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The Interdependence of Feminism and Women's Sports

One of the easiest connections you can make to feminism as a young girl is on the playground. Growing up, my first experiences with the word feminism surrounded sports and competition. I always tried my best to wear shorts and sneakers for daily kickball games, much to my mother's displeasure, constantly prepared to jump in with the sports teams on the playground that were mostly made up of boys. I noticed it in the socially dictated dress code that allowed my brother to comfortably play sports during recess, left me running barefoot in the grass, keeping an eye on my sandals placed under a nearby tree. I first grasped the real meaning of feminism when I finally joined a soccer team, surrounded by the genuine connections, empowerment, and camaraderie sports provide that I haven't experienced anywhere else. I took bits and pieces of philosophy from the field, my teammates, and later from my female club coach. But with the constant and adjacent rise of the United States Women's National Soccer Team, gaining national and global platforms, I began to absorb the ideas they projected as well. I grew up in a half Argentinian household where Messi was, and still is, king of the field, but as I became more invested in the sport that drove the world crazy, and the older I got, I turned my eyes to women's soccer specifically when I was looking to play better. At practices, I began to notice the names Morgan and Rapinoe in sentences where I'd normally hear Messi and Ronaldo. Something was happening, and I didn't fully understand what it was until I attended my first

U.S. Women's game with some teammates for my birthday in 2012 while they were on their World Cup Tour. In those stands I could feel the collective empowerment and strengthening of a movement on the rise. This feminist movement through women's sports isn't something new, it didn't begin with Megan Rapinoe's call for equal pay, it began in the 1970s with a broader goal, to promote women's representation in sports as a whole. Women's sports has seen some major gains throughout the past few decades, but women's representation in sports is gaining this ground with the help of a feminist backing. By examining the past and the present, we can look into the future of women's representation in sports through the work of athletes like Billie Jean King and Megan Rapinoe, as well as growing sports like women's soccer and hockey, and its effects on the local, national, and global scale.

With second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 70s, women's representation in sports began to gain some traction and this is really where we begin to see women's sports ease onto the world stage in an attempt to prove that women can play sports, and just as well as men. Second-wave feminism pushed for the ideas that women were culturally and politically oppressed, and exposed everyday examples of normal activities and encounters to prove their point, and what better platform to expose the inequalities between the lives of men and women than through sports. The movement for the progress and recognition of women's sports was pushed by second-wave feminism and the passage of Title IX in 1972, a combination of feminism and policy.¹ Title IX originally was passed on the basis that women and men needed equal opportunities in school, and that included funding, amenities, and programs, but many slowly began to realize that this applied to women's sports as well.² Title IX gave women's

¹ Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports*, University of North Carolina Press, 2011. p. 8

² Education Amendments Act of 1972, 20 U.S.C. §§1681 - 1688 (2019).

sports teams in schools better practice times, use of better facilities, and access to school funding, where before these simple and basic needs of women's sports teams were severely overlooked. Title IX, whether it intended to rock the boat as much as it did or not, played a major role in promoting the equality of men and women, propelling the ideas of second wave feminism and reshaping American society in ways most people didn't expect it to.³

These two major players in the progress of women's representation in sports came to a head in 1973 with the Battle of the Sexes and tennis player Billie Jean King. Billie Jean King and her Battle of the Sexes tennis match against Bobby Riggs was the ultimate example of the culmination of second-wave feminism and the recognition of women athletes. It was a battle between male and female, a deciding match on whether or not the success of an athlete was limited to their sex. In her book, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports*, Susan Ware writes, "In just under two hours, she forced a reexamination of what it meant to be female and an athlete, or as a New York Times editorial later put it, 'In a single tennis match, Billie Jean King was able to do more for the cause of women than most feminists can achieve in a lifetime.'"⁴ The game was highly political and influential, and Billie Jean King knew this, and recognized that this game meant more than just tennis. With constant sexism in the sport and in the media that covered it, she recognized that she created a special platform, a world stage, and she planned to use it wisely. Ware elaborates that, "Billie Jean King's decision to play Bobby Riggs was a conscious political act. She always realized that the match was much bigger than just tennis, and she was willing to put her hard-won credibility on

³ Kelly Belanger, "Conclusion: Defining Moments," In *Invisible Seasons: Title IX and the Fight for Equity in College Sports*, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2016.

⁴ Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports*, p. 2

the line to prove the point that women deserved just as much respect as men."⁵ The game was televised, highly reported, and her victory left a huge impact on the sport of tennis and women's sports in general, that paved the way for women's sports as we know it today, and even though the work isn't finished it broke ground and laid the foundation. In light of the progress made from the 1970s through the end of the 90s, renowned soccer player, coach, and administrator April Heinrichs stated, "When we look back in 20 years, I really think we are going to say that the Billie Jean King–Bobby Riggs tennis match, Title IX and the 1999 Women's World Cup are the three largest pillars supporting women's sports in this country," and she was certainly right.⁶

Today, the average girl entering the age of political and feministic awareness doesn't associate Title IX with sports, with more attention being drawn towards its use in cases of sexual harassment in light of the Me Too movement, and Billie Jean King isn't a major player in the sports world of the current generation, many don't even know who she is. We are currently in the age of the United States Women's National Soccer Team, more commonly referred to as the USWNT, and Megan Rapinoe.

The USWNT, as it's come to be called, is the current major player in the call for the representation of women in sports. The most famous women's team, and arguably the most famous soccer team in the world, currently has the world stage. And the world is certainly watching, as the players call for the tearing down of the next wall keeping women from equality: equal pay. The success of the women's soccer team comes from an almost grassroots following, with the winning of the first FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991, then later in 1999, 2015, and most recently, 2019. As a result of this publicity that has followed this team over the past three

⁵ Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports*, p. 7

⁶ Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports*, p. 2

decades, we have a generation of female athletes, groomed by competition and a rise in feminism, who have grown up in the light of new expectations, ideas, and values regarding what life should be like for women in the western world, and around the globe based off of the representation female athletes now have. The USWNT has brought about an age of awareness to the current female generation, similar to Billie Jean King, but have kept it going by continuously setting goals and knocking them down with their new found representation. Beginning with the Initiation of the FIFA Women's World Cup and up to their current campaign for equal pay, headed by their captain, Megan Rapinoe.

It's difficult to tie a movement to a team, like the USWNT, because each member operates on different levels within the team when things get political. For this reason, I think a focus on Megan Rapinoe would be more beneficial than to look at the team as a whole. Megan Rapinoe is an interesting figure in sports, with a strong division between those who would follow her to the ends of the Earth, and others who publicly condemn her at the mention of her name in simple conversation. The tabloids and news stories that surround her follow a similar polarization, mostly stemming from her repertoire of protest, which includes kneeling for the National Anthem and declining her invitation to the White House in 2019, but she could care less. Rapinoe's main cause, as of 2019, is to promote equal pay for women, starting with her team and then the nation. Rapinoe has become the most talked about spokesperson for women's sports today for various causes, but the most current one is equal pay. She has spoken out through hundreds of interviews and speeches, on and off the field, making her major, and most well known call to the U.S. soccer federation in an interview within an hour of winning the FIFA Women's World Cup. In a speech during the team's most recent champions parade in New York

City, she stated "I think this team does an incredible job of taking that on our shoulders, and understanding the position that we have and the platform that we have within this world. Yes, we play sports. Yes, we play soccer. Yes, we are female athletes, but we're so much more than that."

⁷ There's a platform, and she and her teammates recognize that. With representation in the sport, followed with success, the female athletes now have leverage, and a strong backing of young girls ready to follow. Rapinoe's stated in an interview that with the team's success, "We've managed to give people hope and with that now we need to do the next step, which is to actually take the progress step."⁸ With this platform recognized, Rapinoe has tirelessly fought for equal pay for her and her teammates, in hopes that it will lead to equal pay for all women in general, throwing in the final punch after talks break down in August of 2019, "You either value us equally, and you show that, or you don't."⁹ She's become an icon for young girls to follow in the expectation of equality, and support of women, not just in sports but outside of them as well, soccer is just the vehicle.

During the hearings and discussion, a lot of controversy has arisen over the fact that the women's team does get paid more than the men by the federation, which is true in a sense, but misinformed. Many people who take that side of the argument neglect to look at the source of those numbers, which are based off of a collective yearly salary. The main argument that Rapinoe and her teammates are trying to make is over the issue of bonus pay that each player gets for wins and ties, regardless of base pay. So even though the women's team has a higher

⁷ Megan Rapinoe, "Megan Rapinoe's Full Speech at U.S. Women's World Cup Champions Parade", *Global News*, July 10, 2019

⁸ Megan Rapinoe, "Full Rapinoe: 'We've Managed To Just Give People Hope,'" interview by Chuck Todd, *Meet the Press*, NBC, July 14, 2019

⁹ Megan Rapinoe and Christen Press, "Megan Rapinoe, Christen Press React to Soccer's Ongoing Fair Pay Fight," interview by Savannah Guthrie, *Today*, NBC News, August 15, 2019

salary, based off of the men's payscale of bonuses, the pay isn't equal. The issue comes with team and league revenue. In an article about the call for equal pay, Kevin Baxter states "The U.S. women and the French men put in equal work and probably deserve equal reward. But how do we pay for that when revenue is so one-sided?"¹⁰ The argument of pay and revenue is the main discussion the USWNT is having, but this has already been achieved in Norway, as Baxter explains, "maybe the women shouldn't have to pay their way since it's in the sport's best interest to have healthy teams on both sides. Norway figured that out 18 months ago when its federation became the first to agree to equal pay for its men's and women's teams, with the men agreeing to take a cut to make that happen."¹¹ Once the issue of equal pay is brought up, the next step is to garner support for expected revenue, which is argued to be the future of feminism in sports.

The future of women's sports, beyond equal pay, can arguably be seen in two goals: The support of national leagues, and the globalization of recognition in women's sports. Recently, November 18th, 2019, Hayley Wickenheiser was accepted as the seventh female hockey player into the Hockey Hall of Fame. Her speech highlighted the differences in experiences for young girls who wanted to play hockey against those of boys, and how much it's changed since she joined the sport. She talks about cutting her hair and sleeping in closets, to developing an ulcer from the stress of walking past disapproving parents and players, "I wanted to play the game so bad, I didn't care what I had to endure."¹² To play women's sports, an athlete has to be willing to make sacrifices. To support women's sports, leagues and federations have to be willing to make

¹⁰ Megan Rapinoe and Christen Press, "Megan Rapinoe, Christen Press React to Soccer's Ongoing Fair Pay Fight,"

¹¹ Kevin Baxter, "On Soccer; Level Paying Field; Demands for 'Equal Pay,' as Espoused by the U.S. Women's Soccer Team, would Require an Honest Conversation and a Deep Dive into Accounting," *Los Angeles Times*, Jul 14, 2019.

¹² Hayley Wickenheiser, "Wickenheiser's Induction Speech", *NHL Network*, November 18, 2019

sacrifices. Women's sports leagues in the United States and Canada exist for some sports and don't for others, but in order to generate recognition of leagues, and even existence, women's sports needs funding. The most recent talk regarding a women's sports league on the rise is focused on the rise of the National Women's Hockey League, the NWHL. The NWHL existed in past years, but has struggled and recently seen their Canadian counterparts disband due to a lack of funding, unable to pay players and stadiums. It has functioned more like the AHL, the American Hockey League, than the NHL, and yet the AHL still runs strong despite being a league of waiting call-ups, no offense to them. So what's the difference? Why are these women's teams failing? The answer is money. Women's sports leagues are severely underfunded, and this underfunding means cuts in advertisement and resources, leaving women's leagues muffled under their more successful and well-funded male counterparts. You can't expect a league to prosper without taking a gamble and giving it a proper investment, you get out of a league what you put into it. To combat this league decline, the small collection of the NWHL are looking to the WNBA for guidance. The Women's National Basketball Association, or the WNBA, is the longest running women's sports league, paving the way for other sports to form female leagues, and coincidentally serving as a model for women's hockey. In a New York Times article, Seth Berkman sheds light on the road ahead for the NWHL and their plan for a "big brother, little sister" league relationship with the NHL, similar to the WNBA and the NBA.¹³ Players and administrators are calling for this relationship because they've seen its success before with teams like the Buffalo Beauties, where close ties means better funding, allowing for better teams and attendance from fans. This isn't a sure plan, with issues of equal pay and television exposure but

¹³ Seth Berkman, "Can the W.N.B.A. Be a Model for Women's Hockey?" *The New York Times*, May 23, 2019.

it's a start. The NHL has begun to recognize the importance of women's hockey following the most recent Winter Olympics in 2018. The league responded with the inclusion of women in their 2019 All-Star Skills Competition, in hopes of boosting support for their female athletes and bring in more support from the NHL fanbase, where USA Women's Hockey player Kendall Coyne-Schofield placed 7th out of eight in the fastest skater competition to prove that the women players could keep up with the fast paced game just as well as the men. There has also been a call for representation of women's leagues in merchandising as well, and Berkman and Layshia Clarendon say it best:

Nike, the official supplier of W.N.B.A. merchandise, has recently been accused of treating female athletes differently. Its online store does not sell any W.N.B.A. player-specific merchandise, a similar complaint among women's hockey players. 'How do you build a fan base when you can't buy jerseys?' said Layshia Clarendon, a guard for the Connecticut Sun.¹⁴

Leagues can't be expected to progress without equal merchandising and funding. With the rise in views of women's sports in global leagues and Olympic games, it only seems logical that women's leagues have and will see a rise in attendance, calling for the proper creation of women's leagues for all sports that work with their male counterparts.

The second, and more ambitious goal of feminism in women's sports is globalization. In interviews following the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup one comment was consistent, the competition is getting better. In response Rapinoe stated, "they've thrown money behind them and, shocker, they're doing better." The success of women's soccer in the United States on the world stage has been spreading to other sports and the rest of the globe through its strong representation of women, and through that platform, has begun to spread feminist ideals,

¹⁴ Seth Berkman, "Can the W.N.B.A. Be a Model for Women's Hockey?"

consciously by some and unintentionally by others. This has led to major breakthroughs in other countries with women's sports, like FIFA's recent plan to invest one billion dollars in women's soccer, and the South Korean women's hockey team in the 2018 Winter Olympics. Women's sports is breaking borders and boundaries beyond the United States, logically following its national progression in the United States. However, there's an issue here, feminism and women's sports is a largely Western idea. This leads to a lot of backlash that becomes apparent in the expectation of women's sports abroad. In a critical essay on the success of the USWNT, Tani Barlow, a historian of modern China states that, "women around the world are seen to heed the U.S. women's achievements even despite their own oppressive states. They can do so without disloyalty to local cultures because international feminism connects undervalued local women with the universalizing value of (U.S.) dollars."¹⁵ And as much as American and Western feminists hate to admit it, she has a point. By promoting their Western feminist ideals, and in an attempt to promote international and globalized feminism, women's sports teams ironically hurt the countries they are aiming to change. Barlow explains this through the most obvious example, that in order to promote feminism and gain a platform, Western teams have to beat other teams, setting them back and putting under abounding pressure from their countries and women. International and global feminism is definitely where women's sports is headed, whether they like it or not, and it will be interesting to see how this issue is combatted as the ideas become more prominent in Non-Western nations.

By looking at the past and the present, we can catch a glimpse of the future of women's representation in sports through the work of athletes like Billie Jean King and Megan Rapinoe, as

¹⁵ Tani Barlow, "International Feminism of the Future." *Signs* 25, no. 4 (2000) p. 1100

well was growing sports like women's soccer and hockey, and its effects on the local, national, and global scale. From the 1970s with second-wave feminism, Title IX, and Billie Jean King, to The U.S. Women's National Soccer Team and Megan Rapinoe, women's sports has continued to be a vessel of feminism and will continue to be for as long as it exists. Women's sports has a huge impact on the young athletes and women of the current and next generation, and if it continues its upward swing, will further reach global audiences and have an impact on women's lives from equal pay to recognition. In her speech, Wickenheiser conveys this impact best when she acknowledges her older female teammates by saying, "what I learned from those women is that they gave up their careers, they fought for relevance, and instead of asking what the game could give them, they asked what they could give the game. And they changed my life forever."¹⁶ And for the younger generations of women, female athletes like Wickenheiser and Rapinoe continue to do the same and empower the next set of strong feminist female athletes.

¹⁶ Hayley Wickenheiser, "Wickenheiser's Induction Speech"

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