

# *The Gender Inequality between NBA and WNBA*

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**Abstract:** Gender inequality is one of most popular topics in modern society. According to the data reports of various media within the sports and entertainment industry, the salary and other financial treatment to professional athletes are different based on gender. However, the potential origins of such issue are heatedly debated. Hence, this research would figure out certain factors that contribute to the distinct salary level between female and male athletes through focusing on the basketball league NBA and WNBA. During the investigation, the method of data analysis has been employed which contained relatively well-rounded comparison on the enormous data, including average salary, viewership, sponsorship, and so forth. After all of these data analysis, this research separated the factors into 3 categories: salary standard, audience attitudes, and regulations of league. In conclusion, all the factors affected salary level in aspect of society, league, and players. As the result, corresponding solutions should be operated by each league, such as more investment in awareness of competition and new policy that makes WNBA game more flexible as well as the athletes themselves, such as seeking for more competitions oversea. Under such circumstance, the pressure of gender discrimination could be released not only between NBA and WNBA, but also for more discrimination within other professional sports field.

**Keywords:** Gender Inequality, Professional Sports, Salary

## 1. Introduction

National Basketball Association (NBA) is the most famous professional basketball league in North America. This basketball league is composed of 30 basketball teams and is divided into eastern and western conference. Since the establishment on June 6, 1946, NBA is always treated as the highest standard in the world regarding to professional basketball competition with the highest popularity, millions of viewers and billions of video views. Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) is the similar basketball league in North America with 12 teams from different regions, which serves as platform of basketball competition for female players. Since the establishment in 1996, the viewership of website and video of WNBA draft have reached several millions.

Within the sports and entertainment industry, the relatively more obvious aspects of inequality would be the salary gap between professional male athletes and professional female athletes in some sports and the related viewership between the men's professional sports competition and women's professional sports competition. Specifically, there is enormous salary gap between the wage earned by the NBA basketball player and the WNBA basketball player. According report done

in the 2021-2022 game season, compared with the average salary of one NBA player which was about 7340.75 thousand dollars, the average wages earned by the female athletes in WNBA are only about 120.65 thousand dollars. Through the precise ratio comparison, those female athletes were making only approximately 1.64 percent of salaries of their male counterparts [1]. In addition, WNBA games suffer much less viewership than NBA, which means audiences would prefer the video records, live shows and official news related to NBA rather than WNBA. Meanwhile, the popularity of WNBA among basketball fans around the world is much lower than that of NBA, represented by not only the scale of fans of specific team or player but also the influence of entire league on the industry and sport of entertainment, such as inspire individual's interests on basketball and spread this sport to all the countries around the globe. Under such circumstance, the female basketball players can be considered as being treated differently compared with the male basketball players who have the same quality and similar platform in this market.

In this research project, the accurate and detailed reflection of the gender discrimination and inequality would be listed for comparison, including the specific wages and revenues in average, range of salary from wage for the most valuable players to that for the relatively fewer valuable players, the sponsorship in both NBA and WNBA, and the average viewership of each competition. After that, there would be a relatively well-rounded analysis about the sources such inequality and wage gap from the perspective of the players themselves, such as the individual characteristics, and of audiences as well. Then, the impacts of such salary inequality would be analyzed from not only the aspect of athletes themselves, but also from the aspect of the whole society and sports and entertainment industry. Finally, there would be some suggestions and methods to settle these kinds of problems down or just reduced the impact of such inequality on all the related individuals. Hence, the logical analysis of reasons and impacts would be the central purposes of this investigation. Based on this central analysis, the proposed suggestions and solutions could precisely relieve salary inequality issue between NBA and WNBA and even more similar problems in other professional competitions.

## 2. Literature Review

According to official definition, the term inequality describes the situation of unfair, unjust, and unbalanced distribution of various opportunities and resources for individuals with certain different characteristics within society [2]. The inequality is built upon the foundation and context that separate groups of people being treated differently should possess the similar or same quality and qualification to obtain the resources and opportunities. Based on the definition of equality on different laws from various countries, such as the United States and many European countries, the equality can be categorized into seven parts, equality as citizenship, neutrality, sub-ordination, equal treatment, accommodation, diversity, and intersectionality [3]. Under these categories of equality, the primary subjects within the situation of inequality or discrimination would be divided into the gender, race, and religion. In this research, the main subjects to be analyzed is separated on basis of their different gender.

Gender inequality can be defined as a main purpose or topic of feminism for several decades. Feminists have insisted on pursuing the similar capabilities and better social status for women [4]. According to various definitions in different books and articles, gender discrimination and inequality could be defined as the different treatment, distinct requirements to people with certain gender, and the general difference in social status and opportunities. This discrimination could be subjective results from the objective or physical differences between woman and man even though they are all qualified for specific achievements and chances. These kinds of inequality could happen on the workplace, such as fewer female candidates for future promotion and lower status or job position in company [5]. Regarding to the limited resources and opportunities, woman won't be

given the greater or more chances to take advantage of them due to certain gender stereotypes, which is the general belief about disadvantage of women compared to men from multiple aspects. In such case, the discrimination based on gender would be gradually formed.

As employees in the entertainment and sports industry, WNBA and NBA players are experiencing the similar discrimination and inequality. Despite the fact that female player and male player possess similar sports skills, body strengths, and outstanding performance on the courts, female player in WNBA would always obtain less viewership, popularity, and salaries. With the limited resources (audience and sponsorship), woman would never be given top priority to take advantage of them. Under such circumstance, there would absolutely be gender inequality between players in NBA and WNBA.

### **3. Gender Inequality Analysis**

#### **3.1. Distinct Treatment to Players with Different Gender**

Within the competitive market of entertainment and sports, the everything derived from audiences would be limited resources. Under such circumstance, there should be fierce competition between NBA and WNBA for the limited entertainment market. However, the original imagined balanced fans scale is actually unproportionally distributed between these two leagues. For most of fans, the NBA is always their preference than WNBA. Hence, there is gradual formation of gender discrimination in the basketball market. Generally, there is three aspects that could reveal the existence of inequality: the salary, social attitudes (reflected on quantitative data and qualitative information), and basic regulation or different natures of professional sports.

As for the salary level, athletes from WNBA only received salary at about 1% of income obtained by players from NBA. From aspects of social attitudes, both quantitative data and qualitative information could reveal the treatments of basketball fans to the athletes in NBA and WNBA, such as the attendance of each game, viewership, and so on. According to the regulations of NBA and WNBA, the length of each game, length of game season, and other difference in regulations all contribute to the different nature of the basketball game between NBA and WNBA, which might be physical factors that lead to the different treatment from audiences. Considering all these aspects of factors, the gender inequality definitely existed between two leagues. Therefore, the detailed reasons should be specifically analyzed in following part so that corresponding and targeted suggestions could be provided

#### **3.2. Factors Analysis**

##### **3.2.1. Salary Difference**

First and foremost, salary level of certain athletes is an obvious indicator of general treatments to them. Higher standard of salary not only represents the respect to specific basketball player from the manager of leagues, but also refers to the preference of most audiences or fans on certain teams or athletes. To begin with, the average annual salaries in 2021-2022 game season was 7340.75 thousand dollars in NBA but only 120.65 thousand dollars in WNBA, which means the average revenue of one female basketball player for one year is only 1.64% of the average revenue of a male player for one year[1]; the highest paid players in WNBA, including Diana Taurasi, Jewell Loyd, and Breanna Stewart, earned 228.09 thousand dollars in 2022, but as the top players in NBA, LeBron James got salary level around 41.2 million dollars and Stephen Curry earned 45.8 million dollars as salary, which indicates that the highest salary of WNBA could only be 0.498% of that for most valuable NBA player [6-7]; Even within the same city, the teams of WNBA would earn much

less than NBA, the WNBA team Phoenix Mercury provided 82.32 thousand dollars and Chicago Sky provided 81.86 thousand dollars in 2019, but the counterpart teams from NBA Phoenix Suns offered 7.83 million dollars and Chicago Bulls offered 7.45 million dollars in same season, which suggests that welfare and benefits in NBA is far more and greater than in WNBA [8-9]. Additionally, the proportion of total revenue of league that is allocated to players in NBA is 50% but is 20% to players in WNBA, such difference in the percentage of share allocated demonstrates the distinct treatments to players and attitudes toward athletes from manager and administrator of each league [10]. Hence, from the aspect of salary and welfare, obvious gender discrimination exists between NBA and WNBA.

### **3.2.2. Attitude Difference Based on Quantitative Data**

Furthermore, attitudes of various social groups toward the female and male basketball players would directly demonstrate the existence of gender inequality. In this part, the reflection of attitudes would mainly focus on relevant data, including the ticket prices, attendance, viewership, social media followers, and sponsorship. Lower data in these aspects would indicate lower interests and preference for specific league. To start with, as the primary foundation of establishment of entire industry, the audiences' attitudes reveal the degree of gender discrimination. The large difference is visualized from data of ticket price, attendance, viewership, and social media followers. The ticket price ranged from 73 dollars to 24 dollars in WNBA games in 2021, but the ticket price ranged from 615 dollars to 80.9 thousand dollars in NBA finals in 2022 [11-12]; the attendance ranged from 5849 to 1145 at WNBA games in 2021, but it ranged from 20881 to 14359 in 21-22 game season of NBA [13-14]; the viewership of finals from 2017 to 2021 is ranging from 386 thousand to 563 thousand for WNBA but from 7.5 million to 20.4 million for NBA [15-16]; as the most popular NBA team with numerous followers and fans, Los Angeles Lakers has had 39.7 million subscription from basketball fans in social media, but the WNBA team Minnesota Lynx only has had 328.6 thousands of followers [17-18]. Meanwhile, another large origin of revenue for entire industry is the sponsorship from multiple companies. Through collaborating with certain famous player for advertisement, companies from various field could generate large profits by expanding the market to basketball fans. So, the revenue from sponsorship can represent the development potential that companies expected player or league to have in the future. Compared with the huge billions of investments from different companies in NBA, WNBA only obtained millions of sponsorship revenue, which means the expectations on WNBA is much lower than on NBA. Therefore, according to the attitudes of society, there is gender stereotypes which created the inequality between NBA and WNBA players.

### **3.2.3. Attitude Difference Based on Qualitative Information**

Moreover, the popularity of NBA and WNBA could suggest the individuals' perspectives on the basketball players from more qualitative way. In this part, the popularity could be defined as the influence of specific league, team, or single player on the basketball fans. Through watching different competitions, audiences might be inspired to participate in or enjoy the sports. In addition to that, the valuable spirits can be conveyed to the fans via the channel of viewing the games, such the positive attitudes toward the success and failure, perseverance, and the fact that practice makes perfect. Therefore, different individuals may have different athletes as models, teachers, or guiders. For most of basketball fans, Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, Bill Russell, and Magic Johnson are inspirational figure that spark their interests in basketball. However, there are only few or almost none of basketball fans or audiences are inspired by the player or any figure from WNBA. This difference is gradually generated from the less attention on that league and those teams from

WNBA. On the contrary, they understand the stories, histories, and even the playing habits or skills of each athlete in NBA, so most of them would definitely set NBA players as the guider and model. Thus, the popularity among audiences and fans could be considered as the demonstration of the gender discrimination from audiences between NBA and WNBA.

### 3.2.4. Regulation Difference

Finally, basic distinction of regulations between NBA and WNBA would generate obvious gender discrimination. According to the setting of season length, WNBA operated formal competitions much shorter than NBA per year; with respect to the scale of each league, there are 30 NBA teams, which is much more than the 12 teams within the WNBA; and there are 144 female players in WNBA but only 12 players on roster for each team, which is less than 15 players for NBA teams on roster; based on the length of each game, NBA required each game to be 48 minutes long but WNBA required only the 40-minute games. Under such situation, the game number and length could largely influence the revenue since more time investment from fans would contribute to more business related to them. Hence, with lower total revenue and fans foundation, players in WNBA don't possess the bargaining capability to negotiate with manager for higher welfare and income. As the result, the overall salary level of WNBA player is much lower than player in NBA [19].

### 3.3. Impact and Suggestion

As for a professional athlete, low popularity and less fans groups for a long period of time would discourage he or she to exit the market and shift to other professions. Therefore, if the gender discrimination on WNBA continues for several centuries, increasing number of players might select to quit the basketball field. Then the female would never occur on the basketball court and this sport will finally transform to the games of man. Hence, some valuable suggestions and solutions should be proposed and applied to reverse or release such issue.

Because of the correlation with the salary, attitudes of audiences, and regulations difference, the inequality problem should be settled down from the management of league. As for salary, the league should allocate same percentage of the league revenue as salaries for male and female and publish some new policies that could increase the valuation of female players; with respect to the popularity and viewership, the league and counterpart NBA should invest more efforts and finance in raising awareness campaigns for WNBA, which can directly increase the popularity and influence of the WNBA among basketball fans; for the individual athletes themselves, the league should provide more training services to ensure that the women could perform better; as for the professional opportunities, the league can set basketball competition as part-time jobs so that the female players can flexibly schedule and attend more other events, including those oversea basketball competition, which offer more salaries for the athletes [19].

## 4. Conclusion

Despite the gradual transition from traditional belief that male should be given greater status and power rather than woman to the modern society that pursues the gender equality. Some discrimination based on gender still occurs around the world. Specifically, within the industry and market of entertainment and sports, the attitudes from audiences and financial treatment from league are the most determinant factors for the career expectation and path of one athlete. Under such circumstance, this research concentrated on the inequality on basketball players as a classic example in professional sports area. Through analysis on the various data about the games, players, and audiences in WNBA and NBA, the scientific evidence of gender discrimination would be



visible as well as the reasons, impacts, and suggestions of such inequality. Within such social background that most male athletes always get preference than female, this research could contribute to the construction of equality in sports market and release this problem not only in NBA and WNBA, but also in all the professional sport events.

According to the investigation in the market of NBA and WNBA, the formation of gender discrimination could be attribute to four categories of factors: salary, attitudes of audiences, and the different natures of competition in each league. Obviously, the salary level of players in WNBA is completely different than those in NBA and even the share of revenue of league is lower for female players than for males. In addition, the attitudes of audiences were revealed from quantitative data and qualitative information. With lower ticket prices, viewership, social media followers, and attendance, WNBA is less attractive to basketball fans from aspect of quantitative data; with the more influences of NBA players on most of fans, NBA league is much more popular than WNBA. Finally, shorter game length, shorter season length, and less players or teams all determine the impossibility of female players to seek for higher salary from league. So, all of these factors consequently contributed to the serious gender discrimination between NBA and WNBA.

Corresponding to the factors, potential suggestions and solutions were proposed. Primarily, the league should revise some management policy, including greater investment of efforts and finance in raising the awareness of campaigns, increasing the value of players, setting same league revenue share ratio, providing better training service, and transform some games into part-time jobs. Moreover, the athletes themselves should take advantages of various resources across the globe, such as the oversea basketball competition, to improve their salary level.

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