

Title IX at 40: what it's done for gender equity – and the road still ahead

The landmark civil rights law turns 40 this week, and White House officials and others are looking at the effect of Title IX in schools, particularly in terms of sports and the sciences and math.



By Stacy Teicher Khadaroo | *Christian Science Monitor* – 16 hrs ago

Title IX is having a birthday bash this week, with many Americans – including top **White House** officials and members of Congress from both sides of the aisle – celebrating a 40-year legacy that has transformed the gender balance in sports arenas and science labs.

Yet continued vigilance is key to tapping the law's potential for gender equity, advocates say.

Formally Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, it was passed by Congress to prevent discrimination in educational settings that receive federal funding. At the time the law passed, it wasn't just the doors of locker rooms that were often closed to women, but the doors to entire universities.

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“It's a landmark civil rights law that has changed the face of opportunity for women in America – and we have a lot more to look forward to in the next 40 years,” says Lisa Maatz, chair of the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (NCWGE), which advocates enforcement of gender-equity laws.

In the past 40 years, high school girls' participation in athletics has grown tenfold, and college scholarships for female athletes have gone from virtually nil to 48 percent at Division I schools, according to a new report by the NCWGE.

One result is a more robust set of women's professional sports opportunities. “Title IX in many ways is our talent pipeline,” says Laurel Richie, president of the **WNBA**. “The game that we put on the court every season gets better ... [as] a direct result of more and more girls participating in sports ... [and their] opportunities becoming richer and deeper.”

Yet Title IX is much broader than athletics. “Most people, when they think of Title IX, they think of sports.... But if we could [get] women and girls interested in STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] careers the way we have in athletics, it could really have a huge impact on innovation and competitiveness and the economy in this country,” Ms. Maatz says.

The share of science and math PhDs for women has grown from 11 percent to about 40 percent since the law passed, the NCWGE report notes. But women don’t always find an equal playing field in preparing for and staying in the sciences.

“Right now, women continue to receive far fewer jobs in the mathematics and science-related fields. We need to do more to achieve progress in that area,” said [Sen. Michael Enzi \(R\) of Wyoming](#), the ranking member of the [Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions \(HELP\)](#), which held a hearing on Title IX Tuesday.

Title IX has had its critics over the years, most notably organizations that say many male sports have been hurt by colleges directing more resources to women’s sports in an effort to comply with the law. Supporters of the law counter that the law is unfairly blamed for what are really budget decisions in favor of big sports such as basketball and football, rather than smaller men’s and women’s teams alike.

Overall, public support for the law runs about 80 percent, according to several polls over the past 11 years, and it crosses gender and party lines, noted Nancy Hogshead-Makar, a law professor and senior director of advocacy at the Women’s Sports Foundation, who spoke at Tuesday’s hearing.

Athletics has been the realm where the law’s impact is most visible for several reasons, Maatz says. Men have gotten behind its promotion of athletic participation, partly because it has affected their sisters, daughters, and girlfriends. Also, it was followed up by policies that required detailed data collection, revealing the inequities in sports that have prompted action. Such data is not as readily accessible to show many other forms of sex discrimination.

An oft-cited moment that crystallized the law’s impact came last summer, when three girls from the [United States](#) swept the categories at the international [Google Science Fair](#).

“These young women embody the next generation ... that feels empowered to pursue every opportunity. That’s why we’ve been fighting [for Title IX] all these years and why we will continue to fight,” said [Valerie Jarrett](#), chair of [President Obama’s Council on Women and Girls](#), at a White House event Wednesday afternoon celebrating Title IX.

Clearing away barriers and supporting girls interested in STEM careers or other fields traditionally dominated by men is still on the Title IX agenda, Maatz and other supporters say. These barriers include everything from gender stereotyping and sexual harassment to discrimination against students who are pregnant.

“We’re working so hard in our Department [of Education] to ensure that schools [have] rigorous standards that help prepare all students ... for both college and career – including access to science, technology, engineering, and math,” [Education Secretary Arne Duncan](#) said at the White House event Wednesday. “While we’ve made some progress in closing the gender gap there, at the higher-level classes ... we still see underrepresentation of young girls, and we have to improve upon that going forward.”

Not everyone agrees with the new emphasis on Title IX and STEM fields. Using the law to enforce “parity in all walks of life,” including academic science, would be taking things too far, said Sabrina Schaeffer, executive director of the Independent Women’s Forum, during a panel discussion on Title IX at the [Cato Institute](#) in Washington Wednesday.

Ms. Schaeffer raised concerns that the conversation about underrepresentation in certain science fields is still about sexism rather than an acknowledgment of social, cultural, and biological factors that may play a role in women’s and men’s career choices. “If we apply Title IX to academics, we have the potential to devastate academic science,” she said.

To mark the 40th anniversary, the White House highlighted several steps the administration is taking to continue to push for gender equity through Title IX. These include:

- The [Department of Education](#)’s Office for Civil Rights has been actively guiding schools and colleges about their responsibilities under Title IX to respond to, and try to prevent, sexual harassment and assault, because it interferes with a student’s right to an education.
- Federal agencies are developing guidance to colleges and universities that receive federal grants, promoting best practices for complying with Title IX. This will improve access and outreach to women and girls in STEM fields, officials say.
- The Education Department is expanding a new data collection system to include all US public school students. It will show, for example, participation and retention in advanced-math and science courses, broken down by gender and other categories, to better allow for gender-gap analysis.