

Gendering the Coronavirus Pandemic: Toward a Framework of Interdependence for Sport

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A growing body of research suggests that economic crises tend to exacerbate existing gender inequalities, particularly in the realms of paid work and political representation. Translating this to the case of sport, how and why might the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic be felt unevenly by professional female athletes and women leaders? In this essay, the authors reflect on the classic feminist critique of the gendered construction of dependence and consider how its application in the context of sport might aid scholars in making sense of (a) the persistence of gendered precarity and inequality in sport, (b) the prospect of their exacerbation under conditions of a pandemic, and (c) how the current crisis might enable sport to move toward a model of interdependence in which its vastly unequal structures are changed for the better.

Keywords: crisis, dependent, feminist, gender

The gendered ideology of dependence has long aided feminist scholars concerned with explaining the origins of gender inequality in the workplace, politics, and the private realm of household labor and caregiving (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Orloff, 1993; Pateman, 1988). A simplified synopsis proceeds as follows: the many privileges afforded to men in the public sphere of work and politics rely on the (classed and racialized) ideology of the male breadwinner and protector, upon whom the female homemaker partner in the presumed heterosexual household is deemed dependent for her economic security and social status. This arrangement is shored up by formal state policies that enact welfare programs destined primarily for men as “entitlements” rather than forms of economic dependence, such as the G.I. bill in the United States¹ (Orloff, 1993), as well as informal workplace practices such as those that financially reward men for becoming fathers (the “fatherhood bonus”) while women accrue a “motherhood wage penalty” (Hodges & Budig, 2010, pp. 718–720).

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In practice, of course, men's independence is a myth: the household, the healthcare system, the education system, and the entire economy depend on the (under) paid and unpaid labor of women. As an ideology, however, it is highly effective in normalizing women's underrepresentation and undervaluing in the public sphere. As an analytical tool, it helps to explain why women's work is often precarious and underpaid and why leadership remains masculine and male dominated.

Curiously, feminist sports scholars have had relatively little to say about the gendered ideology of dependence and its relevance to the place of women on the sporting field, in the ranks of sports leadership, and in the engine rooms of sports media. This is despite clear commonalities: think, for example, of the construction of the female athlete as in need of protection (Henne, 2014), the hurdle of primary caregiving duties for some aspiring women leaders (Leberman & Palmer, 2009), and the invisible reliance of youth sport on the "mother's taxi" (Thompson, 1999, p. 6). In our analyses of the gendered logics that shape the sporting field, sports governing bodies, and media organizations, we (sports scholars) have often focused our critical energy on the systematic devaluing of women's bodies and the association of sport with the maintenance of masculine dominance and for good reasons (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015; Hargreaves, 1994). In this essay, however, we want to consider a different analytical strategy.

Specifically, we take the Coronavirus pandemic as a moment to consider how the ideology of dependence inhibits women's place in sport, with a particular focus on its implications for professional female athletes and women leaders.² Like feminist scholarship more broadly, we will argue that this ideology obscures the extent to which men in sport depend upon a whole range of (gendered) structures that have been established over time, and which the Coronavirus crisis is now revealing. We consider how the feminist notion of *interdependence* could aid in reconfiguring the unequal landscape of sport postpandemic, especially if sports governing bodies, sports media, and other powerful actors commit to recognizing the diverse contributions that are needed to cocreate and maintain the cultural prominence of sport.

Gendered (In)dependence in Sport

Hard-fought recent victories notwithstanding, sport has remained a thoroughly gendered institution and one in which women continue to find themselves more often at the margins, whether that be on the sporting field, in the news columns (and among the journalists that pen them), or in the ranks of leadership and decision making (Cooky et al., 2015; Schoch & Clausen, 2019; Whiteside & Hardin, 2012). With very few exceptions, women athletes are paid substantially less than male counterparts, have far fewer opportunities for professional competition, and must contend with greater uncertainty over their immediate futures as professional athletes (Baker, Seymour, & Zimbalist, 2019). Of course, women in sport are not a monolith and there is growing attention to how intersections with other socially meaningful forms of difference and inequality, including race/ethnicity, nationality, class, and disability, render certain women more marginal again (Crosby, 2016; Melton & Bryant, 2017). Overall, however, it is well documented that women in

sport are often both structurally and symbolically precarious: more vulnerable to the economic fallout of a crisis, and more expendable and at risk of “annihilation” when sports organizations decide what they will prioritize (Cooky, 2017, p. 136).

The above can also be read as a story of maintaining gendered relations of (in)dependence. Men have long been the breadwinners and powerbrokers in sport, especially at elite and professional levels. To gain access to the sporting field, women have had to demand it as a right (Hargreaves, 1994; Schultz, 2014). To gain access to the decision-making table, women have had to prove their worth (Pape, 2020). Demands from women athletes and their advocates to expand professional opportunities, such as providing a women’s Tour de France, are frequently met with the refrain: you are not economically viable. In terms that are familiar to feminists, such a logic enacts women’s professional sport as “dependent,” unable to achieve self-sufficiency, burdensome and therefore expendable.³ It simultaneously overlooks the immense social, public, and corporate investment that men’s professional sport relies upon to retain its cultural prominence, including its monopoly over major broadcasting rights (Cooky et al., 2015). Women, (under) paid and unpaid, are critical to this infrastructure (Thompson, 1999). The case of sports leadership is no different: male leaders, too, are dependent upon gendered organizational structures, networks, and care arrangements in order to realize their position.

Compounding “Dependence” During a Pandemic

When the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, sports governing bodies responded by shutting down professional and elite competitions around the world for the foreseeable future. Women athletes and their supporters now face a scenario that earlier this year was unthinkable: the prospect of women’s sport taking one for the team as governing bodies scramble to ensure the survival of men’s professional leagues, revealing the thin veneer of genuine commitment to women’s sport and gender equity.

If the scale of the economic fallout of the Coronavirus pandemic is anything like what some models are predicting, there is good reason to believe that it will disproportionately and significantly impact women’s sport. A growing body of literature shows that the fallout of economic shocks, including recessions and natural disasters, maps onto and compounds existing forms of social and economic vulnerability, including those associated with gender (Floro & Dymiski, 2000). In the years following the 2008 global economic crisis, for example, women across a range of countries were more adversely impacted than men in terms of their workforce participation, political representation, educational attainment, and health outcomes (Blanton, Blanton, & Peksen, 2019; Kushi & McManus, 2018).⁴ Intersections with other socially meaningful forms of difference also matter: in the case of the 2011 Tuscaloosa tornado in Alabama, the long-term financial impacts of the crisis fell heavily on the shoulders of women of color (Prohaska, 2020).

This is not to say that men are not impacted by financial crises: indeed, many of the industries that contract during recessions are male dominated. Importantly, however, these are also the industries most likely to be supported by state-funded stimulus packages (Walby, 2009). In other words, the state can be

highly responsive to the plight of breadwinners. And yet, bailouts are rarely recognized as revealing the structural dependence of male-dominated industries, with finance being a prominent example.

As the Coronavirus pandemic unfolds, there are already worrying signs that gendered precarity might compound on the sporting field (Ingle, 2020; Macur, 2020). In Australia, for example, where national women's leagues in Aussie Rules (AFLW) and Rugby League (NRLW)—the country's two major football codes—were established in just 2017 and 2018, respectively, there are murmurs that support for these budding leagues could be significantly curtailed or even scrapped as clubs and governing bodies look to ensure their own survival (Whaley, 2020; Wilson, 2020). So, too, might the W-League—Australia's professional soccer league for women—be abandoned to “keep the more lucrative [men's] A-League afloat” (Lewis, 2020, para. 1). It is a curious cost-cutting measure, given that most women players are not even paid the minimum wage. Again, the ideology of dependence is at work: inclusion can be accommodated when the going is good, but there is no room for charity when a crisis hits.

The Coronavirus pandemic simultaneously threatens to reveal the myth: even some of the most (supposedly) independent of men's leagues and clubs are today seeking government support to ensure their survival, including the National Rugby League in Australia and Premier league clubs in the United Kingdom (Lemon, 2020; Smith & Panja, 2020). And yet, it is women's sport that is remembered as unviable: a nonessential service in comparison with men's sport on which national morale depends. As Alice Milliat (founder of the *Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale*) might have warned were she alive today, women are always at risk of being expendable in a sporting structure built by men in service of supposedly independent male athletes and the ideology of masculinity that they stand for (Bryson, 1994).⁵

This highlights the importance of changing the gendered logic of sports organizations, in part by bringing more women into decision-making positions, a goal that has proven even more elusive than access to the sporting field (Pape, 2020). Here again, there is a warning to be heeded in scholarship on the gendered impacts of economic shocks: women leaders tend to fare badly (Blanton et al., 2019; Lei & Bodenhausen, 2018). Beware the yearning for the (independent) strongman: the imagined (male) leader who will offer stability and grit, assertiveness rather than compassion, who is better equipped to forcefully address the economic issues of the moment (Bolzendahl, 2014; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Changing the gendered logic of sports organizations, however, requires more than bringing women into existing structures: it demands changing the underlying ideology that underpins it.

Toward Interdependence in Sport

Just as the Coronavirus pandemic is prompting broad reflection on how economic and healthcare systems might be overhauled to become more equitable and sustainable (Ray & Rojas, 2020), the challenge is also thrown down to sports scholars to consider how sporting institutions could be configured differently postpandemic. Rana Hussain, an advocate for diversity and inclusion in Australian

sport, has observed in relation to the Australian Football League: “[t]he opportunity that presents itself now is to build something new—something that will last. Something more agile and inclusive” (Hussain, 2020, para. 7). How might the Coronavirus moment be leveraged to transform relations of (in)dependence in sport? How might we center instead the *interdependence* that the pandemic lays bare and which critical feminist scholars more broadly have long recognized as the actual state of gender relations (Fraser & Gordon, 1994)? Such an orientation, which calls into question capitalist logic as the *sine qua non* for modern sport, could aid in transforming the pandemic into a great equalizer rather than a great compounder of the inequalities that currently characterize the distribution of sport’s material and symbolic spoils.

Recognition of interdependence takes the form of incorporating diverse women’s voices into response efforts across the sporting landscape, considered media coverage that centers women’s sport as an equally prominent concern, providing equal opportunities for women to resume play, and ensuring public and private rescue dollars are allocated on condition of advancing gender equity (Leberman, LaVoi, & Shaw, 2020). The pursuit of change for women in sport is always multipronged, involving grassroots mobilization and top-down policy commitments, as well as respectful and inclusive media (Cooky, 2017; McLachlan, 2019). A diversity of stakeholders must commit to holding sports administrators to account, with it not left to advocates of women’s sport to do this important work. Sports scholars have a critical role to play in documenting the nature of sports media coverage during lockdown, including the (gendered) narratives being told in the absence of live action on the field. So, too, should we watch for the collateral damage of the crisis backstage: are women leaders as well as paid gender equity and diversity roles being put on the backburner until the next “boom” cycle (McLachlan, 2019, p. 7)?⁶ Vigilance during the initial fallout is only the beginning, given the negative gendered impacts of an economic crisis can last many years following the initial shock (Blanton et al., 2019). All levels of women’s sport, including grassroots, have the potential to be durably impacted (Ingle, 2020).

One final note of caution: as the trajectory of the pandemic unfolds, various media outlets have described a halt to the so-called progress of women’s sport. Yet as one female sports executive noted earlier this year, “there’s been some progress . . . [but] I don’t think we’re anywhere near a tipping point” (Thomas, 2020, para. 37). Progress narratives appear at various points in the time line of women’s sport and do not necessarily translate into durable change (McLachlan, 2019), nor lead to intersectional and widespread inclusion. As scholars, we should take care to frame the Coronavirus pandemic as revealing the façade of genuine progress and reminding us with a jolt just how much work is yet to be done to realize a more durable, equitable, and interdependent model of sport.

Notes

1. The G.I. bill is the common name in the United States for the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944.
2. Throughout this essay, we refer to women’s and men’s sport while recognizing that the boundaries of these categories are highly contested and are currently regulated in ways that discriminate against sex and gender minorities.

3. In the U.S. context, Title IX backlash is also consistent with a framing of women's sport as dependent and therefore undeserving (Barnett & Hardin, 2011).
4. These effects hold regardless of the wealth of the country (Blanton et al., 2019).
5. It is also not clear that women's leagues with independent governance will fare any better, including the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) in the United States, which may not be able to deliver its new collective bargaining agreement (see Macur, 2020).
6. Counterintuitively, it is possible that this crisis will prompt a gendered reshuffling of sports leadership (Prügl, 2012), as evidenced by the case of FIFA. However, there is an important distinction between meaningful inclusion and a "glass cliff," whereby women leaders are promoted when an organization is at its most vulnerable and are subsequently held accountable for its failure (Ahn & Cunningham, 2020, p. 114).

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