



Australian Government
Australian Sports Commission

Roadmap:
An **all inclusive** approach to
governance and leadership
in Australian sport



CASE STUDY 1:

FIFA World Cup: An intersectional lens

Surveys by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) estimate that about 270 million people globally are involved in football, encompassing professional players, recreational players, registered players (including under 18s), futsal and beach football players, referees, and officials. This broad involvement spans all categories of class, gender, ethnicity, age, and ability. Using intersectionality as an analytical tool to examine the FIFA World Cup can illuminate how intersecting power relations of Indigeneity, ethnicity, gender, class, nation, and sexuality organise this sport and sports more broadly.

Structural Domain of Power

FIFA's headquarters in Switzerland provide it with legal protections as an NGO, enabling it to manage finances with minimal government oversight. Managed by an executive committee of businesspeople, FIFA holds considerable influence with global corporations and national governments hosting the World Cup. For example, during the 2014 games in Brazil, FIFA influenced the Brazilian Parliament to pass laws benefiting its sponsors and operations, demonstrating the structural power it wields.

Gender inequality is embedded in FIFA's structural power relations, similar to many professional sports. The first World Cup in 1930 was exclusively for men, with the Women's World Cup only launched 60 years later in 1991. Despite the growing popularity of women's football, financial benefits for elite women players remain significantly lower than for men. The 2019 Women's World Cup saw a record-breaking audience, yet disparities persisted, with women players receiving only a fraction of the prize money awarded to their male counterparts in the 2018 Men's World Cup. This gendered structure results in accumulated advantages and disadvantages based on gender within FIFA's structural domain of power.

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar highlighted structural power issues, with allegations of human rights violations against low-paid migrant labourers. The gendered implications of such practices affect women differently, often exacerbating existing inequalities in terms of safety, wages, and working conditions. For instance, female migrant workers in Qatar faced heightened vulnerabilities due to restrictive legal and social norms that limit their mobility and access to justice.

The FIFA Women's World Cup hosted by Australia and New Zealand in 2023, was the most diverse to date. FIFA expanded the women's World Cup from 24 to 32 teams resulting in eight nations (Zambia, the Philippines, Haiti, Morocco, Panama, Republic of Ireland, Vietnam, and Portugal) competing for the first time. Morocco's Nouhaila Benzina also become the first player to wear a hijab at a senior-level women's World Cup. In previous years, powerful countries like the United States, Germany, and Japan had dominated the competition.

Few predicted that the newer teams that would make it to the knockout round but they outperformed. Nigeria, South Africa, and Morocco advance to the knockout round, the first time three African teams had reached this round and ended up playing the nations that had once colonised them.

Whilst South Africa eventually lost to the Netherlands, Morocco to France, and Nigeria to at England, the very presence of these three former colonised African countries was significant.

These African nations (and many others) have faced familiar barriers to get to where they are: lack of resources and attention, systemic inequities, shortage of home government support, discrimination, pay disparities, and unjust power dynamics.

In a media interview during the 2023 games, Nigerian player Ifeoma Onumonu stated

“I’ve seen what resources England has access to. In Nigeria, we don’t have access to much. Our training fields aren’t great. Where we sleep isn’t great. Sometimes we share beds. There’s a lot that needs to be done. We do what we can because we love playing for our country, but hopefully they make it easier for us to do our best.”¹

The Jamaican women’s team were only able to get to the competition as a result of crowdfunding money and the Moroccan team had to overcome the conditional and systemic barriers of women pursuing athletic endeavours.

Cultural Domain of Power

The FIFA World Cup, the most widely watched sporting event globally, normalises cultural attitudes and

expectations around social inequalities. High audience levels through mass and digital media raise questions about cultural messages regarding gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. For instance, the decision to host the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, a country with restrictive laws on LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality, exemplifies how cultural norms can reinforce gender discrimination. The visibility of male athletes and their portrayal as national heroes often contrasts with the limited media coverage and stereotypical portrayals of female athletes.

Sport contests, like the World Cup, often project a narrative of fair play that overlooks structural inequalities. The metaphor of a level playing field is frequently used, but in reality, social divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, ability, and sexuality create uneven playing fields. This false narrative reinforces cultural myths about meritocracy and fairness, obscuring the systemic barriers faced by marginalised groups. For example, media coverage of the Women’s World Cup often emphasises traditional gender roles and appearance over athletic achievements, perpetuating stereotypes and limiting the recognition of female athletes’ skills and contributions.

Media representation of emerging teams such as Nigeria and Morocco at the 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup 2023 often portrayed these teams as an ‘overnight success’, diminishing the efforts that went into their training in addition to the challenges faced in getting to the games.

Journalist Natasha Marsh wrote, *“Too often when we, people of color, get a seat at the table, we’re expected to be content, satisfied at the (sometimes belittling) welcome. I’m so glad South Africa .. Morocco, Nigeria, and Jamaica displayed on a global scale that “content” is not what we’re after. Their very presence and victories disrupted the game’s established hierarchies and introduced many viewers to their talent, which is nothing short of a win.”²*

Interpersonal Domain of Power

The interpersonal domain of power addresses how individuals experience the combined impact of structural and cultural power, affecting identity aspects such as Indigeneity, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and age. Intersectionality highlights the unique experiences of individuals who belong to multiple marginalised groups. For example, female

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athletes from different ethnic backgrounds may face distinct forms of sexism and racism. Black female athletes, for instance, often encounter both racial and gendered stereotypes, impacting their opportunities and treatment within the sport.

The visibility of athlete identities through media communications compounds the pressure to conform to gender norms. Female athletes, in particular, must navigate societal expectations of femininity while facing criticism for being perceived as overly masculine or for their sexual orientation. This intersectional scrutiny impacts their professional opportunities, endorsements, and public perception. Athletes who do not conform to traditional gender norms, such as those who identify as non-binary, face additional challenges, including discrimination, lack of recognition, and barriers to participation.

The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup

Despite breaking audience records, the financial

disparity between male and female players remains stark. For example, Alex Morgan, the highest-paid female soccer player, earns less than a million dollars annually, compared to Lionel Messi's over \$50 million annual team contract.

These gender pay gaps intersect with issues of ethnicity and class, as seen with the Jamaican women's team struggling to raise funds for participation and the Nigerian team not receiving payment despite their success. Additionally, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds often have fewer opportunities to pursue professional sports due to the high costs associated with training and competition.

With so many countries competing for the first time, and so many players of colour on a global stage, the 2023 Women's World Cup put representation at the foundation of the tournament. However, sustainable change needs people in power to improve allocation of

resources within communities, tackle racial and gender inequality, and champion representation to make football equitable for all.

*"We need more football clubs in under-resourced areas, more women coaches, and more funding and scholarships for women athletes. We need more people interested in the game, demanding change. Seeing players who look like you matters; it proves to youth around the world that they can play, too, because these athletes have proven it. This is the pathway to decolonising football, and the 2023 tournament is just the start."*³

In conclusion, an intersectional analysis of the FIFA World Cup reveals how gender issues, intertwined with race, class, and other power relations, shape experiences and opportunities in football. By acknowledging these intersecting power dynamics, we can better understand and address the systemic inequalities that persist in the sport.

¹ ['We share beds': Onumonu laments Nigeria's resources after World Cup exit | Women's World Cup 2023 | The Guardian](#)

² [The Decolonization of the Women's World Cup Has Only Begun | POPSUGAR Fitness](#)

³ [The Decolonization of the Women's World Cup Has Only Begun | POPSUGAR Fitness](#)



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