

U.S. women chase World Cup title while changing the world around them

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Michael A. Rueda

PARTNER | HEAD OF US SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT | US

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The U.S. women's national team began its quest for back-to-back World Cup titles on June 11th with a 13-0 win over Thailand. Reportedly, the largest win in women's World Cup history. The team is a heavy favorite in the tournament and is comprised of some of the most recognizable faces in sports. Their recognition is not solely attributable to their accomplishments and abilities on the field. These women are constantly breaking new ground, challenging the status quo, and speaking up in support of important social issues. The team is in the midst of a gender discrimination lawsuit with its employer, the U.S. Soccer Federation, turning members of the team into full-time advocates for gender equality. Some of the women use their platform to address social issues beyond the soccer field as well. Others have launched individual brands just before the World Cup that explore how athletes connect with fans and monetize personal brands apart from endorsement deals.

Since 2016, the women's national team has been in a dispute with the Federation. That year, five players, Carli Lloyd, Alex Morgan, Megan Rapinoe, Becky Sauerbrunn, and Hope Solo, filed a wage-discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. They alleged that there was no legitimate and non-discriminatory reason for the Federation to pay the women's national team less than the men. The team signed a new collective bargaining agreement with the Federation the following year, which improved pay and addressed certain other concerns. The women remained unsatisfied with the Federation's progress. On March 19th, International Women's Day, all 28 women's national team players filed a federal class-action lawsuit against the Federation, alleging institutional gender discrimination. The lawsuit appears headed to trial after the World Cup.

Current and former national team members have also challenged FIFA, the sport's international governing body, on issues of gender equality. In 2015, former U.S. star Abby Wambach and current player Carli Lloyd criticized FIFA's decision to play women's World Cup matches on artificial turf. In 2019, Megan Rapinoe criticized FIFA on the disparity in prize money between the men's and women's World Cup, and called for a "major overhaul." Rapinoe also criticized FIFA for its uncertainty regarding the use of the Video Assistant Referee, or VAR, at the 2019 World Cup. FIFA first used VAR at 2018 men's World Cup in Russia. FIFA ultimately increased the prize money for the women's tournament to \$30 million, only 7.5% of the total prize money for the men, and adopted VAR for the 2019 tournament. However, international officials also scheduled championship matches for two international men's tournaments, the Copa America and the Gold Cup, on the same day as the women's World Cup final, drawing substantial criticism.

Members of the team also speak out on issues of equality and justice beyond soccer. Prior to the World Cup, Rapinoe and Alex Morgan preemptively stated that they would not visit the White House if they were to win the tournament. Rapinoe is an outspoken LGBTQ advocate and political activist off the field, who has on several occasions criticized President Trump and his policies. Rapinoe called herself a "walking protest when it comes to the Trump administration." Rapinoe was also one of the first athletes to support former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick by kneeling during the national anthem to protest social injustice. Morgan also publicly criticized Trump administration policies, particularly its policy of separating migrant families at the southern border.

Members of the team are challenging the status quo in other areas too. Just before the World Cup, several national team members launched personal projects that explore new ways for athletes to connect with fans and monetize personal brands. Rapinoe, Christen Press and Tobin Heath and 2015 World Cup winner Meghan Klingenberg launched their lifestyle brand, r9-inc, a week before the start of the World Cup. Direct control over the brand allows the women to exploit certain market opportunities, monetize personal brands, and support initiatives they deem important. R9-inc will reportedly seek to promote diversity among its vendors, partners, and employees while building a gender-neutral lifestyle brand. Other national team members have taken a similar approach. Alex Morgan, Kelley O'Hara, and Allie Long introduced their brand "USA vs. Everybody," which launched a t-shirt, crewneck and hat collection just before the World Cup as well.

These women inspire so many young athletes with their performances on the field. Off the field, their actions are equally as inspiring. They are using their platforms to effect change in ways that resonate beyond sports and can last longer than any single tournament or any single career.

Authors

Michael A. Rueda

PARTNER | HEAD OF US SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT | NEW YORK

Corporate

 +1 203 302 4087

 michael.rueda@withersworldwide.com