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NCAA AND GENDER EQUITY: A COMPARISON OF THE MEN'S AND WOMEN'S NCAA MARCH MADNESS TOURNAMENT

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**NCAA AND GENDER EQUITY: A COMPARISON OF THE MEN'S AND WOMEN'S
NCAA MARCH MADNESS TOURNAMENT**

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ABSTRACT:

This literature review examines how female athletes were treated during the NCAA March Madness Tournament in 2021 and examines the overall inequalities of female athletes within the NCAA. In 2021 Women's basketball was under the spotlight when female athletes started to shed light on these trends via social media apps like TikTok, sharing the inequalities they experienced during the March Madness tournament. This article conducts a comparative analysis of the men's and women's tournaments from 2021 while exploring the Gender Equity Review Phase I report conducted by Kaplan Hecker & Fink LLP. The gender equity review revealed that the planning behind the Women's tournament did not meet the same standards as the men's tournament. This review assesses existing sources such as news articles and journals to further analyze the impact of female athletes during the tournament and the atmosphere the women were put in. This research reveals that women often did not receive the recognition or resources they deserved, which may result in lower turnout for women's tournaments and less prestigious reputations for female athletes. Additionally, this literature review analyzes where the NCAA stands now, and analyzes the progressive movement women are making in sports by making an examination of athletes like Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese and their performance in the most recent year.

Keywords: March Madness, College Basketball, Female Athletes, Gender, NCAA

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INTRODUCTION:

The NCAA Division 1 Men's March Madness tournament is the main source of revenue for the NCAA earning an estimated \$1.28 billion in revenue for the 2022-2023 season, all from streaming and ticket sales to the tournament. However, in recent years, the Women's side of the tournament has earned some well-deserved increase in engagement. Athletes have shared their experience at the tournament on social media platforms like TikTok, X (Formally Twitter), and Instagram, which increased the overall views of the women's tournament. While gathering multiple sources and examining where female athletes experienced inequality it's very obvious that female athletes experienced a different student-athlete experience versus male athletes. Female athletes contributed greatly to the tournament's popularity in recent years, for example, Caitlin Clark of Iowa State, her performance throughout the tournament in 2023 created a much-needed and well-deserved spotlight on the tournament. She, among other athletes single-handedly improved the presence of female athletes in sports and mainstream media by becoming headlines for their accomplishments. Caitlin Clark is still making headlines in basketball, becoming the NCAA's all-time leading scorer averaging 32 points a game, and selling out home games with a record of 15,000 fans at Iowa. Some might say that Clark is more than the face of women's college basketball and is taking over the basketball world. Now we see female athletes getting recognition in the media and creating pathways for those to follow, however, this wasn't the case less than 3 years ago during the 2020 NCAA March Madness tournament. Just last year the women's final four averaged 6.7 million views, where Clark battled against well-known basketball player Angel Reese. These numbers show big-name media companies that they deserve to be treated equally to the men's programs, rightfully earning air time.

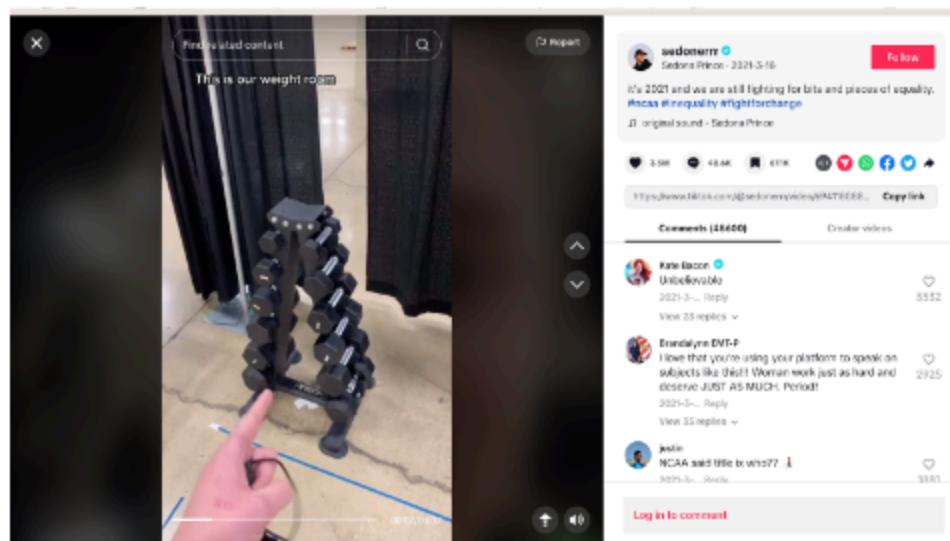
In 2020 the Men and Women's teams who participated in the tournament shared their experiences as athletes at the tournament. Sharing the significant difference in treatment, equipment, and media coverage throughout the past three years, all via social media apps. Most notably on TikTok during the pandemic, when the NCAA tournament was held privately in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, fans viewed the games via television. The pandemic's impact on the tournament affected the entirety of the tournament due to the fact that testing was involved in creating what was very common at the time a "COVID bubble" in which athletes needed to comply with social distancing protocols and testing. Throughout the tournament, Questions arose when people outside the bubble started noticing the differences in the treatment of the women participating in the tournament. There was a difference in equipment availability and merchandise "swag bags" and overall student-athlete experience for the women's teams versus the men's teams. The NCAA acknowledges the issues they faced with the 2021 March Madness tournaments. They did this by realizing the *NCAA External Gender Equality Review*, in doing so they were able to break down each problem the women's tournaments faced and compared it to the men's tournament which will be further discussed throughout the paper.

There has always been a clear difference in the treatment of women in sports, USA women's soccer, Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), and treatment at the collegiate level with the NCAA. At all levels, women and girls don't receive the equal attention and overall treatment provided by the NCAA and Title IX, which should provide equality according to the federal law, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." (Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972). The problem goes beyond pay grade and streaming, it is

rooted in the societal standards of men being the normative. The contracts set in stone by the NCAA with media companies such as CBS, TBS, and ESPN that have the rights to run the streaming and showcasing sports at the higher level are all businesses that strive to increase revenue. This leads to men's sports being streamed more than women's sports but it sparks the thought of low streaming because of the lack of women's sports being shown overall or simply an interest in watching women's sports. Women's sports are profitable however we as a society lack interest and effort to acknowledge these women because of societal standards of women. Suppose some CBS and TBS included the women's tournament in contracts. In that case, we'd see more influx from a business point of view and an increase in airtime, advertisement, and overall tournament revenue for the NCAA and other related organizations. With the rise of women's basketball, the possibility of women's sports becoming the future of women's sports is bright. Athletes like Caitlin Clark contribute to the ongoing success of women's sports. Women are entering a new era of basketball where they are dominating. This goes to show that when female athletes receive equal treatment and are given the proper resources to succeed as their counterparts they can provide the same results if not better than the men's teams.

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE NCAA 2021 BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIP?

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NCAA decided to carry on with the Basketball March Madness tournament. The tournament planning led to the idea of the “Bubble” which took inspiration from the NBA when they played in a similar bubble.



Athletes participating in the tournaments quickly noticed the difference in treatment of the men's and women's sides. The viral TikTok video by Sedona Price gave fans insight into the huge difference in treatment. The viral video shows that the NCAA at the time did not prioritize the women. The quality of the weight room and overall tournament lead back to the planning of the tournament. Following the 2021 tournament, The Kaplan Hecker & Fink LLP conducted an External Gender Equity Review on the NCAA. The first part of this review focused on the basketball tournament specifically. The review concluded that the NCAA simply did not take into account that the women's teams would need a full weight room until the Sweet 16 portion of the tournament after the viral TikTok sparked some controversy for the organization. On the men's side, however, they had plans for a weight room since the start of planning, which was a month before the women could even get started on their tournament planning. According to the

review, “The decision to provide a full weight room for the duration of the men's tournaments was made by the NCAA’s staff after consulting with the NBA about the bubble set up for the 2020 playoffs.”(KHF, 2021). The comparison of both the women's and men's weight rooms was noted in the review. According to both committees, the plans of the weight room were shared; however, a volunteer on the women's side was said to have reviewed the plans but “...did not scrutinize the slides in order to identify potential disparities between the two tournaments” (KHF, 2021). It is also very important to analyze the time given to the women's committee to plan, one staff member said that the manuals were given to each other however “We never put those manuals side by side. We didn't have time to do this...” (KHF, 2021). The most important part of this staff member's statement is the time but into the overall planning. The lack of time led the women's committee to provide the women's teams with poor equipment, however, they stepped up the weight room when the tournament sweet sixteen was in session, “...On March 17, women's basketball received a \$100,000 estimate for their planned Sweet Sixteen weight room” (KHF, 2021). While keeping a budget in mind, the NCAA ultimately came to the decision to provide the women's team with a \$370, 139 weight room. This was all the reaction of the women's committee and the NCAA to the viral TikTok by Sedona Prince, because of the video, the NCAA reacted quickly to the overall response from the outside parties, the mainstream media, social media, and overall general public.



Left is the men's NCAA March Madness tournament weight room. Right is the women's basketball tournament.

The committees in charge of planning the tournaments are separated into two categories, men and women, both tournaments needed to be planned promptly because student-athletes were set to report to the bubble on March 12 and 16th 2021. The NCAA had to take into account the bubble, host locations, and budget. Before the 2021 tournaments, the announcements for moving forward with the men's tournament came out on November 16th, 2020 but were announced to the public on December 14th, 2020. The dates of the planning process are key when understanding the comparable differences between the women's tournaments because later when the women's tournament committee was delayed in their planning because of a financial analysis, they weren't given any approval until late November 2020. According to the NCAA the women's tournament needed to conduct a financial review for COVID reasons, however according to the Equity review "...Men's basketball did not have to undergo the same financial analysis and approval process' (KHF, 2021). Furthermore, after the budget for the women's basketball tournament was approved the NCAA finance committee gave them approval on December 7th, 2020, this then allowed the committee to decide on the location three days later on December 10, 2020. A few

days later is when both the men's and women's tournaments announced the tournament (December 14th, 2020) however, the locations of the men's tournaments were announced on January 4th, 2021, and following the women's tournaments were announced almost a month later, February 5th, 2021. The overall consistent delay of the women's tournament planning is what I believe led to the downfall of the tournament in 2021, besides the clear inequalities of the tournament.

The most interesting part of the bubble was the protocols for both tournaments, both teams had to undergo consistent testing to comply with the area's safety protocols. The protocols were the same when arriving at the tournament. Both men's and women's teams had to show seven days of negative PCR tests before arrival and quarantine for two days. However, the only difference between the men's and women's tournaments was the test given to the athletes. For example, the Men received a daily PCR test whereas the women received a daily antigen test and were allowed one PCR test a week. The accuracy of the antigen test was considered lesser quality because, at the time of the pandemic, PCR tests were the most accurate to take. In the Gender Equity Review, it's noted that "...antigen tests have lower specificity than PCR test and thus create a higher likelihood of false positive or inconclusive results" (KHF, 2021).

As a result, student-athletes noticed their health was a priority to the NCAA. Some stated that "...they wanted to be treated in that aspect of our lives"(KHF, 2021). Athletes felt like they weren't given the test that the men got because they weren't as important. The lack of quality tests led to female athletes missing out on playing opportunities because of false positives or inclusive tests. Mentally this was difficult for teams and coaching staff to deal with and affected the overall student-athlete experience that the NCAA strives to make equal for both tournaments.

A great example of the overall atmosphere and experiences being taken from athletes is from the experiences of the University of Arizona as they were "...excluded from a video about the women's final four teams in part because a false positive antigen test prevented the individuals responsible for putting the together the video from attending and photographing the Arizona practice" (KHF, 2021). It is heartbreaking for athletes to miss out on an experience because of false negatives due to the quality of the test given out when on the other side the men were given better quality tests. However, the men faced similar difficulties but because they received PCR, their test issues were minimal. The proof is in the number of positive tests from both sides, according to the review which took the results from the Division 1 Basketball COVID-19 testing results PowerPoint, the PowerPoint concluded that the men's tournament conducted 20,000 PCR tests. Out of those tests they received only 7 positive PCR tests. When you compare these numbers to the women's side, the women were given a total of 18,00 antigen tests Interestingly enough 226 tests were positive. For PCR, only 2 were positive for the women's tournament. This goes to show that the women had more hardship when it came to COVID testing because the men were given the better test during the tournament. Having said that, I believe if the women were given the same PCR test, they would've seen fewer problems with not playing because of the mandated quarantine needed for the test.

The next issue brought up in the review was the lack of food, meeting spaces, and overall recreation area provided for the women's tournament. The meals provided for the women were subpar and disappointing considering that these collegiate athletes should've received better options for nutrition. The women's teams reported having "...little portions. It wasn't warm and wasn't good"(KHF, 2021). However, this doesn't go to show how the quality of food was and could be overdramatized by the two parties (men's and women's teams). However looking at the

men's buffet that they were provided, and the details of the luxury of having a buffet option from participating men athletes and staff. The women were not treated equally when it came to meals. As shown in the photo, the women's team was given prepackaged meals while the men's buffet situation was shared via Twitter and other social media platforms. Though this isn't proof, the report discusses the disparities in meal options for both men's and women's programs, from the photos shared via social media, you can see the difference in food options.



In response to the food situation, some schools provided food for their athletes but since some institutions have more money than others they were still not given the same food situation. This is frustrating for some programs because coaches not only had to worry about providing their teams with the proper tools to win games but also had the extra problem of needing to find food that would suffice for their athletes. The only real similarity that both tournaments had was when they ate pre-packaged food during their two-day quarantine. According to the report, “The women's team faced a similar two-day quarantine period in San Antonio with pre-packaged food—but then continued to receive pre-packed meals thereafter”(KHF, 2021). The staff that worked for the women simply did not have time to coordinate other options of food for their

athletes as they weren't expecting the inequalities given with the food. The men were able to receive sponsored food but only because the men's planning process anticipated that the hotel food would not suffice for their athletes. Though there were some efforts to improve the food options "The women's staff declined the offer because they thought it was too late in the process to obtain the necessary permits" (KHF, 2021). In simpler terms, this all goes back to the initial planning process and how much time the women were given. If the time was sufficient enough the NCAA would have received so much backlash and the NCAA staff would have needed to provide food trucks at the last minute for the athletes.

Along with the food situation, the lounge space for athletes was also not comparable to the men's. The women had no lounge space to relax and get their minds off of basketball. These lounge spaces were necessary for the student-athlete's mental health. The men had the opportunity to access Victory Field and have some outdoor activities while the women did not have the same opportunities. However, this yet again wasn't planned into the women's tournament. According to staff, it is because of "... challenges in getting approval to do so and perceived difficulties in managing the logistics of 65 teams using the park" (KHF, 2021). Aside from the recreational areas provided for the student-athletes, it is important to mention the disparities between the student-athletes lounges. But it's very important to mention that these issues were prevalent in previous years for example, in 2019 the men's team had a total of eight lounges, four for family and four for student-athletes. In comparison that same year "The NCAA provided only one student lounge that the final four teams shared, and no family lounges; the cost of that single student login was \$10,500"(KHF 2021). This was soon fixed in the 2021 tournament when similar circumstances occurred but the NCAA created spaces for both tournaments with the same outline as the 2019 men's outline as it worked best.

Another discrepancy to the women's student-athlete experience was the gifts and mementos given to the teams participating in the tournament. The women's swag bags were almost nothing compared to the men's. According to Thereview, the men's committee spent "\$125.55 per player on gifts and moments" whereas the women "... spent only \$60.42 per player" (KHF, 2021). Considering the overall turnout of events for the women's tournament, it's not surprising that the gifts and memorabilia were also lacking. Given the circumstances of the men's tournament, the committee planned for a portion of their budget to go towards their swag bags by adding more items than seen on the women's side. In comparison, the men seemed to receive higher quality items as well. In the review, the prices are broken down to better understand. For example "...the men received a March Madness hooded t-shirt that cost approximately \$16.25, whereas the women received a t-shirt with the hashtag #NCAAW, but no



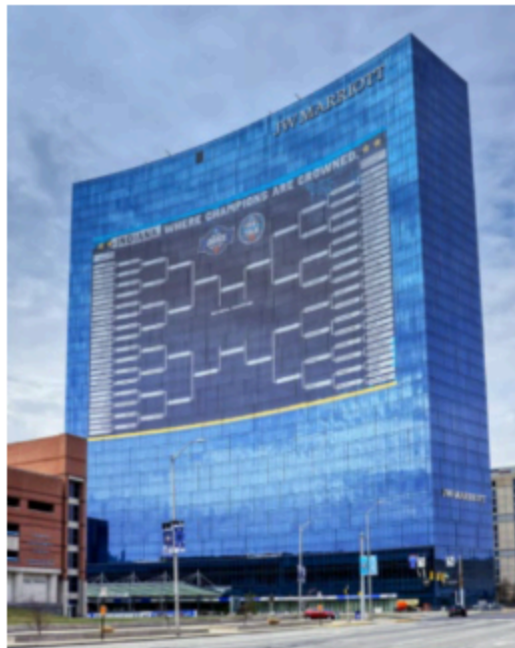
championship branding, that cost \$8.28"(KHF, 2021). For these inequalities to be resolved, it took this news making headlines for the NCAA to respond and take action. Because the women did not receive the same items as the men, the men's tournament decided to take some items from their gifting packages to distribute gifts more eventually for all parties. It's also important

to mention that this inequality in gifting occurred in previous years most notably the NCAA did not allow the women's team to have access to an online gifting suite. This is where hotels could pick from an array of gifts. However in 2016, "The NCAA first offered a gifting suite to the student-athletes at the 2016 tournament—and, in that year only the men"(KHF, 2021). This situation differs from the 2021 tournament vastly as in 2016 it was reported that a "Member of the NCAA basketball staff has to put approximately \$20,000 on a personal credit card as they tried to' create a gifting suite on the fly'(KHF, 2021). It only took one large disparity in the basketball tournament for the NCAA to allow the women's teams to receive the same student-athlete experience as the men.

It's very common knowledge that the NCAA benefits from the men's tournament and the term March Madness has been coined for the tournament. This has become branding for the NCAA in terms of how they decide to market the tournament to the general public. While the name for the tournament for the men in comparison, the women, were shocked to see that the branding for their tournament was little to nothing that included the term "March Madness." Athletes complained claiming that the issue with the men having rights to the name only gave the women more of an issue when it came to being respected. This also created a lot of confusion as noted in the review, athletes said that "...people were saying men's is the only one March Madness... I don't understand that because everyone said we were going to the March Madness" (KHF, 2021). The confusion on the branding of the tournament also leaves the women's team feeling like they aren't appreciated and given the same opportunity as the men's tournament. The term "March Madness" is extremely connected with the men's tournament and it's very prevalent as the men have the term on everything possible. The women aren't allowed to use the term as it's off-limits. This negatively impacts the tournament as they have reached a larger audience in

views but because the NCAA is afraid that their contracts with CBS/Turner and ESPN may be affected by the usage of the term from the women's side. The NCAA also did not approve of any branding the women's tournament committee created. It wasn't until 2021 that the NCAA retracted its decision of only using the popular term for men. "June 2021, the NCAA publicly announced that the women's basketball may use the March Madness brand moving forward"(KHF, 2021). This is very important because women are allowed the same opportunity as men to receive more recognition.

This branding also is somewhat related to the overall signage and atmosphere of the tournament. As mentioned the locations for the tournament are different which also creates a big separation for the two parties. However, it's important to note the contrasting use of signage around the host cities. The goal of the NCAA is to create an equal experience for the student-athletes. They have failed to do as one athlete reported to the reviewer that the tournament "Didn't feel like it was the big tournament" (KHF, 2021). Of course, the tournaments



felt differently and this is solely because of the differences in treatment of both tournaments. One

important thing to note for the tournament is the fact that the men had a larger venue and this caused "... disparities in the signage and branding in the Indianapolis and San Antonio, both inside and outside the tournament venues" (KHF, 2021). Indianapolis was decked out in signage provided by the NCAA, the tournament committee spent a budget for a singular sign outside the Marriott.

This large signage is nowhere near comparable to the women's signage. The lack of signage is a crucial component of the women's overall presence throughout the tournament. Without these signs that in some way announce the tournament the public would have no idea about the tournament's presence. Signage like the ones provided ass to the over ambiance of the tournament further creating a better experience for the athletes. It's interesting to see the officials of the athletic departments comment on the large disparity of the tournament for example as mentioned in the review, "One athletic director who attended both the men's and women's tournaments this year noted that "in Indy, it felt like you were at an NCAA championship anywhere you arrive in the city. In San Antonio, there was nothing when you arrived at that venue. [Indianapolis] had street signs for a mile . . . nothing like that in Austin. So the branding piece, you never felt like you were at a women's NCAA championship event."(KHF, 2021). Considering that the athletic director attends both tournaments, this is a strong statement in the investigation of the equity review.



Along with the atmosphere of the tournament, the fan festivals also differed. For example, for the 2021 tournament, the final four halftime show included a viral tv concert from Miley Cyrus. This halftime show elevated the atmosphere of the men's tournament, whereas the women again were not even met at the same level. Though this even during halftime was sponsored by NCAA corporate sponsors and is contracted through them. It's very disappointing to see that the inequalities only continue and the fear of viewers is what holds the women back for example the women were given a similar opportunity "but the women's basketball staff declined out of concern that only a couple hundred people would tune in and that it would not be worth the \$150,00 it would cost the NCAA to support" (KHF, 2021). These disparities are not new to the organization and have been slowly fixed by the NCAA and this is reflected by the budgets and overall attention to the women. Unfortunately, the women don't receive the attention they deserve and this affects the overall turnout for the women's tournament. We see this in other sports, like the differences in men's and women's soccer. There's always an unfortunate disparity between sports and the way women are treated in our society.

HOW PROFITABLE ARE SPORTS? A BUSINESS POINT OF VIEW:

The overall profitability of sports is high considering how impactful sports are on our society, however, from a business point of view there are multiple ways the industry makes money, making the sports industry competitive. Well, there is no physical product being sold; the consumption of sports is key to profits. For a media company like ESPN, this could be done in numerous ways; Live TV/streams and rights to certain teams stream. For a team or organization Ticket sales, Merchandise sales, and overall sales in streaming impact the profit of a team. A unique way a team can increase revenue is by having a favorable athlete. The reasons stated are why it's clear that the media will stream sports that will increase their revenue.

For college athletics, revenue comes from multiple sources. Most colleges and universities make a majority of their revenue because of athletics. Similarly to professional sports teams, colleges rely on merchandise sales, sponsorships, and ticket sales to bring in revenue. Conferences like the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and the BIG 10 generate revenue from sports like football and basketball. College football in itself has another culture than the other college sports, some may argue that college football is big in the southern states and has its own culture within the state. At the University of Alabama, they bring about “180 Million dollars” (Gaines, 2024) in total revenue with “100 million dollars” (Gaines, 2024) of that being brought in through football. However, that doesn't mean that basketball isn't bringing in some revenue from both the women's and men's teams, the women's basketball team at the University of Alabama had a total revenue of “2 Million Dollars” (Gaines, 2024). Every school differs in revenue, one must take into consideration the success of the basketball program, fan base, and overall presence of the university.

College Basketball alone generates a lot of revenue for the respected conference if the institution participates in the March Madness tournament. Conferences have the opportunity to gain exposure and revenue when a team keeps moving forward in the tournament. According to Forbes, "...each win in the 2023 tournament is worth about \$340,000. If four teams from the same conference win and advance, the conference receives \$1.36 million rolled into a 6-year average total (2108-23) at a minimum" (Weaver, 2023). One president of an institution stated that they focus on men's success in the postseason, "All the decisions we make are geared towards that (success in the men's basketball post-season)" (Weaver, 2023). From a business point of view, this makes sense, giving attention to the team that generates the most money for the institution. Like professional sports teams, this means signing high-quality athletes who can uphold their standards and produce winning teams. Conference payout is important and interesting in terms of the basis of how conferences are paid for their performances. According to Sportico, each game played is considered a monetary unit which then gets paid to the team's conference in the span of six years. However, understanding the women's tournament is very different, conferences don't earn any money from playing a game in the tournament which is a large difference from the men's tournament. The explanation for this is very simple and unfortunate, "Women's March Madness appearances aren't factored into the NCAA's annual distributions the way participation in the men's tournament is" (Caron, 2021). The universities and the conferences participating in the women's tournament receive no money however do receive the benefits of publicity for the university. Though this still is inequality in NCAA sports, one might argue that women's sports deserve the same treatment as men receive. There is obvious inequality in the NCAA in terms of gender and the prioritization of men.

It's very important to analyze the impact that even playing in the March Madness tournament can have on a college. With broadcasting deals, the NCAA capitalizes on the performances of the men's side of the tournament via CBS Sports and Turner Broadcasting (TBS) a "\$10.8 billion deal with the NCAA to broadcast the men's basketball tournament for 14 years, ending in 2024. In 2016, the same parties agreed to an eight-year extension that will last through 2032 and is valued at \$8.8 billion" (Lisa 1). Money is a key contributor to the success of the tournament viewership, and ratings and important for advertisers. According to Sportico, the NCAA tournaments are a billion-dollar business in itself but the women's side "...doesn't generate anything close to the men's tournament, the women's tournament does bring in revenue, mainly through its own TV rights" (Caron, 2021). The women's tournament has its deal with ESPN which includes other sports contracts like the College Baseball World Series and another men's basketball tournament. The ESPN contract altogether will bring the NCAA "\$41.8 million" in 2021 according to Sportico (Caron, 2021). The reach of the tournaments goes beyond the United States and reaches countries, creating an even bigger incentive for broadcasting groups and advertisers to gain the advantage of the tournament's success. So much money is being invested and generated through the men's tournament and the popularity of the tournament in the country. This makes me wonder if the Women's tournament was included in the CBS and TBS contract instead of the ESPN contract, would the NCAA make more money with the contracts combined, and would they see more viewers? Considering the views from the 2023 women's tournaments, where they received 6.5 million views in the final four alone. I think the NCAA would make more money from broadcasting if they included women in their contrast. ESPN commented on the success of the 2023 broadcast saying "The overwhelming success of the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament is a testament to the incredible performances by this

year's student-athletes,' said Nick Dawson" (Elchlepp, 2023). The ESPN deal could further the careers of athletes and take advantage of the playoff games where fans tend to view more. Now with NIL deals, athletes can use their image to earn money and other deals to further themselves.

The NCAA itself has a vast difference in the budget for the tournaments, as mentioned before the broadcasting cost. However, I think it's important to highlight that for the men's tournament, the NCAA has a bigger budget set aside versus the women's tournament. In 2019, when the women's tournament was shown on TikTok and caught the attention of many. The tournament's budget for the men was "\$28 million for the 2019 men's basketball championship, a 68-team, 67-game tournament that was played in major cities nationwide. The N.C.A.A. budgeted \$14.5 million for the women's championship, a 63-game competition that was also staged across the country" (Blinder 2021). Needless to say, this gap in the budget reflects the difference in areas where games are played, equipment, and overall tournament atmosphere. The organization spends less on the facilities that games are played in for the women's side because they allow the men to play at bigger venues in cities where the tournaments are held however, strive to give these athletes the same student-athlete experience. However, why not allow women to have the same experiences as men and allow them to play in areas instead of campuses? This is disappointing to hear as a student-athlete and it's no secret that coaches and athletes feel the same disappointment. Former athletes who turned into athletic officials have had some to say about the tournament fairness, in a New York Times article about the NCAA tournament disparities, former athlete Amy Privette Perko who works as the chief executive for the Knight Commission on intercollegiate athletics has shown this disappointment, "...This is an issue of fairness,' she said. 'The N.C.A.A. is intended to be a unifying organization for its schools to provide educational opportunities through sports. One of its foundational principles is to conduct

its activities in a 'manner free of gender bias,' and in this case, it seems clear that the N.C.A.A. failed to meet its own standard." (Blider, 2021). The NCAA has then apologized for the lack of attention towards the women's tournament and hired a civil rights lawyer to further investigate which was the NCAA External Gender Equity Review mentioned before. There is still so much room for the tournament to improve even now for future tournaments.

WOMEN'S SPORTS ARE BRINGING IN VIEWS

Star athletes like Caitlin Clark are contributing to the rise of the popularity of Women's Sports and it's catching the media's attention. The demand to watch Women's sports has only increased because fans are starting to appreciate the athletes. For a long time, female athletes have been underlooked in our society because male athletes receive the most attention from sports fans. Our society overall tends to overlook women instilling the theory of males as the normative, ignoring females. Despite Title IX in educational institutions, there is a lack of equality for women in our society and we see this through the treatment in the 2020 March Madness tournament. However, this increase in interest in women's sports can also impact the amount of money investors give to female sports to succeed. Teams and organizations need the funding to perform at their best. Securing equipment, staff, athletes, and all things necessary to run a successful program, with the assistance of investors they can have the opportunity to do so.

With the integration of NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness) deals in 2019, athletes are allowed to make money while participating in college sports. Besides Caitlin Clark, Angel Reese better known as The Bayou Barbie is also getting their share of NIL deals. Angel Reese is ranked 8th for the highest paid in NIL deals which is amongst male and female athletes, earning 1.8 Million dollars according to On3.com. Besides her most notable deal with Beats by Dre, she's had 25 NIL deals with other companies since 2022. It's important to mention these numbers because it goes to show the impact that women have on their sport and the amount of money a singular athlete can make just based on their name, image, and likeness.

In Los Angeles alone, the increase of fans for the National Women's Soccer League team went from 0 to 19,000 fans in their inaugural season. In some perspective, investing in women's sports can be a gamble but because little to no people want to invest those that do have the

opportunity to make a huge difference for our society. The co-owner of the Angel City Football Club in Los Angeles said that he invested in women's sports because "— plenty of people invest in men's sports. It's harder to have an impact there from a dollar standpoint. But in women's sports, there's a huge financial and cultural opportunity to make a difference, drive returns, and get people to pay attention." (Streeter, 2023). It may be difficult to start a women's league or team, it only takes one person to see and recognize what there is a lack of. Last year, NCAA March Madness tournament Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese alone impacted the tournament's views. People all over the United States are noticing this change. The gender divide in sports is finally being closed, professor Cheryl Cooky said in a New York Times article, "This isn't just a moment...It's more than that. It's the cumulative effect of a decades-long struggle for equality and recognition. We're at this kind of tipping point of a new era, and the momentum is so great that it cannot be stopped." (Streeter, 2023). The overall shift in societal norms in sports is only creating new pathways for the younger generation to follow suit. It's taken years for the public to recognize that female sports are actually profitable and successful.

There is no longer an argument about female sports not being entertaining because the increase in profits and views is proof. The revenue alone from the United States Women's Soccer Team is proof in itself that even if a team isn't given the money or attention they will still be able to bring in more revenue than the opposing gender. The argument for equal pay with the US men's and women's national teams is nothing new, according to Forbes when speaking about the soccer federation, "The numbers demonstrate that when women's sports are invested in, not only are they profitable, but they are capable of generating as much and even more revenue than men's sports" (Elting, 2023). The argument of whether women's sports are good investments has been overturned by the performances of Women's sports teams around the world. In the United

States, the NCAA tournaments have a lot to contribute when it comes to views. After reassuring the March Madness tournament, I found that these tournaments are the reason why there was and is such a huge popularity in Women's basketball. If other organizations took part in investing their time and money in women's sports we'd see a larger number in views as well as more equality for female athletes.

CONCLUSION

If we as a society continue to celebrate and recognize female athletes and teams we can get to where the men are currently at. Sports are heavily profitable and rely on media contracts, sponsorships, and viewership. The women bring all those components when they are given the opportunity to do so. The signs are clearly there as women's sports are bringing in these components for the investors and business owners. The momentum toward gender equality in sports is gaining traction because sports fans are starting to recognize women as professional athletes. We see this all by the driven growth of demand for inclusive representation and fair treatment across all levels of competition, Coaches, athletes, and athletic professionals have recognized the disparity in sports. Caitlin Clark is doing a great job at breaking gender norms for female athletes breaking men's and women's records and making the records equal and attainable for all genders not just men.

When female athletes receive equal treatment and are given the proper resources to succeed as their counterparts they can provide the same results if not better than the men's teams. Over the past couple of years, Female athletes have fought for equity in sports. The treatment of the Women's March Madness teams is just one of the many examples of how the athletes were poorly treated, from protocols, planning, and facilities. The women were not given the same student-athlete experience as the men. This all could have been prevented if the planning process for the committee had been done better and executed to mimic the men's tournaments. The *External Gender Equity Review* by Kaplan Hecker & Fink LLP shed light on these discrepancies and gave the NCAA the recipe to do better in future years. The review revealed that the women's tournament planning was consistently looked down upon, leading to last-minute arrangements and poor-quality resources that had to be fixed at the last minute. Had not the NCAA paid so

much attention to the men's tournament, the Women would've had a better experience. The NCAA depends on big tournaments to bring in revenue from college athletics and their fans. The tournament in 2021 was a great example of how athletes speaking out on their treatment can only shed light on the disparities that were in desperate need of change.

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