

Women's Golf in the United States: Ongoing Inequities and Fairways to Equity

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ABSTRACT

Women's golf in the United States is at a crossroads: participation is at record levels, and professional women's golf has achieved global commercial success, yet deep inequalities still exist at every level. This paper reviews recent studies to explore four interconnected topics in women's golf in the U.S.: participation trends, institutional and interactional barriers, organizational and media practices in professional women's golf, and the role of golf in women's business opportunities and networking. Analysis of high school participation data shows an increase in the number of girl golfers, but projections suggest their proportional share may decline by 2034, indicating the fragility of recent progress. In recreational settings, exclusionary club cultures continue to hinder women's full participation, while the growth in women's involvement during the pandemic era remains uncertain for the future. In employment and coaching, women comprise less than 5% of PGA golf management program enrollees and under 3% of PGA professionals, driven by gendered perspectives on coaching and male-dominated hiring networks. At the professional level, media coverage of the LPGA reveals intersections of sexism and racism. Golf can serve as a powerful platform for women's networking and entrepreneurship, but these benefits are often limited to those who already possess social capital and can navigate gendered norms.

This paper concludes that these equity issues are interconnected and rooted in institutional and cultural factors rather than isolated concerns, and that they require a coordinated, multi-level approach, including policy reform, organizational culture changes, coach education, leadership development, and media accountability.

INTRODUCTION

Golf has a special role in US sports. It is an individual, skill-based game people can play throughout their lives, a symbol of social status, and a key way to network in business and professional settings (Kitching, 2022; Gray, 2023; Gray, Hicks, & Rundels, 2020). The sport itself does not give men an advantage, especially when courses are adjusted for fairness (McGinnis, McQuillan, & Chapple, 2005; Bowes & Kitching, 2020). Still, men dominate most areas of participation, jobs, and leadership in golf (Kitching,

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Grix, & Phillpotts, 2017; Mitchell, Allen-Collinson, & Evans, 2016). This phenomenon, a sport without inherent physiological limitations that nonetheless exhibits systemic inequality, positions women's golf as an instructive case for analyzing how gender inequality has persisted through institutional and cultural mechanisms rather than biological factors.

Women have played golf since at least the 1500s, but they have often faced limits and restrictions from both official rules and social customs (Kitching, Grix, & Phillpotts, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2016). In the US, women's golf has grown from early amateur events and exclusive clubs into the successful Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), yet inequality remains deeply embedded in the sport (Kitching, 2022). Data on participation, jobs, and media still show gender gaps, racial inequalities, and resistance to fully including women as golfers and professionals (Wu, 2024; Matz & Bowes, 2021; Kitching, 2022; McGinnis et al., 2005; Weiller-Abels, Everbach, Hurd, & Holland, 2023; Kitching et al., 2017).

This paper synthesizes recent empirical and theoretical research on women's golf in the US, focusing on four main research questions.

1. How have women's participation patterns in golf changed at various levels, and what do forecasts indicate for the future?
2. What institutional and interactional barriers shape women's experiences in golf environments?
3. How do organizational and media practices in professional women's golf foster or challenge inequality?
4. In what ways does golf serve as a platform for economic and professional opportunities for women, and who benefits from these advantages?

The paper argues that the inequalities documented across these questions are not isolated problems but are closely interconnected, reinforcing one another through institutional and cultural mechanisms. Therefore, achieving true equity requires a multidimensional, coordinated approach rather than isolated efforts.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a systematic literature review approach. Sources were identified through searches of academic databases such as Google Scholar and JSTOR, using search terms like women's golf, gender inequality in golf, LPGA, golf participation, sports media sexism, and women in sport management, both individually and in combination. The review concentrated on peer-reviewed studies, mainly published between 2005 and 2024, to ensure current evidence. Earlier works were included if they provided important historical or foundational context. Studies were selected based on (1) direct relevance to the research questions, (2) empirical evidence (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), and (3) focus on U.S. women's golf or other similar national contexts (primarily the United Kingdom) where findings are sufficiently applicable to the U.S. context. The core of the reviewed literature includes about fifteen main

empirical studies, along with several supplementary theoretical and organizational analyses. Sources were integrated thematically rather than sequentially, with each section building an overall argument from multiple studies instead of merely summarizing individual works.

HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

From Exclusion to Partial Inclusion

History shows that golf has long been dominated by men, with women often kept off courses or limited to side areas, sometimes playing only “secret games” of putting (Kitching, 2022). This exclusion was intentional and shaped golf's culture. Even as more women played in the late 1800s and early 1900s, club rules and social norms still limited their access, tee times, and decision-making roles (Kitching, 2022; Hudson, 2007). Early women's golf events in the US were often scheduled around men's competitions and restricted to certain days or times (Kitching, 2022). These exclusionary mechanisms were not just part of history; they also shaped the cultural norms and institutions that influence golf today.

Although public golf has expanded and formal segregation has ended, some exclusionary practices still exist. Certain clubs continue to prevent women from becoming members or accessing equal facilities and leadership roles (Kitching, 2022). More broadly, leadership, administrative, and coaching positions within the golf industry remain predominantly held by men, creating organizational conditions where discriminatory practices are maintained through informal norms and hiring decisions rather than explicit policies (Kitching, Grix, & Phillipotts, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2016). Recognizing this historical continuity is crucial: today's disparities in participation, employment, and media coverage are not exceptions but ongoing results of institutional and cultural practices established over a century ago.

The Rise of the LPGA

The Ladies Professional Golf Association, founded in 1950, is one of the longest-standing and most commercially successful women's sports organizations worldwide (Davies & Hungenberg, 2019; Hudson, 2007). The LPGA has gradually shifted from primarily an American tour to a global circuit, driven by the success of legendary international players like Annika Sörenstam, Lorena Ochoa, and Se Ri Pak, and increasingly influenced by the dominance of Asian golfers who now compose a significant portion of the top performers (Matz & Bowes, 2021; Davies & Hungenberg, 2019).

Despite this growth, significant inequalities remain. Women still earn much less prize money than men on the Professional Golfers' Association Tour, and media coverage stays limited despite the LPGA's global success (Kitching, 2022; Davies & Hungenberg, 2019). Leadership decisions, such as the proposed English-language rule and celebrity-focused marketing, reveal tensions around globalization, diversity, and how women's bodies are marketed (Matz & Bowes, 2021; Davies & Hungenberg, 2019). The LPGA case shows that progress and inequality coexist, and that commercial growth does not automatically lead to greater equity.

PARTICIPATION PATTERNS AND TRENDS

High School Golf

One of the few quantitative studies on gender trends in U.S. golf examines high school data from the 2010/11 through 2021/22 seasons, using time-series statistical modeling to describe past trends and to project future trends (Wu, 2024). Female participation in high school golf increased significantly over the study period, primarily due to Title IX enforcement and heightened awareness of gender equity in school sports (Wu, 2024). However, the more important finding is the predicted reversal of this trend: forecasts for the 2022/23 through 2033/34 period suggest that girls' proportional share of high school golfers could decline (Wu, 2024). This projection questions the idea of steady progress and suggests that the mechanisms behind recent advances might not yet have produced the necessary changes for lasting equity. The fragility of these gains could reflect the absence of institutional and cultural changes that establish sustainably supportive and affirming environments for young women.

Recreational Participation

In the United States, women and girls comprised about 63% of the 1.29 million new golfers who began playing between 2020 and 2023, mainly because golf's outdoor, socially distanced setting made it a popular option during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gray, 2023). This demographic shift led to record numbers of women golfers nationwide, but the long-term impacts remain uncertain. Post-pandemic retention will largely depend on whether new players find welcoming environments and fair conditions at clubs, which, according to the literature, are not always available (McGinnis et al., 2005; Mitchell et al., 2016).

In England, evidence from an eighteen-month ethnographic study at an English golf club shows how recreational participation is discouraged by (1) surveillance of women's bodies and clothing, (2) treating women as outsiders through language and social norms, and (3) informal enforcement of gendered expectations about physical appearance (Mitchell et al., 2016). Although conducted in the UK, these findings closely resemble patterns observed in American leisure golf settings, demonstrating the global nature of gender exclusion in club environments (McGinnis et al., 2005; Mitchell et al., 2016).

The Fragility of Recent Gains

Analyzing data from high school, recreational activities, and the pandemic era shows a key pattern: overall participation among women is rising, but this increase remains fragile (Wu, 2024; Gray, 2023). Participation is not only driven by personal interest; it is influenced and restricted by institutional support, cultural norms about who belongs in golf, and unequal access based on gender and race (McGinnis et al., 2005; Kitching, 2022). The expected decrease in high school girls' proportional share, along with uncertain retention rates for pandemic-era recreational participants, suggests that without ongoing, sustainable institutional and cultural efforts, the progress made over the past decade is unlikely to continue.

BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

Objectification, Stereotyping, and Social Exclusion

Research based on interviews with women recreational golfers reveals three interconnected processes through which gender exclusion occurs in everyday golf settings (McGinnis et al., 2005). The first is increased unease, a feeling of being watched and judged not for golf skills but for appearance, clothing, and conformity to femininity norms that have nothing to do with athletic ability (McGinnis et al., 2005). The second is typecasting, where women are presumptively labeled as slow, unskilled, emotionally unstable, or unlikely to improve much—stereotypes that both reflect and reinforce biased views of women's golfing abilities (McGinnis et al., 2005). The third is social exclusion, shown by unwelcoming course environments, dismissive treatment from staff, and a widespread institutional message that women's presence in golf is unusual rather than normal (McGinnis et al., 2005).

These three processes reinforce each other: women who experience objectification and exclusion tend to disengage from golf, which hampers their skill development and appears to reinforce stereotypes about women's limited abilities. Importantly, the coping strategies some women adopt, such as restricting their play to all-women groups or building personal resilience against dismissal, individualize a problem rooted in institutional and cultural mechanisms. They shift the responsibility onto women to adapt rather than holding the systems accountable for creating environments that produce exclusion in the first place.

Coaching Mindsets and Gendered Skill Development

Coaching plays a crucial yet often overlooked role in gender inequality in golf. Research on coaches' implicit beliefs about recreational golfers reveals biased gendered expectations: coaches tend to perceive greater potential for improvement in male golfers than in female golfers, and these implicit beliefs influence the quality of feedback given. As a result, women often receive less developmentally helpful instruction (Shapcott & Carr, 2020). Importantly, these beliefs are changeable rather than fixed; intervention studies show that mindset training can modify coaches' implicit judgments of women's abilities, leading to better feedback (Shapcott & Carr, 2020).

This finding indicates that one reason for women's relatively lower performance in golf might not be their innate ability but the coaching they receive, which reflects and reproduces gendered assumptions. The feedback gap becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: coaches who doubt women's potential provide less effective instruction, resulting in smaller performance improvements, which then seem to confirm the initial belief (Shapcott & Carr, 2020). Breaking this cycle requires not only encouraging women to participate but also transforming broader institutional environments, including coach training, to better support women's involvement.

EMPLOYMENT AND COACHING INEQUALITY

Underrepresentation in Management Education

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The training pipeline for golf industry professionals reflects and reproduces the gender imbalances already present in the golf industry. Women account for less than 5% of enrollees in PGA golf management programs nationwide, a figure that remains consistently low despite decades of gender equity efforts in higher education overall (Cain, Cain, & Lough, 2020). Focus group and survey research with program directors and PGA professionals highlight several ongoing barriers: the perception of golf management as a male-dominated field; long, irregular hours that interfere with women's often increased family care responsibilities; the lack of visible female role models and mentors; and the absence of targeted recruitment efforts aimed at women (Cain et al., 2020).

These barriers operate systematically. The underrepresentation of women in the student pipeline leads to fewer women in the professional workforce, which perpetuates the lack of role models and further discourages prospective women students. Breaking this cycle requires institutional changes, such as flexible internship options, formal mentoring programs, and targeted outreach, instead of simply opening programs to everyone.

Generational Shifts Among Women Professionals

At the professional level, women comprise a surprisingly small percentage of PGA-affiliated golf professionals across North America. In Britain and Ireland, female PGA members made up less than 3% of all professionals in a major empirical study (Kitching, Grix, & Phillpotts, 2017). Qualitative research with women professionals reveals multi-dimensional experiences: ongoing barriers to hiring and promotion rooted in skepticism about women's technical authority and credibility; professional isolation and the need to work harder to earn basic respect. However, younger women professionals are more likely than older ones to actively challenge discrimination and male dominance rather than accept it (Kitching et al., 2017).

This generational aspect is significant to consider. It shows that cultural attitudes are evolving, not just through top-down organizational shifts but also through increasing resistance from individual women who refuse to passively accept institutional sexism. However, attributing progress solely to individual resistance exaggerates personal effort and underestimates the institutional changes needed to make that resistance effective on a larger scale.

Legitimacy Challenges for Women Coaches

A qualitative study of women PGA professionals in coaching roles explores how legitimacy and de-legitimacy develop across four levels: individual, interpersonal, organizational, and societal (Mollin, Allen, & Henning, 2023). Recruitment and access to coaching positions are mainly managed through informal networks, with supportive mentors playing a crucial role in creating opportunities for women (Mollin et al., 2023). Daily interactions with club members and colleagues provide ongoing opportunities to affirm or challenge women's professional identities, while institutional policies that explicitly promote gender equality can help counteract systemic de-legitimization caused by stereotypes about women's technical skills and physical authority.

The main contribution of this research is showing that legitimization and de-legitimization happen on multiple levels at the same time, and that interventions need to address this multi-layered complexity. Simply urging women to "lean in" isn't enough when hiring practices, evaluation standards, and organizational cultures are built on male norms of professional competence. Therefore, changing women's roles in golf coaching requires transforming these institutional and cultural structures.

MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Sexism and Racism in Sports Media

A media analysis of twenty-five US news and sports articles responding to golf commentator Hank Haney's disparaging remarks about the 2019 US Women's Open identifies four recurring frames (Matz & Bowes, 2021). First, coverage consistently downplayed the seriousness of Haney's comments, framing them as personal mistakes rather than signs of widespread sexism in golf broadcasting (Matz & Bowes, 2021). Second, articles showed mixed feelings about women's golf, implicitly considering it less valid or interesting than the men's game. Third, coverage mainly focused on male perspectives and voices, even when discussing women's experiences specifically (Matz & Bowes, 2021). Fourth, the media's approach revealed xenophobic and racial anxieties about the LPGA's Asian-dominant leaderboard, showing how racial discomfort influences gender-related commentary (Matz & Bowes, 2021).

This literature highlights the limitations of analyzing media coverage of women's golf from only one perspective. The marginalization of LPGA players is not just about sexism; it stems from the intersection of sexism and racism, particularly affecting athletes who are both women and Asian (Matz & Bowes, 2021). Ignoring this intersection—focusing on sexism but neglecting racial bias—is likely to fail in challenging the broader institutional and cultural system of exclusion.

Individualism and Collective Action Among Players

Qualitative research on LPGA players' perspectives on equity and representation reveals a key ideological aspect of the issue (Weiller-Abels et al., 2023). While many players recognize the dominance of masculinity in sports and disparities in media coverage, they mostly view these as personal challenges rather than collective problems that require organized action. Some athletes explicitly oppose collective LPGA advocacy for equity, despite acknowledging its potential benefits for all players. This stance underscores the widespread influence of free-market individualist ideology in professional sports (Weiller-Abels et al., 2023).

More concerning, some players showed acceptance or approval of the sexualization of women athletes in marketing, justifying it as a strategic way to attract media attention and increase revenue (Weiller-Abels et al., 2023). Some participants also revealed racialized views toward Asian colleagues, indicating that the logic of exclusion operates not only between men and women but also within the category "women" itself, divided by race (Weiller-Abels et al., 2023). This internal division, caused by individualist beliefs and racial bias, hampers the collective effort that would be most effective in challenging institutional and cultural inequalities.

LPGA Organizational Challenges

From a management and business perspective, the LPGA's organizational history showcases both genuine successes and ongoing structural limitations (Davies & Hungenberg, 2019). The tour's international growth, expansion of global corporate sponsorships, and rise as the top women's professional golf circuit are significant organizational achievements (Davies & Hungenberg, 2019). However, management decisions have sometimes reinforced the very inequalities the organization aims to oppose: proposals for English-language requirements that would have disadvantaged non-native English speakers, marketing strategies that emphasized women's physical appearance over athletic skill, and ongoing gaps in prize money and broadcast investments compared to the men's tour (Matz & Bowes, 2021; Davies & Hungenberg, 2019).

A broader review of women's professional sports leagues confirms these tensions across various sports (Thomson, Hayes, Hanlon, Toohey, & Taylor, 2022). Women's sports organizations often face challenges in balancing commercial interests with social equity goals, especially under male-dominated leadership and uncertain sponsorship deals (Thomson et al., 2022). Addressing this tension in golf requires not only internal organizational reforms but also ongoing external, multifaceted pressure from sponsors, media, athletes, and fans to recognize women's athletic achievements on their own terms, regardless of gender or race, for true equity.

BUSINESS NETWORKING AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Golf as a Professional Networking Tool

Golf is often seen as an important setting for professional networking in business, especially in sales, marketing, and relationship building among executives. Content analysis of over five hundred pages of articles on women, business, and golf identified three main themes (Gray, Hicks, & Rundels, 2020). First, playing golf benefits women in business by providing access to informal conversations with clients and decision-makers, increasing their visibility, and enhancing their credibility in male-dominated fields (Gray, Hicks, & Rundels, 2020). Second, not playing golf can result in missing key networking events and relationship-building opportunities that affect career advancement. Third, reasons women don't play golf include lack of time, feeling insecure about their skills, discomfort in male-dominated settings, and not being invited or mentored into the game (Gray, Hicks, & Rundels, 2020). Other studies indicate that playing golf is associated with career advancement for women, especially when it is used to build professional relationships (Gray, 2023; Gray et al., 2020).

However, these advantages mainly benefit women who already have social capital and the cultural understanding of golf's gendered norms, highlighting the need to address institutional and cultural barriers that limit broader access to these benefits.

Women's Entrepreneurship in Golf

A review of women's entrepreneurship in sports organizations highlights four key areas: education and entrepreneurship, leveraging sports to develop business skills, obstacles to starting businesses, and social entrepreneurship (Costa & Miragaia, 2022). Women still face significant barriers, including limited access to funding and networks, along with persistent stereotypes about their leadership abilities, despite increasing interest in women's sport entrepreneurship (Costa & Miragaia, 2022). Participation in sports, such as golf, helps women develop skills like resilience, risk-taking, and strategic thinking that are directly useful for entrepreneurship (Costa & Miragaia, 2022). Specifically in golf, expanding women's opportunities to play, manage, and coach can open pathways into golf-related business ventures, including facility management, coaching services, technology, and tourism, but only if institutional and cultural barriers limiting women's participation are actively addressed.

DISCUSSION

Interconnected Inequalities

The literature review of women's golf in the U.S. reveals a common theme: inequality in women's golf is an institutional and cultural issue that is interconnected (Wu, 2024; Kitching, 2022; McGinnis et al., 2005; Cain et al., 2020; Kitching et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2016). From high school participation and golf club norms to management education, women face disadvantages that cannot be explained solely by personal choice or biological differences. These disadvantages are shaped and maintained by institutional systems, cultural beliefs, and interpersonal practices that reinforce each other (McGinnis et al., 2005; Shapcott & Carr, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2016).

Cultural exclusion in recreational settings (Mitchell et al., 2016; McGinnis et al., 2005) suppresses women's participation and skill development, which reduces the number of women advancing to competitive and professional levels, further reinforcing the stereotype that women are not serious golfers. The underrepresentation of women in PGA golf management programs (Cain et al., 2020) decreases the number of women in professional and coaching roles (Kitching et al., 2017), which, in turn, maintains the lack of visible role models that discourages the next generation of women from enrolling in those same programs. The individualist ideology observed among LPGA players (Weiller-Abels et al., 2023) limits collective advocacy, allowing practices that sexualize or diminish women's athletic achievements to go unchallenged (Davies & Hungenberg, 2019).

Professional women's golf and the LPGA showcase women's athletic excellence and attract global audiences, yet they still receive less prize money than men's golf and face sexist and racist media coverage that limits their commercial potential and cultural legitimacy (Matz & Bowes, 2021; Davies & Hungenberg, 2019). Golf's potential as an economic equalizer, providing women access to professional networks and career opportunities, is real but remains limited by the same institutional and cultural inequalities that hinder opportunities (Gray, 2023; Gray et al., 2020; Costa & Miragaia, 2022).

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Multi-Level Equity Strategy

Addressing inequalities in women's golf requires coordinated efforts across multiple interconnected levels.

Policy and Governance: High school athletic associations, collegiate governing bodies, and golf industry organizations should establish clear participation and resource equity goals, implement monitoring systems to evaluate progress, and connect funding, certification, or organizational standing to the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Wu, 2024; Cain et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2022).

Organizational Culture: Golf clubs and coaching academies can proactively revise discriminatory dress codes, update tee-time policies to reduce time-based segregation, and restructure membership categories to minimize surveillance and practices of marginalization (Kitching, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2016). Implementing mandatory anti-sexism and anti-racism training, along with creating mixed-gender and women-only competitive formats that focus on skill development and enjoyment, would demonstrate a genuine commitment to cultural change.

Coach Education: Incorporating evidence-based research on mindsets into coach certification programs can effectively alter coaches' implicit beliefs about women's abilities and improve the quality of feedback and instruction women receive during skill development (Shapcott & Carr, 2020; Mollin et al., 2023).

Pipeline and Leadership Development: Targeted recruitment efforts, scholarship programs, formal mentoring relationships, and comprehensive leadership development initiatives specifically for women in golf management and coaching are essential, with a clear focus on supporting women of color and other marginalized groups historically excluded from golf leadership (Cain et al., 2020; Mollin et al., 2023; Kitching et al., 2017; Costa & Miragaia, 2022).

Media and Professional Strategy: Media outlets and the LPGA organization itself can adopt intersectional analytical frameworks that genuinely center diverse women's experiences, actively challenge racist and sexist narratives in coverage, and reduce over-reliance on sexualized marketing images that commodify women players' bodies (Matz & Bowes, 2021; Weiller-Abels et al., 2023; Davies & Hungenberg, 2019; Thomson et al., 2022).

Business Engagement: Companies that use golf for client entertainment should organize inclusive golf events, support women's golf programs at both youth and professional levels, and actively invite and encourage women employees to learn and play, thereby expanding access to golf's networking benefits (Gray, 2023; Gray et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Women's golf in the US is at a critical turning point. More women are playing than ever before,
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professional women's golf has expanded globally and gained commercial credibility, and the golf industry has increasingly focused on diversity and inclusion. However, the evidence reviewed in this paper shows that these advancements coexist with ongoing multidimensional inequalities: a fragile trend in youth participation that suggests a potential decline in the percentage of girls in high school; club cultures that marginalize women; coaching feedback that reinforces gendered assumptions about women's abilities; employment pipelines where women hold significantly fewer positions than men; media coverage displaying sexism and racial bias; and individualist ideologies within the athlete community that hinder collective action (Wu, 2024; Matz & Bowes, 2021; Kitching, 2022; McGinnis et al., 2005; Shapcott & Carr, 2020; Cain et al., 2020; Weiller-Abels et al., 2023; Kitching et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2016). As discussed, these inequalities are rooted in interconnected institutional and cultural systems that require coordinated, multi-level efforts rather than isolated actions to create a true fairway of equity and opportunity for all.

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