

wknd lifestyle

A score to settle

We're at an inflection point, when it comes to pay parity in sport. Women are finally being paid as much prize money as men, at certain levels, in certain sports (such as cricket in India, football in the US). Tennis, with its massive viewership and strident voices, led the way decades ago, but progress has been inchingly slow since then. What will it take? Why does it matter? Take a look

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Last month, FIFA, world football's governing body, kept a promise it made in March. Every player from the 32 teams in this year's FIFA Women's World Cup, to be held in July-August, is guaranteed to earn at least \$30,000.

On the team that wins, all 23 women will take home \$270,000, part of a \$110 million total prize pool. It's a 300% jump from the prize fund in the 2019 edition.

It all sounds fantastic, until one takes a quick look at the total prize money awarded at the Men's World Cup last year: \$440 million. FIFA does hope to have equal World Cup prize money. But it won't happen until 2027.

Divisive force

Women players, in almost every sport, anywhere in the world, are still underpaid, despite efforts to right the balance. In Forbes' 2023 list of the world's highest-paid athletes (which also includes off-field income), only one woman pops up among the top 50: Serena Williams. And even then, the retired tennis star is placed 49th.

That a tennis player has broken into the list comes as no surprise. Until the 1970s, tennis offered only a fraction of the prize money to its women players. (See how things changed, in the story alongside).

CHANGE HAS BEEN SLOW, AND INEXPLICABLY HARD-WON FOR SPORTSWOMEN. ON THE 2023 FORBES LIST OF WORLD'S HIGHEST-PAID ATHLETES, ONLY ONE WOMAN FEATURES IN THE TOP 50. SERENA WILLIAMS, THE RETIRED TENNIS STAR, IS PLACED 49TH

winner was awarded less than half: \$567,215. The organisers have promised pay parity by 2025, even as players question the wait.

"It's really frustrating," Tunisian Ons Jabeur, the world No 6 women's singles player, who lost in the first round of this year's tournament, told New York Times in an interview in Rome in May. "It's time for change."

Scale model

Change has been slow, and inexplicably hard-won for sportswomen. They've been propelled by stirs, lawsuits and boycott threats. Elite American women football players waged an unprecedented legal battle to unlock the coffers of their federation.

A 2021 study by BBC Sport found that 37 of the 48 sports surveyed offered the same prize money for men and women in at least one major competition. While gaps in popular global sports such as football, basketball and golf remain wide, sports such as hockey and wrestling are working towards ending discrimination. The inaugural FIH Pro League, field hockey's top-tier competition, gave the winning men's and women's teams the same prize money in 2019. Wrestling's Ranking Series too did the same in 2018.

Cricket, the study noted, "has taken the biggest strides to narrow the gap", with leagues such as The Hundred in England and Big Bash League in Australia dishing out the same prize money in men's and women's competitions.

Cricket has made a headway in India too. In October last year, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) announced equal match fees for both men and women. (See our story alongside.) The country's international women cricketers are now paid Rs15 lakh per Test, Rs6 lakh per ODI and Rs3 lakh per T20I, up from Rs4 lakh per Test and Rs1

lakh for every white-ball match earlier.

India is the second country, after New Zealand to equally pay all its international cricketers. But here's what the headlines often miss: India's women cricketers play significantly fewer matches than their male colleagues. In the 2022-25 Future Tours Program (FTP) for women, Indian women are scheduled to play two Tests, 27 ODIs and 36 T20Is. The men, in their 2023-27 FTP cycle, are set to turn up for 38 Tests, 42 ODIs and 61 T20Is. The international calendar is not nearly as stacked for women as it is for men, especially in the longest format. So an Indian woman cricketer who hypothetically plays every match across formats in the same cycle will take home Rs3 crore. This is about Rs7 crore less than her male counterpart.

The difference spills over to league cricket too. A full-fledged Women's Premier League (WPL) was rolled out only this year, with five franchises featuring 22 matches. In comparison, the Indian Premier League (IPL) is a two-month affair. On BCCI's annual retainer-ship, which comprises the Board's centrally contracted cricketers, the highest-paid women's contract of Rs50 lakh is still half of the men's lowest.

Other national-level sports events have been redoubling efforts to offer equal pay. Over the last decade, India's national tennis championships and table-tennis events across all age groups award the same prize money to men and women.

Crying foul

A sombre reminder that things are far from ideal came last month. Kerala Blasters Football Club, a professional club based in the football-mad state that competes in the country's top-tier leagues, decided to temporarily pause the club's women's team and its activities. The women hadn't done anything wrong. It was to bear the financial burden copped by the men's team for staging a walk-out in their Indian Super League (ISL) semifinal in March.

The decision sounded another blow for women's football in India, which saw a league of its own only in 2016. Much like cricket, the disparity in duration is staggering here too: The latest Indian Women's League (IWL) edition ran from April 26 to May 21, while the men's ISL season ran for six months.

Football, globally and historically, has been and continues to be ground zero for unequal pay. The US are four-time Women's World Cup champions. Seven years ago, five women players of the US women's football

national team took the US Soccer Federation (USFF) head on, filing a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission citing unequal pay, bonuses and benefits compared to the men's team. By 2019, months before USA won their fourth title, it had turned into a full-blown lawsuit against the federation, with 28 members of the team suing for gender discrimination. The USSF struck a settlement last year. It promised to equalise pay for its men's and women's national teams and agreed to shell out \$22 million in back pay to the suing players and \$2m into a women's team player fund.

The standoff sent shockwaves across American sports. In 2017, USA Hockey agreed to increased salaries, per diems and other benefits after its women's team threatened a strike. Players in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) called for prematurely opting out of their contracts in 2018 for a deal with better salaries and other gains.

The league gave in with a new eight-year Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) featuring significant increase in player compensation in 2020.

Football associations worldwide have watched the wave build. Norway and Australia announced landmark equal pay for women players matching the men, even as the US case dragged on.

"It was just extremely motivating to see organisations and employers admit their wrongdoing, and us forcing their hand in making it right," said Alex Morgan, former co-captain of the US women's team who was among the original five players to take the establishment to court, in an interview to the New York Times in February last year. "The domino effect that we helped kick-start, I think we're really proud of it."

{ RISE OF THE REBELS } HOW TENNIS DID IT

The Original 9 who set the ball rolling

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Billie Jean King and Rod Laver were both major draws in tennis in 1968. While King had four Grand Slam titles to her name at the time, Laver had six.

That year marked the beginning of the Open Era, which would allow both amateur and professional players compete together in Majors for the first time.

Wimbledon had the honour of being the first Grand Slam of the Open Era and there was great buzz heading into it.

However, even as the tournament was being heralded as a huge step in the right direction, King and many others in the women's game were left with a sinking feeling by the time it ended.

While Laver was paid £2000 as prize money for winning the men's singles title, King was handed only £750 for winning the women's singles and left with the realisation that her battle had only

just begun.

"I didn't have any idea we were going to get different prize money," said King on the 2013 PBS documentary American Masters. "I thought it was totally unfair."

Stunned, King spearheaded the formation of Original 9. Seven elite players of this group – King, Rosie Casals, Nancy Richey, Kristy Pigeon, Valerie Ziegenfuss, Peaches Bartkowicz and Julie Heldman – were from the US, while Kerry Melville Reid and Judy Tegart Dalton represented Australia.

The Original 9 were confident they could draw the same crowds to stadiums as men, and deserved equal money for it. In September 1970, they showed incredible courage, launching their own circuit in Texas.

The Virginia Slims Circuit signed one-dollar pro contracts with Gladys Heldman, the promoter and founder of World Tennis Magazine.

King and her band of rebels gained plenty of attention everywhere they played and kept raising awareness about their battle.

After she won the 1972 US Open women's singles title, King once again used her voice

unequivocally in favour of equal prize money in tennis tournaments.

And at last, the following year, things changed for good.

The year 1973 remains momentous for two reasons. The Women's Tennis Association – still the governing body for women's tennis – was launched that year.

And the US Open gave equal prize money of \$25,000 to both the men's and women's singles champions.

King and the Original 9's bravery led to a historic change in the sport.

While the US Open was the first of the four Grand Slams to offer equal pay, the Australian Open (2001), French Open (2006) and Wimbledon (2007) followed.

Ons Jabeur

The world No 6 women's singles player spoke out against the unbalanced payouts at the Italian Open held in May. The organisers have promised pay parity by 2025. "I don't see why we have to wait," the Tunisian told The New York Times. "It's really frustrating. It's time for a change. It's time for the tournament to do better."

Megan Rapinoe

The American was one of five players to take USSF to court in 2016, a suit that ended in a settlement last year. "A collective bargaining agreement is just words on paper... It's the enforcement on both sides that (matters)," she said after that win.

Billie Jean King

The tennis legend spearheaded the formation of the Original 9 in the 1960s, an elite group of players who advocated for equal prize money in tennis. The US Open made the change in 1973. It took decades, but eventually the Australian Open (2001), French Open (2006) and Wimbledon (2007) did too. "Everyone thinks women should be thrilled when we get crumbs," King said, speaking at the Italian Open in 1970. "I want women to have the cake, the icing, and the cherry on top too."



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