

EQUAL PAY, EQUAL HEALTH: PLAYER VOICES FROM THE WOMEN'S SOCCER HEALTH STUDY

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The concept of Equal Pay, Equal Health is motivated by the fact that women's soccer players not only receive less pay than male players but are also under-represented in sports health research. The Women's Soccer Health Study: From Head to Toe has collected data on 560 retired elite women's soccer players in 5 health domains: General, Musculoskeletal, Reproductive, Post-Concussion, and Mental. Previous publications have reported on the high number of musculoskeletal injuries and post-concussion symptoms. Another key finding has been that players with ACL reconstruction have lower post-career satisfaction. To incorporate athlete voices, the players were asked to rank the 5 health domains in order of importance and to report other topics that were missing from the study. The top-ranked area was mental health, and nutrition topped the list of other health issues. Among the 99 written comments, 30% expressed appreciation for this research on female athlete health. The advocacy of Equal Pay, Equal Health should extend beyond compensation to ensure that both women and men can sustain long-term participation in elite sports and receive equitable, evidence-informed care. It calls for a systematic commitment to closing gaps in research, resources, and support so that all athletes benefit from the same standard of health, safety, and performance opportunities.

Chants of "Equal Pay! Equal Pay!" echoed from the stands at the Stade de Lyon in France after the US Soccer Women's National Team won the FIFA Women's World Cup tournament for the second consecutive time in July 2019. Months earlier, the entire team had sued their employer, the US Soccer Federation, for gender discrimination. Their argument was that despite consistently outperforming the US men's team on the field, they were only paid nearly half as much. After years of legal proceedings and public attention, the two sides settled the Equal Pay lawsuit out of court on February 22, 2022.¹

Despite a victory in the Equal Pay soccer lawsuit, substantial pay inequities remain across many other sports, and a parallel sex-based gap persists in the sports medicine literature, where many female athletes continue to be under-represented in research.² Despite increasing rates of sports participation by female athletes, the ratio of

male-to-female participants in sports medicine research has been shown to be 66% vs 34%.³ Another study of co-ed sports showed that 70% of studies focused on male athletes, while 9% focused on female athletes, and 21% included both.⁴ These proportions do not align with female athlete participation at the elite level, which has been at 50% for recent Olympics Games.⁵

To directly address the sex-based research gap, The Women's Soccer Health Study: From Head to Toe was launched in 2021. This study has collected data on 560 retired elite women's soccer players in 5 health domains: General, Musculoskeletal, Reproductive, Post-Concussion, and Mental. Health concerns that were reported on the anonymous online survey included musculoskeletal injuries, post-concussion symptoms, and lower mental health in the early years following retirement.⁶ Another key finding was that players with a history of anterior cruciate ligament (ACL)

soccer players, both during and after their careers, and point to meaningful future directions for research focused on nutrition and holistic athlete well-being.

At the end of the survey, players were asked to provide any final comments in an optional free text box. Among the 99 comments, 30 (30%) contained the words "Thank You", emphasizing their appreciation for such research on the health and well-being of female athletes. The concept of Equal Pay, Equal Health stems from the fact that women's soccer players receive less pay and are under-represented in research compared to their male counterparts. The advocacy of Equal Pay, Equal Health should extend beyond compensation to ensure that both women and men can sustain long-term participation in elite sports and receive equitable, evidence-informed care. It calls for a systematic commitment to closing gaps in research, resources, and support so that all athletes benefit from the same standard of health, safety, and performance opportunities.

KEY POINTS

- Substantial pay inequities exist in women's sports, and a research gap also persists, where many female athletes are under-represented in the literature
- Calls for active athlete engagement in the research process has grown, in order to understand their needs and conduct relevant research
- Among a large cohort of former elite women's soccer players, mental health and nutrition education were reported as concerns of high importance

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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