Athletic Opportunities for Girls Remain Unequal

Despite the fact that Title IX has opened many doors for young women in athletics, schools across the country are still not providing equal opportunities for girls to participate in sports and are not treating girls’ teams equally in terms of benefits and resources. Girls, particularly girls of color, receive far fewer opportunities to play sports than boys do, as well as inferior treatment in areas such as equipment, facilities, coaching, and publicity. Although data on gender equity in athletics are not as readily available at the elementary/secondary level as they are at the college level, the available information indicates that discrimination against this population is widespread.

• Schools are providing about 1.2 million fewer chances for girls to play sports in high school as compared to boys.1 In 1972, only 295,000 girls competed in high school sports, a mere 7.4% of all high school athletes, compared to 3.67 million boys.2 By the 2015-2016 school year, the number of girls had swelled to 3.32 million, while the number of boys was 4.54 million.3

• Girls of color in particular receive far fewer opportunities to play school sports than white girls, white boys, and boys of color.4

• Three quarters of boys from immigrant families are involved in athletics, while less than half of girls from immigrant families are.5

• More than a quarter of LGBT students reported being harassed or assaulted while playing on a school sports team because of their sexual orientation (27.8%) or gender expression (29.4%).6

Girls Face Inequities Nationwide

Complaints of discrimination at the middle and high school levels involve schools providing fewer participation opportunities for girls and treating girls’ teams in an inferior manner.

• California: In 2014, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a district court decision finding that the Sweetwater High School Union District violated Title IX by failing to provide girls with equal opportunities to play sports, as well as equal athletic facilities, coaching and publicity. The court also found that the school district unlawfully retaliated against the girls by, among other things, firing the well-liked softball coach who complained on their behalf. The National Women’s Law Center filed a brief supporting the girls’ claims in the case.

• Indiana: In 2012, the National Women’s Law Center helped represent Franklin County girls’ basketball players who sued their school for scheduling them to play primarily weeknight games while giving the boys’ basketball team almost entirely “primetime” (Friday and Saturday night) game slots. The discriminatory scheduling made it difficult for the girls’ basketball players to complete their homework and deprived them of the opportunity to play before a large audience, with the band, cheerleaders, and dance team. Moreover, the district sent a message to the girls’ basketball players that they are less important than and inferior to the boys,
The Importance of Equal Sports Opportunities for Girls

Ensuring that girls have equal opportunities to play sports is critical. Studies show that sports participation has a positive influence on girls’ academic and employment paths, as well as their physical and psychological health.9

Minority girls are more likely to participate in sports through their schools than through private organizations,10 making it even more critical that they have equal access to school-sponsored sports.

Greater Academic Success

• Female athletes “do better in school, do not drop out, and have a better chance to get through college.”11

• Young women who play sports are more likely to graduate from high school, have higher grades, and score higher on standardized tests than non-athletes.12 This pattern of greater academic achievement is consistent across community income levels.13

• Female athletes are more likely to do well in science classes than their classmates who do not play sports.14

• Female athletes of color consistently benefit from increased academic success. For example, Latina athletes are more likely than non-athletes to improve their academic standing, graduate from high school,15 and attend college.16

Increased Career Opportunities

• One study showed that being a high school athlete was associated with 14% higher wages for women, even when controlling for other factors.17

• Another study using state-level data concluded that an increase in female sports participation leads to an increase in women’s labor force participation down the road and greater female participation in previously male-dominated occupations, particularly high-skill, high-wage ones.18

• A number of senior managers and executives worldwide played organized sports as girls and credit their athletic participation with helping prepare them well for the business world: Of 400 executive businesswomen surveyed, 94% reported playing organized sports while growing up, and 74% “agree that a background in sport can help accelerate a woman’s leadership and career potential.”19

Responsible Social Behaviors

• High school athletes are less likely to smoke cigarettes20 or use drugs21 than their peers who don’t play sports. One study found that female athletes are 25% less likely to smoke than non-athletes.22

• Adolescent female athletes have lower rates of both sexual activity and pregnancy. In fact, female athletes are less than half as likely to become pregnant as their peers who are not athletes.23 This is true for white, African American, and Latina female athletes.24

Health Benefits

• Obesity is an emerging children’s health epidemic and a particular concern for girls of color. African American girls are more likely to be overweight than white girls. In 2014, 20.7% of African American and 21.4% of Hispanic high school girls were obese, compared to 15.1% of white girls.25

• Regular physical activity can reduce the risk of obesity for adolescent girls.26 It can also have positive health effects later in life. The New York Times highlighted research showing that women who played sports while young had a 7% lower risk of obesity 20 to 25 years later, when women...
were in their late 30s and early 40s. The study notes that while a 7% decline in obesity is modest, "no other public health program can claim similar success."28

- Sports participation decreases a young woman’s chance of developing heart disease, osteoporosis, and other health related problems.29
- Women who participate in sports significantly reduce their risk of developing breast cancer.30

**Improved Mental Health and Increased Personal Skills**

- Girls who play sports report better health, body image, popularity, and an overall higher quality of life, compared to girls who don’t play sports.31
- One study showed that the difference in self-reported life satisfaction for girls who play sports versus girls who do not is greater than the difference for boys.32

Are you concerned about sports inequities at your school? Contact NWLC to share your story or for further information.

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3. NFHS, supra note 1 at 55.
12. Id. (A state-wide, three year study by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association found that athletes had higher grade point averages (by almost a full grade point), lower dropout rates, and higher high school graduation rates, than their nonathletic peers.).
17. Id. at 23-24.
20. Id. at 70.

24 Sabo et al., supra note 25, at 7; see also Women’s Sports Foundation, supra note 16, at 79.


26 The President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, Catch the Ball, available at http://www.orau.gov/cdcynergysoc2web/content/activeinformation/media/posters/SOC_catch.pdf.


28 Id.


31 Don Sabo & Phil Veliz, supra note 5, at 96-109.

32 Keith J. Zullig & Rebecca J. White, Physical Activity, Life Satisfaction and Self-Rated Health of Middle School Students, 6 (3) Applied Research Quality of Life 277-289 (2010).