

It's Time For Women's Soccer To Break Away From FIFA

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Alex Morgan celebrates after scoring a second goal for the United States in its semifinal match with England.

In a pre-[World Cup](#) press conference, a reporter [asked U.S. star Megan Rapinoe](#) how to grow women's soccer. "Doing the same exact thing [as the men's side] and trying to replicate that within a system that has kept women down for a long time is probably not the best way to go about it," the attacking midfielder responded.

America's favorite pink-then-purple-haired troll slayer may not have urged a total demolition of the way women's soccer is run today.

But maybe she should have.

My proposal: women's soccer should walk away from FIFA, the governing body of international soccer, and its [confederations and associations](#) — and build a better system, separate from the men's game.

FIFA has had to be pushed, kicking and screaming the entire way, by the players and their fans into caring about and supporting women's football, and it's a stretch even now to say that it does either.

Two of FIFA's confederations scheduled men's tournament finals on Sunday, the same day as the Women's World Cup final, even though the women's game was set first. They've said it was a [mistake](#). They whoopsed into twice forgetting about the biggest women's sporting event in the world.

Meanwhile, we won't know [until March 2020](#) where the next Women's World Cup will be held in 2023. Qatar, where the men will compete in their World Cup in 2022, found out it was hosting [back in 2010](#). Whichever country is chosen for the women's tournament will have just over three years to prepare.

FIFA has also come under intense scrutiny this year for its [failure to handle issues of sexual abuse](#) within the sport, especially concerning the Afghanistan women's team.

As to the current World Cup, there was a [stadium seating disaster](#), issues with FIFA inflating the numbers of tickets sold, a lack of [promotion](#) (which really started [last year in Russia](#) during the men's contest) and thus [lower turnouts](#) than expected.

FIFA's branding for this year's WWC also reveals how it thinks of the women who play. The slogan for the tournament is "Dare to Shine." As Jean Williams, a professor who studies women's sport, told me, that implies that the players themselves "haven't been bold enough to shine before and [FIFA is] giving [them] the platform. But, actually, the structural inequalities are such that a lot of women don't ever get to shine. I think there's only been 36 countries playing a Women's World Cup out of the 211 FIFA member associations."

And those structural inequalities are stark, however you look at them. FIFA and its associations continue to [underfund the women's game](#) and [discriminate against female players](#). When FIFA officials [doubled](#) the total prize money for the Women's World Cup from \$15 million to \$30 million, a \$15 million increase, they patted themselves on the back for it. They also simultaneously raised the men's prize money from \$400 million to \$440 million, a \$40 million increase. You might think FIFA made this decision about the women's game because it can't afford to pay the teams any more money. You'd be wrong. FIFA has reserves worth more than \$2 billion and brought in \$6.4 billion in revenue between 2015 and 2018, [according to the Associated Press](#).

But don't worry! In 2019, 115 years into its existence, FIFA [convened the inaugural meeting](#) of a task force to identify "key areas and measures that can accelerate the future growth of the women's professional game." This is the kind

of thing FIFA thinks is an indication of its embrace of the game. It should actually serve as a warning to us about the depth of FIFA's commitment. It's not action. It's a task force.

One problem that should be simple to fix is accountability for how federations spend the money FIFA gives them. The reality is that if federations can channel that money into the men's teams, they will. We know this because women footballers have had to [go on strike](#), [retire in protest](#), [hold sit-ins](#), file lawsuits [against FIFA](#) and [against their federations](#), [refuse to play](#), and [plead directly](#) with their federations for change. They've played [for almost nothing](#) and [fundraised themselves](#), sometimes [begging for help](#) publicly.

After the United States' 13-0 win over Thailand in the team's opening match of this World Cup, [Rapinoe said](#) as much, suggesting federations shouldn't "get money for anything else until you give more money to the women and make sure it's fully staffed." She then went on: "There's some teams here that since the last World Cup have only played a handful of games, or only the qualifiers. It's embarrassing, not only for the federations — obviously it's embarrassing for the federations — but for FIFA as well. You just mandate it. They mandate all kinds of things."

Federations threaten to drop women's teams all the time and often [go through with it](#). Women could easily return the favor.

"You don't need a federation, technically, that includes both men and women. There's no reason," said Brenda Elsey, a history professor and co-author of "Futbolera: A History of Women and Sports in Latin America." Elsey points to the recent case of [Macarena Sánchez](#) in Argentina, who sued her pro club and the Argentinian Football Federation because of their lack of support.

"If you had an independent women's federation, they would be working with a different set of clubs. Right now, the Argentine Federation is going to give more importance to Boca Juniors or River [Plate], but those haven't been the clubs that really developed women's soccer. Now, if you had a federation for women ...," Elsey said, trailing off there, letting sit there between us the tantalizing idea of a soccer world independent of a system, as Rapinoe said, that has kept women down for a long time.

That it has been so hard to get FIFA to invest in women's soccer in real and substantial ways is wild considering the desire to watch the women's game has deep historical roots. FIFA did nothing as different countries, worried about the

surge in its popularity, [moved to ban](#) women's soccer in the early 20th century. Still, it survived. There were two major international competitions for women's soccer in Italy and Mexico in 1970 and 1971, respectively, drawing financial support from companies, media coverage and tens of thousands of fans, including over [100,000 at the final](#) in Mexico City's Estadio Azteca. But it wasn't until [the mid-1980s](#), a full eight decades after it was founded, that FIFA made any move to support the women's game. The first international women's tournament that FIFA hosted was [titled](#) the "1st FIFA World Championship for Women's Football for the M&M's Cup" because they wouldn't put their sacred "World Cup" name on it. They feared the women would tarnish it. This was in 1991, more than 60 years after the first men's World Cup.

The appetite for women's soccer is strong today. The TV ratings for this year's World Cup are phenomenal. [Records have been set](#) around the world. In [Brazil](#), 22.4 million people watched the national team's three group stage matches, as compared to just under 600,000 viewers four years ago. Nearly 12 million people in the United Kingdom watched the U.S.-England semifinal, pulling down a [50.8%](#) share of the audience.

Here in the United States, "the USA Women's home jersey is now the [No. 1 soccer jersey](#), men's or women's, ever sold on Nike.com in one season," according to the company. The women's national team also brought in [more revenue](#) over the last three years than their male counterparts, \$50.8 million versus \$49.9 million, all while still getting less money from the federation. (As it can't be said enough, the U.S. men didn't qualify for the World Cup last year.) And earlier this week, in the middle of a Tuesday, while we should have all been working, [7.3 million people](#) in the United States watched the team punch their ticket to the final.

If FIFA is barely promoting this tournament, has treated the women's game as inferior to the men's for over a century, and doesn't hold confederations or associations responsible for their support of women, perhaps some kind of alternative is necessary. Why should women's soccer, with a worldwide audience of millions and millions of people, trust [these men](#) with its future?

What have they done to earn that?