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RESEARCH NOTE

**Equity in Sport:  
Public Perception of Equal Pay for  
Women and Men Athletes**

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global sport  
institute poll



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## Equity in Sport: Public Perceptions of Equal Pay for Women and Men Athletes

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### Introduction

In a 2020 poll of U.S. residents' perspectives designed and analyzed by the Global Sport Institute at Arizona State University, we asked questions about equal pay for women and men athletes. In the summer of 2019, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT) captivated the country and much of the world on its run to win the FIFA Women's World Cup. Before, during, and after the tournament, several team members publicly challenged the United States Soccer Federation (U.S. Soccer) over the organization paying its men's national team more than them. In the months that followed, the USWNT's gender discrimination lawsuit against U.S. Soccer saw the [release](#) of controversial legal documents arguing that being on the women's team requires less "effort" and "responsibility" than being on the men's team. Soon after, the president of the federation, Carlos Cordeiro, resigned. This lawsuit reignited public debate about equal pay criteria and policies that extend around the world. Ada Hegerberg of Norway, widely considered the best women's soccer player in the world, made big news when she [sat out](#) of the 2019 World Cup to advocate for equality and greater respect for the women's game. Tennis, on the other hand, is often praised for its [early embrace of equal pay](#) for men and women who win major tournaments, beginning with the US Open in 1973 (driven by Billie Jean King) and culminating with Wimbledon caving to public pressure in 2007 (driven by Venus Williams). These and other examples have provided fodder for researchers, including legal rationales for pay disparity of the USWNT (Jessani, 2018), historical connections to current shifts toward equity (Luther, 2019), and much more. We have seen the media reports and read the scientific evidence, but we wanted your perspectives. So, we asked.

### Aims

The purpose of the poll was to explore American residents' knowledge, opinions, and perspectives about a number of topics. Specific to pay equity, we asked: how do people's age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, political affiliation, and/or personal engagement in sports relate to their perspectives on gender and pay in sports?

### Method

We analyzed data from 750 completed online surveys administered in 2020 by Latino Decisions, an independent survey research firm. The survey was available to both registered voters and an adult sample of non-registered voters, including non-citizens. All respondents were U.S. residents. For respondent demographics, see Appendix A. For full methodology, see Appendix B.

Using the 2019 gender discrimination lawsuit filed by the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team as a reference, we asked respondents what should be done about the gender pay gap between the U.S. women's team, which won the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, and the U.S. men's

team, which did not qualify for the 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup. We offered closed-choice options for determining athlete pay and asked respondents to rank order the choices.

## Results

*Note:* AAPI = Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; Age is reported in years; Dem = Democrats; GOP = Grand Old Party and represents Republicans; Foll Close = Follow Closely and represents closely following sports; Not Close = Do Not Follow Closely and represents not closely following sports; Part Yes = Participating Yes and represents currently participating in sports; Part No = Participating No and represents not currently participating in sports; Bets/No Bets = Respondents' self-reported engagement in or abstinence from gambling; LGBTQ = Self-identification as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and/or queer. Percentages are rounded to nearest whole number and may not equal 100.

**Question: As you may know, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team filed a gender discrimination lawsuit arguing inequitable pay compared to the pay of players on the men's national team. What do you think should be done about the gender pay gap between U.S. Women's Team and U.S. Men's Team? Please rank your answers.**

### Option 1: Pay women athletes equal to men athletes.

	Total	White	Latino	Black	AAPI	Female	Male	Age 18-34	Age 35-59	Age 60+	Dem	GOP	Foll Close	Not Close	Part Yes	Part No	Bets	No Bets	LGBTQ	Non - LGBTQ
Ranked 1st	61%	63%	58%	60%	52%	71%	51%	55%	62%	68%	67%	45%	56%	70%	51%	65%	53%	68%	63%	58%
Ranked 2nd	12%	12%	11%	15%	16%	10%	14%	17%	10%	9%	13%	14%	16%	7%	21%	9%	13%	11%	11%	14%
Ranked 3rd	11%	9%	15%	11%	19%	9%	13%	10%	12%	10%	8%	16%	12%	9%	10%	11%	14%	8%	11%	11%
Ranked 4th	16%	16%	16%	13%	13%	10%	21%	17%	16%	13%	11%	25%	17%	14%	18%	15%	20%	12%	15%	17%

### Option 2: Pay the women according to how much revenue they bring.

	Total	White	Latino	Black	AAPI	Female	Male	Age 18-34	Age 35-59	Age 60+	Dem	GOP	Foll Close	Not Close	Part Yes	Part No	Bets	No Bets	LGBTQ	Non - LGBTQ
Ranked 1st	27%	27%	24%	24%	34%	19%	35%	29%	26%	25%	18%	44%	30%	21%	28%	27%	32%	22%	25%	29%
Ranked 2nd	28%	28%	34%	27%	25%	33%	23%	27%	30%	26%	32%	29%	28%	28%	22%	31%	26%	31%	34%	19%
Ranked 3rd	28%	27%	21%	36%	27%	29%	25%	29%	25%	29%	27%	20%	23%	35%	29%	27%	24%	31%	26%	30%
Ranked 4th	17%	18%	20%	13%	14%	18%	16%	14%	18%	19%	23%	7%	18%	15%	22%	16%	18%	16%	15%	22%

### Option 3: Pay the women more if they're generating media attention.

	Total	White	Latino	Black	AAPI	Female	Male	Age 18-34	Age 35-59	Age 60+	Dem	GOP	Foll Close	Not Close	Part Yes	Part No	Bets	No Bets	LGBTQ	Non-LGBTQ
Ranked 1st	3%	2%	8%	5%	1%	3%	4%	4%	4%	2%	3%	4%	3%	5%	7%	2%	6%	1%	4%	3%
Ranked 2nd	20%	18%	29%	20%	18%	17%	24%	21%	24%	12%	20%	22%	23%	16%	28%	17%	27%	14%	17%	26%
Ranked 3rd	29%	28%	33%	30%	25%	29%	28%	26%	29%	31%	27%	29%	32%	24%	29%	29%	28%	29%	27%	33%
Ranked 4th	48%	52%	30%	46%	56%	51%	44%	49%	43%	56%	50%	45%	43%	55%	36%	52%	39%	56%	53%	38%

**Option 4: Pay the women more if they continue to outperform the men in international competition.**

	Total	White	Latino	Black	AAPI	Female	Male	Age 18-34	Age 35-59	Age 60+	Dem	GOP	Foll Close	Not Close	Part Yes	Part No	Bets	No Bets	LGBTQ	Non-LGBTQ
Ranked 1st	9%	7%	9%	12%	13%	8%	9%	12%	8%	5%	11%	6%	11%	4%	15%	6%	9%	8%	8%	9%
Ranked 2nd	39%	43%	26%	38%	40%	40%	39%	34%	35%	53%	35%	36%	33%	48%	28%	43%	33%	44%	38%	41%
Ranked 3rd	33%	36%	31%	23%	29%	32%	34%	34%	34%	30%	38%	35%	34%	32%	33%	33%	34%	32%	36%	27%
Ranked 4th	19%	14%	34%	27%	17%	20%	18%	20%	23%	12%	16%	23%	22%	16%	24%	18%	24%	15%	17%	23%

## Discussion

Regarding how pay should be determined for the women athletes, respondents overall ranked the following four options in this order: 1) Equal to men; 2) According to revenue they attract; 3) More if they continue to outperform men in international competition; 4) If they generate media attention. Paying women and men equally was the top choice for a clear majority of overall respondents, regardless of race. Older respondents and those who don't follow sports closely were most supportive of equal pay. Both females and Democrats ranked this option first at much higher rates than males and Republicans. People who follow sport closely, currently participate in sport, and/or gamble ranked the equal pay option first, but at much lower rates than other groups. The majority of males chose equal pay as their first choice. However, males who selected revenue generation as their top choice did so at almost double the rate of females.

While it is important to look at the topline, analyzing what people rank second, third, and fourth is also telling. When we isolate respondents' lowest-ranked choice, 21% of males and 25% of Republicans ranked equal pay last; those were the highest rates for any group. For Republicans, revenue generation was chosen at approximately the same rate as equal pay for first choice. Paying according to performance was most frequently selected as the second and third choice for republicans and democrats at similar rates. Among people over age 60, the most popular second and third pick was increasing pay when women outperform men.

## Future Directions

Researchers should explore the general public's awareness of pay disparities and why disparities exist in the face of such strong public support for equal pay. What if people were shown the clear gender pay disparity—would attitudes and choices be the same? A respondent's political affiliation and sex tell a story; the question is why? Additional questions to explore include the relationship between sport participation, sport following, and sport betting to perspectives on equal pay for athletes. Considering the lesser opportunities women athletes receive to generate revenue (e.g., media coverage, sponsorships), what develops the notion that revenue generation is a *fair* assessment for pay? The questions should be further extended to investigate whether these perceptions are consistent with opinions about equal pay in corporate settings. Finally, these findings need to be explored at a global level: How might people around the world respond, and do these findings reflect a general gender inequity that prioritizes males as the athletes worthy of higher pay?

## References

Jessani, A. (2018). Shooting for equality: An analysis of the market force defense as applied to the U.S. Women's Soccer Team's equal pay claim. *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, 25(2), 221-248.

Luther, J. (2019). Giving all women the chance. *Routledge Handbook of Tennis: History, Culture and Politics*.

## Appendix A

### Weighted Respondent Demographic Data

	Total	White	Latino	Black	AAPI	Female	Male	Age 18- 34	Age 35- 59	Age 60+	HS or <	Dem	GOP
White, not Hispanic	65%	100%	5%	0%	3%	64%	66%	59%	60%	83%	59%	54%	80%
Hispanic or Latino	16%	0%	100%	0%	0%	16%	15%	19%	18%	7%	21%	16%	14%
Black or African American	15%	0%	4%	100%	0%	16%	15%	20%	17%	7%	17%	26%	3%
Asian American	6%	0%	2%	1%	100%	6%	5%	5%	7%	4%	4%	6%	4%
American Indian/Native American	2%	1%	5%	1%	0%	2%	1%	4%	1%	0%	2%	1%	1%

*Note:* AAPI = Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders; Age is reported in years; Dem = Democrats; GOP = Grand Old Party and represents Republicans.



## Appendix B

We analyzed data from 750 completed online surveys administered by Latino Decisions, an independent survey research firm, in a respondent self-administered format from January 8, 2020, to January 18, 2020. The survey (and invitation) was available to both registered voters and an adult sample of non-registered voters, including non-citizens. All respondents were U.S. residents.

The full data are weighted within each racial group to match the adult population in the 2017 Census American Community Survey (ACS) one-year data file for age, gender, education, nativity, ancestry, and voter registration status. A post-stratification ranking algorithm was used to balance each category within +/- one percent of the ACS estimates. Overall, the survey contains 86 questions and has a median completion time of 13 minutes.

Data for registered voters comes from the national voter registration database email sample, and respondents were randomly selected to participate in the study and confirmed to be registered to vote before starting the survey. Among the 1,510 people who started the survey, 20 potential respondents were terminated due to their being screened out or quotas being full, for a cooperation rate of 84% and measurement of error of +/- 3.58. Non-registered voters were randomly selected from Pure Spectrum, a research automation platform, and it was confirmed that they were not registered to vote before starting the survey. Programming and data collection for the full project were overseen by Pacific Market Research in Renton, Washington.