

Gender Equality within the Sports Legal Framework: A Comprehensive Analysis and Future Perspectives

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Abstract

Sport cannot be discussed without mentioning gender as one of the social and economic equality topics in the world. Nevertheless, despite the recent improvements in international, European, and national laws, gender discrimination still occurs in different aspects such as representation, opportunities, and funding. In particular, this paper looks at the current challenges facing female athletes in terms of wages, the media, and career opportunities. It also pays special attention to the international and national standards and their effectiveness in eliminating such inequalities, and the impact on sports governance and athlete opportunities. A key focus is placed on efforts to foster inclusivity and equality, particularly through awareness-raising campaigns and policies aimed at supporting women in sport. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting on the gradual pace of change and emphasises the need for collective action to continue to chip away at the cultural barriers that prevent women from being adequately represented in sport.

Keywords

Gender Equality, Sports Governance, Sports Legal Framework, Gender Discrimination, Wage Disparity, Sports Inclusivity, Female Representation, Women's Opportunities in Sport

1. Introduction

Gender equality has become an important topic in international and national institutions and is now regarded as a human rights issue. Sport being one of the most popular global activities, this issue captures our attention. Sport is one of the most excluded sectors in terms of the full integration of women and minorities in the universal celebration of the activity. The gender gap in sports is not just about

who gets opportunities or attention; it also raises legal, economic and cultural issues. Therefore, sports governance rules must guarantee fair treatment at all levels, from the formation of the rules to their practical application. The IOC and FIFA have each made some steps towards gender equality, but there are still distances that need to be covered and they need to be looked at more closely and discussed more often.

2. State of the Art

Various research has been conducted to understand the manner in which gender equality is addressed in sports and if the current laws are sufficient. Fink (2016) and Messner (2002) have also studied the way in which changes in society affect the development of sports organizations and the negotiation of gender roles within such organizations. Many of the legal discussions focus on international treaties for example the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (UN General Assembly, 1979) which is an international treaty that has addressed the issue of equality in all aspects of life including sports. Academic interest has also been drawn to the policies of global organizations like the IOC and FIFA. Nevertheless, despite the existence of legal provisions that are meant to enhance equality between men and women, there is a discrepancy between the two. This is because, often, such laws are not fully enforced or are violated by deeply rooted cultures that continue to hinder women. The issues of availability, resources, and visibility of female athletes continue to be an issue, which shows that legal equality does not always result in equality.

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to examine how gender equality is addressed in sports organizations and how effective the laws that are enacted to ensure equality are. The works of Fink (2016) and Messner (2002) are significant in understanding the impact of social changes on the development of sports organizations and the negotiation of gender roles within these organizations. Many legal discussions are based on international treaties including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which is an international treaty that has addressed equality in all aspects of life, including sports. Of particular interest is the policies of global organizations like the IOC and FIFA which have drawn the attention of academics. However, the problem is that although there are legal provisions for gender equality, the real gap between the theory and practice is still huge. In some cases, these laws are not fully enforced or are not enforced due to strongly rooted traditions that prevent women's advancement.

4. The International Legal Framework on Gender Equality

The international legal system provides a foundation for understanding the significance of gender equality in sports. Various international agreements, some dating back to the 19th century, have underscored the necessity of equal opportunities for

all individuals, irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, or nationality. Among these, the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) stands out as a key treaty affirming the universal right of women to participate in all spheres of social, political, and economic life, including sports. The ratification of CEDAW by UN member states has spurred significant legal reforms, driving progress toward greater inclusivity in sports governance and participation.

Despite the formal commitments established by international treaties, their implementation often faces challenges due to deeply ingrained cultural biases and societal norms that restrict women's roles in professional sports. Historically, many sports have been male-dominated, making integration difficult. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has made strides in promoting female representation in Olympic events and advocating for gender balance across disciplines. However, while these efforts have led to incremental progress, achieving full gender equality in sports requires more than policy enactment it demands structural and cultural shifts that translate legal provisions into everyday realities.

5. The European Union and Measures for Gender Balance in Sports

The European Union has taken a proactive role in promoting gender equality in sports, reinforcing legal mandates with concrete initiatives aimed at fostering balance in participation, leadership, and media representation. The Treaty on European Union (TEU) enshrines non-discrimination and equality as core values, while the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union expands these protections to explicitly guarantee gender parity. The Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 sets forth a structured plan to eliminate disparities, particularly in male-dominated fields such as professional and amateur sports.

Financial support from EU programs, including Erasmus + Sport, has facilitated projects that enhance female representation in coaching, administration, and athletic participation across Europe. One notable initiative is the "She Runs" project, an Erasmus-backed campaign focused on empowering young women through sports and leadership training. Despite these efforts, entrenched gender norms and resistance within sports institutions continue to hinder full implementation. This underscores the challenge of translating policy into practice—achieving true gender balance requires dismantling structural biases and ensuring equal access to resources, training, and opportunities

6. Gender Equality in National Legal Systems

At the national level, Italy and several other European countries have integrated international and EU directives on gender equality into their sports legislation. However, practical implementation often falls short, creating a discrepancy between legal provisions and actual outcomes. Italian law has long recognized equality between men and women, but wage disparity remains a dominant issue, with male

professional athletes continuing to receive far higher pay than their female counterparts, despite similar commitment and performance. One significant milestone in addressing this issue has been the recent recognition of professional status for female football players in Italy, a reform that aims to bridge the financial gap between male and female athletes.

Another critical challenge is female representation in sports governance. Women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles within national and international sports federations. Although legal frameworks encourage diversity, the enforcement of quotas and incentives to promote female participation in governance remains inconsistent. This reflects not only a gap in regulations but also the inadequacy of concrete policies in addressing the culture of inequality.

7. Persistent Disparities in the Sports Sector

Despite legislative and policy advancements, significant gender disparities persist in the sports sector. One of the most debated issues remains the wage gap between male and female athletes. While professional men's sports attract greater financial investment and sponsorship, women's sports often struggle to secure equal funding, leading to discrepancies in salaries, prize money, and career longevity. The market logic, which fuels sponsorships and television rights, often does not favor female athletes, who are relegated to a media shadow that prevents them from being valued as much as their male counterparts. Moreover, limited visibility and media coverage further reinforce this financial imbalance, as reduced exposure diminishes commercial opportunities for female athletes and their leagues.

8. Positive Examples of Gender Equality in Sports

Despite ongoing disparities, some sports have made significant strides toward gender equality. Tennis is one of the few major sports where female athletes have achieved financial and media visibility parity with their male counterparts. Grand Slam tournaments, including Wimbledon and the US Open, now offer equal prize money for male and female players—a milestone that was achieved through decades of advocacy and institutional support. The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) has not only been instrumental in ensuring pay equity but has also championed policies that promote equal media exposure and sponsorship opportunities for female athletes.

Beyond tennis, progress has been seen in other disciplines as well. For instance, Norway's Football Federation implemented an equal pay policy for its national teams, ensuring that female players receive the same match compensation as their male counterparts. The United States Women's National Soccer Team has also led legal battles that resulted in landmark agreements for equal pay. These examples demonstrate that institutional commitment, legal frameworks, and sustained advocacy efforts can drive meaningful change in sports gender equality. Applying similar strategies—such as equalizing prize money, securing dedicated sponsorship deals, and increasing media exposure—could facilitate greater gender equality in other

disciplines, particularly team sports where disparities remain pronounced.

9. Conclusion

Achieving full gender equality in sports remains a complex and ongoing challenge. While international and national legal policies provide an essential framework, their effectiveness depends on sustained enforcement and cultural shifts. The case of tennis illustrates how gender parity can be achieved through a combination of legal frameworks, media strategies, and financial investment. Similarly, progress in women's football and other disciplines has shown that collective bargaining, legal battles, and institutional commitment are key to bridging gender gaps.

To replicate these successes, sports organizations must adopt proactive measures, including ensuring equitable prize money, expanding sponsorship opportunities for female athletes, and enforcing policies that guarantee balanced media coverage. The sports system is still dominated by market logic, gender stereotypes, and cultural resistance, which hinder the full recognition of female athletes and their abilities. Therefore, it is crucial that regulations go beyond mere legal text and are accompanied by everyday actions and a true cultural change within sports institutions, the media, and public opinion.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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