

Equality or Equity? Sex Differences in Attitudes toward Females' Sports Opportunity and Title IX

Abstract

Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was introduced to equalize educational opportunities between males and females in the United States, including access to school-based activities, such as sport. Despite resistance, Title IX has contributed to a tremendous increase in female athletic participation in the United States. Research on the contested nature of Title IX has focused mainly on either legal or policy debates, with little attention to equally important disagreements in the court of public opinion. This study examines public perceptions of the significance of gender equality in sport and public support of Title IX as an equity policy. Specifically, we examine two mechanisms to explain feminist opinions surrounding gender and sport: interest-based and exposure-based attitudes. Results show that a majority of the American public currently favors both gender equality in sport and Title IX; however, a significant sex gap remains in public support. Interestingly, male athletes are more likely to support gender equality and Title IX than non-athlete males. These results show potential evidence of feminist attitudes in sport reflecting an interest-based explanation for women and an exposure-based explanation for men.

Background

Since its development in the nineteenth century, American sport has traditionally been viewed as a masculine activity (Cahn, 1994; Messner, 1992) and thus perceived as a sex-inappropriate arena for women. In the United State, it was not until the early 1970s that females became significantly involved in sports, following the enactment of Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title IX prohibits sex discrimination in *any* educational program receiving federal funds and applies to most elementary, middle, and high schools, and colleges in the United States (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1978). Despite its broad reach across all types of academic programs, Title IX is best known as the catalyst for females' increased access to athletic participation opportunities.

Since Title IX, female sports participation in the U.S. has skyrocketed, but the continued underrepresentation of females in sports is a testament to the challenges that remain. In 1971, there was one girl for every 12 boys participating in high school athletics. As of 2012, the rate is 1 girl for every 1.4 boys involved in interscholastic sports (Acosta and Carpenter, 2012). Furthermore, while women occupy over half of the student population in Division I schools, they receive only 45% of the participation opportunities, 45% of athletic scholarships, 32% of recruiting dollars, and 34% of operating budgets (National Women's Law Center, 2011).

Gender equality and equity in sport

Some scholars have argued that the law has done far less in regard to transforming sport to become more inclusive to women not just numerically, but ideologically (Birrell

and Richter, 1987). Supporting gender equality in athletics is an affirmation of an abstract value system favoring the ideal that men and women should be treated equally. The concept of equity recognizes that equality is an ideal, and that policy and programmatic interventions to achieve meaningful progress toward that ideal are necessary. Title IX legislation exemplifies such an intervention, designed to consider historical discrimination against women, and provide steps necessary to make the institution of sports more equitable.

Largely because of Title IX, school-based sports have evolved from a male preserve to contested gender terrain (Birrell and Richter, 1987; Messner, 2001; Messner, 2011). This is reflected in ongoing policy debates regarding how best to determine the most equitable and effective methods of implementing Title IX without disadvantaging males (Milner and Braddock, 2016; Stevenson, 2007). The primary focus of court cases citing the Title IX statute has been to fight for equal representation of female sports teams in university athletic programs, challenging male privilege in athletics and attempting to remedy decades of gender discrimination that severely restricted females' access to sports. To comply with Title IX, educational institutions have often eliminated non-revenue producing male sports teams, provoking hostility and resentment among men leading to legal challenges (e.g., *Kelley v. Illinois* 1993) from those whose teams have been cut. Cases from women citing noncompliance (e.g., *Biediger vs. Quinnipiac* 2009), and men against Title IX compliance, both reflect the continued resistance of men--who currently dominate sports leadership positions and decision-making processes--to gender equality and equity in athletics (Burton et al., 2009; Whisenant, 2008).

Public attitudes towards Title IX and gender equality

Social scientists (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Brooks and Bolzendahl, 2004; Ciabattari, 2001; Cunningham, 2005) have extensively examined public sentiment towards gender equity and the enforcement and regulation history surrounding Title IX, highlighting men's resistance to gender equality in particular. More recent post-Title IX research (Brown, Ruel, and Medley-Rath, 2011; Hardin and Whiteside, 2009; Hardin, Whiteside, and Ash, 2014) on young people's perceptions of gender equity in sport illustrates that while attitudes toward female sport involvement have become generally more favorable, there is also continuing evidence of male/female differences. Furthermore, females progress in sports has often been viewed as secondary to preserving male dominance, especially among males. For example, Brown, Ruel, and Medley-Rath (2011) found broad support for girls' increased opportunities in school sport; however, girls demonstrate more supportive attitudes than boys, suggesting that sex differences in support for gender equality in sport begin early. Hardin and Whiteside (2009) found that even when individuals support gender equality in sport, their narratives closely align with false essentialist notions of the sex/gender hierarchy that do not focus on the emancipatory aspect of Title IX, but rather, on how Title IX impacts men's sports. Hardin, Whiteside, and Ash (2014) found similar results in their study of sports information directors (SIDs) at Division 1 schools, where SIDs acknowledged that gender equality and Title IX are important, but few stated that women's sports deserve more resources.

Sport equality and feminist attitudes: Interest- and exposure-based explanations

Scholars have conveyed a need for a better understanding of the emancipatory goals of Title IX (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009) in order to counteract the hegemonic gender ideology surrounding sports. Interpreting Title IX as detrimental to men's interests is essentialist and precludes girls' and women's interest and talent in physical activities, such as sports. This essentialist thinking is based on false sexist ideology that women are a group that is separate and physically inferior to men, though there is no scientific or biological proof that a sex binary exists (Sullivan 2011). It is important to note that sex differences are a product (Eagley, 2013) of the patriarchal social structure rather than a reflection of the essentialist notion that there are intrinsic differences between women and men.

Zero-sum thinking about Title IX that may reinforce men's fears of their sports being eliminated is misconstrued. Indeed, gender equality in sport is good for boys and men too. For example, fathers see their own interests intertwine with those of their daughters whose sports teams are provided poorer quality resources (Messner and Solomon 2007). Furthermore, Milner and Braddock (2016) suggest that gender equality in sport in the form of sex integration would result in a number of broad social benefits, such as increased safety and access to athletic participation and decreased prevalence of violence against women, eating disorders, and use of performance-enhancing substances. Articulating men's interests in alignment with women's may be a viable strategy to

encourage broader support for equitable opportunities and distribution of rewards for both female and male athletes.

An important contribution to the literature on how self-interest may influence attitudes towards gender equality comes from Bolzendahl and Myers (2004) who documented changes from 1974-1998 and found that gender attitudes have liberalized and converged between men and women. They frame support for gender equality in social and political realms as “feminist opinions” and posit two mechanisms of explanation: interest-based and exposure-based. According to the interest-based explanation, women are more likely to support gender equality because it directly reflects their interests and personal goals. Women are more likely to benefit from equalized gender relations; however there are cases where men also benefit (e.g., a man with a female spouse in the workforce may indirectly benefit from gender equality in terms of their family’s earning potential). Exposure-based attitudes, reflect attitude changes that are contingent upon social encounters with feminist ideas through personal experience, education, and socialization processes that may lead to more progressive gender attitudes.

Both interest-based and exposure-based explanations may affect how men and women view gender equality in sport. The purpose of this study is to assess public sentiment towards Title IX and gender equality in sport, and how attitudes may vary by sex. Previous research has noted that individuals often express support for the abstract principle of equality, while at the same time adhering to specific patterns of a traditional gender ideology (Hardin and Whiteside 2009). For example, individuals may readily

acknowledge the value of gender equality, yet they may also adhere to traditional gender roles with regard to sports – which assume male superiority (Messner 2011), to the extent that they are more concerned about the negative impact of Title IX on men than Title IX’s emancipatory goals for women (Hardin and Whiteside 2009). Thus, we first compare respondents’ abstract (support for gender equality) and concrete (support for Title IX) attitudes toward gender equity in sport. Next, in order to assess Bolzendahl and Myers’ (2004) theory, we examine whether respondents’ attitudes towards Title IX and gender equality in sport vary by either sex (interest-based support) or respondents’ previous experience in athletics (exposure-based support).

Methods

Data

We analyzed data from the CBS News/New York Times Poll: Health Care/Environment/Gender and Race Relations. The data are publicly available via The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. This survey was conducted in March 2011 and relied on random selection of landline telephone and cellular phone numbers to reach a nationally representative sample of adults in the United States (n=1382).

Measures

Respondents’ abstract attitudes towards *gender equality* in sport were measured as whether or not respondents think that equality of opportunity for boys and girls in sports is important or not important. Attitudes towards *gender equity* in sport were measured by respondents’ perceptions of Title IX. The survey item asked respondents if Title IX law is

(1) not strong enough, and a tougher law should be passed; (2) is adequate and in need of stricter enforcement; (3) is adequate, and no change is needed; or (4) is no longer necessary, and should be repealed. We used binary indicators for both sex and athlete status (athlete in high school or college compared to non-athlete). The analysis also included several socio-demographic control variables: age (in number of years); region (a dichotomized variable comparing the South to all other U.S. regions); education (Bachelors' degree or higher compared to less than a Bachelor's degree); race (Black, Hispanic, Other, compared to White); and political ideology (liberal, moderate, compared to conservative).

Analyses

We began with a brief set of descriptive and bivariate analyses. Next, we employed multivariate analyses to further assess the dependent variable of abstract attitudes towards gender equality in sport, and how attitudes may vary by sex (interest-based support) and athlete status (exposure-based support), controlling for other factors. We used logistic regression techniques and performed separate analyses for men and women.

Next, we used multinomial regression to examine respondents' perceptions of Title IX. Conceptually, the four measured categories of attitudes towards Title IX are partially ordered in terms of intensity of support, but are too complex to be treated continuously, since each category has two parts. The comparison category in this analysis was the response that Title IX is adequate and in need of stricter enforcement, since the

majority of respondents held that view. The model estimated separate binary logits for each pair of outcome categories. The first model, performed separately for men and women, included athlete status, political ideology, education, race, geographic region and age as predictors of support for equality of opportunity for boys and girls in sports. A second model incorporated respondents' abstract views on gender equality.

Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for all variables. The sample is relatively evenly distributed by sex (49.7% male) and athlete status (56.6% athletes).

[Table 1]

Figures 1 and 2 show bivariate results for the two dependent variables. A vast majority of respondents believe that equality of opportunity in sports for boys and girls in high school is very important (71.6%). However, there are statistically significant sex differences in attitudes towards equality in sports, with men significantly more likely than women to think equality in sport is not important ($X^2 = 4.77$, $p = .029$). Similarly, a smaller majority of respondents believe that Title IX is adequate, and needs stricter enforcement (53.7%). Women are more likely than men to believe that Title IX is in need of stricter enforcement, and men are significantly more likely than women to believe that Title IX is in need of no change (27.2% compared to 22.1%), or even that Title IX should be repealed (19% compared to 12.1%). Very few respondents are of the opinion that Title IX is *not* strong enough (6.1% of men and 5.9% of women). The significance levels of the chi-square test of association of sex category with attitudes towards Title IX

($X^2=10.09$, $p=.018$) lead us to conclude that men, on average, are less supportive of Title IX in concrete terms.

[Figures 1 and 2]

Tables 2 displays odds ratios ($\text{Exp}(B)$) of men's and women's abstract support for gender equality in sports.

[Table 2]

Men who report having participated in sports in high school or college have significantly greater odds of supporting gender equality in sports compared to non-athletes ($\text{Exp}(B)=2.025$, $p<.001$). Those who are politically liberal are also more likely to support gender equality in sports than conservative men ($\text{Exp}(B)=2.305$, $p<.05$). Older men are slightly less likely than younger men to support gender equality in sports ($\text{Exp}(B)=.978$, $p<.001$), and men in the South compared to those in all other regions are more likely to support gender equality in sports ($\text{Exp}(B)=1.653$, $p<.10$).

The vast majority of women support gender equality in sports (74.4% feel that equality of opportunity is very important), and the significant effects are in the expected direction. For example, politically liberal and moderate women and those with at least a college degree are more likely to favor gender equality of opportunity in sport. Athlete status, however, has no significant impact on women's attitudes, whereas among men, sport participation in college or high school is the most robust predictor of their attitudes towards gender equality in sport.

Table 3 reports odds ratios from the multinomial regression analysis predicting concrete attitudes towards gender equality and perceptions of Title IX among men.

[Table 3]

In general, our results regarding men's attitudes towards gender equality and perceptions of Title IX are mixed, and there are no consistent trends among control variables (race, region, or age). Political philosophy has modest effects, as liberal men are significantly more progressive, though men who have at least a Bachelor's degree tend to hold more restrictive views of Title IX. Black men and men who identify as "Other" race are more likely to assert that Title IX is not strong enough and a tougher law needs to be passed, relative to the comparison category. The significance of race disappears when accounting for progressive gender ideology, possibly reflecting more progressive views towards gender equality among Black men in the sample.

The findings of particular interest in Table 3 are the effects of athlete status and progressive gender ideology. Results show that male athletes compared to non-athletes tend to hold more progressive concrete views towards gender equality. Relative to the viewpoint that Title IX needs stricter enforcement, male athletes compared to non-athletes are less likely to believe that no change in Title IX is needed ($\text{Exp}(B)=.334$, $p<.01$), or that the law should be repealed ($\text{Exp}(B)=.344$, $p<.01$). This association, however, is partially mediated by men's progressive abstract gender ideology. When gender ideology is added to the model, the significance of athlete status disappears in two out of the three categories. Interestingly, in the first category (law not strong

enough/tougher law should be passed) progressive gender ideology exerts a counterintuitive effect. Males who believe equality of opportunity in sports for boys and girls is important, compared to those who feel it is not as important, are still less likely to believe that Title IX is not strong enough ($\text{Exp}(B)=.182$, $p<.01$).

Table 4 displays multinomial regression results predicting women's attitudes towards the effectiveness of Title IX legislation.

[Table 4]

Most women support Title IX to the extent that it requires stricter enforcement, regardless of athlete status. Abstract gender ideology, however, significantly impacts women's perceptions of Title IX's adequacy and no change is needed ($\text{Exp}(B)=.416$, $p<.05$), or their beliefs that it is no longer necessary and should be repealed ($\text{Exp}(B)=.138$, $p<.001$), relative to the comparison category --supporting Title IX with stricter enforcement. Black women compared to White women are more likely to assert that Title IX is not strong enough and a tougher law should be passed ($\text{Exp}(B)=5.293$, $p<.05$), relative to the comparison category; this effect remains significant when accounting for abstract gender ideology. This finding may be reflective of the reality that Black females have benefitted less from Title IX than White females (Pickett, Dawkins, and Braddock, 2012). Hispanic women have greater odds of accepting Title IX as it is with no change needed ($\text{Exp}(B)=2.915$, $p<.05$), relative to the comparison category, yet the significance of ethnicity disappears when gender ideology is added to the model. The

effects of political philosophy are in the expected direction, with liberal and moderate respondents holding more progressive views towards Title IX.

The finding of particular interest in Table 4 is the non-significant effect of athlete status. Intuitively, one might expect that playing sports would influence how women perceive Title IX, but our results suggest otherwise, where athlete status operates differently for women and men. In comparison to men's attitudes towards Title IX, progressive gender ideology also operates differently for women. Women with more progressive *abstract* gender ideologies are more likely to express progressive *concrete* attitudes towards gender equality, which we see in their support for Title IX.

However, results show that for men, holding a progressive gender ideology may not always be associated with similar concrete support for Title IX, since men's progressive gender ideology is inversely associated with believing that a tougher law should be passed. The effect of gender ideology and athlete status on attitudes towards gender equality varies across gender categories, suggesting the operation of both interest-based explanations for attitudes towards gender equality among women, and exposure-based explanations for attitudes towards gender equality among men.

Discussion

Our results are consistent with previous research (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Brooks and Bolzendahl, 2004; Ciabattari, 2001; Cunningham, 2005) examining gender attitudes with regard to females' participation in the workforce and politics, and other political and social issues suggesting that men on average tend to be less egalitarian than

women. Overall, we find widespread support for gender equality in sports for boys and girls, yet significant sex differences remain. In the current study, fewer men than women support both gender equality as an abstract principle, and Title IX as a specific governmental equity initiative designed to ensure gender equality in sports. More men than women view Title IX adequate as it is, or even in need of repeal. More women than men view Title IX as in need of stricter enforcement. These sex-based perceptual gaps are concerning, especially given the continued underrepresentation of females in sports at multiple institutional levels (Acosta and Carpenter, 2012; National Women's Law Center, 2011). Although we have documented sex differences in attitudes towards gender equality in sport, we believe that these differences are a product (Eagley, 2013) of the patriarchal social structure rather than a reflection of the false essentialist notion that there are intrinsic differences between women and men.

While Bolzendahl and Myers (2004) do not address attitudes toward sport specifically in their interest- and exposure-based perspectives of feminist opinions, our results show support for their theory in explaining sex differences in support for gender equality in sport and support for Title IX. We interpret women's support for gender equality regardless of their athlete status as an example of an interest-based explanation for support of gender equality, in the sense that women in general perceive more benefits resulting from gender equality in sport and specific government legislation to ensure equality of opportunity in sport (Davis and Greenstein, 2009).

Our main results for the male sub-sample, however, indicate that men's abstract and concrete support for gender equality may be more consistent with an exposure-based explanation, since male athletes compared to non-athletes are more likely to support gender equality *and* Title IX. While we have no direct measures of the social encounters of these male athletes, it seems reasonable to assume that male athletes are more likely than non-athlete males to be exposed to female athletes. This more extensive exposure potentially impacts how male athletes view the importance of gender equality of opportunity in sport, and their support of Title IX to reach those goals. In addition, male athletes may support Title IX because of their awareness of the inequities they observe in female sport experiences compared to their own in terms of media attention, monetary support, and fan interest.

Future studies should assess how different experiences among athletes contribute to attitudes towards gender equality and support for Title IX. Specifically, research should focus on how various types of sports participation (e.g., team vs individual; hyper-masculine vs. gender neutral) may be associated with athletes' views on gender equality and equity. For example further exploration of male athletes perceptions of the benefits to their own interests of gender equality of opportunity in sport and in particular the efforts that Title IX has made towards this goal may be valuable. In particular, this interest convergence must be thoroughly examined and made accessible to the public. Because public sentiment towards gender equality in sport and support for Title IX could indirectly influence future judicial or legislative decisions regarding Title IX

implementation, it is imperative that the public not only understand the legislation itself, but also, the law's potential to benefit individuals themselves and the broader society.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for independent variables

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>Percentage of Sample</i> |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Sex (Male=1) | 49.7 |
| Athlete | 57.5 |
| Political philosophy | |
| Liberal | 23.3 |
| Moderate | 37.5 |
| Conservative | 35.4 |
| Education | |
| College/+ | 43.4 |
| Race | |
| Black | 11.5 |
| Hispanic | 12.5 |
| Other | 14.7 |
| South | 36.5 |
| Age | Mean = 45.73 |

Table 2. Logistic regression of men's support for gender equality of opportunity in sport

| <i>Variables</i> | <i>Odds Ratio (men)</i> | <i>Odds Ratio (women)</i> |
|------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Athlete | 2.025*** | 1.027 |
| Liberal | 2.305** | 2.068** |
| Moderate | 1.133 | 2.114** |
| College/+ | .640 | 1.904** |
| Black | .595 | 1.712 |
| Other | .385** | 1.011 |
| Hispanic | .718 | .899 |
| Age | .978*** | .983** |
| South | 1.653* | 1.400 |
| Constant | 3.889*** | 2.639** |

***p<.001, **p<.05, *p<.10

Table 3. Odds Ratios from Multinomial Regression of Men's Attitudes towards Title IX^a

| <i>Variable</i> | Law not strong enough/tougher law should be passed | | Law adequate/no change needed | | Law no longer necessary/should be repealed | |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|----------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> |
| Athlete | .544 | .533 | .334** | .346** | .344** | .482 |
| Gender ideology | | .182** | | .298** | | .043*** |
| Liberal | .750 | .680 | .375** | .412* | .074*** | .109*** |
| Moderate | .712 | .722 | .670 | .663 | .213*** | .192*** |
| College/ + | .223 | .247 | 2.272* | 2.225** | 2.425** | 1.844 |
| Black | 1.213* | 1.239 | .578 | .490 | .331 | .146* |
| Hispanic | 1.425 | 1.013 | .837 | .695 | .370 | .282 |
| Other | 7.203** | 3.787 ⁺ | 1.097 | .781 | .511 | .204 ⁺ |
| South | 1.108 | 1.402 | .812 | 1.008 | .883 | 1.830 |
| Age | .976 | .972 | 1.019* | 1.014 | .996 | .980 |

*** p < .001 ** p < .01 * p < .05 ⁺ p < .10

^a Odds ratios in this table reflect the odds of holding the attitude towards Title IX heading the column compared the viewpoint that Title IX is adequate and needs to be more strictly enforced.

Table 4. Odds Ratios from Multinomial Regression of Women's Attitudes towards Title IX^a

| <i>Variable</i> | Law not strong enough/tougher law should be passed | | Law adequate/no change needed | | Law no longer necessary/should be repealed | |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------|
| | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> |
| | Athlete | 1.008 | .967 | .598 | .662 | 1.027 |
| Gender ideology | | 1.296 | | .416* | | .138*** |
| Liberal | .715 | .738 | .375** | .437 ⁺ | .044** | .061* |
| Moderate | .683 | .732 | .411** | .419* | .309** | .319* |
| College/+ | .892 | .892 | .980 | 1.040 | .266** | .305* |
| Black | 5.293* | 5.047** | 1.240 | 1.181 | 2.184 | 1.911 |
| Hispanic | 2.759 | 2.752 | 2.915* | 2.408 | .581 | .319 |
| Other | 1.470 | 1.484 | .453 | .428 | .318 | .339 |
| South | .538* | .553 | .471* | .490 ⁺ | .800 | .981 |
| Age | 1.035* | 1.035 ⁺ | .986 | .984 | 1.005 | 1.006 |

*** p < .001 ** p < .01 * p < .05 ⁺ p < .10

^a Odds ratios in this table reflect the odds of holding the attitude towards Title IX heading the column compared to the viewpoint the Title IX is adequate and needs to be more strictly enforced.

Figure 1. Attitudes towards equality of opportunity in sports for boys and girls in high school, by sex ($X^2 = 4.77$; $p=.029$)

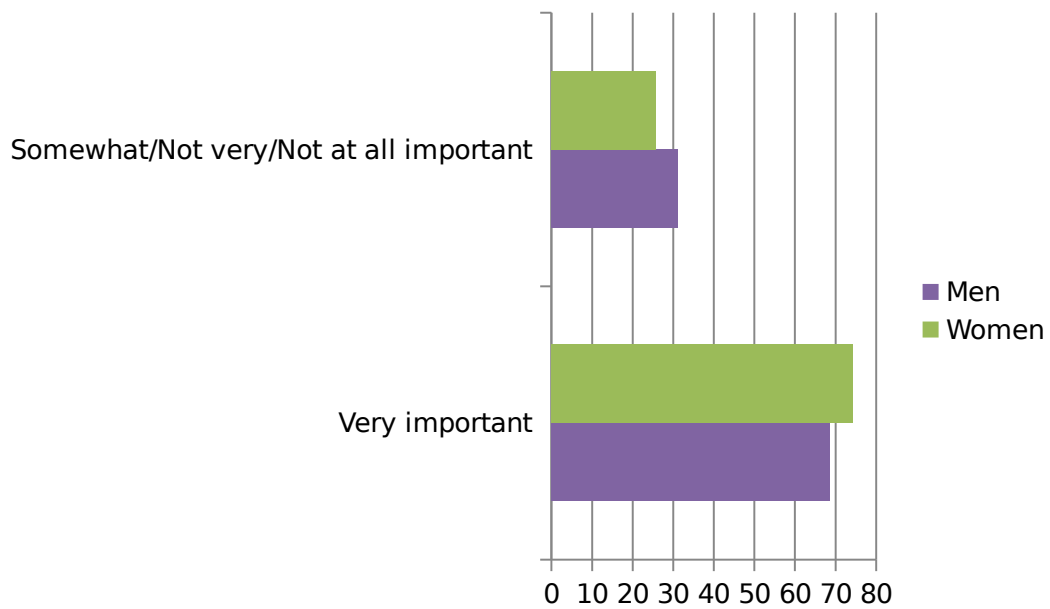


Figure 2. Attitudes towards Title IX effectiveness, by sex ($X^2 = 10.09$; $p=.018$)

