



Fall 2018

# The Damaging Effects of Intersectionality and Layers of Oppression on United States Female Soccer Players

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Priddy, Brooke L., "The Damaging Effects of Intersectionality and Layers of Oppression on United States Female Soccer Players" (2018). *Student Publications*. 688.

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# The Damaging Effects of Intersectionality and Layers of Oppression on United States Female Soccer Players

## **Abstract**

Black athletes face structural and overt racism in all sports across the country, in which the majority of White Americans either chooses to ignore or sometimes even use to victimize certain athletes. They are discriminated against because of the color of their skin, despite achieving the same levels of success and fame as their white competitors. Black athletes must work harder than white athletes for the same end goal, not because of any sort of athletic disadvantage, but because of racial injustice and intolerance. Soccer is a prime example of how Black athletes face racism in sport. Black female soccer players, however, face many more layers of oppression compared to not only Black male soccer players, but also their female counterparts. The lack of representation and involvement of Black female athlete in the sport of soccer shows the repercussions of these layers of oppression. The sport of soccer favors male athletes and their success, caters to middle- and upper-class families and individuals, and structural racism within athletics prefers white athletes.

## **Keywords**

Black, female, soccer, oppression, racism

## **Disciplines**

Africana Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology

## **Comments**

Written for AFS 250: Black Bodies in American Sporting.

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Final Paper  
December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018

## The Damaging Effects of Intersectionality and Layers of Oppression on United States Female Soccer Players

Black athletes face structural and overt racism in all sports across the country, in which the majority of White Americans either chooses to ignore or sometimes even use to victimize certain athletes. They are discriminated against because of the color of their skin, despite achieving the same levels of success and fame as their white competitors. Black athletes must work harder than white athletes for the same end goal, not because of any sort of athletic disadvantage, but because of racial injustice and intolerance. Soccer is a prime example of how Black athletes face racism in sport. Black female soccer players, however, face many more layers of oppression compared to not only Black male soccer players, but also their female counterparts. The lack of representation and involvement of Black female athlete in the sport of soccer shows the repercussions of these layers of oppression. The sport of soccer favors male athletes and their success, caters to middle- and upper-class families and individuals, and structural racism within athletics prefers white athletes.

Competitive soccer in the United States is a very expensive sport to play, in which upper- and middle-class suburban families dominate the sport, leaving out the majority of Black Americans. The elite club teams and programs, which are necessary to be a part of in order to be seen by college colleges and gain success, have high expenses. These teams are also referred to as travel teams because of the high costs

and extreme amounts of travel to other states, in which low income families cannot afford to participate in (Otiko, 2015). Manny Otiko reports that, "If you want to play on a competitive team you are looking at \$7,000 per term, not including gear", and adds that "top players often have to attend camps to improve their skills and these can cost more than \$600", which explains how exclusive soccer is to play (Otiko, 2015). According to the Chicago Tribune and a National Bureau of Economic Research study, Black Americans have struggled to move up the economic ladder for years (Long, 2017). The article additionally states that the black unemployment rate is nearly double the white unemployment rate and that Black Americans receive extremely lower wages than white and Asian Americans. This has led to a rate of 1 in 4 black households being in poverty and a median household income of \$39,000 for African Americans, compared to the median income of \$65,000 for whites (Long, 2017). If an average term of soccer costs around \$7,000, then that would be 18% of an average African Americans household income spent on their kids' participation in competitive soccer, whereas it would only amount to around 1.1% of a white Americans household income. Soccer in the US is only accessible to play if one can afford it, in which African American families cannot. The socioeconomic disparity between races in the United States directly impacts the ability for young Black Americans to get involved in soccer.

The socioeconomic disparity additionally relates to the fact that American soccer is a highly suburbanized sport, in which suburban area schools and families foster the idea that their white children play soccer. A study from the Sandford Graduate School of Education found that Hispanics and Black Americans need a higher income than white Americans to live in affluent neighborhoods (Andrews, 2015). The study explains that

white Americans with the same income of a Black and or Latino American will live in a neighborhood with better support systems, school systems, and resources (Andrews, 2015). Nationally, on average, Black families live in neighborhoods where the median income is \$10,000-\$12,000 lower than in the neighborhoods where white families with similar incomes live (Andrews, 2015). This excludes Black Americans from affluent white suburban neighborhoods, in which soccer is seen as a rite of passage for youths. David Andrews touches on this phenomenon, "Indeed, such has been youth soccer's material and symbolic penetration of the suburban landscape, that the game presently enunciates the dominant rhythms and regimes of suburban existence every bit as naturally as the single-family home, ballet classes, sport utility vehicles, lawn sprinkler systems, *The Gap*, and the imperious Martha Stewart" (Andrews, 1999 p. 31). The rise of the stereotypical soccer mom supports this idea and demonstrates the lack of black youths playing soccer. The classic stereotype of a soccer mom within our society is solely thought to be a white, suburban, and middle- or upper-class women. The "soccer mom" has turned into an important social and political demographic, in which the demographic can represent the lack of diversity in American soccer (John, 2014). If Black families do not live in wealthier neighborhoods, despite the same income of white families, then they do not have the access or encouragement to play soccer. Instead they turn to sports such as basketball or track and field that are easy to afford and can be played anywhere, which explains why there is an absence of Black athletes in soccer. For example, one of the most famous female soccer players, who is also Black, Briana Scurry, noted that basketball was her main passion until her family moved to a suburban neighborhood during her grade school years. The idea of a city kid playing

soccer, according to Scurry, was ludicrous (Carpenter, 2016). Moreover, in a study that looked at race and gender equity in sports in respect to Title XI, it states, “the diversity of sports now being offered at many college and university campuses disproportionately exclude women athletes of color because the majority of newly added women’s sports teams tend to attract suburban, White females”, in which one of the fastest growing sports in the NCAA is soccer (Pickett, Dawkins, & Braddock, 2012). Socioeconomic status of Black Americans ostracizes black youths from entering the sport of soccer from a young age. Both income and discrimination within one’s residency, on the basis of racism, creates an environment in the soccer community that excludes Black Americans.

In addition to socioeconomic status hindering the involvement of black athletes in soccer, gender inequality within the sport is severe and creates an environment that does not support women’s success. In addition to already facing difficulties entering the sport, black female athletes face gender discrimination. While white female athletes face this discrimination as well, they do not face racial or class discrimination. The intersectionality of Black female soccer players presents them with a huge disadvantage in finding success in their careers. Women face gender discrimination in respect to earnings and pay, leadership and management positions, and athletic ability. The National Women’s Soccer League has a pay ceiling per player of only \$37,800 compared to an average of more than \$300,000 and a median of about \$100,000 for men’s Major League Soccer. Moreover, the National Men’s Soccer League has a salary cap of \$3 million whereas the National Women’s Soccer League has a salary cap of just \$265,000 (Close, 2016). The women’s national team over recent years has achieved

higher levels of success and championships, but still is paid far less than their male counterparts.

They spend equal hours of time and travel but are still seen as athletically inferior just on the basis of their gender, in which their salaries pay the price. Although gender inequality may seem inadvertent, the salaries of professional female athletes confirms that gender inequality exists within athletics.

In addition to salary, there is a shortage of female coaches and female management positions, which therefore does not foster a comfortable environment for female soccer players. In respect to the sports world, "It is argued that sports cultures tend to affirm male dominance. As a theory, homologous reproduction proposes that a dominant group within an organization will work to 'carefully guard power and privilege' by systematically reproducing themselves in their own image", in which men continue to hire men in other leadership roles which creates a prolonged cycle of gender inequality (Wadesango, Machingambi, Ashu & Chireshe, 2010). According to a gender study done by FIFA, the percent of registered female coaches in the United States and Canada was only 21%, which shows how the overwhelming majority of United States coaching staff is men (FIFA, 2014). Women are not seen as leaders nor are they considered qualified enough for head coaching positions in the soccer community, in which the effects of gender inequality in managerial positions trickles down into the player's gender discrimination. In the soccer community at large, women are expected to maintain the role of the "soccer mom" as previously discussed. This idea is explained, "a team is structured very much like a "traditional" heterosexual family: The head coach-nearly always a man-is the leader and the public face of the team; the team parent-nearly

always a woman”, in which the classic US gender roles are expressed through United States soccer (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). This systematic gender inequality within the National Women’s Soccer League, FIFA, and the soccer community can arguably represent gender inequality beyond soccer and display the challenges women face in social, political, and economic realms in the United States.

Additionally, a women’s athletic ability is often overlooked by media and women are sexualized by the media. Women’s national United States soccer is far less broadcasted and represented by the media, however when women’s sport does get media attention, female athletes are sexualized, aestheticized, and trivialized (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017). In the sports media world, the idea that men are strong and tough and that women are attractive and approachable dominates magazines, commercials, and advertisements. Professional women athletes are more likely to be portrayed in a sexualized manner in terms of the amount of skin showing and the poses that they are directed to use (Jacobs, 2017). Additionally, 61% of women in the study were photographed smiling, whereas only 28% of men were smiling in the studied photographs, which implies that men are more determined and serious about their athletics than women are (Jacobs, 2017). Not only are women photographed in a sexualized way but the captions and aligning texts takes away from their athletic success and focus on their looks instead (Jacobs, 2017). When women are given the opportunity to represent their team or sport, the focus is on their looks because that is what sells. In a study that compared how men and women both perceived sexualized sports targets, sexualization of female athletes were greater for female athletes in terms of competence than male athletes. This means that despite seeing both photographs of



sexualized male and female athletes, women were seen as less athletic and qualified for sports than men (Nezlek, Krohn, Wilson & Maruskin, L. (2015). Dually noted is that the “sexualization had no effects on women’s perceptions of the competence of male targets, whereas for men, sexualization affected their perceptions of the competence of both male and female targets”, which shows how gender inequality and sexualization is normalized to men but women do not engage in gender discrimination (Nezlek, Krohn, Wilson & Maruskin, L. (2015). The multiple layers of gender inequality within the soccer community inhibits women’s success and opportunities. Compared to their male counterparts, they get paid far less, have fewer coaching and managerial jobs, and are sexualized by the media despite achieving the same accomplishments and success on the field.

Finally, black athletes face overt and systematic racial discrimination in athletics as a whole and specifically within the soccer community at large. The lack of representation by Black athletes in soccer is shocking and is a result of many different reasons. One reason for the lack of representation of Black soccer players is the systematic racism within United States Soccer. Doug Andreassen, the chairman of the US Soccer’s diversity task force, believes that United States soccer is a “broken system” and notes that “people don’t want to talk about it” (Carpenter, 2016). Talking about the system as a whole, he adds that “The system is not working for the underserved community, it’s working for the white kids”, in which white athletes make up the majority of the demographic in United States soccer (Carpenter, 2016). Soccer in the US fosters and supports the success of white athletes because they are easy to target and will spend the money. Nick Lusson, the director of Non Call Premiere Soccer

Foundation, adds that United States Soccer is “a system that has been built with blinders to equality”, which are extremely hard to remove. Racism in soccer has shifted as an intrinsic aspect of contemporary soccer culture, which stems from the system doing nothing about racism for far too long. For the eradication of racism to occur in not only the United States, but also globally, a major pushback on racist slurs, stereotype threats, and taunting from leading soccer organizations needs to occur. Although challenging systematic racism is a large task, recognition of the lack of diversity by the soccer community at large will make a difference.

The lack of representation of Black female soccer players at elite levels of soccer is specifically striking, which shows the discriminatory problem with US soccer. US soccer is set up to favor white children and leaves out black children across the nation. This then results in national teams, the highest level of soccer one achieves in the US, having a roster with very little diversity. From the first women’s World Cup in 1991 to the 2016 Rio team, there has only been a total of 14 players of color over 25 years (Epps, 2016). By the age of 14, girls drop out of sports at twice the rate of boys as a result of many different factors, one of them being a lack of role models, according to the Women’s Sports Foundation (Epps, 2016). If this is a problem for girls of all races, imagine how young black girls perceive their future in United States soccer when there have only been 14 Black soccer players on the women’s roster in 25 years. The United States Tennis Association, USA Swimming, USA Gymnastics, and USA Volleyball all have a mission statement that addresses inclusion, discrimination and diversity, while US Youth Soccer has not (Epps, 2016). All of those above sports are sports that involve money and are easily accessible for affluent suburban white children, just as soccer is,

but the difference is that those sports have recognized diversity as a problem unlike U.S. Soccer. United States soccer may not have been built on the premise of racism at all, but it has inadvertently left out Black children, specifically Black girls, from getting involved.

Two different Black Women's soccer players at the national level, Crystal Dunn and Briana Scurry, have been very outspoken about racism and the representation of Black women in soccer. Crystal Dunn began playing soccer when her family moved to a Long Island Suburb for better schools and a safer environment, similar to Scurry's entry to soccer. When asked if Dunn thinks about the color of her skin, she responds "Yes, occasionally. But it's not like when I step on the field, I feel like I have to do this for all the black girls out there. I've always been taught to represent yourself and your family and friends. I just try to be the best role model, whether my fans are black girls or white girls", in which the conflict of race and her athletics is shown (Wahl, 2016). The lack of Black female soccer players at the elite levels pressures the few Black female athletes to take on the position of a role model, but as Dunn expresses she wants to act as a role model for all races. Briana Scurry has also used her fame and success to point out the lack of diversity within United States soccer programs. After Scurry made the save to win the 1999 Women's World Cup, the media did not represent her, but rather her white teammate Brandi Chastain. Chastain was featured in magazines, advertisements, and TV interviews, whereas Scurry did not receive much media attention at all, despite making the winning save. This lack of representation can clearly be attributed to the racial differences of the two athletes.

The sport of soccer in the United States is an extremely marginalized sport, in which most people that play the sport are white. Black athletes in general are systematically and overtly discriminated against not because of their lack of athletic ability but because the sports world leaves out underprivileged urban Black children. Soccer, as a national organization, caters only to those who are able to pay the steep price for success, in which many Black Americans cannot afford. Socioeconomic disparities between races has hindered many young Black children from participating in certain sports from a young age, which then is shown in elite levels when the rosters are comprised of mostly white athletes. United States Soccer has not been proactive enough in combatting a system that leaves out Black Americans. Black female soccer players, however, face discrimination because of their gender. They are sexualized by the media, in which their athletic abilities are overpowered by their looks. They are directed to pose in provocative and sexual ways, unlike their male counterparts who are directed to look tough which portrays the notion that they are serious about their sport. Not only are female athletes sexualized, but they are paid just a fraction of male soccer players and women are not often found in coaching or managerial positions, which therefore does not present them as leaders within the soccer community. A black women's intersectionality presents them with various struggles in everyday life, but these same struggles are also seen in United States Soccer. Black women and girls face discrimination in respect to their race, gender, and socioeconomic status. These layers of discrimination impede their involvement in soccer, which is shown by the lack of representation of Black female athletes in all levels of the sport.

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