Topic Summary
On March 8, 2019 (International Women's Day), the U.S. women's soccer team filed a gender discrimination suit against the U.S. Soccer Federation, which governs soccer in the U.S. The soccer team's complaint alleges pay inequities and inferior support and working conditions. In their statement released by the team, the twenty-eight players described “institutionalized gender discrimination” that they say has existed for years.

The U.S. Women's National Team has been much more successful than the men's team; the women have won the World Cup three times and are four-time Olympic
champions, while the men's team has never won either tournament and failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup. Despite the women's team's success and popularity, U.S. Soccer pays their players less compared with the players on the men's team. Specifically, they are paid less for each "friendly" match, they are paid less for making the team's World Cup roster, and they're paid much less for their performance at the World Cup.

Star player Megan Rapinoe stated: “We very much believe it is our responsibility not only for our team and for future U.S. players, but for players around the world — and frankly women all around the world — to feel like they have an ally in standing up for themselves, and fighting for what they believe in, and fighting for what they deserve and for what they feel like they have earned.”

In 1972, Title IX was passed, which is a law banning discrimination based on sex in all education programs that receive federal funding. One of the most important impacts of the Title IX was girls’ ability to play sports in school. For example, before Title IX, one in 27 girls played varsity high school sports. Today, about 2 in 5 play sports. The year before Title IX was enacted, there were about 310,000 girls and women in the U.S. playing high school and college sports; today, there are more than 3,373,000. Despite this, women in sports face a wide range of inequalities including spending discrepancies in college sports, the gender wage gap, lack of women coaches and disparate media coverage.

Update: In May 2020, the U.S. District Court Judge for the Central District of California rejected the team's argument over receiving lower pay than the U.S. men's team. He also dismissed a claim of unequal working conditions related to the number of turf and real grass pitches. After the ruling, a spokesperson for the team promised that the team "will appeal and press on." Regarding disparities in working conditions, in December 2020, the U.S. women's national team players and the U.S. Soccer Federation settled their lawsuit over working conditions, which the soccer team said were inequitable compared to the men's national
The deal called for charter flights, hotel accommodations, venue selection and staff support that is on par with the men's team.

You can watch a video to learn more: US women's soccer team sues for discrimination

Age
10 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- Why do you think the team filed the lawsuit? And why did they do so on International Women's Day?
- What has changed about women in sports since Title IX? What do you think it was like for girls and women in sports before that time period?
- As a society, what are the current challenges we face in terms of equity and fair treatment for women in sports?
- Besides the lawsuit, what other actions do you think should be taken to address the pay inequalities and other unfair treatment?
- What message do you think this lawsuit sends to girls and women, and society in general?

Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- What are some of the gender roles and stereotypes our society has about girls/women and sports?
- What is gender discrimination? What is sexism? What role do they play in how women in sports are treated?
Ideas for Taking Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Educate others about gender, sexism and sports by talking with family and friends about the lawsuit, the history of women in sports and the discrepancies in women's pay, treatment and conditions.
- Write a letter to the U.S. women's soccer team or individual players that expresses your support for them, the lawsuit and gender pay equality issues in general.
- Learn more about the support that your school, community or local college provides to girls and women's sports teams, and if there are disparities, explore ways to address them.

Additional Resources

- Soccer, Salaries and Sexism (ADL Lesson Plan)
- The Gender Wage Gap (ADL Lesson Plan)
- Mo'Ne Davis and Gender Stereotypes (ADL Lesson Plan)
- How Can I Prevent Gender Bias in Young Children?
- Toward Communication Free of Gender Bias