

Neeve Z's Human Rights Speech: Gender Inequality in Sports

It's a Saturday afternoon and I am in need of some new basketball shoes. I ask my dad "Hey dad, do you think we could go to the mall today and get some new basketball shoes?" "Sure," he replies with a smile on his face. We get in the car and arrive at the mall. We go to the Nike store, my favorite store. I see my favorite WNBA player Candace Parker on the billboard out in front of me, with Nike's headline JUST DO IT. I glance around and look at the women's basketball shoes - 3 pairs. I see two in pink and one in purple—none of the colours I like. I ask the salesman if he has any women's basketball shoes in a size 6 in the back, and he replies "Sorry only the ones out on the rack". I look down at the 2-year-old beat-up shoes I'm wearing, which I got from the boy's section when I was 10. I'm frustrated as this is the third store I've been to with no basketball shoes available other than in the colour pink. I walk around the store while my dad is looking for a new t-shirt. I take a look at the men's shoe selection and see a wide range of options and about 20 pairs of basketball shoes, all at 25% off.

Dear Toronto Heschel School students and teachers. My name is Neeve Z and I'm here to talk with you today about gender inequality in sports. While lack of shoe choice might seem like a small issue, there's a much greater inequality that exists between men and women in sports, and that's the subject of equal pay for performance. From my perspective this is a major issue that must be addressed to ensure girls like me get an equal opportunity to pursue their dreams in sports.

While male athletes receive endorsements and commercials for soda cans and deodorant, women receive only 2-4% of media coverage for games and endorsements combined. Even the way male and female athletes are portrayed in the media differs

greatly. Male athletes are portrayed for their strength and dominance in their sport, whereas the focus for female athletes is not always on their sport or performance at all - but more so on their appearance or clothing. When female athletes do appear in commercials or endorsements, they are often sexualized, which gives viewers the wrong impression of who these women are and what they are capable of. Recent studies have shown that 95% of media coverage goes to men's sports. In 2019, just 5.4 percent of SportsCenter's airtime was devoted to women's sports, which falls to just 3.5 per cent when that year's FIFA Women's World Cup is excluded. "80% of the news and highlights programs in our study devoted zero time to women's sports," said Cheryl Cooky, a professor of American Studies at [Purdue University](#). "On the rare broadcast when a women's sports story does appear, it is usually a case of 'one and done' — a single women's sports story partially eclipsed by a cluster of men's stories that precede it, follow it and are longer in length." NBA commissioner Adam Silver stated in 2018 that the WNBA had lost an average of \$10 million each year that it has been in existence, including \$12 million in the previous season. Since there was such a drastic drop in WNBA revenue there was less interest in the league and its players.

Many little girls are inspired by a player, but how can they look up to them when they rarely get to see them play on television? When games are only televised at 3 a.m. or on channels that few people receive? How can a little girl sit down and watch a player they look up to? Even though equality in sports is starting to change there still is a huge difference between the exposure that male and female athletes receive in the mainstream media.

English broadcaster journalist and writer Jane Street Porter said "Far too many women are hesitant, and remain trapped in jobs for which they are over-qualified or paid beneath their worth." What I take away from this quote is that female athletes feel they are stuck in their jobs that they don't get paid enough for. That they don't have another option. Even though they work hard when they receive their paycheck and look over to their male counterparts the difference between the numbers is significantly larger.

Picture this, I'm one of the top female soccer players in the world and I'm receiving my first paycheck since turning pro: I'm super excited because now I can invest and provide for my family. As my boss walks up to me and hands me the cheque I look down and see the sum of \$445,000 dollars. And as I'm smiling with joy, I look over and see my male colleague paycheck with over 3 million dollars. I think to myself with 3 World Cup wins and none for him why are the amounts so different? This was the case for the U.S women's national soccer team. The women's soccer team is ranked no. 1 in the world with three world cup wins and 4 Olympic Gold medals. The US men's national team has none of these accolades, and yet the women receive a paycheck that equates to just over a third of what the men make. After their World Cup win in 2019, The U.S women's soccer team filed a lawsuit against the U.S soccer federation in protest of their earnings after the World Cup. They collectively received 4 million dollars and 30 million was awarded to all teams participating. In contrast, the French men's national team was awarded 38 million dollars for their win, the prize money totalled was 400 million dollars for all teams. This is one of many examples of how the sports industry does not meet gender equality standards.

In Masechet Sanhedrin daf 39 it says:

שָׂאֵדָם טוֹבֵעַ כְּמָה מִטְבֵּעוֹת בְּחֹתָם אֶחָד וְכוּלָן דּוֹמִין זֶה לְזֶה אֲבָל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא טוֹבֵעַ כָּל אָדָם בְּחֹתָמוֹ
שֶׁל אָדָם הַרְאִשׁוֹן וְאֵין אֶחָד מֵהֶן דּוֹמֵה לַחֲבִירוֹ׃

This translates that every human being is made in the image of the first human. One side was female and the other male. It says how even though we all look somewhat different from one another we are all the same. There's equality built into the very idea of a human, whether male or female. As well as the large differences in their pay, many female athletes seem to struggle with their brand deals as well. Allyson Felix, an Olympic sprinter, cut off her contract with Nike because they wanted to take 70% off her paycheck because she was pregnant. She describes Nike as “being unsupportive” to female athletes who were “pregnant and new mothers”. Since then Nike has changed their policy for pregnant athletes. A lot of female athletes like gymnast Simone Biles have switched their brand endorsement deals to ones more personally aligned with their beliefs. Why should they have to? The “big” brands like Nike should be supporting athletes to further grow their deals. This again is another reason why gender equality is important in the sports industry. Not just because they deserve the money but so they can be a role model for young athletes.

Abraham Joshua Heschel once said “To us a single act of injustice--cheating in business, exploitation of the poor--is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.” Even though this problem is not a direct threat to the world as a whole, it is affecting people. It is affecting female athletes. It's not just affecting them but the generations to come and the generations after that. You might be wondering why it is affecting generations to come? Well think

about all the young female athletes who dream to go pro, who dream they will be as famous as Serena Williams, who dream they will get the same opportunities the little boy in their class can get. The sad truth is in our society today is they can't. But that doesn't mean they never will and the situation can change with both men and women speaking up. By spreading awareness about pay equity and fighting for equality like the US Women's soccer team did, we can help change things in women's sports. More networks streaming events, posting on social media and providing exposure for strong female role models are a few ways to ensure pay equity continues to grow and become the norm. When a little girl has dreams to go pro in the sport she loves and puts in the hard work just like her male counterpart, it doesn't have to be just a fantasy, it can actually become reality.

Imagine that I'm now 5 years into my soccer career since turning pro: I receive my paycheck, and see over 2 and half million dollars. I'm really proud and happy. I look over and see my male colleague with an equal amount. All the hard work I put in to receive the same paycheck as a male athlete paid off. Let's make this story become a reality.