

Inequality of Salaries between the WNBA and NBA

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Introduction

Did you know NBA towels boys and mascots are being paid more than superstars in the WNBA? Can you imagine the person cleaning up LeBron or Kevin Durant's sweat getting paid more than Sue Bird? Or Benny the Bull, mascot from the Chicago Bulls getting paid more than a WNBA legend? No need to imagine, because it is happening. There has always been traces of inequality between female and male athletes, especially in salaries. This paper will be highlighting the unequal salaries between athletes in the WNBA and NBA because of its wide margins and raising of awareness. As an athlete, I find it unfair how WNBA salaries are and how the organization is treated. I watch both the WNBA and NBA, and see no difference but dunking. The love is the same, the grind is the same, the work ethic is the same, the way they inspire people are the same, so the pay should be the same. Athletes in the WNBA should be paid equally as NBA athletes and staff.

According to *Boardroom TV*, a media network founded by Kevin Durant and Rich Kleiman, the average salary for a professional mascot amounts to some \$60,000 per year. \$60,000 is equal to what a third rounder rookie or undrafted rookie in the WNBA would make. If the rookie in the WNBA would be drafted second round or between the 9-12 picks their salary would increase to \$65,000 and \$68,295. A rookie in the WNBA being drafted in the top four picks their salary would increase to \$74,000. According to *Boardroom TV*, The highest paid one is Rocky the Mountain Lion, representative of the Denver Nuggets, who earns \$625,000 a year(Alikpala 1). This figure is more than ten times the median salary for the job. Next on the list is Harry the Hawk who represents Atlanta: he earns \$600,000 annually. He is followed by Benny the Bull of Chicago, with a yearly salary of \$400,000, then Go the Gorilla of the Phoenix Suns who takes

home \$200,000 a year. Rounding out the top five earners is Hugo the Hornet who represents Charlotte, with a paycheck of \$100,000 annually (Alikpala 1). Those four mascots in the NBA alone get paid more than all the women who were drafted this year in the WNBA 2023-2024 draft selection.

Sue Bird is an WNBA legend, constantly compared to LeBron James, Magic Johnson, and Kobe Bryant when it comes to being a hall of famer in the professional sport across the world displaying dominance, love, leadership, hard work, and more. Sue Bird for the Seattle Storm accolades includes 4x WNBA Champion in three decades, 16 WNBA All Star appearances, 1st in the WNBA in games played, 1st in the WNBA in seasons played, 1st in the WNBA in assist, 1st in the WNBA for most all star appearances, 1st in the WNBA for minutes played, 2nd in the WNBA for most made threes and more. That is the reason Sue Bird is compared to NBA legends and is called the WNBA goat which in sport terms means greatest of all time. Sue Bird has had the highest paid salary in the WNBA with \$228,000 which is 3x less compared to Rocky the Mountain Lion mascot for the Denver Nuggets whose salary is \$620,000. Sue Bird, a WNBA legend for her whole career has been paid less than the Denver Nugget mascot Rocky the Mountain Lion. Sue Bird now works for the Denver Nuggets front office as a basketball operations associate, the coincidence. According to the LinkedIn article titled *NBA Towel Boy Salary*, while the average salary of an NBA waterboy is \$53,000 to \$58,000 a year, the highest-paying teams pay their waterboys upwards of \$100,000 a year. Waterboys must be physically fit and have a good sense of awareness. Their duties include being vigilant in the preparation of a game.-Being an NBA floor cleaner is a great way to earn extra cash. NBA teams play 82 games each season, and floor cleaners typically travel to at least 41 games a year. Additionally, the

playoffs mean extra travel for cleaners. The salary for this position can be upwards of \$100,000 per year, depending on the level of experience you have. NBA staff including mascots, waterboys, towel boys, floor cleaner, and salaries are more than 3/4th of the WNBA. NBA floor cleaners can make up to \$100,000 which is half of the highest salaries in the WNBA and more than anyone being drafted in the WNBA this year and previous year.

History of Salaries and Caps between WNBA-NBA

Before displaying the history of salaries between the WNBA and NBA, you have to understand what is the CBA and what is a salary cap. A salary cap is all the amount of money a team has to spend on players or the maximum total salary of all the players of a team has on the books. The WNBA faces many issues because each team's salary caps are always low and does not give wiggle room for teams to draft, trade, and pay their athletes. The CBA is the Collective Bargaining Agreement, the NBA and WNBA have one. The Collective Bargaining Agreement is an agreement that gets signed every four years and it is an agreement that attempts to get players the best deal and opportunities. The CBA gets signed, looked over, and discussed by the athletes, players association, executives committees, and athletes from both organizations that represent both leagues. Below is the player salaries, team salary caps, annual household income, and more according to *Boardroom Tv*. The information is from when the NBA started 75 years ago and details the analytics every 25 years.

First Season (1946-47)

- Average Player Salaries - \$5,000/\$6,000
- Team Salary Cap - \$55,000
- Annual Household Income - \$2,600

The 25th Season (1970-71)

- Average Player Salaries - \$90,000

- Team Salary Cap - The NBA abolished the Salary Cap until 1984
- Annual Household Income - \$6,497

The 50th Season (1995-96)

- Player Salary - \$2.2 million
- Team Salary Cap - \$23 million
- Annual Household Income - \$35,492

The 75th Season (2021-22)

- Average Player Salary - \$8.8 million
- Team Salary Cap - \$112 million
- Annual Household Income - \$79,000

The NBA salary cap has grown massively since the first season in 1946, the team salary cap has jumped over \$100 million and the average player salary has jumped over \$8 million during the years. Every year since the Women’s National Basketball Association’s season began in 1997, the highest-paid women’s basketball player has earned less than the lowest-paid National Basketball Association player. In the 1997-98 season, NBA rookies made over 110% more than WNBA rookies. And while that gap narrowed slightly at the start of the 2010s to 172%, it widened again by the end of the decade to 182%. Appendix 1A for the comparison graphs from Adelphi University between the WNBA and NBA average player salary, rookie salary, team cap, up to 3 years salary, up to 6-8 years salary, and 10 years salary cap. (see appendix 1A)

The NBA athletes receive 50% of its revenue, that is the one of the reasons their salaries are high. The WNBA only received 20% of its revenue until the 2020 Collect Bargain Agreement, where it was raised to %50 and for the first time the average WNBA player salary reached six figures. 2020 CBA for the WNBA was a historic one. Below is the graph displaying it from Adelphi University.

WNBA 2019-2020 Season	After 2020 CBA
Rookie salary: \$41,965 Three years: \$56,375 Veteran players: \$115,000 Salary cap: \$117,500 Average: \$75,000	Rookie salary: \$57,000 Three years: \$68,000 Veteran players: \$185,000 Salary cap: \$215,000 Average: \$130,000

NBA players get millions in dollars while WNBA players are still in the tens of thousands and just now reaching six figure deals. A rookie in the NBA in 2010 average salary is \$473,604 and that is more than the highest paid WNBA athlete in 2023. In 2010 a player in the NBA who signs a 6 year contract gets \$13 million compared to a WNBA team salary cap of \$99,000 in 2010. Both leagues, WNBA and NBA are ahead of its time and two of the biggest organizations out there, both are the #1 source of the highest entertainment of professional basketball. You can tell by what NBA players are being paid but with the way WNBA players are getting paid you would think they are behind. According to NBCSports, the highest salary in the WNBA as of today is Jackie Young from the Las Vegas Aces being paid \$252,450. According to ESPNsports, the highest paid athlete in the NBA is Stephen Curry from the Golden State Warriors being paid \$48 million, which is more than half of the WNBA's revenue.

Consequences for Low Salaries and Caps

WNBA athletes should get paid equal to NBA players and their staff. There are many consequences of the WNBA salaries and team salary cap being so low. Many WNBA players leave to go overseas because they are being paid more. College athletes tend to stay longer in school because now with NIL deals they are getting paid more than some WNBA players. Many WNBA teams are running into numerous problems because of the team caps, WNBA teams have to cut players and draft less players because they do not have the money to pay them. WNBA has found themselves in trouble with the salary caps because they also can't maintain players because they are broke, rosters on WNBA teams are becoming restricted and insubstantial. WNBA players are cutting top picks in previous years because they can not afford to pay them, which is like Golden State releasing Stephen Curry because they can not pay him. Which seems unimaginable but happening in the WNBA daily.

Crazy to imagine WNBA athletes playing two seasons because their salary in the WNBA are so low. WNBA athletes go play overseas where the majority of the time they get paid more money. WNBA athletes have been playing overseas in other countries for decades now because of the unfair salary in the WNBA. “Turkey is an especially popular home to WNBA players this year. Jonquel Jones (Sun), Tiffany Hayes (Dream), Queen Egbo (Fever), Emma Meesseman (Sky), DeWanna Bonner (Sun) and Riquna Williams (Aces) are among those playing there. Other players are competing in Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, Israel and other nations” (THEAthlete 1). WNBA athletes find themselves playing in China, Turkey, Russia, France and more because of the better salary they can acquire. “The maximum annual base salary for W.N.B.A. players is \$228,094, and just three players earned that much this year, according to

Spotrac. Griner's salary is just under the maximum. The minimum is about \$60,000. Each team has a salary cap of about \$1.4 million to fill 12 roster spots. The league offers bonuses for winning awards like defensive player of the year, and also helps players find internships or marketing deals during the off-season" (Ganguli and Abrams 1). "By contrast, some players can make more than \$1 million playing overseas. Jones, who has played for the Connecticut Sun since 2016, once told ESPN that she made her entire W.N.B.A. salary — \$205,000 this season — in one month playing in Russia. Players in Turkish leagues can make several hundred thousand dollars in a season. Jones signed with Cukurova in Mersin, Turkey, for the upcoming off-season, as did the W.N.B.A. players Chelsea Gray and Briann January. Breanna Stewart and Emma Meesseman, who played for Yekaterinburg, have signed with Fenerbahce in Istanbul" (Ganguli and Abrams 1). The authors explain how some WNBA players get paid their entire salary playing one month overseas. The authors quote top WNBA athletes who have been playing in places such as Turkey, Cukurova in Mersin, and Fenerbahce in Istanbul. WNBA players are having to travel across the world right after playing a full season in the WNBA because some need more money and the pay is higher. WNBA players are having to schedule for two seasons and endure many challenges because of their salary.

Low salaries in the WNBA are a clear reason why NCAA female athletes feel there is no rush to be a professional athlete. Since the introduction of the Name, Image, and Likeness(NIL) college athletes can now be compensated for their name and image through marketing and promotional endeavors. With a battle to remember in the 2023 NCAA Women's Basketball Championship between Angel Reeses LSU Tigers and Caitlyn Clarks IOWA Hawkeyes, both athletes wanting to win not knowing both their lives are going to change. You would think both

athletes are going straight to the WNBA with their performances and talents but both are going back to school to compete and get another year of education. After the 2023 NCAA Women's Championship Game both Caitlyn Clark and Angel Reese NIL salary deals jumped over \$300k. Now both athletes' NIL salary deals are over \$1 million, which is already more than the max salary in the WNBA. College athletes are getting paid more than WNBA players so they are going to take their time to make it to the WNBA and may not be as much excited when that moment comes because they know they are making less money. According to Sports Illustrated, Olivia Dunne from the Louisiana State gymnastics team NIL salary deals is currently at \$2.6 million, Suni Lee from the University of Auburn gymnastics team NIL salary deal is currently at \$1.5 million, and Paige Bueckers from the University of Connecticut women's basketball team NIL salary deal is \$824k (SPORTS Illustrated 1). All three of those athletes make more than the max salary in the WNBA. Olivia Dunne and Suni Lee salary deals are more than WNBA teams salary caps, which is the money each team gets to pay their players. There are players in the WNBA getting cut from the WNBA because of this issue.

That is another problem WNBA athletes face that many don't know and it is regarding their salary. Top WNBA athletes from years prior are getting cut because teams do not have the money to pay them, rookies, and everyone else. "Situations such as Clark's have been commonplace throughout the WNBA, which opens its regular season Friday. There are just 144 roster spots in the league, with each of the 12 teams able to carry 12 players. Because of salary cap maneuvering, many teams don't use all 12 slots. Those limited opportunities have led to some harsh decisions, particularly with young players. The Las Vegas Aces traded their first- and second-round picks in 2023 to get the Nos. 8 and 13 selections in this year's draft — and then

waived those picks, Mya Hollingshed and Khayla Pointer. The Seattle Storm cut No. 17 pick Elissa Cunane, a second-team Associated Press all-American from North Carolina State. The Minnesota Lynx waived 2020 rookie of the year Crystal Dangerfield and the 2021 No. 9 pick, Renna Davis. The Indiana Fever previously cut bait with 2020 No. 3 pick Lauren Cox and 2021 No. 4 pick Kysre Gondrezick. The examples go on and on” (Copeland 1). Copeland explains how top WNBA athletes such as Elissa Cunane, Crystal Dangerfield, Renna Davis, and more have been waived from their teams because of their teams salary caps not being enough. Breanna Stewart, the 2018 WNBA MVP quoted “I hate seeing so many great players being cut from WNBA teams,” Salaries went up, but a very restrictive hard cap has put teams in a bind. We need to soften it to allow [sic] our league to grow” (Koons 1).

Reasons for Difference between Salaries of WNBA-NBA

WNBA players should be paid equal to NBA athletes and their staff because the NBA generates over billions of dollars more than the WNBA. There are many reasons for the difference in salary between the WNBA and NBA. Two main reasons is the NBA has been around longer and they generate more money than the WNBA. The NBA leads in every category when it is compared to the WNBA. The NBA has been around for 75 years while the WNBA has been around for 25 years. “The NBA’s average attendance is 17,760, the WNBA’s 6,535. The 2019 NBA Finals averaged a little more than 20 million viewers per game; the 2019 WNBA Finals averaged about 400,000 viewers per game. The NBA has 30 teams, the WNBA 12. The NBA’s average ticket price is variously reported at between \$51 to \$89; the WNBA’s \$17. NBA games average 2 million TV viewers per game; WNBA games averaged 246,000 viewers during

the 2019 regular season, according to Sports Media Watch (we'll ignore the 2020 season impacted by the pandemic). And that's a 7% improvement. The NBA's annual revenues are \$7.92 billion, the WNBA's \$60 million — which would not even cover the combined salaries of NBA players Kevin Love and Damian Lillard. Revenues, of course, are not to be confused with profits” (Pay Disparity between WNBA-NBA). The NBA statistically leads the WNBA in every category. The NBA generated nearly \$8 billion while the WNBA generated over \$7 billion less with \$60 million. Another big reason for the difference in salaries is the percentage of revenue each league player gets to receive. NBA players get to receive %50 of their \$7.92 million while the WNBA gets to receive %20 percent of their \$60 million revenue. The NBA is more popular than the WNBA which causes many of the differences in salaries. The NBA plays over 1,000 games more than the WNBA which causes more revenue coming in from more attendance. The NBA is generally just more than the WNBA, they lead in every category including revenue, viewership, endorsement deals, attendance, and more. The WNBA needs more money to be able to give more money. Every year since the WNBA inaugural season in 1997, the highest paid women's basketball player has earned less than the lowest paid National Basketball Association player. The numbers speak for itself, it is unfair. The NBA being around longer than the WNBA has caused many advantages in salary too. The NBA being around longer has caused them to make more money, join with more partners, learn throughout the process, make TV deals, and more. The NBA being around longer makes them richer because any deal they have had over decades now has doubled due to inflation. The NBA is not on the same level financially with the WNBA which causes the difference in salaries. The highest rated NBA game was the 2015 finals between the Cleveland Cavaliers and Golden State Warriors rating 11.6 and reaching nearly 20 million viewers. The highest rated WNBA game is in 2022 the Las Vegas Aces versus the

Seattle Storm which reached 1.1 million people and had over 800,000 people watching. When being compared to the WNBA the NBA doubles, triples, max's out all of their numbers from revenue, viewership, endorsement, salaries, team salary caps, season bonuses, and more. The NBA is just more than the WNBA, when they are under the same organization which is unfair to me. All the numbers are clear and situations are only going to get worse with inflation, recovering from COVID-19, and all those women athletes are going to continue facing challenges that we the people are going to know anything about.

What WNBA/NBA can do

The NBA and WNBA can work together to solve this issue and make it less unfair. WNBA athletes make less than everyone in the NBA including their staff such as towel boys, floor cleaners, general managers, and more. To improve their issue with salary and salary caps, the WNBA can try to agree to a new CBA agreement in 2027, where they receive more percentage from the WNBA revenue which is currently at %20. The NBA can leverage its existing infrastructure and resources to help increase the visibility and revenue of the WNBA. By investing in the league, promoting crossover events, using existing platforms to broadcast games, increasing public awareness, and collaborating with sponsors, the NBA can help ensure the continued success of the WNBA. The NBA can increase their investment into the WNBA, they can give their partnered WNBA team more money so they make improvements and increase salaries. The NBA can promote crossover events, where the WNBA and NBA play right after each other or at the same time. That can increase their viewership, attendance, audience, and bring in more revenue. The NBA can increase the WNBA public awareness by promoting the WNBA on their social media channels, tv channels, and media. The more fans the NBA

introduces to the WNBA can help majorly with salary and team salary cap issues. The NBA can also help with the WNBA revenue by collaborating their endorsements and partnerships with the WNBA so it can produce more money and marketing efforts.

To help with the WNBA audience, the NBA can help improve the scheduling of WNBA games so they aren't on holidays, busy days, or days where major events are occurring or being televised. The NBA can promote more cross promotion of WNBA and NBA athletes, they can promote commercials with both WNBA and NBA players. They can promote the WNBA at their games, by broadcasting what WNBA are occurring and showing highlights during the NBA game. The NBA and WNBA can play at the same place, like when the NBA bubble was occurring but there will be fans. If NBA fans can be in the same building to watch WNBA, that will change the game drastically. Both audiences of the WNBA and NBA can increase the WNBA revenue by millions even probably a billion and cause more people to watch the WNBA.

The WNBA can help increase their audience by increasing their marketing efforts to reach a larger audience and can also increase their ticket sales so more money can come in. The WNBA can create what the NBA has, a League Pass, where they stream games online and fans can obtain exclusive merchandise and exclusive access to games. The WNBA can secure more sponsorships that align with the leagues values and demographics. This could provide more financial resources to support the league's values and demographics. The WNBA can also develop international markets by teaming up with some of the overseas teams their players go to or partnering up with other countries to expand their fanbase. Overall, the WNBA can improve their revenue by increasing marketing efforts, increasing ticket sales, leveraging digital

platforms, securing more sponsorships, and developing international markets. By taking a comprehensive approach to revenue generation, the WNBA can ensure the continued success of the league.

The WNBA can improve their revenue by focusing on increasing attendance, expanding revenue streams, developing sponsorship opportunities, increasing visibility, and enhancing fan engagement. Increasing attendance can increase the WNBA revenue through targeted marketing campaigns, promotions, and incentives for fans. This could include offering discounts on tickets, creating family-friendly events, and collaborating with local businesses and organizations to promote the league. Expanding revenue streams can improve the WNBA revenue, offering merchandise sales, creating a mobile app such as WNBA League Pass for exclusive content and merchandise, and partnering with streaming platforms to offer live and on-demand games. Enhancing fan engagement can help improve audience and revenue through creating more opportunities for fans to connect with players and the league. This could include meet-and-greet events, Q&A sessions with players, and social media takeovers. They could also create more content for social media platforms to engage with fans and increase their reach.

I know it may seem like a lot but if the WNBA and NBA can attempt to do half of those things, we will see a difference in the revenue and business of the WNBA. But it is something both parties have to agree on and something we will just have to wait and see for.

Conclusion

In conclusion, WNBA athletes should be equally paid as the NBA and their staff. Despite the fact that WNBA players are highly skilled and dedicated professionals who work just as hard as their male counterparts, they continue to earn significantly less than NBA players. Since the WNBA began in April 1996 their athletes have been paid an abundance less than their counterpart athletes in the NBA.

Every employee who works for the NBA including athletes, towel boys, waterboys, and etc make more than or equal to the majority of the athletes in the WNBA. It is totally unfair and they need to be paid. There have been ongoing consequences because of the salaries and team salary caps in the WNBA that the athletes have been having to face nonstop including going overseas, getting cut from their team, and college athletes not wanting to go professional and more. The NBA clearly makes more money than the WNBA. As an athlete, it is deranged to think WNBA players are playing two seasons because they get paid more overseas and NBA mascots are getting paid twice as much as the highest paid player in the WNBA. But it isn't deranged at all but it is occurring and that just does not sit right with me. There are steps the WNBA and NBA can take to try to help the issue but both sides have to agree and be willing.

Ultimately, we must recognize that achieving true equality requires a concerted effort from everyone, including athletes, fans, and policymakers alike. By working together, we can create a world in which all athletes are valued and compensated fairly, regardless.

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Appendix 1A.

	1997-1998 Season	2010-2011 Season	2019-2020 Season
N B A	<p>Minimum rookie salary: \$242,000</p> <p>Salary cap: \$26,900,00</p>	<p>Rookie salary: \$473,604</p> <p>Up to six years: \$13,603,75 0</p> <p>7-9 years: \$16,324,50 0</p> <p>10+ years: \$19,045,25 0</p>	<p>Rookie salary: \$898,310</p> <p>Up to six years: \$27,285,000</p> <p>7-9 years: \$32,742,000</p> <p>10 years or more: \$38,199,000</p>
W N B A	<p>Minimum salary: \$15,000</p> <p>Salary cap: \$50,000</p>	<p>Rookie salary: \$35,190</p> <p>Three years: \$51,000</p>	<p>Rookie salary: \$41,965</p> <p>Three years: \$56,375</p> <p>Six years: \$115,000</p>

	Six years:	Salary cap:
	\$97,000	\$117,500
	Salary cap:	
	\$99,500	