

Foul on the Play!

Examining gender inequities in professional North American sports

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Problem

Women's sports in North America are on the rise, but the long-term viability of leagues proves to be a struggle due to unrecognized and unaddressed inequities other than insufficient compensation.

Methods

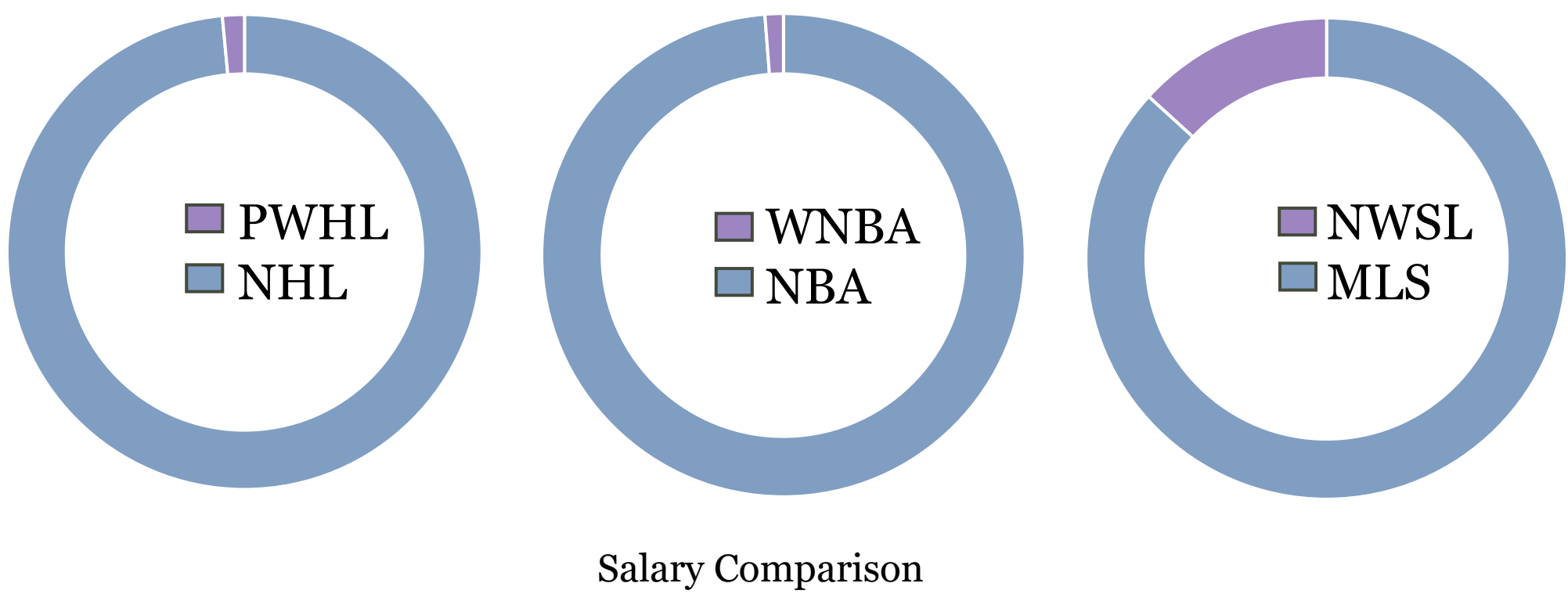
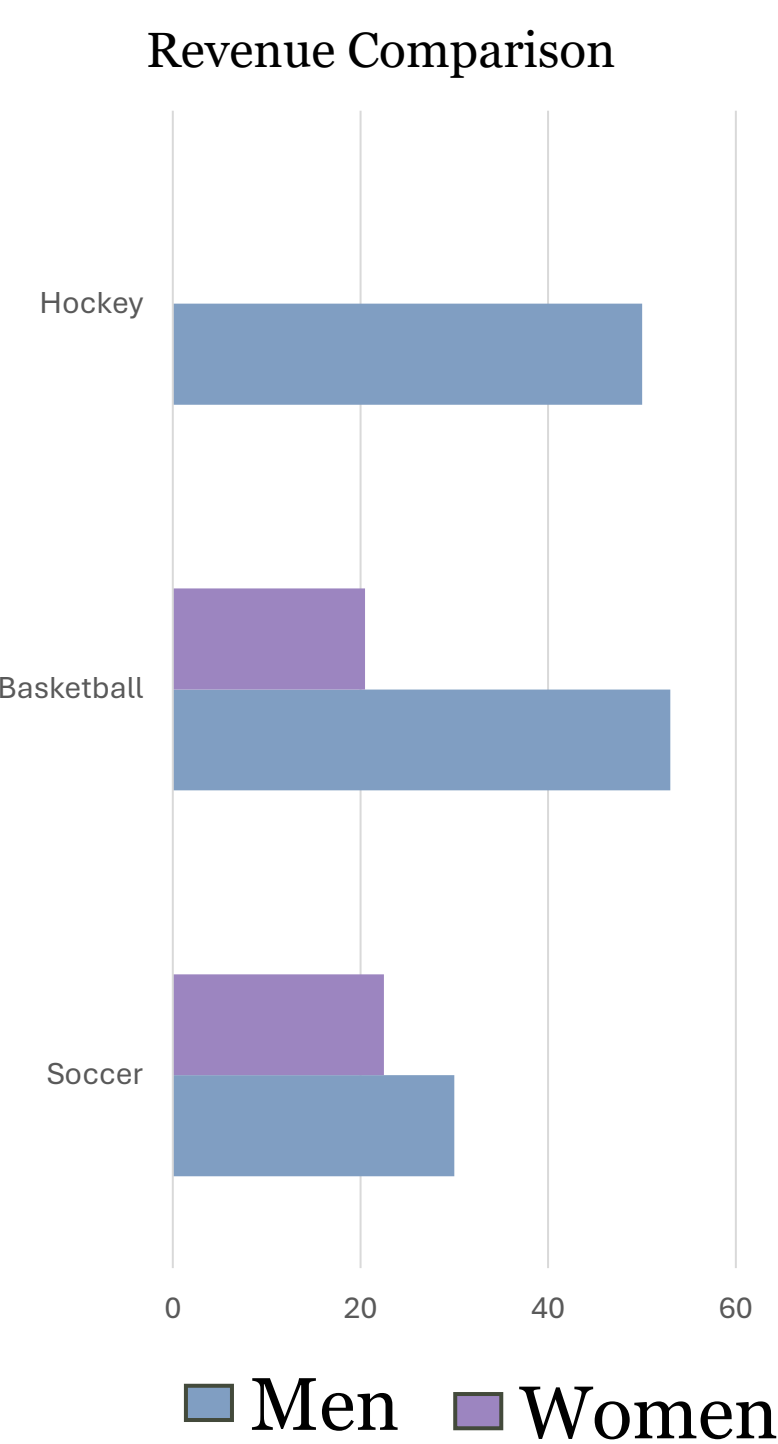
This research reviews media reports and the scholarly literature about the sustainability of women's hockey, basketball, and soccer leagues in North America.

Background

PWHL vs. NHL
No revenue split¹ vs. 50% of league revenue²
Average salary: \$55,000¹ vs. \$3,630,000³

WNBA vs. NBA
20.5% vs. 53% of league revenue⁴
Average salary: \$147,745⁵ vs. \$11,910,649⁶

NWSL vs. MLS
~22.5% v. 25-30% of league revenue⁷
Average salary: \$54,000⁸ vs. \$354,390⁹



History

Creating a sustainable league has been difficult, as proven by the history of league existence

Hockey

-CWHL (2007-2019)
-NWHL (2015-2021)
-PWHPA (2021-)
-PHF (NWHL rebrand) (2021-2023)
-PWHL (est. 2023)

Basketball

-WBPL (1978-1981)
-LPBA (one month) (1980)
-WABA (1984)
-NWBA (canceled before regular season) (1986)
-WBA (1993-1995)
-WNBA (est. 1996)
-Unrivaled (3x3) (est. 2025)

Soccer

-WUSA (failed relaunch) (2001-2003)
-WPS (2007-2012)
-NWSL (est. 2012)
-NSL (est. 2025)

Findings

1. Geographic Accessibility

- Early professional hockey saw players live in one state and travel to play with their teams in another on the weekend¹⁰
- The WNBA did not provide charter flights until the 2024 season¹¹
- Small league sizes = spread out markets, making geographic accessibility difficult for fans



2. Advertising, Investment, and Media Rights

- Women's sports rarely exceed 10% of media coverage and comprise ~3-5% of televised coverage¹²
- The NWSL's \$1.5 million CBS-exclusive deal limited distribution, exposure, and accessibility¹³
- NWHL relied heavily on private investors to fund league operations¹⁴

3. Facilities

- The Connecticut Sun's (WNBA) practice "facility" is part of Mohegan Community and Government Center ¹⁵
- NWHL players shared youth-size locker rooms, had limited-to-no bathroom access, played games after public skates, and practiced on miniature ice rinks¹⁶
- 13 of 14 NWSL teams play in a shared stadium¹⁷



4. Player Involvement and League Transparency

- NWHL player salaries cut by 38% five games into year two without warning¹⁴
- The first Collective Bargaining Agreement (2022) in the NWSL was not created until ten years after the league's establishment¹⁸
- WNBA¹⁹ and NWSL²⁰ players could be traded without their knowledge or consent



5. Infrastructure

- Professional hockey players had limited access to medical staff, athletic trainers and physical therapists, and specialized coaching staff (i.e. strength and conditioning)¹⁴
- Lack of healthcare and similar benefits, including paid parental leave^{14 18}
- Increased risk of injury without proper resources for prevention and rehab²¹
- High turnover rates for coaching, management, and assorted operations staff¹⁰

Progress

Hockey:

- The PWHL held an evaluation camp, allowing players and staff to negotiate league operations, including game presentation and rule changes¹⁴
- The league curated more than 40 brand partnerships, including Barbie²²
- As part of the CBA, players receive a housing stipend¹⁴

Basketball:

- Three WNBA teams have built dedicated player practice facilities, with seven more planning or currently building their own²³
- A new media rights deal is expected to see a 67% value increase at time of renewal (end of 2025)¹³
- Unrivaled (3x3 league) offered an alternative offseason opportunity for WNBA players²⁴ with all the amenities in one facility

Soccer:

- The NWSL penned a \$240 million, four-year media deal (\$60 million per season)with multiple broadcasters and has dedicated pre-match, halftime, and post-match shows¹³
- The Kansas City Current constructed the first-ever dedicated professional women's stadium²⁵
- In 2025, Canada established the first professional women's soccer league in the nation, the Northern Super League

Results

- The PWHL set six attendance records for women's hockey in its inaugural season²²
- 123,601 total fans attended nine neutral-site games in the 2024-25 season²⁶
- The WNBA saw a 93% increase in league ticket sales for the 2024 season¹³
- The New York Liberty's 2024 playoff run generated \$18.3 million for New York City²⁷
- Unrivaled made \$27 million in revenue, almost breaking even in its first season²⁴
- The NWSL saw a 42% year-over-year increase in attendance in 2024, surpassing one million fans for the third year straight; six clubs set attendance records²⁸
- Viewership saw a total of 24 million viewers across all platforms in the 2024 season²⁹

Next Steps

Capitalizing on the exponential growth of women's sports in North America is essential to the viability of these leagues. To ensure sustainability, addressing these inequities—building dedicated facilities with full-time access to staff, protecting players' rights and offering appropriate benefits, including athletes in decision-making, increased media coverage, and fan accessibility, to name a few—will benefit the industry tremendously.

References

