

Billie Jean King Prepared Comments
US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
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Thank you Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi and distinguished Senators.

It is an honor and a privilege to testify before you this morning as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of Title IX.

Title IX is one of the most important pieces of legislation of the 20th century and the 37 words which comprise the language of amendment have proven powerful enough to change our society and provide opportunities in the classroom and on the athletic stage for countless young men and women.

I'm a pre-Title IX student athlete.

In high school I attended Long Beach Poly in Long Beach, California – a school which is well known as a sports powerhouse. But when I attended in the late 1950s and early 1960s, only the boys' teams played competitive sports against other schools in California. The girls never travelled to compete against other schools. We were only allowed to compete against our fellow students at Poly.

When I attended California State College at Los Angeles in the 1960s we were still a full decade away from the enactment of Title IX. Financial assistance was available for tennis players . . . but only available to the men players.

Two of the top men's tennis players of the time were attending college down the road from me. Stan Smith was on a full ride at USC and Arthur Ashe had a full scholarship at UCLA.

We did things differently at our school. Scotty Deeds, the coach of the men's tennis team and Dr. Joan Johnson, the coach of the women's team felt our tennis program would be stronger if the men and the women practiced together.

Even though I was arguably the best tennis player at Cal State LA and had already won a Wimbledon title I was not receiving any athletic scholarship funds. I did have two jobs on campus – one of which was handing out gym equipment in the locker room – and I will tell you I thought I was living large.

But I knew things just were not right. Things were not equal.

Thanks to the heroic and committed efforts of Sen. Birch Bayh, Sen. Ted Stevens, Congresswoman Edith Green, Congresswoman Patsy Mink and countless others, we righted this wrong when President Richard Nixon signed Title IX into law on June 23, 1972.

So often people think Title IX is just about sports. The amendment is primarily about education and completely about equal rights. But, so often people think the amendment is about sports. Why do they think that – because athletes are so visible.

Just a little more than one year after the passage of Title IX, I played Bobby Riggs in a much heralded match in Houston, Texas. This event – which was dubbed the “Battle of the Sexes” -- was a tennis match only on the outside. In reality, it was much more about social change than tennis.

I wanted the King/Riggs match to change the hearts and minds of people to more closely align with the legislation of Title IX. I was scared and I was afraid if I did not win we would give people a reason to weaken Titled IX. It was definitely a pressure-packed moment and so many people were counting on me to win.

Sometimes you have to “see it to be it.” King/Riggs was one of those times. I felt I could be an example to show women what we could do if we just had the opportunity to do.

I learned from the King/Riggs match that Title IX is so important that we must always keep moving forward and we cannot allow ourselves to go backwards.

Let’s take a moment to look at the progress we have made in the last 40 years.

Since the passage of Title IX girls’ participation in sports has gone from 1 in 27 to 2 in 5 at the high school level.

Tremendous progress has been made and the Women’s Sports Foundation, an organization I founded in 1974, has been the “Guardian Angel” of this legislation.

Girls and women were underserved at that time and it was important to galvanize resources to address the inequities -- to enable them to achieve their potential in academics, in athletics, in life. The Women’s Sports Foundation exists to advance the lives of girls and women through sports and physical activity. Today the Women’s Sports Foundation has leveraged its leadership in advocacy to become a recognized research organization, a respected program provider in underserved communities, and a champion for sports and physical activity as a necessary opportunity for all girls and women to be healthy, confident, strong, and successful.

All of us at the Women’s Sports Foundation care so deeply about Title IX and the protection of the legislation because of the tremendous benefit it brings to education and sports, specifically in terms of its impact on the health, emotional and academic growth of our young people.

We also have learned we must remain committed to keeping girls in the game.

Also in 1974 I co-founded World TeamTennis, a groundbreaking co-ed professional tennis league.

If you have ever seen a WTT match, you have seen my philosophy of life in action. We have men and women competing on the same team, on a level playing field with equal contributions from both genders. We feel it is important for the players to experience both a leadership and a supporting role.

More than 25 years of research from the Women's Sports Foundation shows us that by age 14 girls drop out of sports at twice the rate of boys, for many reasons including:

- Lack of access. Girls have 1.3 million fewer opportunities to play high school sports than boys have. Lack of physical education in schools and limited opportunities to play sports in both high school and college mean girls have to look elsewhere for sports –which may not exist or may cost more money. Often there is an additional lack of access to adequate playing facilities near their homes that makes it more difficult for girls to engage in sports.
- Safety and transportation issues. Sports require a place to participate – and for many girls, especially in dense urban environments, that means traveling to facilities through unsafe neighborhoods or lacking any means to get to a good facility miles away. And if there isn't a safe option like carpooling with other families, the only option for a girl and her family may be to stay home.
- Cultural barriers. It's true that in some homes, girls have responsibilities that boys simply don't have, like taking care of younger siblings or older family members. These commitments often take precedence over extracurricular activities including sports. And in some cultures, adults may promote or allow boys to participate but limit girls' participation.
- Decreased quality of experience. As girls grow up, the quality level of their sports experience may decline. The facilities are not as good as the boys' venues and the playing times may not be optimal. The availability of quality, trained coaches may be lacking in their community or these coaches may be more focused on the boys' programs that have more money for training. Equipment, and even uniforms aren't funded for many girls' programs at the same levels as boys so their ability to grow and enjoy the sport is diminished. In short, sports just aren't "fun" any more.
- Cost. School sports budgets are being slashed every day, all across the country. Fewer opportunities within schools mean families must pay to play in private programs while also footing the bill for expensive coaches, equipment and out-of-pocket travel requirements. This additional expense is just not possible for many families.
- Lack of positive role models. Girls are bombarded with images of external beauty, not those of confident, strong female athletic role models. To some girls, fitting within the mold that they are constantly told to stay in is more important than standing out. Peer pressure can be hard for girls at any age; when that pressure isn't offset with strong encouragement to participate in sports and healthy physical activity, the results may lead girls to drop out altogether (see www.womenssportsfoundation.org for more information)

It's pretty simple to me. Girls or boys can't play if they don't have an opportunity to play.

I feel it is important we continue those traditions today. We must remain committed to providing access to sporting and athletic activities for all of our children.

At its very core, Title IX is truly about the issues this committee deals with every day – Health, Education, Labor and the future of this nation.

It's about health – and getting our children active and committed to reversing the obesity trend.

It's about education – because children who participate in sports and physical activity in school perform better academically.

It's about our workforce – because we know that boys and girls who are active and participate in sports develop confidence and leadership skills which will help them succeed in life.

It's about our future . . . and getting more girls and boys to participate, benefit and succeed.

The health of our nation is depending on us to do the right thing.