

## Politicizing – for better or worse – the Women’s World Cup by Tim Elcombe

As the group phase at the Women’s World Cup heads towards the end of week one, early indications suggest the 2023 tournament will be a massive success. On the field, [increasingly competitive games](#) between national teams representing all confederations suggest the gap from the historic powers to the lower-ranked qualifiers is closing.

Commercially, strong pre-event [ticket sales in Australia \(less so in New Zealand\)](#) have surpassed records set in Canada in 2015. Over [1.4 million tickets](#) were purchased in advance of the tournament’s 64 matches – [compared to 1.35 million](#) for the 52-game tournament in Canada. To kick off the 2023 event, the [largest ever football crowd in New Zealand](#) attended the co-hosting nation’s upset victory over Norway. Hours later, [75,784 watched Australia](#) narrowly defeat Ireland in Sydney, also breaking domestic records while becoming the third most attended Women’s World Cup match of all time (behind two games played during the ground breaking [1999 tournament in the USA](#)).

Beyond the stadiums, American broadcaster FOX and its Spanish language partner Telemundo reported record audiences in the United States for their women’s team’s (USWNT) opening match against Viet Nam. An estimated [6.55 million viewers tuned in](#) to watch the USWNT defeat the Southeast Asian debutants 3-0 despite airing at the same time as Lionel Messi’s first game for Inter Miami. This record-breaking American group stage audience affirms pre-tournament [predictions for a 79% increase](#) in global viewership – from 1.12 billion to 2 billion – for the 2023 event.

Some within FIFA, as well as European and North American advocates, feared the Australian/New Zealand [time zone differences would negatively impact](#) viewership in these women’s football hotbeds – concerns magnified when FIFA President Gianni [Infantino threatened television blackouts](#) across Europe due to underwhelming broadcast rights bids. However, the game’s continued growth in the Global North, increased tournament size (from 24 to 32 nations represented) and hopes for [increased Asian attention](#) with the event held in Oceania have led to predictions of record-breaking viewership – live in stadiums and watching on multiple digital platforms globally.

The incredible growth of international football competitions (FIFA World Cup, UEFA Euro Championship, Summer Olympics), along with the rise in popularity of the professional game (UEFA’s Women’s Champions League, England’s top-tier professional Women’s Super League, and the United States’ National Women’s Soccer League) have elevated women’s football (in the Global North) to ‘mega-sport’ status. And

as a mega sport, the women's game increasingly intersects – for better or worse – with global politics.

FIFA, as the game's powerful governing body, has long held what I call a [“sporting exceptionalist”](#) view of this intersection. Simply put, FIFA argues that overt and intentional political actions ought to be resisted to protect the sanctity of the “beautiful game”. In turn, apolitical, neutral, and sporting-centred football can become an “organic” source of social advancement and international understanding. If football can remain free from politics, it can positively impact the world. This position is exemplified through FIFA's collaboration with the UN to [“Unite for Gender Equality”](#) despite its clear aversion to political intrusion.

The alternative, from FIFA's perspective, is football becomes a [“crude instrument”](#) of agenda-driven [state and non-state actors](#). Those who overtly use the game for political or commercial advance, with no regard to the best interests of the game and its participants, destroy the “organic goodness” of football according to “sporting exceptionalists”. FIFA, therefore, sees itself not only as the game's sport governing body, but also its moral gatekeeper holding non-sporting intruders at bay. Others, however, argue that sport and politics cannot be separated, and that a globally consumed practice such as football ought to be leveraged, even sacrificed, for political and social good. For example, despite FIFA's goal to remain politically neutral, it (along with UEFA) [expelled Russia's football team](#) from the 2022 Men's World Cup qualification process due to the state's invasion of Ukraine.

An alternative to the “sporting exceptionalist” and “crude instrumentalist” orientations is to take a [“complexity” view](#) of football and politics. Sports like football are human creations, happening at certain times and in certain places, [infused with contextualized values and meanings](#). Sport, especially football, cannot be disconnected from the social and cultural contexts it happens within. Therefore political (formal and informal), commercial, and sporting actions always intertwine, and the tension between football's sporting and non-sporting interests will always exist.

The men's game, with its massive global appeal, has long been part of this [global sporting/non-sporting complex](#). In 2023, [the rise of women's football](#) into “mega-sport” status now means it will increasingly become [significant “beyond sport”](#). Major issues arising for the 2023 Women's World Cup, for example, have moved from isolated sporting stories to broader global sport/political issues. [Pay equity battles](#) between national team players and football associations is now a [human rights issue](#); the rash of [ACL injuries](#) raises questions about sport science and medical support for female athletes as a gender equity issue related to the [UN's Sustainable Development Goal #5](#); and [Saudi](#)

[Arabia's failed attempt](#) to use the Women's World Cup as a national branding opportunity shows that [even in nations with limited interest](#) in women's football (to date), the [game's soft power potential](#) is on the rise.

From its inception in 1991 the Women's World Cup has moved from a (mostly) sporting tournament to a complex global mega sport event. Recognizing the [emergent political significance of women's football](#) - both as a lens into current geopolitics and a tool for hard and soft power - will become increasingly important.