

Examining the Gender Pay Gap in Surfing Competitions: A Study on Women Surfers' Experiences in Australia

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Abstract:

The gender pay gap in the sports industry has been a topical issue in women's sports, in the past few years. For example, in the longboarding competition at North Curl Curl, NSW, Australia in April 2021, Lucy Small received \$1,500 in prize money while the men's winner on the same day was awarded \$4,000. In thanking the sponsors, Lucy asked the pertinent question: "Why is our surfing worth half of the men's prize money?" (Allman, 2021). Lucy's comment highlights that "there is no law in NSW standardising prize money or requiring sporting clubs to pay men and women equally" (Allman, 2021, p. 25).

Despite significant advancements in gender equality in various fields, the issue of pay disparity continues to persist in sports (Morgan, 2021), including surfing. The surfing industry is seen as a male-dominated culture with male surfers portrayed as aggressive, competitive, powerful and privileged (Wheaton and Thorp, 2018). Therefore, success and monetary rewards are measured according to standards that are determined by this hegemonic masculinity (Ford & Brown, 2005; Franklin & Carpenter, 2018). According to Schmitt and Bohuon (2022), the institutionalisation of surfing initially excluded women and partnerships with sponsors have traditionally favoured men over women to finance competitions. This resulted in significant inequality between men and women surfers. Women surfers have been provided fewer opportunities to compete and have been paid less to finance their professional needs.

"Although pay is the most visible topic in discussions of sports equality, broader respect for women's competitions and the provision of support services are just as important" (Nimphius, 2021).

In its 2023 rulebook, Surfing Australia has added a pay parity section, mandating clubs to offer equal prize money in events affiliated with Surfing Australia (Surfing Australia, 2023). However, the question remains why the pay discrepancy in surfing competitions still exists and why the gender inequality in the surfing industry has not been eradicated yet at the grassroots level. Limited access to resources, and unequal representation still results in disproportionately low recruitment and retention rates for women surfers. This not only undermines diversity but also poses integrity risks as the industry limits its own potential for growth. While there is a considerable body of research examining the cultural dynamics and gender relations within the surfing industry, insights, and research on understanding the subjective experiences of women surfers about the pay gap have been scarce.

This paper concerns the first phase of an ongoing research project and presents the underlying factors perpetuating inequality in surfing and the pay gap. In this phase, we conduct media analysis of publicly available news and documents from surfing competitions in Australia to contextualise the status quo of women surfers in relation to revenue and prize money and determine the factors influencing the existing disparities.

In the second phase, semi-structured qualitative interviews will be conducted with Australian women surfers to gain insights into their experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding the gender pay gap in surfing. Thematic analysis will be applied to identify recurring themes and patterns within the narratives, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

By giving voice to these experiences, our research aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on gender equality in sports, particularly in the realm of surfing by focusing not only on the gender pay gap and inequity in the sports industry but what this means for women surfers in terms of recruitment, retention, and integrity risks. Ultimately, by illustrating discrepancies and systemic barriers, our research aims to draw attention to the professional careers of women surfers and how gender equity is perceived in the sport industry.