

Assessing Corporate Sponsorship in Women's Sports to Reduce Gender Bias

Adil Singh Sethi

GATE MBA Student Fellow

June 2019

Abstract

This research looks to assess the inherent bias that exists around corporate sponsorship in women's sports, what its root causes are, and how it can be overcome so that decisions around sponsorship are taken with an unbiased gender lens.

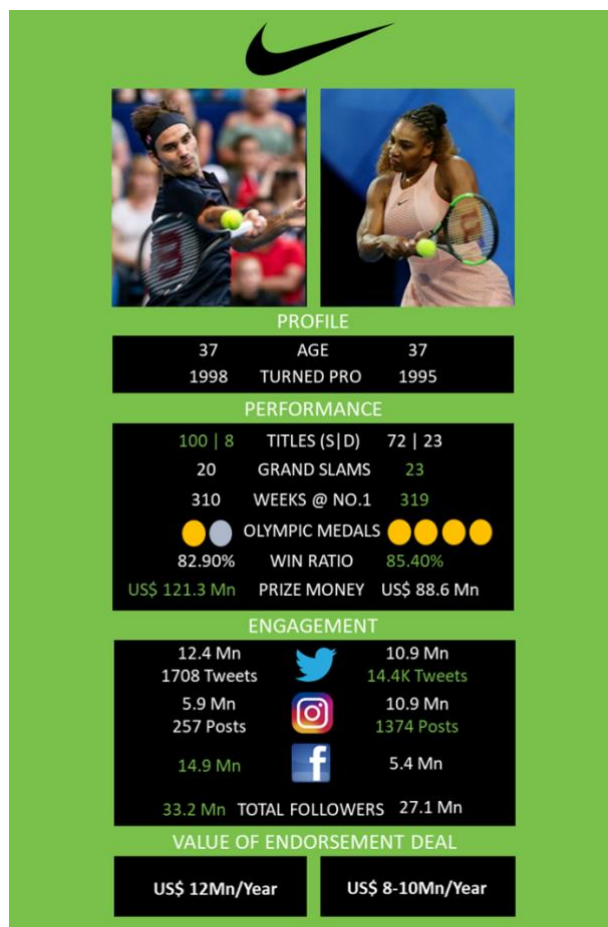
Report

It is a common belief that women's sports have come a long way over the past century. From originally not being allowed to compete in specific sports and sporting events, women currently compete in every sport that men compete in. Participation of women at the Olympic Games increased from 2.2% at the Paris 1900 Summer Olympics to an expected 48.8% at the Tokyo 2020 Games. Women have even competed in the Men's PGA Tour. Professional women sports leagues have been developed all over the world, but the question is: What are we benchmarking this progress to? A 2017 survey by BBC Sports found that 35 out of 44 major sports pay equal prize money to men and women. It may seem that this is progress, but this survey does not take into account wages, bonuses or sponsorships that continue to be skewed, often by a factor of 40, towards men.¹

Disclaimer: This report was prepared by Adil Sethi as a part of his 2018-2019 Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE) MBA Student Fellowship. The opinions expressed in this report are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of GATE or the University of Toronto.

Learn more about GATE and this fellowship program at <https://www.gendereconomy.org/education/mba-student-fellows/>

There is an argument that men’s sports and male athletes should make more through sponsorships and endorsements than their counterparts on the grounds that they generate more money for their respective sports. However, even when women raise more money than men, they are still receiving less. Take for example, the US women’s soccer team, ranked number one in the world and currently 23 places above the men, generates on average nearly US \$20 million more in revenue for the US Soccer Federation than the men’s team, but receives a significantly smaller share of the Federation’s sponsorship money than the men.¹



Data as on 25th March 2019

Source: WTA & ATP websites and athlete’s social media pages

Another striking example is the pay inequity between Serena Williams’ and Roger Federer’s endorsement deals with Nike, when Federer was still associated with the

sporting apparel giant. Both of these athletes need no introduction and at the time of this comparison, were at the top of their game and the best that tennis had to offer. Despite having a majority of performance and engagement stats in her favour as can be seen in the infographic above, William's endorsement value was below Federer's. It is important to note that Federer was at the end of his \$12 Million a year contract with Nike in 2018 and this disparity would have increased even more had he continued his association with them. This is evident from the \$30 million a year contract he signed with the Japanese retail brand, Uniqlo last year.² If this is the scenario with tennis, considered to be the most gender equal sport in terms of financial disparity, it is safe to speculate that the disparity within other sports is higher.

For this research, I interviewed sponsorship decision makers and sports marketing agencies in order to understand what corporates look for when evaluating sponsorship opportunities. The responses I received are bucketed under the following themes: brand building, engagement, awareness and marketability.



Source: Primary Research; Canadian Sponsorship Landscape Study 2018

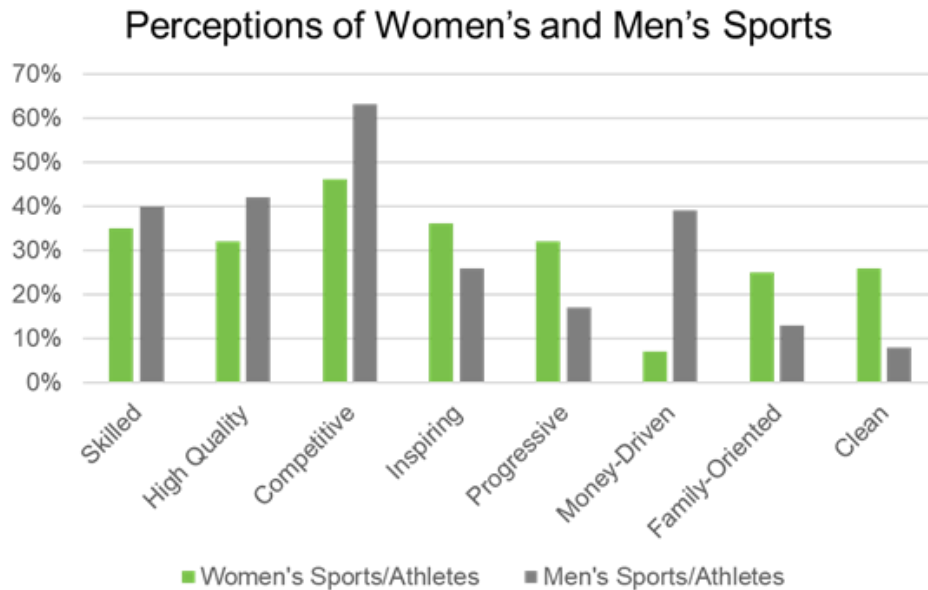
Some key insights from the primary research were: sponsorship is market driven and is in line with the sponsor's target market and business objectives; sponsors expect a return on their investment even if they don't explicitly emphasize it; sponsors utilize an internal

scorecard to value sponsorship; and performance was a key metric for athlete endorsement.

If the two of many such examples elaborated above are anything to go by, there seems to be an incongruence between how sponsorship decisions are said to be implemented and how they are actually implemented. According to Ernst & Young, women drive 70-80% of all consumer purchasing globally through a combination of their buying power and influence.³ In a country like the US, women purchase over 50% of traditionally male products, make 68% of all new car purchases and over 80% of healthcare and 89% of bank product related decisions.^{4,5} However, less than 20% of all sports sponsorship is targeted towards women.⁶ On average, there is a significant difference between the value of men and women athletes' endorsements. Sponsors generally believe that they have a good rationale behind their decision, but in reality, one in two sponsors do not use valuation to determine their spend.⁷

Sponsors talk about the importance of return on investment driving their sponsorship decisions, but over 85% of sponsors are not satisfied with either the ROI methodology of, or the return on, their sponsorship investment.⁷

Looking at consumer perception, 46% of the population perceives women's sports as competitive. Additionally, women's sport is considered more inspirational, progressive, family oriented, clean and less money driven than men's sports. This begs the question of whether sponsorship decisions are in line with current public sentiment.⁸



Source: Nielsen Sports Women's Sports research 2018

An example to substantiate this finding is the “I Will What I Want” campaign launched by American clothing and accessories company, Under Armour. The campaign featured women influencers such as American ballerina, Misty Copeland; Alpine skier, Lindsey Vonn; and pro surfer, Brianna Cope. According to Repucom, the women centric campaign received 52% positive sentiment, where on average an advertisement receives 5%.⁹

There is little doubt that bias tends to exist when it comes to sponsorship in women's sports, however, it is important to understand what the root causes for this could be. The top five hurdles that women face in sports, according to this research, includes insufficient funding, the lack of media interest and coverage, the lack of exposure to women's sports, the lack of financial incentive to pursue a career in sport and the shortage of female led instruction, mentorship and role models.¹⁰ The statistics around these hurdles were shocking to say the least. Some of them included women's sports receiving 4% of the total coverage on Canada's national sports networks and 5.1% of the total sports coverage in print media over a four-year period.¹⁰ Women's sports also accounted for just 0.4% of global sponsorship spend between 2011 and 2013¹¹ and less than one out of every four decision makers in sponsorship is a woman.⁷ Girls have 1.3 million fewer

opportunities to play high school sports than boys do¹²; and only 16% of all Athletic Directors in Collegiate sports in Canada are women.¹⁰

This lack of coverage, finances, exposure and mentorship leads to 41% of all girls between the ages of three and seventeen not playing sports, girls dropping out of sports one and a half times faster than boys by the age of fourteen, and 51% of girls quitting sports altogether by the age of seventeen because they do not have a sense of belonging or see a future in sports.¹³ Sports participation by women has been dropping over the past 20 years in Canada from 38% in 1992 to 16% in 2010.¹⁰ This reduction creates a pool of fewer professional women athletes, which thereby leads to the creation of a vicious cycle that feeds into the very same statistics outlined above (refer to Appendix A).

In an attempt to break this cycle, I have focused my research around the coverage of women's sports. The stakeholders include broadcasters, all forms of media, and rights holders of sports properties. I chose to focus my recommendations on coverage rather than the other hurdles because there is significant untapped potential in the coverage of women's sport.

Potential for Coverage in Women's Sports

According to Nielson, 84% of general sports fans have an interest in women's sports (they stated that they either had an interest in both men's and women's sports or just in women's sports). Of those, 51% are male, showcasing that engagement with women's sports and opportunities for growth are not gender specific. In regards to viewership, 46% said that they would watch more women's sports if it were accessible on free TV, however, there is a market for subscription streaming of women's sports. Countries such as Italy and the UK lead this market with 35% and 28% willing to pay up to €10 and £10 per month respectively. In the US, 18% are willing to pay up to \$10 per month to watch women's sports. This confirms the possibility for rights holders to investigate this form of broadcasting in more depth.⁸

There have been numerous examples of women's sports generating higher viewership numbers than the men's at the global, national and even collegiate level, providing adequate evidence that women's sports should not be overlooked. For example, during 2017, the global audience for the UEFA Women's European Championship was 149.5 million, the ICC Women's World Cup was 87.4 million and the Women's Rugby World Cup was 33.9 million. All three events achieved higher global audiences than men's only events, such as the Ryder Cup 2016 (20.9 million), the Lions Tour 2017 (25.2 million) and the European Rugby Champions Cup (28.8 million), all three of which were promoted more and were more accessible than the women's sports events.¹⁴

At the national level, the US National Women's Soccer team has continuously drawn higher audiences compared to the men's. The finals of the 2015 Women's World Cup garnered 26.7 million viewers in the US, rendering it the most watched soccer match in U.S. history. The highest viewership that the men's team has ever generated for a single game was 25.2 million.¹⁵ Even at the collegiate level, the 2015 Women's College World Series viewership outperformed the Men's College World Series by 31%, with an average viewership of 1.85 million for the women as compared to 1.41 million for the men.¹⁶

Thinking back to the imbalance in the coverage statistics presented earlier regarding broadcasting and print media, it's easy to imagine how much larger these viewership numbers could have been if these women's sporting events received the same amount of media coverage and viewership accessibility as the men's events.

Recommendations

The recommendations outlined below are the result of a culmination of case studies and global best practices that are in line with the current potential for coverage in women's sports.

Impact of Free to Air Television

Free-to-air (FTA) television has the potential to reach new and larger audiences compared to individual pay TV channels. This is especially important as women's sport is establishing itself with viewers, and still building a fanbase. FTA television provides visibility in a mainstream setting. FTA television channels in Europe such as BBC, Channel 4 (UK) and Sveriges Television (Sweden) have played a vital role in bringing women's sport to a wider audience. An example of this would be Channel 4's coverage of the Women's European Football Championship, attracting 9.6m viewers in 2017.¹⁷ However, I will be using the example of how FTA television has had a profound impact on women's sports in Australia with the Women's Big Bash League (WBBL).

The WBBL, Australia's version of its domestic Twenty20 Cricket League, was launched in 2015 as a counterpart to the Men's Big Bash League (BBL), when interest in women's cricket was minimal and was concentrated solely towards the Women's National Team.

Cricket Australia's decision to partner with FTA broadcasting house, Network Ten (followed by Seven Network) saw interest in women's domestic cricket in Australia increase to 43% within 3 years.⁸ In the 2018-2019 edition, the Seven Network broadcasted 23 out of the 59 games of the WBBL with average viewership numbers well above the 350,000 mark and peak television audiences reaching close to 630,000.^{18,19}

It is important to point out that the success of this form of broadcasting would not have been possible without the drive and ingenuity of the rights holder in question, Cricket Australia, showcasing that a combined effort is required of all stake holders involved. Some of the steps Cricket Australia took to act as a catalyst to this success included streaming all non-televised games for free on its website and mobile app; branding WBBL teams the same as those in the BBL and often scheduling the BBL and WBBL games as double headers, thereby leveraging existing team and brand loyalty to build interest in the women's teams of the franchises; and making initial investments in player's wages and broadcasting infrastructure to create a sports property of similar repute as the BBL.

Partnering with a free-to-air network comes with its shortfalls however, in the form of not achieving full revenue generating potential that could have possibly come through partnering with a private broadcasting network. Recently, Cricket Australia had to decide whether to continue focusing on “exposure” of the sport by taking a hit on broadcasting revenue that accounted for 80% of its total revenues or to go down the “investment” route by partnering with a private network that would move televised cricket in Australia to pay television, thereby reducing the number of viewers of the League. Understanding the long-term ramifications of any deal that denied access to sport to those without pay TV, it took the middle ground by accepting a joint network bid between the Seven Network (an FTA network) and Fox Sports (a private network), where Fox would have the exclusive rights to broadcast certain games that would only be available to paying subscribers. A non-negotiable term for Cricket Australia in this deal was that all women’s international cricket matches were guaranteed to be shown on free-to-air television in addition to the WBBL games, thus ensuring continuous exposure of women’s sports to Australians.²⁰

An example of what happens when a rights holder takes the investment route is the England and Wales Cricket Board. In 2005, the Board moved its entire televised cricket schedule to pay-tv provider Sky Sports. Although Sky’s investment in English and Welsh cricket was unprecedented, cricket’s popularity in the country dropped on the back of no terrestrial exposure, and is yet to return. The peak audience figures for the Ashes Series, England Cricket’s biggest cricket extravaganza, dropped from 8.2 million in 2005 to a mere 1.3 million in 2013.²¹

The Rise of Over-the-top Platforms and Live Streaming

Traditional broadcasters have always chosen to follow rigid contracts and display the sports properties that gain the best viewing figures. Therefore, even though women’s sports have garnered interest and a growing fan base all around the world, their coverage has been lacking on our TV screens. Live-streaming and Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms have opened avenues for women and amateur sports to broadcast content and do so through flexible partnership possibilities.

The best example of this is the partnership between the WNBA and Twitter that commenced in 2017. Ten televised games into the season, the WNBA was averaging 800,000 viewers with a third of those games having hit the 1 million viewer mark.²² The 2017-2018 season ended with an increase in the average unique viewers per game to 613,000.²³ In comparison to this, the WNBA had a combined average television viewership of 202,000 viewers in 2015.¹⁹ Although this streaming service is free, there is a sizeable market for paid subscription as well should a streaming platform or service provider decide to pursue a subscription-based revenue model. Rights holders can also follow this model by investing in their own streaming service. The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) has gone down this path by streaming women's matches live and on-demand to subscribers around the world for a monthly or annual fee.

As OTT continues to become more viable, especially with the advent of players such as Facebook, Amazon and Twitter among other sports specific OTT platforms, it will not be surprising to see more partnerships between rights holders of women's sports and OTT platforms, and more rights holders opting to invest in their own services. However, a concept that has garnered a lot of attention recently is the use of OTT platforms to stream amateur sports, particularly women's amateur sports, live. In April 2019, Adidas became the first corporate mover in this space through its "She Breaks Barriers" campaign in partnership with Twitter and Intersport that will feature women's high school games across the country.

Although it is too early to know the impact of this campaign, it makes me wonder whether more corporates entering this space could result in resolving hindrances around exposure and mentorship in the vicious cycle associated with women's sports. As aptly quoted by Adidas Senior VP and Brand Director Kate Ridley, "It is essential that girls have access to sport—to play it, to practice it and, yes, to watch it. If girls don't see role models through sports media, they won't have a reason to join or stay in sport."²⁴

Consistent and Continuous Coverage of Women's Sports Content

One-off events such as the Olympic Games or the Women's World Cup generate great interest and engagement in women's sports. However, due to the time gap between two consecutive events and inconsistent broadcast and media coverage of women's sports, this interest tends to fizzle out. Even during major sporting events, less emphasis is given to women athletes and sports before and after a televised game, thereby not allowing sports fans to build affinity to a particular sport, team or athlete.

Consistent and continuous coverage of women's sport is key for it to build on the interest that is generated around it. Fox Sports' decision to devote 200 hours, 6 broadcasts teams and a broadcast studio for the Women's FIFA World Cup, despite its skeptics doubting the financial feasibility of the move, proved pivotal in the viewership numbers reaching what they did in 2015. This included pre-match build up with player interviews and post-match analysis of the game. Their decision was further strengthened as it went on to net 400% more advertising revenue than it did during the 2011 Women's World Cup.²⁵ Other media organizations that have pushed to achieve this continuity and consistency have done so by having easily accessible and regular placeholders for women's sport, be it online, broadcast or in print media, as well as taking the responsibility to improve the gender balance through in-house measuring of progress on gender equality and reflection on that progress; and setting quotas and monitoring targets for women's sport coverage.¹⁷

Furthermore, rights holders and sports organizations can play their part when considering competition schedules by actively targeting gaps in the sporting calendar, and increasing co-ordination with, and across, national governing bodies and other rights holders and organizations of men's and women's competitions.

Gender Tagging

Gender tagging is using the prefix 'women's' before a competition title in order to differentiate it from the men's competition. The removal of gender tagging, for example, would lead to calling it the ICC Cricket World Cup instead of the ICC Women's Cricket

World Cup. This means that neither women's nor men's sport are referenced as such, thereby creating a sense of balance and equality. Sweden is at the forefront of this practice. For example, both the men's and women's floorball leagues are called the Swedish Super League. Until the 2015-2016 season, both the Swedish Volleyball Leagues were known as *Elitserien* (The Elite League). Even though they are named differently now, there is no mention of gender in the rebranded names of these leagues. Similarly, New Zealand has branded their national teams with gender-neutral terms. For example, the Silver Ferns (netball), White Socks (softball) and White Ferns (cricket) are names of their women's national teams, where as All Blacks (rugby), Black Caps (cricket) and All Whites (soccer) are the names of their men's national teams. Both their men's and women's hockey (Black Sticks), surfing (Black Fins) and lawn bowls (Blackjacks) teams are referred to by the same name.

Another way to look at gender tagging is the example of the United States Soccer Federation choosing to label its teams as the United States Men's National Team (USMNT) and the United States Women's National Team (USWNT). There is no United States National Soccer team, as the national team, by default, is more often than not perceived to be the men's team. This way men's and women's soccer are framed as equals at the national level leading to a change in how future generations view the sport and its participants.

Action Focused Content and Reporting

The media has often, consciously or subconsciously, sexualized women athletes, portrayed them as feminine and heterosexual, and trivialized their athletic achievement. Men on the other hand have been characterized as powerful and dominant, with content related to them predominantly focused on their performance.²⁶ Similarly, a report analyzing the covers of Sports Illustrated and the ESPN magazine found that the majority of female sports personalities depicted on these covers were in passive poses (63.7% of all women), while the majority of photographs of male personalities were

action oriented (61.1% of all men).²⁷ This has been viewed as a common cause for discouraging women and girls from consuming and participating in sports.

The conscious use of action-focused content for discussing team success and player attributes by media and broadcasters when addressing women's sports, instead of talking about an athlete's lifestyle and personal stories, is essential to normalize sport for women. This includes avoiding references to stereotypical adjectives and diminutives such as 'women' or 'girls' in favour of gender-neutral terms.

Production managers of broadcasting houses can challenge gender stereotypes by showing women in norm-breaking and non-traditional roles. For example, a broadcasting house in Sweden assigned two women reporters to cover the Vasaloppet, the oldest cross-country ski race in the world, by skiing the length of the competition. They were shown during the 90 kms, being sweaty, exhausted and with running noses. Albeit contrary to traditional broadcasting practice, this too helps normalise sport for women.

Media houses should look to portray women's players as 'experts' of the game. For example, former English rugby union player and world cup winner, Maggie Alphonsi was a part of the Telegraph's expert writers for the Lions Tour (men), and has regular columns covering men's and women's rugby. Former cricketers such as Anjum Chopra (India), Lisa Sthalekar (Australia) and Isa Guha (England) have all broken into the so called "boys club" of cricket commentary both on radio and television and have become role models for women following international cricket.

Conclusion

Although this research has only focused on rectifying the hurdles around the coverage of women's sports, addressing the vicious cycle associated with women's sports needs to be pursued from all angles simultaneously. A conscious application of these recommendations from all stakeholders involved will act as a stepping stone to resolve the bias that is prevalent in sports sponsorship, and form a positive chain reaction.

Sources:

1. Madolciu, A., & Scherer, A. (2018, March 07). Pay Equity for Women's Sport. Retrieved from <https://crowsoberman.com/blog/pay-equity-womens-sports/>
2. McIntosh, W. (2018, July 02). Everything you need to know about Roger Federer's Uniqlo deal. Retrieved from <https://www.sbnation.com/tennis/2018/6/12/17450372/roger-federer-nike-uniqlo-adidas-endorsement-deals-tennis>
3. Brennan, B. (2015, January 21). Top 10 Things Everyone Should Know About Women Consumers. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bridgetbrennan/2015/01/21/top-10-things-everyone-should-know-about-women-consumers/#6f3318736a8b>
4. 2018 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2018) Halifax, NS June 5 – 9, 2018 Page 525 How Much has Changed? Decision-Making Processes Surrounding Sponsorship in Women's Sport Janet Fink, University of Massachusetts Amherst E. Nicole Melton, University of Massachusetts Amherst SeJin Kim, University of Massachusetts Amherst
5. The Purchasing Power of Women: Statistics. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://girlpowermarketing.com/statistics-purchasing-power-women/>
6. Gender gap in sports and sponsorships [infographic]. (2018, June 11). Retrieved from <https://blog.optimy.com/gender-gap-in-sports-and-sponsorships-infographic/>
7. O'Reilly, N., & Beselt, E. 12th Annual Canadian Sponsorship Landscape Study 2018
8. *The Rise of Women's Sports*(Rep.). (2018). Nielsen Sports. Retrieved from <https://www.nielsen.com/ca/en/insights/reports/2018/the-rise-of-womens-sports.html#>

9. *Women and Sport*(Rep.). (2015). Repucom. Retrieved from <http://niensports.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Women-and-Sport-Repucom.pdf>
10. *WOMEN IN SPORT: FUELLING A LIFETIME OF PARTICIPATION*(Rep.). (2016). Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS). Retrieved from https://www.caaws.ca/e/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/FWC_ResearchPublication_EN_7March2016.pdf.
11. Sponsorship & Media. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.womeninsport.org/about-us/sponsorship-media/>
12. Factors Influencing Girls' Participation in Sports. (2016, September 9). Retrieved from <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/support-us/do-you-know-the-factors-influencing-girls-participation-in-sports/>
13. Adidas kicks off Initiative to break down barriers faced by Women and Girls in Sport. (2018, December 10). Retrieved from <https://news.adidas.com/american-football/adidas-kicks-off-initiative-to-break-down-barriers-faced-by-women-and-girls-in-sport/s/87fa878d-dbe4-4619-826d-f4b71e1b33cc>
14. Rogers, C. (2018, December 21). Why brands must rethink their approach to women's sports sponsorship. Retrieved from <https://www.marketingweek.com/2018/02/08/brands-neglecting-womens-sports-sponsorship/>
15. Duncan, A. (2018, September 20). The US won the World Cup---not the Women's World Cup. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/the-us-won-the-world-cup-not-the-womens-world-cup-44403>
16. National Fastpitch Coaches Association. (2015). Retrieved from https://nfca.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6281:record-viewership-at-the-2015-women-s-college-world-series&catid=109&Itemid=149
17. *Where are all the Women?*(Rep.). (2018). Erasmus Programme of the European Union.

18. Bigbash.com.au. (2017, December 10). Records smashed as WBBL|03 begins. Retrieved from <https://www.bigbash.com.au/news/womens-big-bash-rebel-wbbl03-opening-weekend-sydney-records-ashleigh-gardner-sixers-attendances/2017-12-10>
19. Belzer, J. (2016, January 22). Why Australia's Big Bash League Is Changing The Professional Sports Paradigm. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonbelzer/2016/01/22/why-australias-big-bash-league-is-changing-the-professional-sports-paradigm/#58b4cce34c0e>
20. Smith, M. (2018, April 13). CA announces new broadcast deal. Retrieved from <https://www.cricket.com.au/news/cricket-australia-broadcast-deal-media-channel-seven-fox-sports-tv-guide-how-watch-bbl-television/2018-04-13>
21. Fordyce, T. (2015, July 6). Ashes 2015: Will English cricket ever regain 2005 lustre? - BBC Sport. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/sport/cricket/33407465>
22. Glass, A. (2017, July 27). How Twitter Is Attracting More WNBA Followers. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alanaglass/2017/07/27/how-twitter-is-attracting-more-wnba-followers/#5330ae0449c4>
23. Glass, A. (2018, October 01). The WNBA's Best Fans. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alanaglass/2018/09/26/the-wnbas-best-fans/#59590ae1192b>
24. Adidas continues push for equality in sports, increasing visibility for female athletes. (2019, March 07). Retrieved from <https://news.adidas.com/football/adidas-continues-push-for-equality-in-sports--increasing-visibility-for-female-athletes/s/2a1bbd18-8a81-4e19-811d-81905304f564>
25. Fink, J. S. (2015, November 2). Sponsorship for women's sports presents untapped opportunity. Retrieved from <https://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2015/11/02/Opinion/Changing-the-Game-Janet-Fink.aspx>

26. Nicely, Stacey, "Media Framing of Female Athletes and Women's Sports in Selected Sports Magazines." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2007. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_theses/31
27. Martin, A. & McDonald, M. G. (2012) Covering Women's Sport? An Analysis of Sports Illustrated Covers from 1987-2009 and ESPN the Magazine Covers from 1998-2009. Graduate Journal of Sport, Exercise & Physical Education Research, 1:81-97.

Appendices

Appendix A: Hurdles associated with women's sports leading to a vicious cycle

