

Organizing Women's Soccer Playbook

Women+ Soccer Detroit was founded in March 2023 to provide a space for women and non-binary folks to learn, play, and compete in soccer.

We are challenging organizations and organizers to improve the quality, quantity, and turnout for their women's events. This playbook outlines the current climate and challenges of equitable play women face, as well as solutions and suggested pathways organizers can take to improve the experience.

We urge you to read and digest our playbook and then reach out to us afterwards to collaborate and create a game plan to improve your upcoming women's events.

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The State of Women's Soccer & Its Consequences

In the last few years of organizing women's soccer, we have learned that doing it well requires a lot more energy and effort than organizing men's soccer. This is because women are cautious and skeptical of soccer leagues and tournaments labeled as "women's." These events are often under-resourced, less cool, and relatively disorganized which leads to lack of enthusiasm for the events, underwhelming experiences, and/or canceled events.

Men's tournaments and leagues are relatively easy for league organizers and tournament organizers to run: if you make a men's tournament, men will come. This is the case for a number of reasons:

1. Men's tournaments are regular and therefore there is an expectation that they will occur reasonably often.

2. Men know they are the target audience as evidenced by marketing materials (flyers, videos, etc.), so they feel confident and comfortable signing up for tournaments that are made for them.
3. There is typically infrastructure (leagues, pick-ups) for men to play soccer, so there is always a pool of players from which to target.
4. There are communication channels to support the distribution of league/tournament information because of the infrastructure
5. These leagues/tournaments are well resourced, cool, and reasonably well organized which incentivizes men to participate and minimizes the likelihood that these events will be canceled. Men trust and can expect cool tournaments, so they show up in droves.

At large, women do not have this same infrastructure or experience. For example, girls have 1.3 million fewer opportunities to play high school sports than boys have according to a [Women's Sport Foundations study](#). This along with other external factors only compounds when we discuss women's sports in adulthood.

Inequity between men and women in sports stretches into adult sports.

1. **There is not consistent and reliable infrastructure for women to play soccer across the United States.** There are women who want to play, but structures and organizations don't always exist to reliably organize and support these players' interests. Leagues are either co-ed or male and pick-ups are male-dominated.
2. **Women's tournaments are not regular and there is not an expectation that they will occur often.** Women must organize for individual instances of tournaments instead of being able to quickly pull from a reliable pool of women from existing leagues and tournaments. This makes organization more time intensive and more challenging.
3. **When women's tournaments and leagues are created, they are often not designed by input from women.** Women's leagues and tournaments are often tacked on to men-centered events in order to bring inclusivity. This is a start, but the event might not be appealing to women and, therefore, not be incentivizing for women to participate. These events can often lead to disappointing and underwhelming experiences because the event itself was not intentionally or thoughtfully designed, resulting in women not wanting to participate in the future.
4. **Women are often not the target audience,** so they don't feel confident or comfortable signing up for events that are targeted for men (or, at the very minimum, not demonstrating inclusivity of women). The marketing material does not include women or depict women having a cool or good experience.
5. **There are no central communication channels to distribute women's tournament and league opportunities.** Women typically find out about events relatively last minute through word of mouth or small, local organizations they participate in. They are, therefore, not as easy to distribute information to and don't allow the necessary time to organize a team.
6. **Women's leagues and tournaments are not well resourced, cool, or typically well organized.** As such, women are not enthusiastic about participating. Having a women's

division tacked on to a men's event is not enough to draw women to an event. Because the intentional recruitment of women in tournaments is often low (and more difficult than recruiting men), women's leagues and tournaments are typically sub-par (e.g. women play for swag whereas men play for cash prizes) and oftentimes canceled last minute. As such, it can be hard for women to believe their experience will be a positive one and therefore worthwhile to sign up and participate in.

The lack of women's participation is not because there aren't women who want to play.

Women want to play soccer and want to compete. In 2023, Women+ Detroit alone fielded nineteen women's teams across seven tournaments. In every tournament except maybe one, we were disappointed and underwhelmed with our experience. In four out of seven tournaments, Women+ represented 50% or more of the teams participating in the tournaments (ranging from Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Knoxville). In one of the seven tournaments (based in Chicago), Women+ registered *the only two participating teams* (as a result, the women's division was canceled). It is unacceptable that organizers organizing women's tournaments and leagues in major cities cannot field robust women's events. **Organizers and organizations must do better to rebuild the trust of women's teams through building connections and improving our experience.**

How to Organize Women's Experience Excellently

In March 2023, Women+ hosted a 3v3 tournament with 4 participating teams. In November 2023, Women+ hosted a 3v3 tournament with 10 participating teams. We have learned a lot and we want to share this knowledge with others to support the nation in creating environments women want to play in. Women+ does not want to carry the full burden of improving women's sports everywhere, but we do want to share what we've learned and implore organizations and organizers to dedicate human resources, monetary resources, thought, and effort into the following in order to build more equitable and better women's events.

1. **Put in the extra effort.** Organizing for men is easier—if you build it they will come and you will make money. We, however, are collectively building and improving the infrastructure for women, and it takes *work*. Including women may not make your league or tournament money right now, but once there is a reliable, quality space for women, they will participate. Be the organization that is building the foundation of women's sports.
2. **Take on the challenge of building women's events at the same caliber as your men's events.** This means cool prizes (money, kits, cleats). This means the same size trophies as the men. This means having DJ's, photographers, videographers. Get photos/videos of us scoring goals, executing cool moves. Make it a big deal on your website, Instagram, TikTok before, during, and after the event. Make it an event that women are excited to attend. We want the whole shebang too—action shots, cheering fans, commentators. Whatever the men have, we want that too.

3. **Treat women athletes with the same respect as men.** We are athletes. We are skilled. In past events, we have been treated as second to the men's divisions. Examples include organizing staff not knowing the registration/check in processes for the women's teams, Women+ having to facilitate the retrieval of our own awards for winning, and more. In short, be diligent with the care and attention you provide to women's teams. Trust needs to be rebuilt.
4. **Have well organized and clear websites/social media.** Women need to feel safe and have clear expectations for an event. Women are typically more cautious about travel because life is generally more dangerous for us. If you want women to attend, you must have all of the following information **clearly outlined** and **easily accessible/visible**. We don't want to search for this information.
 - a. Date(s) of event
 - b. Address of Event
 - c. Registration cost and structure
 - d. Registration deadline
 - e. Description of Event (day by day with times)
 - f. Structure of Event
 - i. How many players on the pitch and if there is a goalie
 - ii. How many games each team gets to play
 - iii. Group stages, playoff structure
 - iv. Play on turf, grass, indoor/outdoor
 - g. Rules of Play
 - h. Level of inclusivity: Clearly state your policy on inclusion of trans and nonbinary players. For many of these individuals, participation in gendered spaces without explicit inclusion policies can feel risky and dangerous.
5. **Communicate clearly & early.** We have often run into very last minute communication because an event needed more women's teams and they are seeking help. Instead, create a website/insta/tiktok with the right information as identified above, and reach out to local women's soccer/sports organizations *early*. We need time to poll our community, space for them to ask questions, time to organize the teams, as well as time to organize travel/housing, etc. Please be timely and responsive as these groups will often have additional questions.
6. **Provide discounts or scholarships when possible.** Women aren't used to having spaces to compete. As such, many women feel that competition isn't for them, even though they may be very talented. Reducing the barriers to participation can make it easier for women to participate. For one tournament in Knoxville, a tournament organizer sent Women+ \$1,000 to support travel fees and provided us free hotel rooms. While this is above and beyond, other options are reduced registration rates, hotel discounts, airline discounts, and food discounts.
7. **Connect with women's organizations.** Dedicate time to research social media platforms for local women's soccer/sports organizations. Personally invite these organizations to the event. Ask them what support they need in order to play. For example, sometimes teams need more information or free agents. To reach these groups, an organizer can post the event information and tag these women's

organizations to raise awareness of the event. Ask these groups you connect with if they can share the information with their communities. Ask these groups if they know other groups and if they can share contact information for them. These are just some suggested ways in which to open up communication with the women soccer community in advance of hosting an event.

8. **Add women to your social media campaigns.** Women want, need, and rightfully should see themselves in the advertising for an event. Put a woman on your poster. Share videos of women playing soccer. We don't want to go to a men's soccer event where there happen to be some women. Show us that this space is ours too.
9. **Add women to your organizing staff.** Not all women have the same experience, but men certainly do not have nearly the same experience as women. Including a woman (or, even better, women!) and non-binary folks on your organizing staff can help you anticipate what we want and need in order to play and how to design an event that we're excited to participate in. Seeing women represented in the tournament can also help us feel like this space is ours too.

Resources

As mentioned before, Women+ does not want to fully bear the burden of improving women's sports. We do not want to do the work for you. You likely have employees who can do this. We've done the work, and, turns out, doing the work works! That being said, we do want to support organizations in a consultative capacity because we understand that organizing women's soccer can be challenging but we've seen success and we're inviting you to come along.

The lists below are not comprehensive. We wanted to provide you with a place to start. Please search insta/tiktok/fb for local groups yourself.

Women/Non-Binary Soccer Instagrams

Baltimore

- bmorequeersoccer

Chicago

- Chicagowoso
- Queersoccerclubchi

Michigan

- Womenplussoccerdet
- Zoocityfc
- Kalamazoounited
- ypsi.queer.soccer

Philadelphia

- casasoccer_womensnonbinary

NYC

- queersoccerleague

San Diego

- sandiegosoccerwomen
- Queersoccersd

Texas

- Futbolera_brand

Facebook Groups

- “Women’s Adult Soccer” a hub for women’s soccer tournaments