

TEAM
EQUALITY
SPORT
EMPOWERMENT

**WOMEN
LEADING**
the
Game

**STATE OF PLAY AND FUTURE OF WOMEN'S SPORT:
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

ATHLETE
CAREER
IMPACT
RESILIENT

**A PROJECT LED BY
ARIFÉ YILDIZ**



Funding is provided by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs with Meridian International Center as the implementing partner.



**"I'M NOT THE NEXT USAIN BOLT
OR MICHAEL PHELPS.
I'M THE FIRST SIMONE BILES."**

SIMONE BILES, GYMNAST

WOMEN'S SPORT IN QUESTION(S)

In the world of sport, women have long struggled for recognition and equality. Despite significant progress, many obstacles remain, especially for young girls aspiring to reach the top level. This booklet, part of the **Women Leading the Game** project, highlights some of these challenges and suggests ways of overcoming them.

Women's sport has come a long way since the first official competitions. While the first official participation of women in the Olympic Games goes back to 1912, it was not until 2007 that the Olympic Charter made it compulsory for women to take part in all sports. Since the beginning of the 20th century, iconic figures have paved the way, breaking down barriers and inspiring future generations. Yet the road to equality is still strewn with pitfalls: wage disparities, lack of media visibility, persistent prejudice, etc. These issues are even more prominent among young girls, who are often discouraged by a lack of role models and institutional support.

The **Women Leading the Game** project brought together top-level French and American athletes and young players from the women's section of the Lyon la Duchère soccer club (U18 and Senior). This project provided an opportunity to share experiences, highlight some of the difficulties encountered by women in sport and reflect on how to instigate change. The discussions also served to boost the self-confidence of the young participants, empower them and highlight the passion that drives them despite the difficulties. These personal stories illustrate the resilience and determination needed to excel in women's sport.

As it fosters social cohesion, emancipation and education, sport has a profound influence on the state of mind, career and life of those who practice it. Sports clubs are about more than just learning to play; they are places where people build their self-knowledge, work on their personal development and ability to take on challenges, work as a team, overcome adversity and share a wide range of emotions. It is therefore vital to ensure that young girls, whether amateur or professional, have the same resources and opportunities as boys, so that they also have the opportunity to **lead the game**.



STATE OF PLAY AND FUTURE OF WOMEN'S SPORT: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Topics covered in our discussions:

Significant pay gap

We looked at the abysmal gap between the pay of male and female athletes, highlighting differences of up to 100 times more for Division 1 male players. While many male athletes live on incomes that allow them a high and comfortable standard of living, this disparity often forces sportswomen to juggle their passion and a secondary job to support themselves.

Scouting and recruitment

The glaring lack of scouting opportunities for young female players compared to their male counterparts was discussed. While recruiters frequently attend men's games, opportunities to

spot female talents are much rarer, limiting their access to professional career paths.

Club resources

We discussed the lack of resources granted to women's clubs, shown by differences in refereeing, infrastructure, equipment and logistical support. These constraints exacerbate the challenges faced by women's sections and reflect a lesser appreciation of their sporting contribution.

Communication and public image

Insufficient investment in the promotion of female players and their competitions was

highlighted, in particular the lack of professional media coverage and the underexposure of women's events, perpetuating the under-representation of women's sport.

Family and societal support

The crucial role of family support was examined, highlighting the prejudices that often favors encouraging boys over girls in sport. This dynamic has a negative impact on the number of girls pursuing sport at a higher level.

Lack of major events

The rarity of major women's sporting events and their low media profile contribute to the limited visibility of women's sport, reinforcing the perception that women's competitions are less important.

Teaching and management approaches

Listening to the athletes' stories enabled us to discover and understand the negative impact that an unsuitable management and teaching approach could

have on them, creating traumas and hindering the development of female athletes and teams.

Mental health and support

The stress and pressure put on young girls and athletes, particularly during competitions, can affect their performance and mental health. A lack of support for players embarking on a professional career can have an impact on their choices and pathways.

Sexist behaviors still very much present in the world of sport

The frequent manifestations of sexist behaviors in sport persist, even when women succeed, reach important positions within clubs and prove their skills. Unfortunately, they still face persistent unequal treatment, perpetuating discriminatory attitudes.

The discussions highlighted the persistent challenges faced by women in sport, while suggesting ways forward to a fairer and more inclusive future. The aim of the project is to continue to break down barriers and promote equality in all spheres of sport through committed dialogue.

OUR AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

- Promoting gender mix from an early age**
 Encourage girls to join mixed teams to foster an inclusive sporting culture. This enables girls to rise to the level of their male peers while deconstructing gender stereotypes from childhood, at the start of their sporting career.
- Integration and individualization**
 Advocate the inclusion of professionals on the technical staff, especially for the physical preparation of players. Adapt training to women's physiological particularities, such as the phases of their menstrual cycle, to optimize their performance and well-being.
- Equality in sponsorship and communication**
 Stress the importance of sports clubs actively seeking sponsors for women's teams on an equal footing with men's teams. Invest fairly in the promotion of women's teams to enhance their visibility and image.
- Support for maternity**
 Addressing the issue of maternity among professional athletes by advocating the establishment of protocols and support systems. This will enable them to reconcile their sporting careers with their desire to have children, without risking infertility or damaging career breaks.
- Adapted management and communication**
 Adapt the management and teaching approach to the specific characteristics of women's teams and sportswomen, encouraging respectful communication and coaching that is attentive to the specific needs of players. Offer specific training courses for coaching women's teams, with the support of sports federations and the Ministry of Sports.



6 Mental health

Emphasize the importance of and invest in mental support for athletes, particularly those embarking on a professional career. Recognize and deal with the impact of stress and pressure to maintain optimum physical performance and mental well-being.

7 Exchange and training sessions

Organize regular exchange sessions between staff, coaches, physical and psychological trainers and players to refocus objectives and discuss progression strategies, as well as any sensitive subjects that sportswomen wish to discuss.

8 Building a mentoring network

Introduce annual exchanges between top-level sportswomen and young players to share experiences and advice. This would strengthen support for women's sport from an early age and help build a mentoring network.

9 Visibility initiatives

Encourage the development of events and initiatives aimed at increasing the visibility of women's sport. This includes the creation of communication platforms and media coverage (particularly audiovisual) of women's competitions to inspire and encourage the practice of sport among young girls and within families.

10 Creation of educational programs on autonomy and self-confidence

Develop educational programs incorporating modules on autonomy, self-confidence and stress management specifically adapted to young girls practicing sport. This will strengthen their resilience in the face of obstacles and promote the development of essential skills beyond sport.

11 Invest in the fight against sexist and sexual violence in sport

Guarantee the safety and physical integrity of female players, who may be deterred from getting involved in sport by fear or decide to leave this sphere because of negative experiences or even aggression.

WOMEN LEADING THE GAME : GOING FURTHER

The Women Leading the Game project has given players in the women's section of the Lyon La Duchère soccer Club the opportunity to discuss important issues with top sportswomen. This dialogue has played an important role in boosting the self-confidence of the girls involved. This initiative calls for collective action to break down barriers in women's sport. Together, we can build a sporting future where young girls are encouraged to aim for the top, supported by a community that recognizes and celebrates their potential.

"Created in 2010, the women's section has the same objectives as the football academy: to help players discover soccer and learn the civic values that are so important to our club. 100% women's teams: since 2019, we have been able to put together 100% women's teams in all categories, from U7 to Senior enabling girls of all ages to play in an ideal environment in which they enjoy their passion. We have therefore achieved our first objective. Our goal for the future will be to give our girls the chance to discover 11-a-side soccer and to take the youngest players through to our senior team, in order to create a genuine spirit of training that is based on the model we developed at La Duchère within our women's section."

CALL TO ACTION

Everyone can join us in this effort: your commitment can make a significant difference to the lives of today's and tomorrow's female athletes!



INÈS DAHMANI

Head of the Women's Section of the Lyon La Duchère soccer club



"Sport is a universal language. Sport is a language we all understand."

ANAÏA HOARD



U16 European Champion and U-17 World Vice-Champion with the French national team, Anaïa is a Franco-American basketball player and artist, she worked on the NBA Creator Series campaign.

"Sport is a personal project, like school, it has to be rooted in you. For me, soccer is a family where I surround myself with the right people in the dressing room and on the field".

"Don't set yourself any barriers, don't limit yourself. If someone tells you not to go through the door, come back through the window."

LUCIE BLANCAL

HELENE FERCOQ

Hélène is a French soccer player (midfielder) for Dijon FCO



Member of the executive committee of the Hauts-de-Seine soccer district and regional women's referee for the Paris Ile-de-France soccer league, Lucie is also a lawyer

"Our aim as top-level players is to increase visibility in order to change mentalities. We need to maintain the values of amateur sport and not move towards a baffling system."



GAËTANE THINEY

French international soccer player, Gaëtane is the captain of the Paris FC team

INSPIRING DISCUSSIONS

"Find your allies, don't be afraid to say yes and ask the tough questions. I haven't achieved all my dreams, but I've been able to do things I never even dreamed of. There are still a lot of places where people would rather see a man than a woman, but go ahead, enter the room because you belong there and bring your teammates with you!"



AMY GRIFFIN

Amy is head coach of the U.S. deaf soccer women's national team, Executive Director and coach of the OL Reign Academy in Seattle (now Seattle Reign FC), former American soccer player (US women's national soccer team, winner of the 1991 FIFA Women's World Cup).

A project led by Arife Yildiz –
2022 Alumni of the US State
Department's IVLP (International
Visitor Leadership Program) for
"Young European Leaders".



"In sport as in life, I sincerely believe that the limits are the ones we impose on ourselves - challenging our limits, committing ourselves with passion, being in motion and innovating, that's what makes the unthinkable possible! That's what I've tried to pass on to the players at the club through this project, and I'm looking forward to continuing along this path together."

ARIFE YILDIZ



**International Visitor
Leadership Program**
U.S. Department of State

Funding is provided
by the U.S. Department
of State's Bureau of Educational
and Cultural Affairs with Meridian
International Center
as the implementing partner.

FEBRUARY 2024

Arife Yildiz

[in](#) @arifeyildiz

+33(0)6 70 61 61 46