

Gender inequality and sexism in sports

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Conflict has remained at the centre-stage of international relations across various epochs of global history. However, the attempt to reduce conflicts has also been a constant. In the myriads of tools and mechanisms that have emerged to reduce possibilities of conflict, sports stands out. Diplomacy is practised through sports and sports events facilitate dialogue and cooperation among countries. International sports events also promote cross-cultural understandings, contributing to people-to-people contacts. Hosting major sports events also boost tourism and economic growth, while enhancing national prestige.



Gender inequality (Shutterstock)

Examples of how sports contribute to the easing of tensions between countries include ping-pong diplomacy of 1971 when United States (US)-China table tennis exchanges eased tensions and the 2018 Winter Olympics when North and South Korea marched together, promoting unity. While sports in itself has great potentials to reduce conflict, it remains marred by a lack of gender equality and sexism. Gender inequality has always remained and continues to remain a big source of discrimination leading to various forms of social and political conflicts. Sexism in sports is a persistent issue that has affected women athletes, coaches as well as officials.

To begin with, there is the ever-persistent, across professions' issue of pay disparity. Women often receive lower salaries, prizes and endorsements. As per *Forbes* in 2022, female athletes earn 30-50% less than their male counterparts. Women's National Basketball Association players' minimum salary as of 2022-23 was \$41,965, while that of National Basketball Players was \$1.5 million. The bonus for women's World Cup soccer champions in

the US was \$250,000 while that for men's world cup winners was \$38 million! Women also receive lower endorsements, as well as limited opportunities as compared to men. There are fewer women's teams, leagues and competitions for women, in addition to inadequate facilities and resources. There is also an absolute lack of representation in leadership positions in addition to the stereotyping and objectification of women in media and amongst fan attitudes.

Billie Jean King, Wilma Rudolph, Mia Hamm, Serena Williams, and Simone Biles are just a few of the many athletes who have tried to combat sexism in sports, but the struggle is far from over. In 2022, Serena Williams earned \$22 million while Novak Djokovic earned \$148 million! In 2022 again, Megan Rapinoe earned \$447,000, while Cristiano Ronaldo earned \$127 million! In the same year, Breanna Stewart earned \$119,000 while Stephen Curry earned \$40 million! If sports in itself were not plagued by sexism, the media's irresponsible attitudes only add fuel to fire. The bias in the media against women athletes leads to a disproportionate focus on male sports, a sexualisation of women athletes, and a presentation of the very few women commentators and analysts as not being mentally competent enough, and as a mere tool for eyeball attraction. An example of this is the media focus on Serena Williams' body and motherhood. In 2024, Sania Mirza stated how in her career, even after winning six grand slams, she got more questions about her personal life, rather than about her game!

The problem plagues even socialist countries, which in principle aim at various forms of equality, including gender equality. Even in China, where immediately after the creation of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong stated "Women hold up half the sky", deeply rooted sexist attitudes find their way even into sports. Just the way it is in the most powerful country of the existing system, the US, women's sports in China receive less funding, less resources, and less attention. Women athletes face expectations to conform to traditional feminine roles. Sexist media coverages focus only on physical appearances, while women athletes earn significantly less than their male counterparts. Women hold very few leadership positions in Chinese sports. Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai disappeared in 2021 after she made accusations of sexual assault against retired Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli. Her whereabouts remain unknown. Women's sports sections in newspapers often feature models and not athletes. Confucian values emphasize women's domestic roles, while traditional gender norms prioritise men's physical strength and there is a social pressure on women to prioritise family over career.

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Across the world, women's sports in any case receive just 2-5% of total sports media coverage. Even when it does get coverage, there is a lack of prime-time scheduling. To add to the quagmire, women's achievements are often diminished by labelling them "good for a woman". The problem is that the issue of sexism is not limited to sports alone. In the myriad ways within the domain of sports, that women are subjugated to discrimination, it leads to an adverse impact on the athletes' self-esteem and body image. It continues to perpetuate pay disparity, adds to the normalising of stereotyping and objectification and perpetuates the societal existence of sexism.

While women athletes have outlined and discussed the sexism in sports at great lengths, the issue still remains, and there is an urgent need to increase representation and diversity in sports media, support advocacy groups and initiatives, to promote women's sports as standalone events while encouraging inclusive and respectful commentary. There is also an urgent need to increase investment in women's sports infrastructure, to ensure equal pay policies and sponsorship deals, and increasing viewership through targeted marketing. Otherwise, sports, which has great potentials to reduce conflicts, becomes just another mechanism to further gender-based conflicts.

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