Gender Differences in the Pay of Professional Basketball Players

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Gender Differences in the Pay of Professional Basketball Players

Nola Agha and David Berri

Introduction

In 1891, James Naismith invented the game of basketball at Springfield College to find something for male students at the school to do during the New England winter. The next year Senda Berenson organized the first women’s basketball game with slightly different rules 25 miles away at Smith College (Hult & Trekell, 1991). By 1900, the game had spread to colleges, high schools, and amateur clubs across the country (Emery & Toohey-Costa, 1991). Although both men and women have essentially played this game since its introduction, the men’s game has generally received a much greater share of attention and funding. For example, men’s basketball became an Olympic sport in 1936 but it took another 40 years for women to compete in basketball in the Olympics. In terms of professional opportunities, the NBA began in 1946, though it was not until 1997 that the WNBA began play. This chapter will undertake a comparison of pay in women’s basketball with an emphasis on its inception in North America which was rooted in gendered ideologies of the early 20th century. The historical content of both men’s and women’s leagues is critical in discussing pay disparities because each league is a different age. By comparing the leagues at the same period in their life cycles we show that women are underpaid even after accounting for the age of the league. We find the same result when comparing wages to other North American sports and women’s leagues in Europe.
A Brief History of Basketball

The history of women’s participation in basketball in the U.S. is consistent with women’s participation in most other sports in the early 1900’s; a movement existed to prohibit women from playing because it was too masculine and threatened male expectations of female health and physiology (Johnson, 1991). Playing games publicly in front of men was considered a threat to the “standard of womanhood” (Emery & Toohey-Costa, 1991). Others believed efforts to discourage women’s participation was because the women’s game resulted in competition with men’s basketball for publicity as well as resources, such as lockers and gymnasiums (Hult & Trekell, 1991).

In 1908, the U.S.-based Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) said women should not play basketball in public. Then in 1914, the U.S. Olympic Committee announced that women should not play basketball at the Olympics (Lewis, 2020). In 1923, the Women’s Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation began working to get women’s basketball banned by churches, high schools, and industrial leagues by arguing that basketball was just too competitive for women (Lewis, 2020). Despite these, and other, organised efforts, women’s basketball carried on at the local level throughout the nation (Hult & Trekell, 1991). After 1928, the AAU did start holding tournaments, but widespread women’s basketball only came into existence with the passage of Title IX in 1972. Men’s basketball, on the other hand, has an uninterrupted history of playing at the amateur, high school, and collegiate level. The first professional league, the National Basketball League, played regionally in the Northeast from 1898-1904 and dozens of professional men’s leagues played throughout the twentieth century (World of Basketball, 2020).

The first professional women’s basketball players originated in the U.S. not with a league, but with a team called the All-American Redheads. For 50 years, from 1936-1986, this all-White team of women travelled across the country playing mostly against men’s teams, according to the rules of the men’s game, with Globetrotter-type play that included dribbling, trick shots, and dancing to
entertain the crowd (Kelly, 2013). The All-American Redheads were generally successful, reportedly winning 70% of their games against men (Kelly, 2013). Other semi-professional traveling teams existed in this time period such as the New York Cover Girls and Arthur Murray Girls, but opportunities for women to earn a living in basketball were few (Kyvallos, 1991).

Women's Professional Basketball in the U.S.

The passage of Title IX in 1972 helped pave the way for expanded collegiate opportunities, participation in the Olympics, and the first female professional basketball league. The Women's Professional Basketball League (WBL) began play in 1978 but only lasted three seasons. Similar to the struggles of start-up leagues in general (Quirk & Fort, 1997), it was described as a league of “one-night stands in Ottumwa (Iowa) and Griffith (Indiana), of low paychecks, late paychecks, rubber paychecks, and sometimes no paychecks” (Banks, 1980, p. 75). At a time when the 33-year-old NBA was paying an average of $173,500 (Dupree, 1983) and the average US woman earned $9,350 (United States Women's Bureau, 1994), most WBL players, except a few stars, were paid between $6,000 and $10,000 (Trekkell & Gershon, 1991). Based on the definitions in the volume introduction (Bowes & Culvin, cite introduction) WBL players might more appropriately be described as semi-professional.

While most women were excited at the opportunity to play basketball professionally, gender differences in pay were further exacerbated by race in a league that was 40% Black, while the NBA at the same time was 70% Black (Banks, 1980). Just as Black NBA players were paid less than their White counterparts in the 1970's and 80's (Koch & Vander Hill, 1988) the same occurred in the WBL: Lusia Harris, a star who led Delta State to three AIWA national championships and was the high scorer on the 1976 US national team, was offered $15,000 while her White national team teammate Ann Meyers received a three-year contract averaging $48,000 (Banks, 1980). The intersections of
race and gender were not lost on the players. In describing the WBL, an unidentified Black player stated,

“This is a White girls’ league. And it’s run by White men. The few women coaches (four) they hired last year, they got rid of. So, you have racism and sexism running things. They (owners) feel that because pro women’s basketball is a new product, they can’t afford to have it dominated by the Black girls” (Banks, 1980, p. 76).

In trying to position and sell the new product of women’s professional basketball, fans and owners exhibited “sexist attitudes and fears about the femininity of the players”, while many athletes “felt they compromised their self-esteem by submitting themselves to the ‘beauty’ ideals of the owners and some of the fans instead of their own sporting ideals” (Trekell & Gershon, 1991, p. 413).

Ultimately, the lack of owner investment, inadequate advertising, and low revenues were typical challenges of a start-up league that led to its demise. However, compared to the NBA, the WBL struggled with the intersectionality of racism and sexist attitudes towards women.

An attempt was made to launch two more leagues in the next decade. The Women’s American Basketball Association (WABA) launched and failed in 1984-85, and the Liberty Basketball Association launched and failed in 1990-1991 due to low revenues. Without any opportunity to play professional basketball in the U.S., an estimated 200 American women in 1990 played in women’s basketball leagues in Europe and Asia with some earning salaries near $200,000 (Becker, 1990). This large pool of talented women continued to represent the U.S. on national teams and Olympic rosters. In 1996, spurred by a third U.S. Olympic gold medal in women’s basketball and the large pool of college talent after a generation of Title IX, the professionalisation of women’s basketball in the U.S. finally succeeded with two leagues by 1996.

The American Basketball League (ABL) was founded in 1995, and the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) was founded in April 1996 by the NBA Board of Governors, just a few months
before the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games (Lewis, 1996). There were clear differences in the structure of each professional league. The ABL was formed as a single-entity league while the WNBA was built as a subsidiary of the NBA with WNBA teams founded in the same markets as NBA teams. Access to the front office capabilities of NBA teams was a competitive advantage in the WNBA’s early years (Staffo, 1998). Although the ABL did not have the might of the NBA behind it, the league committed early to liveable wages compared to the WNBA, which allowed the ABL to sign most of the stars from the 1996 gold medal winning team. For example, according to various newspaper reports, in 1997 the ABL average salary was $70,000 (minimum $40,000 and maximum $150,000) and the WNBA average salary was $28,000 (minimum $15,000 and maximum $50,000).

The ABL also located its teams in markets with popular collegiate women’s basketball programs (e.g. Hartford in Connecticut and San Jose in California) with the idea that a consumer market existed for the product of women’s basketball. In addition, the ABL was able to secure sponsorship deals with Reebok in 1996 and with Nike in 1997 which helped the ABL double their marketing budget to $3 million (Staffo, 1998). In its first season the ABL was able to average 3,536 fans per contest. The next season that increased 22.5% to 4,333 fans per game. As Table 1 illustrates, both attendance figures exceeded what the NBA was able to attract its first two seasons. In sum, the ABL appeared to be doing quite well its first two seasons.
Table 1. Attendance for the first 23 seasons of the ABL, WNBA, and NBA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>ABL Year</th>
<th>Average ABL per-game Attendance</th>
<th>WNBA Year</th>
<th>Average WNBA per-game Attendance</th>
<th>NBA Year</th>
<th>Average NBA per-game Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1996-1997</td>
<td>3,536</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>9,661</td>
<td>1946-47</td>
<td>3,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>10,205</td>
<td>1948-49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>9,080</td>
<td>1949-50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>9,110</td>
<td>1950-51</td>
<td>3,576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>9,237</td>
<td>1951-52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>8,826</td>
<td>1952-53</td>
<td>3,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>8,588</td>
<td>1953-54</td>
<td>3,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>8,171</td>
<td>1954-55</td>
<td>3,345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>7,480</td>
<td>1955-56</td>
<td>4,498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>7,740</td>
<td>1956-57</td>
<td>4,895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>7,949</td>
<td>1957-58</td>
<td>4,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>8,039</td>
<td>1958-59</td>
<td>5,077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>7,857</td>
<td>1959-60</td>
<td>5,008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>7,955</td>
<td>1960-61</td>
<td>5,494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>7,531</td>
<td>1962-63</td>
<td>5,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>7,578</td>
<td>1963-64</td>
<td>5,266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>7,318</td>
<td>1964-65</td>
<td>5,371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>7,655</td>
<td>1965-66</td>
<td>6,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>7,716</td>
<td>1966-67</td>
<td>6,631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>6,746</td>
<td>1967-68</td>
<td>6,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td></td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>6,528</td>
<td>1968-69</td>
<td>6,484</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data compiled by authors from basketball-reference.com and http://www.apbr.org/attendance.html

However, the ABL simply didn't have the resources to compete with the WNBA. For example, the WNBA's marketing budget was $15 million (Staffo, 1998, see Adam Rugg’s contribution for further insight) and it had the resources to give away many of its tickets (Berri & Krautmann, 2013). In addition, the NBA was able to help the WNBA secure media contracts, leverage season ticket holder...
lists, and sign national sponsors. Consequently, the WNBA’s average attendance was 9,661 its first season—a number the NBA was not able to reach until its 31st season. In the middle of their third season, the ABL abruptly filed for bankruptcy, cancelled its season, and folded the league (Glister, 1998). Hence, after 1998, the WNBA was the only women’s professional league in the U.S.

Recent attendance declines (Table 1) do not necessarily reflect a lack of interest in the league. Early on, as noted, the league was reportedly giving away many tickets. In recent years, teams are doing much less of this. In addition, part of the attendance decline in 2018 and 2019 reflects that the New York Liberty moved out of the centrally located Madison Square Garden, also the home of the NBA’s New York Knicks, and into the Westchester County Center which was located outside of New York City and had a much smaller capacity. Consequently, average attendance in 2018 fell from 9,889 per game to 2,883. Similarly, the Washington Mystics moved into a smaller venue in 2019 and saw their attendance decline by more than 1,500 fans per contest. Despite these decisions, WNBA attendance in its 23rd year is comparable to the NBA at the same point in its history (Table 1).

In considering the success of the WNBA, it is pertinent to consider various definitions of success beginning with a comparison of the WNBA to leagues of a similar age using other metrics besides attendance. Major League Soccer (MLS) began play in 1996, a year earlier than the WNBA, but has received substantially more public investment; $800 million in public subsidies alone (Berri, 2018a). Additional private investment occurs every time a new team joins the league, most recently a $325 million expansion fee in 2019 (Negley, 2019). Using recent television ratings as an alternate measure of success tells yet another story. ESPN announced in 2019 that MLS television ratings were up 2% with an average audience of 246,000 for each broadcast on ESPN and ESPN2 (Carp, 2019). In contrast, the WNBA reported that television ratings for the first half of its 2019 season averaged 318,000 viewers per game (across ESPN, ESPN2, and ABC; Moran, 2019). The next season it was
reported the average WNBA television audience increased 68% over the previous season (Negley, 2020). Given these numbers, one might expect the WNBA to command more television dollars. But the deal the NBA negotiated for the WNBA is only for $25 million per season (Ourand, 2016). In contrast, MLS has a deal with ESPN and Univision that pays the league $90 million per year (Young, 2020). The WNBA has better television ratings but earns less than a third of the television money. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising when considering that the decision-makers in sports, who are predominantly men, typically devote more than 90% of its coverage to men's sports (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2014).

Importantly, these numbers suggest that after 23 years, the WNBA could be considered reasonably successful: its attendance numbers are comparable to the NBA at the same time and despite far less public and private investment, its television numbers are better than the MLS. Unfortunately, these better numbers haven't translated into better pay for its players.

**Gender Pay Gap in American Professional Basketball**

In 2018-19, the average pay in the NBA was $6.2 million. The top player, Stephen Curry, was paid $37.5 million (Basketball Reference, 2020). In contrast, average pay in the WNBA in 2019 was less than $80,000 with an individual salary cap of $117,500 (Megdal, 2019). With an average WNBA player receiving about $1.25 for every $100 an NBA player was paid, there is a substantial gender-pay gap.

Looking at averages alone cannot provide all the necessary detail; instead it is useful to look at revenues. Although leagues do not release exact revenue figures there are reports that the NBA brings in over $8 billion in revenue each year (Badenhausen, 2019) and a conservative estimate of
WNBA revenue is $60 million (Berri, 2020). There are three primary reasons the NBA has more revenue. First, the league has been in operation for 50 years longer than the WNBA. When the NBA was the same age, its audience was quite a bit smaller than it is today. In addition, the NBA has received more than $3 billion in public investment (Baade & Matheson, 2012). Although the NBA does support the WNBA, women’s sports have not seen billions of dollars in investments. And finally, the NBA, and men’s sports in general, receives far more free sports media coverage (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2014). None of these advantages were earned by men and all help explain why the NBA has a substantial revenue advantage.

Regardless of the reasons for league revenue disparity, a common argument is that differences in league revenue should explain the differences in pay. To explore this argument in detail, we use the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) between the leagues and their respective player’s unions that define the terms of player pay and employment conditions. The NBA CBA guarantees its players about 50% of league revenue. The WNBA CBA does not guarantee a share of league revenue to wages although the actual percentage paid to players can be calculated. In 2019, average salaries in the WNBA were $80,000 and there were 156 WNBA players, thus total salaries in the league were $12.48 million. With revenues of $60 million, players were only being paid 21% of WNBA league revenue.

Looking over the history of the NBA, it does not appear that NBA players were ever paid this poorly as a percentage of league revenue. Consider the NBA’s 10th season in 1955-56 when average attendance was 4,498 (Table 1), lower than any year in the WNBA. In 1957, the NBA also reported in testimony to Congress that its total league income was $1.8 million (Fort, 2020) or, accounting for the time value of money, $17.3 million in 2020 dollars. In other words, the NBA after ten years was less than 30% the size as the WNBA in 2019, in terms of revenue. Looking at pay, though, those NBA
players were paid about the same as WNBA players were paid in 2019. According to Congressional testimony, total player costs (salaries and bonuses) were $745,728 in 1955-56 (Fort, 2020). With 92 players earning minutes that season, the average NBA player was paid $8,106 in the 1955-1956 season. In 2020 dollars, that works out to $77,748 nearly the same as the $80,000 average pay in the WNBA in 2019. However, in 1955-56, NBA teams paid 41.5% of league revenue to its players – so the players were effectively better paid.

As time went by, the NBA players earned a larger share of league revenue due to the 1976 Oscar Robertson Rule, which gave NBA veterans substantial free agent rights. Free agents make substantially more than other athletes because they can earn fair market value for their services. The 1982-83 season was the NBA’s 37th year, and average attendance was 10,202 fans per game. According to the Washington Post, the NBA was paying 59% of its revenue to its players (DuPree, 1983). The introduction of the NBA’s salary cap in 1983 lowered that percentage to 53%. However, the player’s share rose to 57% after the 2005 CBA, before falling back to 50% after the 2011 labour agreement (Berri, 2018c). All of these percentages from the NBA tell a clear story: it does not appear the NBA ever paid its players as poorly, as a percent of league revenue, as the WNBA was paying its players in 2019. This argument that players were only getting 21% of revenue is based on the conservative estimation that league revenue was only $60 million; it is likely revenue was higher. If revenue was $70 million, then the percentage paid to players was only 18% and if league revenue is $80 million it falls to 16%.

The pay disparities did not go unnoticed after Forbes began publicising it (Berri, 2017). All-Star Skylar Diggins-Smith said,

“Players in the NBA get about 50% of the revenue. For women, the percentage is in the twenties. So before we even talk about base salary or anything like that, we don’t even get
paid the same percentage of the revenue that we bring in, which is kind of unbelievable.

People try to hijack this issue and say that women’s basketball may not be as interesting a
game, because they disparage women in sports, period. But we don’t even make the same
percentage of revenue!” (Wealthsimple, 2018)

After the 2019 season, a new CBA was reached that substantially raised average pay. As the WNBA
announced, “For the first time in WNBA history, the average cash compensation for players will
exceed six figures, averaging nearly $130,000” (WNBA, 2020). If average pay is exactly $130,000 and
revenue is $60 million, then WNBA players would be paid 34% of league revenue (Berri, 2020). If
league revenue is really $80 million, though, the player’s share falls back to 25%. Even with the new
agreement, WNBA players are still not being paid as well as NBA players were being paid in the
1950s when the NBA was much smaller and had lower attendance.

Instead of comparing the player’s share of revenue in the WNBA to the NBA, we will look at this
from a different perspective and calculate how much WNBA players would earn if they received the
same percentage of league revenue as NBA players. To begin, imagine the WNBA still has the same
$60 million in revenue but, similar to the NBA, it must share 50% of that with its players. The players
would be paid $30 million and average pay would rise to $192,308. In addition, imagine the WNBA
adopts the same pay structure for minimum payments to veterans as in the NBA. For example,
average pay in the NBA in 2018-19 was $6.2 million and minimum pay for a 5-year veteran was
$1,757,429 (Urbina, 2018) or 28.5% of the average. A 10-year veteran was guaranteed $2,393,887
(Urbina, 2018), 38.6% of the average. If the WNBA adopted the same approach to pay, a 5-year
veteran would be guaranteed $54,748 while a 10-year veteran would be guaranteed $74,575.¹

Similar calculations can be made for each year of a player’s experience.

The minimum wages guaranteed to every WNBA player in 2019 would sum to $7.6 million. Of the total $30 million dedicated for salaries, $22.4 million remains to be allocated. Using win shares as a measure of player productivity (for more details see Berri and Krautmann, 2019) that $22.4 million can be allocated according to each player’s productivity, where each win in the WNBA is worth $99,472.² For example, in 2019, Courtney Vandersloot produced 10.1 wins.³ Given her guaranteed minimum wage ($67,460) and her production of wins, Vandersloot would have been paid $1,075,768 in 2019 (Table 2). In other words, because the WNBA did not treat its players the way the NBA treats their players, Vandersloot salary was more than $950,000 less. All the players listed in Table 2 would be paid more than $500,000. This calculation does not presume the WNBA has any more revenue. It simply is based on the WNBA allocating its revenue in the same fashion as the NBA.

### Table 2. What Select WNBA Star Players Would Earn Under the NBA’s Salary Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Wins Produced</th>
<th>WNBA Salary</th>
<th>Salary under NBA rules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Courtney Vandersloot</td>
<td>Chicago Sky</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>$117,500</td>
<td>$1,075,768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Elena Delle Donne</td>
<td>Washington Mystics</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>$115,000</td>
<td>$1,008,953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Alysha Clark</td>
<td>Seattle Storm</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>$84,100</td>
<td>$645,275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nneka Ogwumike</td>
<td>Los Angeles Sparks</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>$115,000</td>
<td>$642,905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jonquel Jones</td>
<td>Connecticut Sun</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>$59,718</td>
<td>$633,734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Napheesa Collier</td>
<td>Minnesota Lynx</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>$49,539</td>
<td>$622,023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The minimum salary for a WNBA player in 2019 was $41,965. So, the NBA approach would lower minimum rookie pay. In other words, minimum wage WNBA rookies appear to be the only players paid better than NBA players.

² The approach taken in Berri and Krautmann (2019) is to guarantee each player the minimum salary. Some player’s though, produce a negative quantity of wins. To overcome this issue, we add together the number of wins produced by players who had a positive production of wins. In 2019 in the WNBA, this summation was 224.8 wins. If we divide $22,363,760 (the pool of money not allocated to minimum wages) by 224.8, we see each win is worth $99,472.

³ See Berri and Krautmann (2013) for an explanation of how to measure a player’s production of wins in the WNBA. This methodology follows from Berri (2008) and Berri, Schmidt, and Brook (2006).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Wins</th>
<th>Salary 19</th>
<th>Salary 20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sylvia Fowles</td>
<td>Minnesota Lynx</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>$113,360</td>
<td>$617,072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Allisha Gray</td>
<td>Dallas Wings</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>$57,886</td>
<td>$607,598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Courtney Williams</td>
<td>Connecticut Sun</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>$59,718</td>
<td>$593,792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Alyssa Thomas</td>
<td>Connecticut Sun</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>$115,000</td>
<td>$541,580</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Wins produced are calculated via the method in Berri and Krautmann (2013).

The NBA owns 50% of the WNBA and has $8 billion in revenue. Hypothetically, if the NBA were to replicate their same pay structure in the WNBA in 2019, the NBA would only have to allocate 0.23% of league revenues, or $18 million, to player pay in the WNBA. In 2018-19, the NBA paid Carmelo Anthony $25.5 million for 294 minutes of play. Therefore, for less than what the NBA paid one player who barely played, the NBA could have closed the gender-pay gap in professional basketball.

The WNBA players did sign a new CBA that raised the pay of all players, including the star players listed in Table 2. By 2027, the final year of the most recent CBA, the WNBA regular maximum salary will be $227,527 and the so-called ‘super max’ salary (the salary that can exceed the normal maximum to reward and retain stars; see Mox, 2020, for more details) will only be $264,423. Although pay increased, the stars in Table 2 will not see salaries approaching the “Salary under NBA rules” until after 2027. To put that in perspective, if Table 2 was extended to the top 40 players in the WNBA, it would show the 40th player was Ariel Atkins of the Washington Mystics. She produced 2.3 wins in 2019 and according to the above projected salary calculations, she should have been paid $266,656. Therefore, the new WNBA CBA indicates that the highest paid player in the WNBA in 2027 will still be paid less than Ariel Atkins (i.e. the 40th best player in 2019) would have been paid had the WNBA simply followed the NBA compensation plan.

**Pay Differences within Women’s Basketball**
The relatively low pay in the WNBA, even when compared the identical formative time period in the men’s professional league, led 49 American players to seek employment in basketball leagues in Europe and Asia in 2019. Although this is fewer than the 200 American women playing professionally overseas in 1990 (Becker, 1990), it constitutes 48% of American WNBA players. In these leagues, players receive much higher salaries (see Table 3). In general, Team USA players are paid the highest ($350,000 or more), other U.S. players and domestic stars generally receive $120,000-$200,000, while domestic players receive $60,000-$100,000 to play in Europe.

Table 3. Salaries in Women’s Basketball Leagues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>League Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Established</th>
<th>Teams in 19-20</th>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Salary Average or Range</th>
<th>US Player Pay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WNBL</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Oct-March</td>
<td>$35,000-$70,000</td>
<td>$70,000-$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCBA</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Oct-March</td>
<td>$14,000-$350,000</td>
<td>$300,000-$900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LFB</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Oct-March</td>
<td>$50,000-$80,000</td>
<td>$120,000-$130,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB I/A</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>xx</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sept-March</td>
<td>$70,000-$100,000</td>
<td>$175,000-$200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Oct-July</td>
<td></td>
<td>$120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LBF Serie A1</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Oct-April</td>
<td>$40,000-$70,000</td>
<td>$200,000-$250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBLK</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Oct-April</td>
<td>xx</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WBPL</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Oct-April</td>
<td>$80,000-$140,000</td>
<td>$500,000-$1,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WKBL</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Oct-April</td>
<td>$75,000</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LF</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Sept-April</td>
<td></td>
<td>$170,000-$250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TKBL</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Oct-March</td>
<td>$80,000-$120,000</td>
<td>$150,000-$250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WNBA</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>May-Sept</td>
<td>$75,000</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. Data compiled by authors from official league websites and personal communication with a European basketball player agent, July 15, 2020.

Although it will be past 2027 before a player is paid a million dollars in the WNBA, it is not unheard of for a woman to make more than a million dollars to play professional basketball outside of the U.S. In 2014, Diana Taurasi, the "Michael Jordan of women's basketball", led the Phoenix Mercury to a WNBA title (Berri, 2018b). In 2015, though, Taurasi refused to play for Phoenix. UMMC Ekaterinburg, the Russian team that employed Taurasi, offered to pay her WNBA salary in 2015 if she agreed to not return to the Mercury so she could stay healthy and injury free for the Russian basketball season. That offer was on top of the $1.5 million UMMC Ekaterinburg was already paying Taurasi (Prada, 2015).

Taurasi was not the only player who has been paid considerably more to play outside the WNBA, and Russia is not the only place where high salaries can be found. It was reported in 2014 that the Women's Chinese Basketball Association paid Brittney Griner, Maya Moore, and Sylvia Fowles $600,000 each (Gaines, 2014). Los Angeles Sparks star Candace Parker has played around the world on highly successful teams like UMMC Ekaterinburg in Russia, Fenerbahçe in Turkey, and Guangdong Dolphins and Xinjiang Tianshan Deers in China. The motive to earn a higher wage overseas might seem rational; but consider the way players view the WNBA after playing overseas. Parker explained,

"It's funny because everyone would ask me, 'What's your off-season job, what's your summer job?' Actually, this is my summer job, the WNBA, because I feed my daughter overseas...the money over there is 10-20 times more than you would make here." (TooFab Staff, 2020)
The reasons leagues outside the U.S. are willing to pay higher salaries relate to history, business structure, and economic theory. Most European clubs were founded as football clubs, but over time have added competitive teams in other sports (for a history of club-based teams in football see Szymanski & Zimbalist, 2006). For example, given the intense rivalry between clubs in Turkey, if one club added a women’s basketball team their rival often responded with a team of their own. For this reason, women’s basketball was played professionally in Europe in the 1950’s, 60’s, 70’s and 80’s (see Table 3) at a time when early U.S. leagues struggled to exist. The business structure of European clubs means they do not move to different cities like privately-owned, profit-maximising American franchises do. Thus, club teams are a source of local pride especially when they win or are not relegated. For this reason, the business decisions in clubs are generally designed to maximise winning to avoid relegation at the expense of profit. The fundamental business motives of win-maximising clubs allow them to survive even if there is insufficient demand for the team to generate a profit (Sloane, 1971).

Economic theory predicts these club-based win-maximising owners will pay more for talent to help a team win more games (Késenne, 2015) and this is illustrated in practice through the salaries in Table 3 or through the English Premier League paying 69.5% of its revenue to its players, much higher than in profit-maximising U.S. sports (Berri, 2018b). When discussing the wealthy owners of UMMC Ekaterinburg, Russia’s most dominant team, Diana Turasi said, “They’re hotheads who want the best women’s basketball team, and that’s their hobby, so they don’t care how much they pay” (Woods, 2019). The opposite situation occurs in the U.S. where profit-maximising owners engage in behaviours that devalue wins and therefore the salaries necessary to win (Fort & Quirk, 2004). The WNBA and its NBA partner are traditional profit-maximisers that make a substantial effort to reduce player pay.
In addition, the short-run versus long-run nature of investment in leagues plays a role in pay differentials. Historically, the NBA spent a relatively substantial amount (relative to the WNBA) on playing talent even when attendance was low because the focus was on the long-run future of the league. The following quotes from NBA commissioners help substantiate this view. In 1949, NBA Commissioner Maurice Podoloff issued the following directive to push a positive narrative about the start-up league:

"We are getting very bad publicity due to the fact that some of our team managers are just a bit too scrupulously honest in giving attendance figures to radio and newspapers. If you can avoid giving the figures out, do so. If, however, you must announce figures, a little padding will be forgiven" (Surdam, 2012, p. 29)

By the 2010’s, there were many instances when the WNBA or its NBA partner made negative public statements about the WNBA including NBA Commissioner Adam Silver stating, "On average (we've lost) over $10 million every year we've operated" (Feinberg, 2018). In the early history of the NBA, struggles were hidden in an effort to encourage long-run investment while no such effort is made for the WNBA thus making it more difficult find long-term investors. These behaviors are consistent with Micelotta, Washington, and Docekalova (2018) who found many negative projections regarding the long-term success of female leagues.

In sum, it appears owners are motivated by:

- maximising wins (i.e. outside of North America),
- long-run profit maximisation (i.e. early history of men’s professional sports), or
- short-run profit maximisation (i.e. women's professional sports).

It is only when owners adopt a short-run profit-maximization view that we suggest you will see a focus on keeping salaries as low as what is seen in the WNBA today.
Concluding Observations

This chapter has taken a quantitative approach to wage comparisons in the WNBA and an economic approach to explain the findings, and still obtains the same conclusions as a sociological perspective. Namely, although women’s basketball players in the U.S. meet the definition of professional athletes (Bowes & Culvin, introduction), they remain undervalued because of clear evidence of a gendered hierarchy in sport. The wage undervaluation of women’s basketball players, as computed and described in the sections above, holds in comparison to men’s basketball, men’s basketball in the same time period, men’s soccer, or women’s basketball in Europe and Asia. The constraints to pay are not only gendered systems (e.g., Burton, 2015), but also, as we have established, the structure of profit-maximising leagues and teams in the U.S.

In sum, it appears both the WNBA and NBA are primarily profit-maximising leagues. Despite a similar focus, NBA players have always been paid a higher percentage of league revenues than the women of the WNBA. This was even true when the NBA had a much lower level of revenue. Salaries in the WNBA are then further depressed by a league that seems to prioritize short-run profit maximization over long-run investment thus continuing to delegitimize the WNBA.

Ultimately, short-run profit maximisation is not in the best interest of the long-term success of the WNBA as many stars may contemplate walking away or playing elsewhere for people who have some questionable characteristics. For example, when discussing the UMMC Ekaterinburg owner, a former KGB agent and convicted spy, Sue Bird explained, “[he] viewed us as performers and entertainers and wanted to share our talents with the world.” Her teammate Turasi added, “He made everything bigger than life. And at the time, women’s basketball needed someone to make it bigger than life” (Ellentuck, 2019).
The Ladies Professional Golf Association and the Women’s Tennis Association struggled for decades to professionalize and be recognized by men’s leagues (Taylor, O’Connor, & Hanlon, 2020). The route to legitimization was shorter for the MLS because billionaire Phillip Anschutz owned, operated, and invested in over half of MLS teams for many years. Women’s basketball is in need of such a fierce advocate to help make the game “bigger than life”, legitimize the sport, and thus allow women to earn salaries that are equivalent to their male counterparts.

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