event, with the more they pay, the more they value the athletic play.)

This “**Keeping Score**” aspect of the project will collect data around 1) rule and/or structural differences in youth sports play and 2) **ticket price** and 3) coach salary differences among specified revenue and non-revenue-producing college sports. In the first case, the reason for focusing on youth sports is because research shows no gender-based athletic performance differences before puberty, suggesting a powerful (and damaging) social effect in place. If there are not enough examples in youth sports, we may consider broadening the inquiry to include Olympic sports and/or recreational league sports. The power of youth sports, of course, is that they shape young girls’ perceptions and conceptions of what they are – or are not – capable of doing. By the time too many girls reach puberty, self-censorship and self-limitation dictate “choices.”

**In the second case, we will collect data from Division I colleges, looking at ticket price differences in men’s and women’s sports in three seasons: soccer, possibly ice hockey, and baseball/softball or lacrosse. We may also collect data on basketball. In the case of basketball, we will need to collect one additional data point for comparison, either NCAA tournament appearances in past 5 years or another figure that will allow for comparisons of the teams’ relative success (perhaps promotional budget?). Some of this information may be available on college web sites or through NCAA data collection. Other data may require directly contacting athletic departments. We may want to also consider collecting**

data of this nature at select high schools, which while subject to Title IX do not have the same awareness around compliance or have the same reporting requirements as college sports (though there is a proposed law to change this). While this is a massive undertaking, being able to understand the scope and nature of differential financial value in the form of salaries and ticket prices at institutions subject to Title IX rules will be valuable and enlightening.