



Ways women can shatter sexist policy we once supported

BY SHANNON KERWIN
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Women are undervalued compared to men on and off the field of sport — and we know this. But we also treat the symptoms instead of the illness.

In our silence around the inequality elephants in the room, we are all complicit — and neither men nor women are exempt from supporting the norms that drive our most sexist policy.

These inequitable policies are so commonplace that we don't see the forest for the trees. We see that women do not receive the same job opportunities, evaluations and pay as men in sport. As a prime example: the U.S. women's national soccer team has documented unequal compensation where the World Cup champions were paid over \$2 million less in bonuses than their male counterparts by the same federation. This is tangible evidence of the disparity in pay structure.

But there's more beneath the surface.

The Equal Pay Act requires that men and women in the same workplace be given equal pay for equal work. With the soccer team, the workplace is the playing field, and the norm is in clear conflict with this equality policy. Here, the norm is to devalue women's performance by suggesting that women do not deserve the same rewards for equal performance. Both men and women have upheld this norm by making claims that the women's game is not as popular, exciting, or physically demanding as that of the men.

In countless examples, it becomes clear that we're fighting systemic problems — so what do systemic solutions look like?

What's missing from this dialogue is a challenge to the norms that exist where women are expected to be grateful and optimistic about simply being at the table within athletic and sport employment discussions around compensation.

To fix biased labor standards, compensation and development opportunities for women in sport, women must stand up and challenge sexist norms associated with being a woman in sport — and some of them will be norms we've supported in the past.

Let's examine some dominant norms underlying some of our most common policy challenges, and explore how questioning these premises opens new doors.

Question hypermasculinity

Sport is still defined by a norm of hypermasculine focus, which emphasizes nepotism in that masculinity is the prescription for success. This drives how organizational policy is structured, with job postings and access to reward systems emphasizing this overly masculinized focus on skills and experiences, which therefore are inherently (and explicitly) sexist.

Rather than challenge the underlying norms within the policy, we often blame women for not taking initiative, not stepping up, and not powering through to gain access to employment positions and proper compensation in sport.

To shatter this norm, reshape HRM policies and practices toward the core foundations of sport: cooperation, sense of community, and skill development. This redefines "who fits in the sport workplace" away from a hypermasculine lens.

Redefine femininity

In sport, it is clear women must still meet a certain standard of femininity. Those who are hired in positions that are front-facing (reporters, analysts, CEOs) experience underlying biases in practices where women must bring with them an increased femininity to succeed.

Policy related to who sits on hiring committees continues the trend in sport that (white, heterosexual, cisgender) men make hiring decisions. These individuals hold traditional notions of what it means to be a woman, in appearance and behavior (i.e. being attractive, carefully groomed, submissive, nurturing). Without thought, we "tone police" women in sport to be "ladylike" and not demonstrate characteristics that are defined as being confrontational. This expectation inadvertently makes women believe they should not push for equal pay or equal access to positions.

The solution: Immediately, stop tone-policing women who stand up and ask for equal pay. We need to focus on the data and make changes to the policy where inconsistencies in equality are clearly present.

Reexamine grit

We have let the term grit become a normative standard by which sport professionals have defined a "good employee." The good employee is "gritty." Being gritty means being tough, uncompromising, and courageous. Grit is also associated with policy norms that support working long hours with little pay.

Without thinking, we uphold a standard of grit and allow ourselves to judge performance of sport athletes and boardroom personnel who may not (by societal standards and design) be able to put in the extra hours and work for little to no compensation. Therefore, women are often judged as poor performers within personnel evaluations and receive fewer promotions, limited reward structures and less prestigious positions.

We can disregard the damaging norm, and conduct audits to identify and remove policy and practice that elevates grit and creates an unequal playing field — clouded by the misuse of grit.

Installing a new system is long-term work, and difficult work, requiring challenging and intricate conversations held at new scale. But let curiosity, anger and fairness guide your direction for change. Then give voice to what action is needed.

It's the only way we'll get new answers to old problems.

Shannon Kerwin is an associate professor at Brock University. This piece is crafted in partnership with The Collective Think Tank: a global consortium of academic minds and industry leaders focused on gender parity and improving diversity. The collaboration is led by The Collective, Wasserman's women-focused division.



QUOTE OF THE DAY



Some of this may sound strange with the way he left the game, but he brought an integrity and a determination to do what's right because it was the right thing to do. He was forceful; he was considerate.

-- Sports marketing consultant Marc Ganis, on the late Jerry Richardson.
CHARLOTTE BUSINESS JOURNAL, 3/3

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