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Girls Can Play: Analysis of Racial and Economic Barriers of Entry for Women of Color in Sport

Abstract

In order to understand the racial division of modern sport, it is essential to investigate the barriers to entry that occur for black youth at an institutional level. Inner-city and low-income youth are denied opportunities presented to predominately white middle and upper-class youth, who are awarded the opportunities to advance in the dimension of sport. Low-income children are being pushed out of sports, falling into a track that provides marginal community programming, while the economically advantaged are funneled into the other track of competitive private clubs. Race, economics, and social status become drivers for this segmentation in youth sport.

Although barriers that impede the entry and success affect both black girls and boys in sports, the reality is that there is a disparate impact between genders. Therefore, this research aims to assess the conditions faced by black girls, which hinder their entrance into and continued success in sports programs. Although significant legislation has increased the amount of female participation in sports, further consideration must be given to the intersection of race and sex in order to make necessary advancements.

Keywords

Economics, Race, Sport, Female, Barriers

Disciplines

Africana Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Race and Ethnicity | Sports Studies

Comments

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Girls can play: analysis of racial and economic barriers of entry for women of color in
sport

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Introduction

In order to understand the racial division of modern sport, it is essential to investigate the barriers to entry that occur for black youth at an institutional level. Inner-city and low-income youth are denied opportunities presented to predominately white middle and upper-class youth, who are awarded the opportunities to advance in the dimension of sport. Low-income children are being pushed out of sports, falling into a track that provides marginal community programming, while the economically advantaged are funneled into the other track of competitive private clubs. Race, economics, and social status become drivers for this segmentation in youth sport, as the average pretax income for black households is the lowest by ethnicity in the United States. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates the average pretax income for black households was \$48,871 for the period 2014-2016 (Noël, 2018). With consideration of the economic segregation of race, it is evident that the proportion of black children in poverty is a significant barrier to their participation in youth sport. Making up 28% of children living in poverty under 18 in 2017 in the United States, black children are exposed to significant barriers that they must overcome in order to enter and excel in the dimension of sport (Children's Defense Fund, 2018).

Analysis of the barriers that disproportionately affect the participation of black youth in sport exposes the reality that girls of color are given significantly fewer opportunities to play. With regards to opportunities for participation on sports teams, predominately white high schools offered on average 58 spots for girls per 100 students, while predominately minority high schools offered 25 spots for girls per 100 students (Cook, 2017). Although barriers that impede the entry and success affect both

black girls and boys in sports, the reality is that there is a disparate impact between genders. Therefore, this research aims to assess the conditions faced by black girls, which hinder their entrance into and continued success in sports programs. Although significant legislation has increased the amount of female participation in sports, further consideration must be given to the intersection of race and sex in order to make necessary advancements.

Specifically, Title IX prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in federally funded institutions and requires these institutions to provide equitable opportunities to men and women with regards to participation in sports. Despite the increase in the participation rates for girls in high school sports since the passage of Title IX in 1972, further research must emphasize the role that intersectionality plays in this conversation (Simon & Uddin, 2018). Through the theoretical framework of intersectionality, the disproportionate effect on black girls and their entrance into sports can be better understood.

In order to conclude that true progress has been made in the sector of female athletics, considering race and gender is not adequate enough. Yarbrough (1996) concludes within her research that the intersection of race and gender for female athletes is particularly important when understanding why women of color are disproportionately excluded from sports participation (Yarbrough, 1996). The intersection of race and gender impacts women due to the fact that they are discriminated against in both spheres when they enter sports. Despite the intention of Title IX legislation to providing a race-neutral system for increasing equality in sports on the basis of gender, it is evident that a hierarchy comes into play and black females are

impacted negatively through a lack of resources and opportunities (Yarbrough, 1996). The lack of resources that black females face becomes the premise of this research, as this disadvantaged status is not favored by the seemingly equal system. The divide worsens as the strategies of recruiting female collegiate athletes to continue, favoring those who are deemed to have the best skill simply because of their participation in elite clubs. If a policy is able to engage this intersection of race and gender, opportunities will open up for black girls who have the desire to play but lack the resources and support. Therefore, the condition of poverty for black female athletes is a primary facet in the analysis of the disparate impacts they face.

Poverty

Physical activity and participation in sports for girls during adolescence provides notable health benefits in the short and long term. Psychologists and health experts have noted improved rates of self-esteem, lower risk-taking behaviors, drug use, and rates of depression (Simon & Uddin, 2018). It is evident that the benefits of physical activity for children go far beyond cardiovascular health, muscle strength, and other physical aspects, and stretch to include mental health benefits (Halpern, 2006). Seemingly, all children have the ability to increase levels of physical activity. However, the condition of poverty hinders this necessary process of growth for children. Specifically, black youth are affected by poverty, and through many mechanisms have lesser chances of advancing through sports and escaping poverty. Halpern (2006) notes, "Close to three-quarters of African American children in the United States grow up in racially segregated, densely settled, and geographically restricted neighborhood environments, with little or no safe, usable outdoor play space" (Halpern, 2006, p. 44).

Consequently, black children living in poverty have a disproportionate lack of access to adequate resources for sports participation and success as compared to their white counterparts. Specifically, the lack of clothing and equipment, transportation, funding for training facilities to propel black children, girls in particular, into sports at the youth and collegiate levels presents as a significant racial and economic barrier.

Lack of resources

The cost of participation in sports remains the most prominent dividing factor that pushes black girls out of sports. Black girls in low-income families are not able to afford the strenuous economic demands of certain sports. In many instances, black females face a lack of economic support from their parents and also their schools. Schools in predominately black neighborhoods that lack proper funding for athletics often attract girls to the least expensive sports such as track and field and basketball. Although research has shown that levels of desired participation in sports between white and black females are similar, division begins when black girls acknowledge that their families would not be able to afford costly lessons and equipment required by certain sports (Yarbrough, 1996). It is important to note that even when black girls choose to enter or are only given the opportunity to enter sports such as basketball and track and field, there are still costs associated with attaining success. For example, purchasing a pair of track flats and running sneakers, basketball shoes, practice, and warm-up gear, is still a struggle for those whose schools and parents are not willing or able to provide these funds. Getting nutrients daily for sustaining energy to last until practice time also is a barrier to success in various sports, where a lack of energy can be interpreted by coaches as a lack of interest or willingness to succeed in sports (Flanagan, 2017).

Specific sports or clubs aside from school sports offered also require a means of transportation to these venues, which many low-income black girls lack. In many cases, girls living in inner-city environments must seek out community centers to practice sports when their high schools cannot afford to provide adequate training. Through the lens of intersectionality, black girls may face discrimination on the basis of gender, in the sense of not feeling like they can compete with the boys playing at these community centers, or conforming to gendered stereotypes that girls should spend their time elsewhere. School districts in major cities with high poverty rates are also increasingly voting to consolidate sports teams at the multiple city high schools into one program, in order to cut budget costs. Although this makes these sports more competitive, it creates far more harm than good due to the fact that it prevents kids from participating and strengthens the barrier of transportation. Once sports teams are consolidated it requires that live far to find a way to get to these sites (Cook, 2017). The lack of funding for training facilities also creates barriers for girls of color into certain sports.

Deemed “country club” sports these activities constrain minority groups from entrance due to the economic costs associated with joining and training and allows for the domination in sports by race. For example, inner-city black girls will never have the opportunity to enter elite country clubs and take lessons in golf, tennis, swimming, water polo, and volleyball. Economic barriers to entry in these country club sports prohibit the advancement by gender and race into such sports and they remain a majority white. Dutton and Snider (1999) argue that there is not enough interest in such “country club” sports within this demographic and although some community programs aim to tackle this issue and bring black girls into these sports, they fall short in producing lasting

talent (Dutton & Snider, 1999). Researchers cite instances in which modern black female athletes have broken the color barrier in “country club” sports such as Venus and Serena Williams, yet the support from their father was a powerful force that propelled them into stardom (Dutton & Snider, 1999). Many girls from low-income families do not have this form of parental support; therefore it is important that the Williams sisters put their resources towards skills development in the sport of tennis for girls who might have never even heard of the sport of tennis.

With the lack of access to certain sports reserved for the nation’s elite at the high school level, black girls are denied access to athletic scholarships at the collegiate level. Despite the efforts of Title IX to provide equal opportunities to men and women in federally funded institutions, money is provided disproportionately to certain sports, creating another barrier for black girls to play in college. Title IX programming mandates that schools provide extra programming to non-traditional sports such as volleyball, crew, and soccer. However, because these sports attract mainly white females, further division occurs on the basis of race. Although funds are being channeled into non-traditional sports to increase female participation rates, often funds for sports such as track and field and basketball stay stagnant in the amount of funding they receive for scholarships at the collegiate level. Therefore black females are excluded from the chance to be lifted out of their circumstances to play in college or even to receive a college degree. The challenge of transforming sports into an integrated community requires confronting the highly institutionalized notion that sports are black and white.

Health and safety

The dual agenda of breaking the color barrier in youth sports while also ensuring that opportunities are equal for girls and boys in their entry into sports uncovers the systemic restrictions that enforce such divisions. Such divisions in sport must be challenged due to research by the Women's Sport Foundation (2018) that shows specific sports provide positive health outcomes across all dimensions of diet, amount of sleep and mental health, academic achievement, and well-being. Specifically, the sport-by-sport analysis showed that track and field, cross country, tennis, and soccer, provided the most health benefits for girls (Women's Sport Foundation, 2018). Out of the four sports listed as being the most beneficial for overall health and well being, only track and field has high involvement rates for black girls. Therefore, policy and programming must assess the numerous health benefits gained through participation in certain sports and work to dismantle barriers that impact low-income black girls. Without participation in sports, these girls are left to fall into more sexual risk-taking behavior increasing their chances of teen pregnancy (Simon & Uddin, 2018). Support for the ability for black girls to enjoy the health benefits associated with participation in sports calls for the assessment of the safety of playing.

The lack of access to facilities to run play in low-income and inner-city environments leaves many children with the choice to play outside in unsafe neighborhoods lacking parental supervision and offering exposure to violent crime or to remain inactive. Although the construction of public parks in low-income and inner-city neighborhoods has been an initiative of many U.S. cities, often times these basketball courts and playgrounds become sites for drug use gang membership (Halpern, 2006). Therefore, girls are less likely to utilize public spaces that are littered with broken glass

and drug paraphernalia and are not well kept by city parks and recreation committees. Federal capital funding of public spaces to play must recognize the powerful health benefits associated with girls' participation in sports, and develop a policy that recognizes these unique needs. Research has provided significant evidence that outdoor play in neighborhoods significantly correlates to increased overall physical activity, and therefore neighborhoods act as spaces where children do not need to pay to play (Carver, Timperio & Crawford, 2007). Unsafe neighborhoods with high crime rates create barriers for children to engage in outdoor playtime.

Although many parents of primarily white middle to upper-class status have the ability to monitor their daughters' outdoor play time and forbid them from playing without parental supervision, many parents of black daughters in low-income areas do not have the time or resources to provide this monitoring (Carver et al., 2007). Therefore, their daughters are left to their own devices to decide if they want to play outside and expose themselves to crime. Additionally, without proper health and sex education, many girls may look towards sexually rebellious activities in such neighborhoods, leading to teen pregnancy, and thus further complicating their condition of poverty. For specific sports like track and field, unsafe neighborhoods remain a barrier for girls who have natural talent and drive to succeed. For long-distance events, it is essential to go on runs to build such endurance. However, without access to a treadmill, these girls are forced to run outside in dangerous areas, risking exposure to violent crime just to enjoy the health benefits of running. Therefore, policies must aim to increase access to training facilities and safe play spaces so that girls have the opportunity to not only participate in significant daily exercise but also to truly excel and succeed in certain sports. Although

policy exists to allow low-income and predominately black girls the access to community centers where they can gain exposure to sports, the skills development, training and coaching is often inadequate and does not help to produce talent.

Learning from mom

Another barrier that black girls face in their entrance into sports is parental support. A broad look at low-income families shows that parents are less likely to support physical activity and participation in sports because they view other responsibilities as more important (Halpern, 2006). Specific emphasis on black girls and relationships with their mothers through the psychological theory of social learning theory provides a further understanding of the function of the mother as a role model. Social learning theory provides the theoretical framework to explain the ways in which children replicate the behaviors of their parents and tend to hold similar beliefs to their parents later in life (Bandura, 1977). Scholarly attention has focused on the importance of the socialization processes between mother and daughter. If daughters are likely to imitate the behaviors of their mothers and see them as role models, then this relationship becomes central to research on the barriers that hinder girls of color from participating in sports. If mothers in low-income families are impacted by the stresses of poverty, they are likely to put more emphasis on academics or getting a job for their daughters, rather than participating in sports. Therefore, mothers who do not put emphasis on the benefits of sports for positive personal development are likely to influence, through socialization processes, the way their daughters view sports.

Additionally, a gender-based theory can be applied to this research to explain the characteristics of mothers. Mothers in the low-income and predominately black

demographic who must work to support their families often fall into secondary labor markets in which low skill and education levels are required, as explained by the dual market labor segmentation theory (Lichtenwalter, 2005). White mothers in middle to high socioeconomic status levels are more likely to have the economic means and personal desire to help instill egalitarian beliefs in their daughters that girls can play sports too, and provide the best training. However, black and low-income mothers who fall into the secondary labor market are likely to be impacted negatively by the lack of resources and increased demands that they face at work. The job demands-resources model, in which mothers who fall into the secondary labor market tend to face increased job demands without adequate resources to combat these demands such as access to childcare, can explain why they find themselves in a state of deteriorated mental and physical health (Ode-Dusseau, McFadden, & Britt, 2015). Therefore, in application to this discussion of mothers acting as role models for their children, predominately black mothers in low socioeconomic statuses are often preoccupied with the stresses of their jobs and cannot place emphasis on the importance of sports for their daughters. Stress leading to depression and obesity can influence daughters, as they are likely to replicate the behaviors of their mothers.

Conclusion

Analysis of the racial and economic barriers that disproportionately affect black girls and their entrance into and continued success in sports calls for changes to current policy to address this intersection of race and gender. Overall, the increase in investment for all girls' sports instead of a select few will help bridge the gap that exists not only affecting gender, but also race. Instead of developing purely remedial

programming, programs should provide mentorship with female coaches to act as role models when role models are not present in families. Sports programming in inner-city and low-income environments should have an educational component to educate parents and children on positive health, academic, and behavioral impacts of the involvement of girls in sports. Dedication and commitment to specific programming targeted towards girls in low-income areas must target the areas outlined in this research. Specifically, the lack of access to proper resources and training facilities, and positive female role models remains a powerful barrier that future policy must dismantle. Through educational programming and investment in girls' sports, a future in which all girls can play sports will be achieved.

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