Abstract
The negative consequences of patriarchy include gender inequality in sports. In both the United States and Colombia, the highest level of women’s basketball illustrates this problem. This research highlights two social and political dimensions of the problem. First, it exposes discrimination and the way in which the media trivialize the work performed by female basketball players; second, it questions the way in which women players are called “professionals” but are not always treated as such. Through a comparative analysis method, I explain some of the similar gender challenges faced by women’s basketball players in both the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) in the United States and the Superior Women’s Basketball League (LSBF) in Colombia. In both countries, women basketball athletes have less media coverage than the men. The Colombian media, however, normalize the labor precariousness experienced by women basketball athletes. Frequently, the media call them “professionals,” but they are not treated as such. In America, female athletes have better labor conditions than Colombian women athletes. These conditions, however, are not equal to or better than those of male players in the (men’s) NBA.

Keywords
gender inequality, sports communication, professionalism, women’s basketball, WNBA, LSBF

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INTRODUCTION

I am a Latin American feminist woman who has been playing basketball for more than half of my life. I deeply believe that patriarchy is not simply an abstract social structure, but rather a reality that generates multiple problems, including gender inequality within basketball; one example of that inequality can be found in elite women’s basketball leagues. Existing gender research, however, has not fully addressed in a comparative perspective the repercussions of gender inequality in women’s basketball labor conditions, the difficult path that women have journeyed to be treated as professionals, and the way the media have portrayed them in the United States and Colombia.

This research is important because it shows the discrimination and undervaluation daily experienced by female basketball athletes in a highly masculinized sport. Thus, the aim of this paper is to answer the following questions: (1) How do the media portray the highest level of women’s basketball in the United States and Colombia? (2) What are the labor conditions for the highest level of women’s basketball in the United States and Colombia? and (3) How is the idea of “professionalism” framed differently for women’s basketball players in the United States and Colombia?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FEMALE BASKETBALL LEAGUES: THE WNBA IN AMERICA AND THE LSBF IN COLOMBIA

The WNBA: A Successful Attempt to Professionalize Women’s Basketball in the United States

After the United States won the gold medal in women’s basketball in the 1996 Olympics (Ariail, 2020), the atmosphere seemed right for the development of female professional basketball in the country. The WNBA began with the Eastern and Western conferences and eight teams (WNBA, 2002, 2012). To make the WNBA stronger, the original strategy was “pairing teams with established NBA franchises [. . .] to take advantage of existing facilities, fan bases, and media presences” (Wallace, 2020). However, in 2003, other independent entrepreneurs started creating new teams in non-NBA cities. Today, 12 teams compete for almost six months and play 36 games per season.

Mentors

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The LSBF: The Strongest Attempt to Professionalize Women's Basketball in Colombia

The professionalization of female basketball in Colombia started in 2013 with a Female Especial Cup and four teams who took part in it. The players led and created the tournament, and the economic support came from private investor Camilo Sarria (N. Cajiao, personal communication, January 9, 2022). After seven versions of the Female Especial Cup, in 2021, the Sport Ministry gave $125,000 (500,000,000 COP) to the second version of the LSBF. Thanks to that support, the league was made possible (N. Santis, personal communication, January 8, 2022). Each team received a budget of $1,500 to hire two reinforcement players who had competed in international leagues or who played on the Colombian senior national team (N. Santis, personal communication, January 8, 2022).

The international performance of Colombian female teams has been better than the international performance of the male teams. Yet the female league does not have the same level of support from the government and the fans despite its success. According to FIBA (2021), the Colombian female senior team is the fifth-best in the Americas.

Gender Inequalities Expressed in Media Coverage

Neither sports nor media are neutral. The media reflect representations of the realities that are traversed by power relations, ideologies, values, and people's beliefs (García, 2020). Sport is “a discursive construct that organizes multiple practices—science, medicine, technology, governing institutions, and the media—that intersect with and produce multiple bodies, raced, sexed, classed, heterosexual, reproductive, prosthetic, cyborg, etc.” (Cole, 1993, p. 77). So the images and messages observed many times daily about women's professional basketball coverage are gender-biased.

In 2008, coverage of female athletes made up only about 5% of daily sports news on average (Bernstein & Galily, 2008, p. 191). That large disparity in coverage reinforces male hegemony. For that reason, it is said that the media is a necessary instrument for the legitimization of male superiority in sports (Messner et al., 1993). Some suggestions for media roles in addressing this disparity have included broadcasting more female games (Bernstein & Galily, 2008) and eliminating sexism and racism present in media content (León, 2020; Pérez-Ugena, 2020).

Method and Results

Comparing the labor conditions of female basketball players and the media coverage they receive are two ways to define some of the gender inequalities that exist in women’s professional basketball leagues. In Colombia and the United States, female athletes do not have the same labor conditions as their male counterparts. To show that, I compared male and female salaries, awards, and duration of tournaments in both countries.

Additionally, the quality of media coverage that female athletes receive is different in comparison with the coverage devoted to men. To expose these differences, I chose two magazines specializing in basketball news: *Slam* in the United States and *Orange Ball* in Colombia. I compared the coverage that *Slam* and *Orange Ball* provided during the 2021 playoffs in both countries for women’s leagues (WNBA in the United States and LSBF in Colombia). I focused my attention on news articles related to the playoffs and finals because these events receive the highest attention and coverage during a basketball season.

Lastly, I conducted semistructured interviews with different coaches and women playing at the highest levels in both countries. In the United States, I interviewed three professional players who have been playing basketball in the WNBA, Europe, and Israel. In Colombia, I interviewed seven players (five women and two men) and three coaches, including a past champion of the LSBF.

Gender Inequality Repercussions in Women’s Basketball Labor Conditions

Female elite athletes experience a range of working conditions in terms of salaries, prizes, and medical care. The Colombian case, however, is an example of a complex process of job insecurity and precariousness at
work compared to the American case. In Colombia, not all athletes receive money for their work. Only the international players and the members of the Colombian senior national team receive a salary of about $750 on average for their participation in the LSBF—even for these few players, it is far from a living wage.

The LSBF also does not offer any kind of prize or compensation to the first-, second-, or third-place teams. In terms of medical help, the players do not have any coverage or health benefits. The league paid only for one physical therapist who cannot be available for all the players in case they need care. So if each club did not have its own resources for paying a physical therapist, each player would have to provide her own medical services (Ulloa, personal communication, January 6, 2022).

In contrast, the Colombian male league, called W Play League of Basketball, offers better working conditions for its players in terms of salary, prizes, and medical help. There, all the players who have not played in international leagues receive a salary between $375 as a minimum and $1,000 as a maximum. If the player has played abroad, he can receive a contract for over $1,000. Also, three physical therapists are provided by the league to treat the players, not just one, as in the female case (S. Ramirez, personal conversation, January 9, 2022).

There can be several reasons for the disparities between men’s and women’s basketball in Colombia; one is a higher level of support for men’s basketball in Colombia, and another is the seniority of the league—more than eight years older than the female league in Colombia (K. Masquitta, personal communication, January 7, 2022). The pay gap between male and female athletes in Colombia (beginning with the fact that all male pros are paid but not all female pros are paid) illustrates very obvious gender discrimination. Colombian female elite athletes have faced a difficult path to build a strong professional league in the country. Even though they have won more international awards than the male teams, the minimal support they receive does not allow them to carry out their work as professionals.

Some national coaches have argued that this is a problem of management, administration, and marketing. They also have mentioned that if the female players do not improve their marketing, they will never have a truly professional league (Cuenca, 2022; Garcia, 2022; Santis, 2022). But it is important to notice that male players do not need to work in marketing because apparently their participation in professional sports does not need to be promoted or validated.

On the other hand, American women athletes have better labor conditions than Colombian women athletes. These conditions, however, are still less advantageous than those of male players. All the WNBA players receive a salary and, thanks to their collective bargaining agreement (CBA), they have medical insurance, maternity leave, and better travel accommodations. But the disparity with the men’s league is still striking.

On average, the WNBA players receive a salary of $121,798, and veteran players receive a salary of around $225,000 (Suggs, 2022). The WNBA season lasts four months and each year the championship prize pool is $500,000, which is split as follows: Each player from the winning team gets $30,000, while players from the losing team get $10,000 each. The MVP of the championship game gets an additional prize of $5,000 (Maloney, 2021). Also, players can receive different bonuses according to their individual and team achievements. The NBA pool is $15 million and “is distributed to teams as they advance through the playoffs. Each team can choose to divide the playoff dollars however they wish” (UNC Kenan-Flagler, 2019). In contrast, a rookie player in the (men’s) NBA receives a minimum salary of $925,000, and a veteran player can receive a salary of more than $30 million depending on the contract. That means that the least experienced, least valued rookie male player earns more money than the top veteran woman player (AS, 2021).

A comparison between basketball stars Sue Bird and LeBron James is useful to illustrate the gender pay gap. Both players have earned four championships and played 18 seasons in their respective leagues. The difference in their salaries, however, is huge; while Bird earned $221,450 in 2021, James’s salary in the same year was $41.2 million (Silva, 2021).

As in the Colombian case, the salary gap between men and women players in the United States is enormous even though they both play basketball at the highest
levels—essentially the same work. In the American case, that problem is connected with other factors: the longevity of the NBA—which started 50 years earlier than the WNBA—the higher profits, the longer season, the established sponsors, and the large amount of dedicated media coverage that male basketball receives, to name a few.

The Idea of Professionalism of Women's Basketball Players in the United States and Colombia

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2019), professional athletes “face widespread discrimination, particularly on the grounds of gender and race.” The idea of “professionalism” is one problematic point in common between the U.S. and the Colombian women's basketball players.

It is important to mention that the meaning of the word “professional” in English and Spanish is exactly the same, and in both countries, there are two different types of professional athletes. The first case is an athlete who plays a sport for a living and spends the main part of their time playing and training. This situation describes the “profession” inherent in the word “professional.” An example of this kind of full-time professional is a WNBA or NBA player.

In the second case, an athlete is a professional if he or she receives money for playing, even if the pay is not enough to make a living. Frequently, these athletes split their time between playing, training, and working in other places to obtain enough money (this arrangement is typical of many American minor leagues and developmental leagues). This is the case of the Colombian male basketball athletes who work in their top-level professional league for almost three months, but whose pay is so low that they also need to work in other places to earn a living. The Colombian female athletes who work without receiving any money, however, do not meet any part of any professional category mentioned above. That is why the experience, motivations, and rewards of playing basketball in the WNBA and the LSBF are very different.

In Colombia, for example, one female player said: “Basketball does not give me anything and I just play [in the LSBF league] as a hobby” (S. Stephens, personal communication, January 29, 2022). Something similar was mentioned by Hamileth Ulloa: “They do not give us anything and basically, we played for love. The league does not have [enough] support and only foreigners receive a salary. So we did it for love” (H. Ulloa, personal communication, January 6, 2022).

The highest-level basketball athletes in Colombia's LSBF know they are not true professional athletes and play only for personal interest, not for money. Paradoxically, the Colombian media call them “professionals” even though they are not actually professionals in terms of being paid for their work. Additionally, Colombian women athletes know that their work conditions are inferior to those of Colombian men athletes. One observed, “While men have a stable minimum salary, we have nothing. The difference is brutal” (D. Muñoz, personal communication, January 12, 2022).

The experience of the American player Chelsea Hopkins is a striking contrast with the Colombian experiences mentioned above. Chelsea has been playing in the WNBA and in the Israeli Superior Basketball League for almost 10 years. In her opinion, basketball gave her everything, and thanks to that, she “got a full scholarship for college, traveled around the world, bought [her] own house, and made money with that” (C. Hopkins, personal communication, January 30, 2022). The experience of Krystal Vaughn is similar. She is a professional basketball player who has worked in the WNBA and European leagues. Thanks to basketball, she fulfilled her dream of traveling around the world. In her own words: “Although playing for the Washington Mystics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sue Bird (WNBA)</th>
<th>LeBron James (NBA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of seasons played</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of championships earned</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary in 2021</td>
<td>$221,450</td>
<td>$41.2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonus for winning 2020 Finals</td>
<td>$11,356</td>
<td>$370,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on Silva (2021).
“professionals,” but that is not the case for female players. By calling the LSBF “professional,” Colombian media essentially hide the precariousness at work experienced by Colombian women’s basketball players. I found some examples of this inaccurate nomenclature in the sports section of the newspaper El Heraldo and the online magazine Infobae. They both described the LSBF as a “professional” basketball league, as you can see in Figure 1 and Figure 2. I have highlighted the word professional in yellow.

Additionally, the mayor of Barranquilla, a Caribbean city in Colombia, celebrated in a tweet the championship won by the Atlantas Club in the “professional” LSBF league (Figure 3). In all these examples, no one acknowledges or reports the true conditions faced by these basketball athletes in the LSBF league. Media coverage is ignoring that only 10 of 150 players received any compensation last year. This misleading coverage of the (not-quite-professional) league contributes to normalizing the precariousness at work experienced by women.

**TABLE 2. A Comparison Between the WNBA and the LSBF**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WNBA</th>
<th>LSBF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salaries on average</td>
<td>$121,798</td>
<td>Not all the players receive a salary. Only the international players and the members of the Colombian national senior team receive a salary of $750.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Championship team prize</td>
<td>$500,000</td>
<td>No prizes or compensation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical care</td>
<td>Each player with a standard player contract will be provided with medical benefits. That includes dental coverage, life insurance, and pregnancy benefits.</td>
<td>Only one physical therapist during the tournament. They do not have more health support from other professions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of the league (months)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of games per season</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the WNBA CBA and personal conversations with Colombian players.
Sport Is Not Neutral

only women athletes without sexualizing them, and their stories are well told (Figure 4). In this publication, the WNBA’s athletes are portrayed as tough, fantastic, offensive players, relentlessly competitive, and indomitable (Megdal, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Sport is a social field that is not neutral. Sport and other social fields are shaped in part by patriarchy and gender hierarchies that affect women athletes around the world on a daily basis. When analyzing and describing women’s highest-level basketball leagues in Colombia and the United States, it is possible to describe in detail some of the ways gender inequalities still have a significant impact on the sports work of women.

These gender inequalities are reflected in the fact that female basketball players perform the same work as male basketball players, but without receiving the same rewards. In the Colombian case, they win more...
international tournaments, but they do not even have a real professional league (in the sense that professionals are people who are paid for their work). Moreover, the media have called them professionals when they are not actually treated as that, potentially legitimizing the current inequitable situation. These are the kinds of observations that feminists try to expose and overturn. As one of the players mentioned, “Inequality is big in most aspects of the game and hopefully we can make advances in the next few years” (A. Cohen, personal communication, February 3, 2022).

Finally, although media coverage currently perpetuates gender inequalities, it also has the potential to contribute to reducing it in sport. Sports media have the power to reshape or even delete gender stereotypes about women’s sports. And within women’s basketball, the creation of women’s basketball player associations is essential to improving the labor conditions of the athletes. Consequently, the WNBPA has advocated and already brought about improvements in the treatment of WNBA players. And that path inspired other women athletes to make basketball a fairer place in terms of gender.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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Este equipo con gran esfuerzo de @SecDeportesBaq y Yanet Arias quien cumple el sueño de ganar con la camiseta de su ciudad. Orgullo al 100. [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/jaimepumarejo/status/147264948164317699?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

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